A Tactician's Legacy

by katriona_subasa

Summary

Father Sky, please help me make sense of this. Why did Bern launch a war on everyone? The older folks, the veterans of Campaign of Fire, know more than they say, but they wait and let my generation forge ahead blindly. I hope they know what they're doing, because I don't know if we do. But we'll try anyway. My name is Irene, tactician, and this is the legacy we've inherited.

FE6 novelization

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The stories tell us that humans were the children of Mother Earth, and the dragons, the children of Father Sky. Just as the earth and sky share the same horizon, so too did the humans and dragons. But then, one day, the peaceful coexistence between them shattered. The great war, the Scouring, destroyed both sides, warped the very laws of nature, and in the end, cast the dragons away from this world entirely.

Most of the stories talk about how it was divine right that led humans to victory, but Mom's lessons are always careful to emphasize that war is not so easily defined, and that humans did many horrible things for their victory, just as dragons did many horrible things to try and win. She always makes her children these lessons after Sue and I visit Etruria and had our ears ringing with all the sermons of the silly Elimine church. Not that Elimine was silly. But her church is. Why worship a woman when there was the sky and earth and the spirits that danced through them?

I suppose that must sound odd, but I think it's normal. My mother is Etrurian by birth, and well loved by her family and friends even after eloping, so we visit places outside the Plains often, mostly Etruria or Lycia. But I am Sacaean by birth, just as my father is, and so I listen to the whispers of Father Sky and the reassurances of Mother Earth far more than I do the singing of Etruria's Elimine.

It's strange, learning from two completely different worlds, but I find it fun. It's me. It's my normal. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Thud. Thud. Thud. My arrows arced gracefully into the target, hitting perfectly. Thud. Thud. Thud. I enjoyed archery. It was such a calming, peaceful exercise. Thud. Thud. Thud. All I had to do was breath. It was me and the arrows, with the earth below and the sky above. Thud. Thud. Thud. This was exactly what I needed.

"Irene?" I shot one last arrow before turning at the call, smiling at Mom as she walked up. "You need to either stop or set up another target, sweetling," she gently chided. She swayed a little as she walked, a result on the brace on her leg making her limp. "Are you feeling better?" She reached up to stroke my hair gently, wincing a bit as she raised her arm too far. "…It has been twenty years. How do I always forget I cannot do that?"

"Well, Mom, isn't it because you just ignore your health when you think people you love are hurting?" I asked innocently. "That's what Dad says, at least." She made a face, but accepted my kiss on the cheek. "But yes, I'm better."

"Good…" She breathed a little sigh of relief, and gently took the bow out of my hands, checking my palms. It always startled me how soft Mom's hands were. Everyone else in the tribe had calluses all over their palms and fingertips, but Mom barely had any, even after twenty years of living out here in the Sacae. "Come. The hunters are going to return soon."

"I hope Sue did all right." Slowly, Mom and I left the practice area and walked back to the main
part of the camp. "She was really nervous. Did you notice?"

"Of course. She always clings a little when nervous." She gave me a look. "Just as you tend to yell and scream." I simply grinned in reply. Sue was stoic like Father, but I apparently got Grandfather's rather nasty temper. I think it was from him. It wasn't from Grandpa, and it wasn't from Mom. Mom never seemed to lose her temper at anything. "You forgot to finish the laundry, by the way."

"I finished it!"

"Leaving the wet clothes scattered about does not count as leaving them out to dry, Irene." Argh… she noticed… "You will have to re-wash half of them."

"I'm sorry."

"This is the importance of not taking shortcuts." Mom reached up to tap my nose, making me squirm. "You must apply your work ethic to tactics and archery to other aspects of your life, Irene."

"Mom, I'm eighteen. When am I old enough to escape lectures?"

"Never, for you are always my precious baby girl." She laughed as I groaned. "Would you rather I did not lecture?"

"No, because you only don't lecture when you're sick."

"…I'm sorry…"

"Huh? Oh, no, Mom, it's fine!" I smiled to reassure her. Uncle Mark once explained that Grandmother had been horrible to Mom, so now Mom lived in fear she would be horrible to us. I didn't get how, after eighteen years, she was still afraid, but I was always willing to remind her. "You're the best mother in the world!"

"That is sweet of you to say, Irene." There she went again. I knew she wasn't accusing me of lying, but it did always annoy me when she brushed off my compliments. "Ah, there they are."

"I swear, Mom, you and Dad have some sort of psychic connection," I deadpanned, noting that the horses were barely visible on the horizon. But she always just seemed to know when Dad was returning.

"I am just good at guessing." I thought it was Mother Earth whispering to Mother, but while Mother encouraged Sue and me to believe in it, she… well, it wasn't that she didn't believe, but more that she thought Mother Earth and Father Sky would not speak to an 'outsider' like her. "But I'm glad they're back sooner than usual. I need to talk to Rath." The serious look on her face told me it was something bad. I felt my heart stop, remembering the last time serious news had come. "Easy, sweetling." She stroked my hair, smiling reassuringly. "No one has died."

That was… good. That was good, but it didn't prevent me from leaning into her and clinging a little as the hunters all returned. I tried to throw off my fears to smile, but the first thing Dad did when he dismounted and came over was ruffle my hair and tug me into a hug, so I guessed I failed. Well, that wasn't a surprise. Dad saw everything.

"Did something happen while we were away, Katri?" he asked Mom, stroking my hair as I leaned into him. Dad's hugs were always soothing. "I know she was crying earlier…"

"I got a serious message from Eliwood, and that worries her," Mom answered. Her smile was warm and soft; Dad always got her best smiles. "It has only been a year since Mldain's accident, my lord
husband." Dad automatically made a face at that and it made me laugh. Whenever Mom wanted to be extra teasing, she used that, since it was what she would be expected to call him in Etruria. "Welcome back, Rath." She leaned up to kiss his cheek, hand resting on his shoulder. She lingered a bit, and I wondered if she was whispering in his ear. But, if she was, Dad gave no sign. He was a master at what Cecilia called 'a poker face'.

So, instead, I pulled away from Dad's hug, not wanting to eavesdrop. Mom and Dad had their secrets, and that was... annoying, but fine. But sometimes, Mom forgot how keen my hearing was.

Sue didn't, though, and the quiet trickster part of her loved sneaking up on me. "Hello, Irene," she whispered in my ear. I playfully squeaked and stumbled back, as if thoroughly shocked. It was part of the old game, and her soft smile told me she still appreciated it. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes, I am," I reassured. I held still as she tilted her head to study my face, and smiled when she gently poked the skin around my eye. "Yes, I know. I'm still puffy. But I am feeling better."

"Okay." She hugged me, pressing her cheek to mine affectionately. "Love you, sister."

"Love you too, sis." I pulled away, and prodded her cheek. "How did your first real hunt go?"

"I missed my first shot." Her eyes narrowed slightly and her head dropped. "My second one didn't, but my first did."

"I bet you fired the second one so fast no one even noticed."

"Dad did."

"Dad notices everything." Since she still looked disappointed, I started tickling her to make her squirm. "Cheer up! You're the second-best hunter in all of Sacae!" Dad was the best, no questions about that. The best warrior of the plains.

"Fifth. Dad, Grandpa, Sin, and you are better than me."

"I am stronger and more accurate perhaps, but you are faster, which is much more important during a hunt."

"You would be faster if you did not overanalyze everything."

"You would be stronger if you actually did those exercises I showed you." Laughter caught my attention, and I turned to sulk at my parents. Mom might have been the only one laughing, but Dad was smiling indulgently at us as Mom leaned into his side. "I am thrilled that you are amused." But that did remind me. "Sue, Mom didn't believe me when I said she was the best mother ever."

"..." Sue's immediate reaction was to go to Mom's side, hugging her tightly. "You are. As always, you are the best mom for us."

"I have the sweetest girls," Mom laughed. I huffed a little at how she dismissed it again. "But your father is going to feel unloved at this rate." ACK!

Sue and I immediately pounced on Dad, Mom moving out of the way to make it easier for us. He squirmed under our dual-hug, eyes wide as he struggled to make sure all three of us didn't fall. Mom laughed and laughed, clapping her hands in delight, and Dad eventually smiled, clearly pleased that Sue and I were happy.

We were a silly little family, and the others of the Kutolah looked at us fondly as we laughed. I
loved it. This had to be the definition of bliss.

After redoing my chores, Sue and I went out on our daily ride. It was a tradition that started with our parents. In order to help us sleep, they would take us out on a ride. When I turned fifteen, I would take Sue out by myself. Now that she was fifteen, though, we both just rode our own horses.

"Ah, this is the life," I breathed. We had stopped by a river to let the horses drink and rest, so Sue and I had flopped down in the grass, watching the clouds pass by overhead. "We should pick some flowers to bring back."

"We should," Sue agreed. She sounded half-asleep. That wasn't normal.

"...Did I keep you awake?"

"No, I found it hard to sleep. I miss him too."

"...Thanks." It was nice, hearing that bit of reassurance. I would get weepy all the time. "It's hard to believe it has been a year..." I reached up to the sky, as if to catch a cloud. "I still can't quite process it."

"It's because Mildain was a skilled rider." 'Was' was the key word. Mildain was dead. There had been some riding accident, and he had died. "That makes us question it."

"He rode that horse because of her unnatural calm." I just couldn't think of what would have spooked her that much. That mare shrugged off everything from rambunctious children to floods. "There are so many questions." Then, there was... well...

"You worry for Etruria." Sue lifted herself up slightly to look at me. I just looked up at the sky. "The king is broken and his son is dead."

"You would think I would take advantage of that to just live and focus here in Sacae." But I couldn't. Etruria was not 'home', and it had such strange practices. I hated how false it appeared under the crystal spires and laughing masks. But... "I had wanted it to be better. I can see how it could have been." I laughed bitterly, twisting to face her. "You don't feel as torn, do you?"

"Not in the same way." Sue lied back down, studying the sky. "I feel bad for our friends and family who are there." Yes, I could understand that. "But I do not like Etruria. I like some of the people within it, but that is the extent of it all. So, I am torn, because I know our friends grieve, but not in the same way you feel."

"I wish I could just think that way."

"You are you, and I am me. We are sisters, not the same person."

"Look at you, spouting wisdom like a diviner." I rolled over on my stomach and poked her in the side. "May I remind you that you are the younger sister here?"

"You think too much. Then you get mad and charge forward." I groaned in reply, wishing I could refute that. You would think with two calm parents, I would be calm like Sue, but I wasn't. "I like that, though. I like how you are brave enough to show what you're feeling. I'm always scared."

"I envy your ability to remain calm." The two of us looked at each other, and just started laughing. Sue's were quieter than mine. She was always quieter. I often feared she was trapped in my shadow, but she seemed content. So long as she was happy, I wouldn't bring it up. "What do you
think the serious business is?"

"Mom and Dad will tell us. If it's serious, then she'll need to leave." Mom was a Master Tactician for Etruria, and was the brightest tactical mind in all of Elibe. Uncle Douglas would request her help for really big things. "Maybe we'll go stay with Aunt Lyn and Uncle Hector in Ostia. I'm sure Lilina will want to talk about her crush on Roy."

"She can also share with us some Lorca tales." Aunt Lyn had been of the destroyed Lorca tribe, but she still taught Lilina the customs, and Lilina taught us. Sue and I taught some of the other Kutolah. In that way, Aunt Lyn's tribe would live on. "We might also go stay with Uncle Eliwood in Pherae."

"We could help him with things. He's pretty ill, isn't he?" I didn't think he was on the verge of dying, but Uncle Eliwood apparently couldn't even ride his horse anymore. "Then again, this is the peak hunting season, so we'll probably just stay here."

"That isn't so bad. It is easiest to hear Mother Earth and Father Sky here in the plains." That was true. "We should head back. Mom will be done with dinner soon."

"We won't want to miss that!" I hopped onto my feet and held out a hand to pull Sue up. "Let's head home. You think Grandpa will join us again?"

"He'll probably show up in time for the sweets." We shared a smile. "Let's gallop back. It will be good to feel the wind."

"Sounds good."

Dinner was, as always, a quiet affair. When I was really little, Dad had been the one to cook, but as I got older, Mom took over the job, leaving Dad to just make the tea for us to drink. After dinner, just as always, Dad would tend to his bow, I would read, and Mother and Sue would handle any mending that needed to be done. It was a quiet sense of contentment. I always got the feeling that Mom and Dad were happiest in these sorts of moments.

So, it was a surprise when Mom set aside her mending and looked at me. "Irene, what do you think about riding to Pherae alone?" she asked me. I stared at her dumbly as I dragged myself out of my book of Sacaean stories and returned to the present. The book used to be Mom's, but she had given it to me as a child when I learned how to read. "Do you think you're up for it?"

"Yes?" I answered, still really confused. What was going on? "Why?"

"There is no need to be so suspicious!" Mom laughed, but that just made me more confused. "I told you earlier about the message I got, yes?" I nodded, glancing at Sue. She gave me a silent little shrug, telling me she had no idea what was going on either. Dad, however, was perfectly stoic, showing he did. "There is possibly going to be some trouble in Lycia soon. Hector is calling together the Lycian army in order to deal with the problem." That sounded bad. "His illness prevents him from attending himself, though, so he must send Roy."

"Roy's fifteen!" That was old enough to ride on your own. That was old enough to hunt. That was not old enough to lead an army! Even if it was just the cavalry of Pherae, that was just…

"That is precisely why Eliwood asked for help." Mom's eyes grew sad. "However, my own health hasn't been so well as of late, so I fear going myself. I was wondering if you would mind."

"I'll leave in the morning!" There was no way I was leaving Roy to lead that army alone! "I
promise; I'll keep him nice and safe."

"Thank you, Irene." Mom's smile was warm, but a little sad. "Ah, my little girls are growing up. Soon, you'll fly away."

"...Mom, I'm just going to Pherae. I'll see you again when the trouble calms down."

"When I left my own nest, I met a very lovely, very wonderful person I fell in love with~" Mom laughed as Dad's eyes narrowed. "It is true, Rath. You cannot deny it. And you cannot pretend to be overprotective. We agreed Irene and Sue make their own choices on that front."

"I did not say anything."

"I will," I promised. That was one of the two things Dad had insisted when Mom started teaching me tactics. I had to be willing to delegate, and I had to know how to fight. Mom got into a lot of trouble health wise because she hadn't done either. "But, Mom, are you sure I'm skilled enough to deal with the trouble?"

"Yes, Irene," Mom instantly replied. "I believe in you." I gave her a dubious look. "Come now. You do well in my lessons." Perhaps that was the case, but I was well aware that I wasn't as good as her. If people called me second to her, there was a great chasm between us. Mom was the perfect genius, the ultimate tactician. I was... just her daughter. "You will be fine. I have faith." I was glad someone did. I think I would say an extra prayer to Mother Earth and Father Sky tonight for luck. "But I had better fix your clothes if you are leaving in the morning. You caused quite a rip on your shirt yesterday."

"That wasn't my fault!"

Morning came early the next day. The sky was grey and foggy as I checked over my saddle. I had extra food and water just in case I couldn't find an animal to hunt or a stream to make camp by, changes of clothes, my horse-tending kit, and Mom was currently doing her best to fill up every free space in my saddlebags with books and papers.

"Mom, will I really need that many things?" I asked with a laugh. She frowned as she tried to figure out how to put in the very last book. "What even is that?"

"It's my logbook from the Campaign of Fire," she answered. I gaped at it. That was it? I had always wanted to read it! "I also put in my logbook of the Caelin Inheritance Dispute and some of my notes from both campaigns that didn't make it into the logbooks. You are likely going to get very bored, so I figured I'd give you some new things to study." She slipped the book in at last, smiling. "There, done."

"You're the best!" I gave her a giant hug. "Thanks, Mom!"

"You're welcome, sweetling." Mom returned the hug, and she clung a little. "...I love you very, very much, Irene. Don't doubt that."

"That's a weird thing to say." I pulled away, smiling at her. "Of course I'll never doubt that. I love you too."

"Well, I'm sending my baby girl off. Allow a mother to fret." She stroked my hair, and after a moment, removed her earrings. "Here, take these." She put them in my palm. "It will reassure me that you are protected." She looked... odd without them. I had never seen her without an agate
protection earring in one ear, and an amber drop in the other. They were as consistent as her leg brace, the headband in her hair, and her wedding ring. "Indulge me?"

"I'll give them back when I see you again." I slipped them into my pocket and gave her another hug. "I love you soooo much!"

"I love you more." Mom stepped back, and smiled at Dad as he walked up. "Has Dayan recovered from the shock of one of his granddaughters going off on her own?"

"Yes, but an emergency came up, so he won't be able to see her off himself," Dad answered. He slipped a necklace on me. "That is from him. A safe-travels charm." The wooden pendant, a carved wolf, was still warm. He must have just finished making it. "Have you gotten your bow yet?"

"No, that was going to be the last thing," I replied. I was feeling jittery now. I had never left the tribe on my own before. "Why?"

"Then take this instead." Father held out his bow. "Rienfleche should hold up better than your bow."

"Dad…" I knew what he was saying. He wasn't going to be there to protect me, so he wanted to be there in spirit. "Um… isn't this the bow that somehow shoots twice for one arrow?"

"Yes, but given your skill, I believe its might will be weakened some. That is the magic in it." So, it wouldn't be ultimate bow of death and destruction until I practiced more. Well, that was a motivator if there ever was one. "Be careful."

"I will." I grabbed him in a tight hug. "I love you, Dad. I'll be strong enough to bring out the full might of the bow when I next see you. I promise."

"I look forward to it." He kissed the top of my head. "I love you more, Irene." My eyes pricked a bit with tears. No, I didn't want to cry. That would make them worry.

Thankfully, Sue was there with the save. "Mom, I managed to fix the chain," she explained, passing me another necklace. It was one Mom carried but rarely wore, some family heirloom of Hanover house that was supposed to bring good luck. Mom said she didn't wear it because she said she had enough luck in her life. "I… took advantage to add some beads to the chain, though." They were beads carefully carved with wolves. I knew Sue had done it herself. "It is the only token I have for you, Irene. I am not nearly as fast in carving."

"Then you have to give me an extra big hug," I teased. I slipped the necklace on and she immediately gave me the hug. "I'll see you later, Sue."

"Stay safe until Father Sky brings you back to us." Sue stepped back, and I decided it was time to mount up. I'd never leave otherwise. "I'll have a proper gift when you get back."

"I look forward to it!" I waved to my family, and they waved back, smiling at me. "I'm off! Love you all!"

I kicked my horse into a gallop and headed south for the horizon. Here was to an adventure of a lifetime!

Since I'm going to be an 'official' tactician for this… oh, Mother Earth, I'm going to be an 'official tactician' for the first time. I'm really nervous…
...I'm just going to make notes on myself now, okay?

Me, Irene of the Kutolah (and Hanover House)

- At the insistence of my parents, I am trained in archery as well as tactics, fighting on horseback like Dad. Compared to Sue, I am stronger and more accurate, but I'm slower. I'm only more accurate because I take my time. So, really, I'm just stronger.
- I've had tactical lessons from Mom since I was little, but she focused a lot on 'field tactics' for me. She says I have a gift for it, but I think it is more accurate that I'm not really good with the whole 'long term strategy' thing for armies? I'm nervous about helping Roy with an army, but I'll have people to help me out. ...I hope.
- I... do have a bit of a temper, and when I'm mad, I will sometimes forget things like 'don't go after pointless battles'? I'm better when I'm commanding people, but I have been known to hunt people down when I am really mad. Like that time I chased Sin for half a day because he broke Sue's toy and made her sad.
- I tried out Dad's bow on the hunt, and discovered the magic in it won't activate for me, essentially putting it at half-strength. There must be a powerful and wise spirit in it, just like the spirits in Aunt Lyn's Mani Katti. I will have to work hard to prove as worthy of it as Dad.
- Oh, I should write down my affinity! It is important to know what spirits watch over everyone, because that can effect how people work together. My affinity is Light, the opposite of Dad's. He always looks relieved when it comes up, for some reason.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Welcome to A Tactician's Legacy. This is an FE6 novelization, and this is our POV char, Irene. Yes, she fights as well as does tactics, but she will eventually serve more as the 'field tactician', leaving the long-term planning to other characters. (And yes, while Irene has Rienfleche, it's at 'half-strength', basically putting it at around 10 might, or about the might of a Steel Bow). Since FE6 doesn't have a 'prologue' chapter, but instead jumps straight to chapter one, I am using a 'prologue' to introduce Irene, and showcase her relation with her sister, Sue, and her parents.

This is a direct sequel to my FE7 novelization, A Tactician's Testimony, and will be including details also from A Thief's Legacy (mostly when backstory of the Scouring starts popping up) and possibly some from A Thief's Testimony (these will likely be more of brief mentions for characterization purposes).

FE6 is an interesting game in that it was never localized, meaning that I am dependent on fan translations. There are two currently, and I will likely be relying more on the newer one than the older one, if only because that is the version I am replaying to remind myself of plotpoints. Some of the older one's, however, will still be used, if only because I think SF only has the script for the older one. FE6 also has a manga adaptation. While I have some mixed feelings on it (mostly the protagonist), I will be taking some plot points or setups from it as well (I'll do my best to make notes of when this
happens).

As always, if you are curious about potential pairings, simply message me, but since romance isn't the focus, I'm not going to announce it in the author's notes here. But I hope you all enjoy!

Next Chapter – Dawn of Destiny, FE6 proper
Chapter 1) Dawn of Destiny

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 1) Dawn of Destiny

The trip to Pherae was a little lonely. I had never been on my own for a prolonged period of time. Mom and Dad both made sure we had our space when Sue and I needed it, but also made sure we didn't feel alone-alone. Mom was always supportive of us, and Dad was always certain he was there, to teach us or be the shoulder to cry on. Grandpa said it's because they knew what it meant to 'be alone'. I just kind of assumed it was part of their awesomeness. Seriously, I have the best parents.

Rambling again. The trip was lonely, and the rumors I heard from other tribesmen and merchants as I passed by the border between Sacae, Bern, and Lycia were… unnerving. Bern was launching a war? Why? While I had never met Zephiel in person, he and Mother wrote a lot, and I used to peek at the letters. Everything about his words seemed kind, reasonable, if lonely. It was like Mom was one of the few people who understood him, and his respect for her practically bled from the ink. Even when his words became angrier, more frustrated at everything, as they had in recent years, I could see it.

So, why would he launch a war? Didn't he know Mom would oppose him with everything she had?

Why was Pherae so far away? I suppose it didn't help that when I'd left, the Kutolah had been on its way to Bulgar for the Sky Festival. …Aw, I was going to miss that this year. I loved the Sky festival. The city was always packed and you could feel the energy pulsing through the air. It was amazing!

Sighing to myself, I rode through the woods not far from Pherae, glad to be out of the mountains at last. I always felt wrong, climbing and riding on mountains. It was like I was riding on Mother Earth's spine or something, and then there was how Mom was just always uncomfortable. I've been told she fell down a mountainside once and that's why she was uneasy. Though she maintains it was one of the best things that happened to her, since it was because of that she met Aunt Lyn and, eventually, everyone. Still, mountains made me nervous. One wrong move, or one spooked horse, meant you were tumbling down and down. I was glad to just be in the woods. You could hear a tree falling more easily than you could hear something that would spook a horse!

…Wait, why was I hearing clanging?

Clicking my tongue to catch my horse's attention, I changed my path slightly so I could exit out of the woods already, instead of taking the path down and around like I had originally planned. When I got out of the trees, my eyes narrowed at what I saw. Fighting. There was fighting, a large group of bandits and a small group of not-bandits. This was… weird. Why hadn't the Pheraean knights obliterated them already?

Something was definitely wrong. I should try to find a way to contact Roy or Uncle Eliwood and figure out how to proceed from there. It was dangerous to just charge into the middle of a battle…

The sound of hooves beating the ground caught my ear, and I turned to see a person in red armor
coming right for me. I opened my mouth to greet them, only to yelp as I had to quickly dodge. He hadn't stopped!

He also hadn't stopping to apologize for nearly running me over. Instead, he turned to come for me again, sword flashing in the sunlight as he swung it up to try and decapitate me.

"Look, can we talk for a second?" I asked, ducking under the sword. This was a little nuts. "Seriously, why are you attacking me?" I would have just attacked back by this point, but the armor was Pheraean. Was there a rebellion? …No, that was ridiculous. No one would rebel against Uncle Eliwood. It was as preposterous as the idea of a rebellion in Ostia.

"Die, bandit!" …Bandit? Bandit? What sort of bandit rode a horse?! A good horse at that!

"Hey, can we stop with the attempted stabbing and start with some listening?!" The sword flashed, gouging my cheek. Okay, I was done. I was done, and I was mad, and if he wasn't going to listen, then I was going to make him!

I reached down into my pack, and started hunting for a good, strong book that didn't hold a lot of sentimental value. I relied on my lovely horse to dodge the knight's strikes until I got the perfect book, one on Etrurian strategies. Then, as the knight's guard opened up, I threw it as hard as I could at his face.

He yelped when it struck him perfectly, blood trickling down from a busted nose. "Now are you going to listen?" I growled, annoyed. He blinked slowly at me. "The attempted murder got old real quick."

"You threw a book at me!" he yelped. My, what wonderful observation skills he had. "You threw a book at me!"

"I applied physics on your face so that you could stop attempting to murder me."

"What sort of bandit has a book?"

"What sort of bandit has a good horse?!

"...That's a good horse?" I could feel what remained of my temper fraying. I really could. "It looks so weak, though." OKAY, MISTER, PHERAN KNIGHT OR NOT, I WAS GOING TO-

"Allen, what are you doing?" I just went ahead and glared at the approaching cavalier. Green armor to the other's red, he blinked slowly before sighing. "Allen, what did you do?" he sighed. "Miss, I apologize for whatever my hotheaded, reckless partner did. He gets rather zealous in defense of Lord Roy, and-

"Roy is here?" I demanded, just not in the mood. Green Knight nodded slowly. "Good. Either lead me to him or bring him to me. Before I apply physics with something sharp."

"...Allen, get Lord Roy." Red Knight hesitated but eventually nodded and rode off. "Might I ask your name, miss?"

"You may ask, but I'm not answering." This was just aggravating! Weak horse?! How dare he?! "I just want to find out what's going on, and I'm going to find out from Roy."

"Lord Roy."

"I don't call him by title." Green Knight's eyes narrowed, and I could see him tensing. "If you
"I'm attacking back, Pheraen armor or not. And I guarantee you. You will miss and I won't."

"Irene?" Slowly, I glanced down to see Roy walking up, Red Knight behind him. "Irene, what are you doing here?" he asked, eyes wide and voice very confused. "Aren't the Kutolah normally near Bulgar at this time of year?"

"Yes, and I'm here trying not to get stabbed by your knights." I dismounted, raking a hand through my hair in irritation. It pulled some strands out of my ponytail, but I didn't care. "...I need a hug."

Roy laughed a little and hopped over, giving me a warm one that I returned. "It is good to see you, though I remain confused." He smiled kindly at me, and I slowly felt myself relaxing. "So, what happened?"

"Your red knight over there ambushed me, complained about me throwing a book at him, insulted my horse…" I glared at Red Knight over Roy's head. "Give me my book back, by the way."

"No way!" he immediately yelped. My temper was fraying again. "You threw it at me!"

"And you tried to stab me! So give me back my book, you little-!"

"Peace, peace!" Roy pleaded. He sighed. "I'm already in a nightmare scenario with the castle under attack."

"Speaking of which, what is going on?" I asked, letting the subject turn. Roy looked so frazzled. "Red Knight-"

"Allen."

"Allen called me a bandit, so I'm assuming that there's a bandit attack. Somehow. Where's Harken? Isn't the normal strategy just throw him at them for some light exercise?"

"Harken, Isadora, Lowen, and Rebecca are inside the castle from what Lance told me." He gestured to Green Knight, who bowed in the saddle. Allen and Lance, red and green knights. I was reminded of Uncle Sain and Uncle Kent, though the armor colors were switched. "The province is undermanned due to war preparations, so it's really only them, and some bandits did manage to make it inside."

"...So there's some truth to those rumors." I sighed, reaching back to undo and redo my ponytail. "Well, Roy, would you like me to assist? This isn't really a battle that needs a lot of tactical, but I do have my bow."

"I would gladly take a mounted archer, Irene. Wolt tries, but he just can't run fast." Roy smiled warmly before his expression blanked. "Ah, yes." He turned to the two knights. "Lance, Allen, this is Irene of the Kutolah Tribe and Hanover House. She's Aunt Katri's eldest daughter, and is like my big sister."

"I'm here to help my cute little brother lead an army, and really do not appreciate a reckless idiot insulting my horse and trying to stab me."

"You can give Allen lessons on what constitutes a good horse after we've dealt with the bandits? Lilina went ahead to the castle-"

"What do you mean Lilina's in there?!" I quickly mounted up, unhooking my bow and quiver. "Lend me your two knights and head to the castle with the rest of whoever is here with you, Roy."
"Thanks, Irene." He smiled warmly before turning his attention to the two knights. "Allen, Lance, listen to Irene as you would me." Allen looked sheepishly annoyed, while Lance simply nodded. "I'll see you inside the castle, you three."

"Don't hold back, Roy. This isn't training, and that bandit really will kill you."

"I know." He gave me a look, and I shrugged. It was practically my job to worry. "Stay safe."

"You too."

Since I came into the battle about halfway through, routing the bandits didn't take much time at all, especially when Harken, Isadora, Lowen, and Rebecca came out to reinforce. They were going with Marcus to ensure the villages were safe, leaving the rest of us to head inside and wipe off the blood and sweat. Of course, as soon as Roy and I had cleaned ourselves up a little, we went to a little study where Uncle Eliwood and Lilina had been hiding.

It took me a second to recognize Uncle Eliwood and, even then, it was mostly because of his bright red hair. I knew the stress of losing Aunt Ninian, ruling a province, and his own illness had hit him hard, but… but Uncle Eliwood was only thirty-seven. He looked like he was approaching his fifties. I could also see how he was having trouble standing, even when using a desk. Uncle Eliwood, who would race horses with Dad when we visited, who used to play tag with me… he could barely stand.

I… had never really thought of him as 'mortal' before. Yes, he was human, and yes, like all humans, he was mortal and he would die eventually. I got that, logically. But it was always 'eventually'. It was always something that would happen 'one day'. He, like my parents, had always been larger than life, a goal that I chased after and could never reach. He, like them, was part of my ideal. They were my heroes, my role models, the stars I guided my actions by. They shouldn't be able to die. They were supposed to always be there.

"My, what's this I see?" Uncle Eliwood noted gently, smile warm and kind as always. Roy darted over to Lilina to check on her, allowing us two to talk. "I think I see an Irene."

"Yeah, I came to visit," I replied. I could not force myself to smile, not in the wake of realizing he was very close to death, so I stepped forward to give him a hug. He felt so thin. "Mom sent me to help Roy."

"I figured she would when I sent the message." He pulled away, cupping my face. "Here, let me look at you."

"Uncle Eliwood, I haven't changed so much in the year it's been. I still have the same green hair, the same amber eyes, and I'm still wearing blue-colored Kutolah clothes."

"Yes, but it seems like every year, you take more after your mother. Though, it's easy to see Rath in your looks as well."

"That makes sense. Children look like both their parents. Even Roy, who looks like a younger you, has physical traits from Aunt Ninian." He also had some 'not quite physical' things, like being incredibly tolerant to cold. "…Are you going to be okay, Uncle Eliwood?"

"My health is still holding, and it is not consumption. So long as I rest, and take the medicines given to me, I should eventually recover." Strangely, that was not as reassuring as it should have been. "Now, Roy, are you well?"
"I'm fine, Father," Roy answered easily. His smile was warm as both he and Lilina came over. "The others took good care of me." The smile fell for a serious look. "Your message said I had to return urgently. Is it what I think it is?"

"Yes, Bern has started to invade Lycia," Uncle Eliwood confirmed. I must have looked really startled because he immediately grimaced. "Forgive me, Irene. When I sent that message to Katri, there was only some troubling news from some spies that Bern was prepping for war somewhere. I had assumed they were going for Etruria."

"Etruria is weakened due to Mildain's death, so it does make a better target than Lycia," I murmured. I crossed my arms to hide my clenched fists. What was going to happen to the Sacae? What was going to happen to Etruria? What was going to happen to Lycia? This was all madness! "I assume you thought Lycia would only have to deal with strays?"

"Yes, but it seems King Zephiel is determined to wage war against the entire continent, instead of having everyone dragged in little by little." This was nuts. "Who would have thought twenty years would make a sweet child like him do something like this?" Uncle Eliwood shook his head. "Regardless, though, we have our duties."

"We have to honor the ancient pact and sworn oaths," Roy confirmed. His eyes were certain, but I saw his hands shaking. "Pherae must join the rest of the alliance."

"Yes, and we're already a bit late since I had to call you from your studies," Uncle Eliwood sighed. "I'm sorry, Roy."

"Don't be, Father. I'm glad to be able to help you." Roy smiled warmly. It did not hide his fear very well. "Besides, I have Marcus to help me keep the army organized, and if Irene is here, then I won't have to fret about tactics."

"Merlinus will be going with you to help with inventory and finances."

"See then, Father? I will be fine. I have everyone working to help me."

"I can go too!" Lilina volunteered suddenly. Roy all but jumped, startled, and I knew I was frowning. They were too young... "My magic could be helpful, right?"

"Yes, but you can be more helpful at Ostia," Uncle Eliwood gently refused. I could see Lilina's jaw lock stubbornly. "Hector is not in Ostia, and there is war on the horizon. For the people's sake, it is best that you return to Ostia and help Lyn govern."

"...Fine..." Lilina didn't look happy at all about that. "I'll go home." But when Uncle Eliwood reached out to ruffle her hair, she darted behind me to hide. Yeah, she wasn't happy about this at all. She understood, but...

"So, we're heading to Araphan or something?" I asked, mostly to direct the subject away from Lilina. "I remember hearing something about that while traveling."

"Ah, yes," Uncle Eliwood confirmed. He looked a little hurt, but there wasn't really anything I could do. He was doing what he thought best, and Lilina didn't agree it was the best, even if she could see the logic. "But first, you will need to head to the border. I hired some mercenaries to help bolster the forces some. Harken, Isadora, Rebecca, and Lowen will remain with me here in Pherae to take care of bandit threats."

"And Imalia is staying because she broke her leg, right?" Roy asked. When Uncle Eliwood nodded, I wondered if Harken and Isadora were a little relieved that their daughter wouldn't be going off to
war like the rest of us. "Thank you, Father."

"You'll be fine." Uncle Eliwood reached out to Roy, and Roy hugged his father tightly. "You head out and show everyone just who the next Marquess of Pherae will be."

"I will. I promise. I'll make you proud."

"You already do, Roy." Well, this looked like adorable father-son bonding that I really shouldn't be eavesdropping on, so instead, I nudged Lilina out of the study with me, shutting the door behind us. She immediately walked away, shoulders tense with hidden frustration. I would let her be for now, but that did mean I needed to figure out something to do…

…Allen never did give return my book. I was going to cheer myself up by getting it back. Now.

The Huntress was unarmed. The Pack was facing us. The Lady was unchained. The Eagle was resting. The Horse wasn't rearing. The Dragon was… the Dragon was awake, but it was not baring fiery fang. It was warning that something old was walking, that the past was returning to the present, for good or ill.

…I should really read through Mom's notes. If the past was returning, and war was on the horizon, then things were just going to get very messy, very quickly.

"Are you reading the stars?" I turned and smiled as Lilina walked up. "You do that a lot," she murmured. "Mother says Aunt Katri used to do it a lot."

"Yeah, she always says it reassures her," I murmured. I shifted over so she could lean against the railing too. "After all, the stars are Father Sky telling us that there is light in the darkness, no matter how bad things seem." Father Sky used the stars to give warnings and advice to the people of the Plains. Diviners read them, but Mom taught me what she had learned. "So, what's up? Were you looking for me?"

"Yes. I wanted to tell you that I am sending Bors with you. Lowen and Rebecca will escort me to Ostia and then return." She sighed, slumping. "I wish I could fight with you all."

"It's going to be the real thing. It's not like Cecilia training you and Roy."

"I know. That's why I want to be with everyone. I'm going to be fretting and worrying the whole time, wondering if you're getting injured or if I could've helped at all." She glanced down at her hands. "I know why Uncle Eliwood is sending me home. I do not have my parents' gifts. I am frailer in body than both of them. I am only decently fast. I have none of my mother's skill, or my father's strength. I only have my magic."

"Your very powerful magic."

"Yes, I can blow up a wall with a fire tome. That's not very useful outside of anything but a war." She looked at me, eyes sad. "This is my home too. I can't be as strong as my parents, but I can learn to be strong enough, right? All I'm good for is smiling like a pretty doll to reassure people, but can't I learn? Why can't I protect my home like everyone else?"

"I would use age, but you're actually a few months older than Roy." I sighed, drooping. I knew the feelings she had. I was not as smart or clever as Mom. I was not as strong or skilled as Dad. I just had to hope I would be enough, and I was desperately afraid I would never be. They were the impossible goal that I strove for anyway because I loved and admired them so much. "Okay, Lilina, I'll make you a deal." I held out my pinky for a pinky swear. "You return to Ostia, and do
what you can to help Aunt Lyn keep things running smoothly, and I will plead your case to Uncle Hector."

"You will?" Her eyes widened, but she finally smiled. "Oh, thank you!" She hooked her pinky around mine for the pinky swear before tackling me with a hug. "Thank you! Thank you! I knew you would understand!"

"Yes, I do." I hugged her back. "But you can understand why I will insist on you being stationed near me, right?"

"Yes, it's so you can protect us, like you always have." She pulled back, smiling warmly. "You're the best, Irene!"

"Hey, keep in mind that it'll be me going up against stubborn Uncle Hector." She simply laughed and I smiled. "Now, I've an idea. Why don't you room with me tonight? I'll share you some gossip from the Kutolah, and you can vent to me about things."

"Like my feelings for Roy? I know you will trick them out of me!" I grinned in reply and she sighed with a little smile. "It does sound like fun, though. Yes, let's do that!"

I knew she was also agreeing because I could reassure her, repeatedly, that things would eventually be fine, and she knew I would do so no matter how many times she asked. I didn't mind.

The nomads of the plains do not abandon their fellows. The sorrow of my dear friends was my sorrow, their anger was my anger, their fear was my fear. That was simply the way of the Sacae. I would not leave them to fight this alone. Even though I was certain I would not be enough help.

She ran off, likely to go fetch a change of clothes, and I returned my gaze back to the stars. I wondered if Mom and Dad were also watching the stars. Did they see the Dragon was awake too? Why was it awake? What was going on? There was a war, started by someone Mom adored, and the past was haunting the present.

What sort of mess were we being dragged into?

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**Notes on Roy**

- *Since he's trained in Pheraen arts more than anything, he's a rather balanced fighter, which could be good or bad depending.*
- *Favors a thrusting style, but learned Etrurian dueling from Cecilia (who learned from Perceval in case she was ever without a tome) in his studies, which does give him a measure of unpredictability.*
- *He's also learned some tactics from Mom, and has a cunning streak that many don't expect from someone his age. It'll be fun working together on tactics!*
- *He's kind, noble, and idealistic, but I know he worries about succeeding his much loved father, and I know one reason he refuses to fight on horseback, despite being a good rider, is to try and avoid being caught in his father's shadow.*
- *His affinity is fire. For some reason, everyone looked rather uncomfortably amused about it whenever it comes up.*

**Notes on Allen**

- *Reminds me of Uncle Sain, except for the whole red armor thing and being slightly less dramatic. Despite attacking me with a sword, he is best with lances, meaning he does take into account weapon advantage unlike Uncle Sain.*
Hot headed and charges without thinking. Also has no eye for horses. (Yes, I'm still mad about that!) Despite his zealouons, he is capable of being sheepish. Though he refuses to give me back my damn book.

His horse is of Hanover stock, one of the more balanced ones. If he can be trained properly, he will actually be a rather powerful soldier, with both speed and strength to trample enemies.

That said, his horse is of Hanover stock, one of the more balanced ones. If he can be trained properly, he will actually be a rather powerful soldier, with both speed and strength to trample enemies.

That said, he's horribly slow right now, as he doesn't seem to know you can use a horse's speed for more than just charging forward or something. The poor horse… he better at least be taking proper care of the poor thing!

Like Roy, his affinity seems to be fire.

Notes on Lance

Reminds me of Uncle Kent, just with green armor instead of red. They're both rather calm and stoic. Though, unlike Uncle Kent, he seems to specialize in lances just like Allen. Shouldn't one of them have gone with swords to balance things out?

Seems to have a complex about something, though he's tightlipped about it. I'm sure it'll come out in time. Until then, it's best to not ask. Outsiders and lies go hand in hand, especially when they are being defensive.

Like Allen, his horse is Hanover stock, one of the faster breeds. Unlike Allen, he actually knows how to take advantage of said speed, earning twice as many attacks in as Allen.

Despite this, though, he seems to be lacking in strength, so while he is capable of doing a lot of damage, his weapons might not last as long, and he is at risk of counterattacks.

His affinity seems to be anima, like Grandpa.

Notes on Wolt

One of Roy's oldest friends, though he and I have never been close. He's Rebecca and Lowen's son. I think they're milk-brothers, since I'm pretty sure Rebecca was Roy's nursemaid. Aunt Ninian wasn't strong enough after the birth to take care of such things herself.

Perhaps due to being raised by a knight and a retainer, he has an overly dutiful, deferential personality. He shares his father's love of chivalry, and his mother's smile and talent for archery.

That said, he had actually been studying to be a cook until recently, so his natural talent is a little stunted. …I should give him some drills to try.

Speaking about cooking, he's a REALLY GOOD COOK! I still prefer Mom's cooking, but it's a close second. He's the designated cook of the army from now on.

Surprisingly for such a cheerful person, his affinity is ice.

Notes on Marcus

He's sixty years old. He's sixty years old, and has been fighting since he was twenty or twenty-one. Marcus, seriously, retire already! (Why is he coming with us instead of Harken?) …It's probably just mean of me, but I do stand by it. He's old and his joints pain him. He should be relaxing and enjoying what life he has left. Mother Earth, Mom's note about him serving until he was old and grey in the saddle was correct. Well, of course it was, Mom's never wrong, but still.

That said, he still remains skilled in lances, creaky joints aside, but it's clear he is not the powerful knight of twenty-years ago. He can guard people with the best of them, though, and help set up kills. I'm already making medicine to help relieve his arthritis.

He's also a bit grumpy about the younger knights and their lack of 'respect' or whatever grumpy old men complain about. But he has some of the best gossip about the army, since
people go to him for advice. He also seems to really enjoy the idea of Roy and Lilina getting together.

- While he'll fight in the early battles, I've a feeling he'll step down to ensure everyone's training goes well. Oh, right, I can work with him to create training regiments and schedules. That will be good.
- Suting his stoic calm, his affinity is ice.

Notes on Bors

- Easy going knight of Ostia who has the weirdest hair. How does he get it to stay down like that? ...That's not important. He is one of Lilina's knights, trained by Oswin personally. She sent him with us, though, because she's desperately worried.
- I think he has a little sister, actually. Lilina made a mention of her during our gossip talk. ...I miss Sue...
- Despite being an armor knight, it's rather obvious he was trained for defense in close quarters. I'm actually rather worried about him in open terrain.
- That said, he's rather fast with all that armor. Apparently he was drilled to run in heavier armor than what he actually wears.
- His affinity is wind, like Sue.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: While this is technically the first chapter, Irene coming in half way results in a lot of the dialogue being missed. So… ah… have some of Irene's temper? And her insecurities, and some of Lilina's insecurities, and really, when you're the children of heroes, I imagine there's a lot of issues with 'how good' you really are.

I added in mentions of Harken, Isadora, Lowen, and Rebecca, as the benefit of going from FE7 to FE6 is being able to decide what happens to the Fe7 chars who do not have their fates spelled out in the game or epilogue. The last lines here, about the sorrow and anger, is based off of Lyn's boss dialogue with Nergal.

Next Chapter – The Princess of Bern
Chapter 2) Captured Princess

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 2) Princess of Bern

Apparently, the mercenaries we were meeting had been working in Bern prior being hired. They're a small squad from the Bernese Hawks, and we're meeting them at a small village near the border of Bern and Pherae. It's a bit dangerous, since there is a fortress just on the other side of the mountains, but things should be fine. It's not like there's going to be anything wrong at a border castle yet. ...I think?

"What a beautiful little village," I murmured. It was small, but bustling, with the people smiling as we road through the main street. "Roy, nose out of the book. We're here."

"But it's about Bernese tactics," Roy complained. Still, he tilted his head back to smile at me. "Thanks for letting me ride with you so I could read."

"It's no trouble, Roy." I used to do the same thing a lot when I rode with Dad. "I just hope the book is helpful."

"I think so. It gives a general idea of what to expect, if nothing else." If only Mom had fought Bern… then there was no way we could lose. "Are you going to go practice your archery again?"

"Yes, I need to." If I could get to be half as good as Dad, then I could protect Roy and keep my promises. But that was going to be a lot of practicing.

"You're already better than Wolt, though?" That… wasn't all that hard. It was quite obvious he had taken it up recently. I'd cry if he were better than me, when I had been practicing since I was little. "Um… Irene?"

"Yes?"

"It wasn't a bad decision to take a small group ahead to Araphan while the rest of the Ph Eraean soldiers catch up, right?"

"No, the meeting at Araphan is supposed to just be everyone talking and working out tactics, right? No one is going to be fighting there yet. It's better for us to catch up. We're already a bit late since you had to travel to Pherae first."

"That's what I was thinking." He breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Irene. It's reassuring to know you think the same." Did Marcus and Merlinus give him a hard time? "Irene?"

"Yes?"

"I need you to stop if I'm to get down."

"Oh, right!" I clicked my tongue to get my horse to get her to stop and lifted my arms so he could more easily jump down. "I'll be on the outskirts practicing."

"Okay, then I will see you later." He waved as he walked off, and I rode through the village,
keeping an eye how the people reacted. Dad taught me that you could sense trouble in an area just by watching the people. Even when trying to behave as normal, there were tells. I think he learned during his time wandering. I still didn't know why he went wandering. He and Grandpa never wanted to talk about it.

Regardless, though, these people seemed genuinely relaxed, so I headed to a tree not far from the village and dismounted. Dad always says to start off practice by shooting on foot, and then work on shooting mounted. That way you were practicing mounted shooting in 'more real' conditions, with tired arms and eyes.

I focused on my breathing as I strung my bow and drew an arrow back. Pull back on the inhale, release on the exhale. Dad taught me that too, as a way of calming and centering myself. I needed it. I was so incredibly nervous. If I fought like Dad, and did tactical from Mom's notes, I should be fine… but that was a big if.

Dad was the best archer, the strongest hunter, of all the Sacae, which basically meant he was the best in all of Elibe because no one beat Sacaeans when it came to archery and hunting. Mom was the best tactical mind in Elibe, contested by no one. Really, if they were here, I knew things would be okay. But they weren't. I. Was. Would it really be okay? Could I really help Roy? Could I help Lilina? Could I help Uncle Eliwood and Uncle Hector? Could I really do it?

I didn't know. I just knew… I just knew that I did not want to lose another friend. Mildain's death still made my heart ache, even after a year. If I lost any more friends… if I lost any more family… n-no! No, I would not think it. Everyone would be fine. Uncle Eliwood said his health was recovering, and it wasn't like anyone could defeat Uncle Hector, Aunt Lyn, Dad, or Mom. No one could kill them! They were the best! That's why they were my goals. Even if I knew I would never make it, I still chased after their backs on the path, reaching out in vain hopes of catching up.

"E-excuse me…" I fired another arrow and turned, tilting my head at the strange girl standing in front of me. Her looks and accent were Bernese, but her garb was that of an Elimine cleric. "Oh, goodness, a Sacaean…" she breathed. My grip tightened on my bow. While people, for the most part, thought better of Sacaeans, you still sometimes had the ignorant idiots who called us 'savage'. "Did I make a wrong turn?" …Uh… "I must have… how could I get so lost that I made it to Sacae?"

"You… can't reach the Sacae from here," I told the girl. She looked startled by the words. "Sacae is to the north. The border city between it and Bern is Bulgar, the free city of the plains."

"But you are a plainswoman, yes?"

"Yes? But I am currently in Lycia. We are in Lycia." Actually… "Did you… hit your head?" Her eyes were really unfocused. Maybe she had a concussion?

"No, I'm fine. I must help my lady." If she didn't have a concussion, then she was absolutely exhausted, which meant she was going to faint. "I… really must…"

"You can't help anyone if you're about to pass out." I hooked my bow and half-empty quiver on my horse, and tugged the girl onto my back. "We'll get you help, but you have to help yourself first."

"Yes, that's what… Lady Serra… taught me…" Wait, hold on, she knew Aunt Serra?! How did…? Oh, right, Aunt Serra traveled to Bern once a year to help out teaching at her old church. She probably met her there. "I'm sorry. I'm so tired. I can't think straight."

"I figured when you couldn't think of a reason for a Sacaean to be in Lycia, and jumped straight to
'I must have somehow traveled a month's time to reach the Sacae.' "Carefully, I walked back, my horse following me faithfully. "Anything I need to know immediately?"

"My mistress is being held captive in the fort." ...What did I just get us caught up in? "And if you can make sure no men are around? I don't mind children, but I am... horribly shy... I even find it hard to talk to Zeiss sometimes, and he's a childhood friend."

"I'll stick near until you wake up."

"Oh, thank you..." She sounded half-out of it. She was definitely passing out. "My name is Elen..."

"Irene, of the Kutolah."

"It is very nice to meet you, Miss Irene."

Elen slept for a good few hours, and I bandaged up her injuries as she slept. She had some bruises on her arms, and scrapes on her hands. Her feet were actually bleeding, with the shoes worn through. It was easy to see why. They were 'noble' shoes, made to be pretty and comfortable, and to be worn inside places. They weren't really suited for walking about in the wilderness.

"Thank you again," she murmured. I brought her to Roy's room at the inn after she woke up. "Both for carrying me all the way here, and for the boots." Well, I couldn't let her go barefoot.

"So, what's going on exactly?" Roy asked. He was taking Elen's sudden appearance surprisingly well, and had waited for Elen to be properly seated at the table with him. "Irene told me something about a mistress?"

"Yes." Elen's eyes were rather confident when she wasn't half-mad with exhaustion. "My mistress and I were traveling to meet someone from the Lycia Alliance." That so? "But while we were passing through, we were captured by Ruud, the lord of the fortress here to the east." ...His name was Ruud? My, how rude of his parents to give him such a name. "Please, I need help... I have no fighting ability. I simply know how to heal."

"Your mistress?"

"My mistress is a magic user, but we don't have tomes." She slumped slightly then. "I had hoped to catch Miredy before she left, but was too late. Wyverns are too fast." Her mistress was someone ranked high enough to have a wyvern knight escort her? Combined with the shoes Elen had been wearing, and we definitely had a very important person being held captive.

"Roy, saving her mistress might involve a fight with Bernese soldiers," I pointed out. I shifted a bit, leaning against the wall by the window. "Actually, forget the 'might'. It will."

"Yes, but we also cannot abandon a guest of Lycia," Roy pointed out. His small smile told me he knew I was just giving him an opposing viewpoint to make him think. I did this a lot when he was studying. "Still, we cannot charge in carelessly. I want to help, but we must think of a good solution."

"Sadly, we have no fliers with us, but Lance is a rather quiet rider, so..." Movement outside caught my attention, and I glanced down to see Bernese soldiers rushing through the streets, attacking anyone in their path. "Mother Earth, do I ever love with You make the enemy stupid."

"Hmm?" Roy got up and walked to the window. "Ah, it seems like they provoked hostilities." He
sighed a little. "Merlinus is going to be mad."

"Point out that they attacked us, so it is completely fair to attack back. After all, we *must* save the civilians, and there is no reason for us to not continue all the way to the fortress to get Elen's mistress out of custody. We are simply making things safe."

"If he yells, I'm telling him this is your fault."

"Sure, go ahead. I'm as used to ignoring his lectures." I turned to smile at Elen. "The enemy made is a lot easier, so we're going to your mistress, okay?"

"Thank you so much!" Elen replied. She stood up and bowed to us. "Please, allow me to assist."

"Huh?" Roy looked so confused. "Oh, you don't have to do that," he reassured, turning to face her. "We're glad to help."

"But it is my fault you are tangled up in this mess." Wouldn't the soldiers be the ones to blame here? "Please, as I mentioned, I cannot fight, but I *can* heal. Let me be of some assistance?"

"But…"

"Roy, I will hurt you if you turn away a healer," I deadpanned. I held up a hand to stop his protest. "At the moment, Roy, we are dependent on things such as vulneraries and bandages to patch up injuries. Not only does this take up extra time, but that is going to be very expensive, very fast. While I do know medicinal herbs, I frankly can't fight, strategize, and play healer."

"I will be very careful and will listen to all orders faithfully," Elen added. Well, now she was looking stubborn. "Please…"

"I give up," Roy sighed. He shook his head, though, and smiled. "Please, don't strain yourself."

"I shan't. Thank you." Elen was a person who really liked telling people how grateful she was. "Miss Irene, you mentioned strategizing?"

"Yes, I'm helping out with tactics," I explained. I glanced outside the window again. Bernese soldiers were so… clumsy. Yeah, everything would be fine. Ha, Uncle Hector could probably kill them all without breaking a sweat. "First order of business is chasing them out of the village, so let's have Allen be a hothead like he always is."

"You're just mad that he still hasn't given you your book back," Roy teased. I ruffled his hair and nudged him out the door. "Let's go, everyone." Yes, let's.

Thanks to Allen charging like a maniac, and being very blessed by Father Sky to not even get injured in the mess, we managed to get the soldiers out of the village before too much damage was done, and charged our way around the mountains. The problem was… if I had doubts before that Elen's mistress was Very Important, then they would have been blown away by just how many soldiers were looking for a lady in waiting.

"Come on, Lance!" Allen laughed as we rode. We were using our mounts to reach the farther away enemies more quickly, leaving Roy to coordinate with Elen, Wolt, and Bors. Marcus was guarding Merlinus. Merlinus had not combat ability, and I was just too scared to let Marcus fight. "I lagged behind you during the last battle, but not this time! Watch and learn from my skill!"

"Of course, since I need to know what not to ever do," Lance *immediately* deadpanned. Allen
scowled, but Lance smiled. "I have no intention of losing to you in this battle either."

"My, such confidence from the calm and cool, Lance~ No need to try and impress Lady Irene. She's not biting."

"I am not trying to impress anyone."

"Really? Because it does make you popular. That's why those village girls kept giving you presents."

"...Wait, that's why? I thought they were just sharing surplus."

"Boys, I'm going to outdo both of you if you don't shut up," I pointed out dryly. For emphasis, I shot an opposing soldier through the neck. "Strategy is that I cripple, you kill, but if you two would rather let me stampede over you...?"

"I'll show you the strength of Pherae!" Allen growled, eyes determined as he charged forward. He cut down one soldier, and trampled another. "See?"

"I grew up with Uncle Eliwood. I think I know what Pherae's strength is." I smirked. "You'll need to try harder to impress me."

"Careful, he tends to get more reckless when he feels he has something to prove," Lance murmured. Still, he looked ready to laugh as Allen went right back to fighting. "Best chase."

"It's really not much of a chase with both of your horses so slow," I teased. I reached over to pet his horse on the nose. "But that's okay. Such a good horsie to have to deal with the knights."

"You definitely prefer horses to people." ...No, that wasn't really it. "You barely socialized with us during the ride here." I just... needed to study, and I was scared to get close to them. One wrong order from me meant they'd die. I'd rather study and keep my distance. "...Why is Allen so far ahead?"

"Because he's an idiot." Still, he wasn't outside my range, so I drew arrow and fired, taking out someone trying to go for his weaker left. "I love Dad's bow so much." It was just a really nice weapon. I could see why it was his preferred bow. "Let's cover him."

"Of course." We both charged forward. I glanced back, worried for Roy, but I could see he was using Bors to defend Elen, and having Wolt shoot from one of the trees while he darted about. Not bad. They'd be fine for a little longer, so long as we didn't give them more to worry about.

Eventually, the sound of wings fluttering caught my ear, and I looked up to see a pegasus knight flitting about. Bern rarely hired pegasus knights; they had their wyverns. But it was not uncommon to see pegasus knights training with mercenary groups, so...

"Hey, little flier!" I called up. A girl with short blue hair looked down. "If you're looking for Roy, he's a little farther back, but I'm the tactician in the group if you'd rather talk to me." ...It felt so odd to say that. 'The tactician'. It felt clunky. It sounded clunky.

"Okay!" But the pegasus knight didn't seem to care as she swooped down, giving me a bright smile. "My name is Shanna," she introduced. "My boss sent me to see if Lord Roy was here already, but wow, it seems like you're in trouble."

"How many? I understand it's a small group."
"Very small, but the best. Deke himself is here." Ah, I'd heard about him from Mother. Joined the Bernese Hawks about ten years ago, and still fought under the name. "Plus there's Lot and Wade. Deke is a sword user, and those two are axes." Well, considering we had a lot of lance users in front of us...

"Can you direct them to come back this way? We'll catch them in a pincer."

"Got it~" She lifted off again, a fast gallop up into the skies. Either someone was impatient, or they were teaching the new trainees different things now. Aunt Florina cantered, at the fastest.

"Allen, Lance, we're about to get reinforcements from behind," I called. Both of them nodded. "Be careful about attacking any axe or sword users." Though, it really did look like we just had archers and lance users right here. "Focus on the archers. The mercenaries have a pegasus knight."

We fell into the enemy, those two handling the archers while I sniped lance users from afar. It wasn't long at all before I saw two axe users joining the field. One was laughing, like this was a great big game, and the other one was calm and cool as he split heads. Well, I think we found two of our mercenaries. Shanna flitting overhead seemed to confirm that. Excellent.

"So, you're the tactician, yes?" I fired an arrow to cripple an archer aiming for Shanna before turning towards the voice. I... knew this man from somewhere. I knew I did. Where...? "The name is Deke, miss," he continued. "Jono decided the Pherae family was worth sending me out for." Jono used to be the leader of the Bernese Hawks, but after retiring, he just handled out contracts, basically serving as a 'guild master' for non-Ilian mercenaries. "Mind pointing out who Roy of Pherae is?"

"He's the one with bright red hair that's fighting with a rapier," I answered, pointing towards him. He and Wolt were double-teaming a lance user. "...Do I know you from somewhere?"

"You're Sacaean, right? Might have seen me in Bulgar. It's a popular place to meet employers."

"No, I wouldn't remember you if I just saw you in passing there, distinctive scars a...side..." Wait, I knew those scars. I... used to poke them, trying to get... "Dieck?" I used to poke them, trying to tickle him and make him laugh. It had been a game, and he played along to help me learn the tricks needed for hunting.

"It's 'Deke' now, Little Lady Irene." 'Little Lady'. I had protested him calling me 'lady', because Mom was 'Lady', so he took to calling me that, just as he called Klein 'Little Master'. "You got big."

"I'm taller than Mom now, about as tall as Dad." This was... weird. It really was him. It had been eleven years. I still remembered, clearly, I had visited Reglay and found my 'big brother', who I had even made a gift for because I had missed his birthday, had bought his freedom and left without a word to even Klein. "You..."

"Orders, Little Lady?" ...That's... that's right. I was on the field, and I couldn't let personal things distract me. Argh, Mom wouldn't have made such a stupid mistake... "You've got a bit of a mess for an army, mind."

"It's fine. I have Mom's notes." Glancing around to make sure things were clear, I dug through my packs and pulled some out. "Let's see..."

"...Little Lady, I just said you have a mess of an army. There is no way you have-"

"Strategies for lone pegasus knights, two axe users who balance each other, and a skilled
mercenary with significant prior training?" I held up the pages in question. "Sorry, but…"

"What sort of army did your mother command?" He sighed heavily, and I giggled, so proud of Mom. "Well, I know one thing she never did." Hmm? "She never commanded someone who was taught to fight in the arena, like me." …W-well… "And that's a different set of fighting than what you get anywhere." I could feel myself drooping at the words. "I can make things work, mind, but if you give me orders as if I was a properly trained person, something will eventually give." I… was so stupid… "Personality factors a lot into how a person fights, not just the weapon. The notes will help with the weapons, but not the people." It was a testament to how out of my depth I was to be reminded of one of Mom's basic lessons… "Little Lady?"

"What?"

"You… look ready to cry." …I wish I was like Dad or Sue. They could hide their emotions so easily. "Little Lady-"

"It is nothing for you to be concerned about, Deke." This all just hurt now. I was also horribly embarrassed by it hurting, frustrated that it was, and it all just wanted me to cry more. "You mentioned wanting to speak with Roy. He's free now." I ducked my head, mostly so that no one else could tell how close to tears I was. "Go on."

He stood there for a while before doing as I asked. I ground my teeth, just working on not crying as I desperately tried to think of a strategy.

I hated being prone to crying. I hated that my default reaction to embarrassment, pain, and frustration was crying. I wished I could take everything calmly, like Dad. Even if he seemed to like that I showed emotions freely, even if Sue admired it, I didn't.

The strategy I settled on was the cavalry breaking through the lines, allowing Roy and D… Deke to charge the boss of the soldiers, the unfortunately named 'Ruud'. Roy had his rapier, and Deke had the armorslayer Merlinus conveniently got from the villagers. It was enough to make me wonder if the villagers had just been waiting for someone to kill the guy.

With the leader gone and the fortress seized, though, it didn't take that long to settle things down enough to double-check that Elen's mistress was still… you know… safe.

"I cannot thank you all enough." …Elen's mistress was incredibly gorgeous. Incredibly gorgeous. Mother Earth and Father Sky, everything from her looks, to her smile, and voice was just pretty. It was almost enough to make me wonder if she was human! "Elen has already told me everything," she continued softly, smile incredibly gentle. She lit up the throne room we were awkwardly standing in. Most of the others were confirming the enemy's surrender. Well, Merlinus was probably eavesdropping. "Truly, thank you."

I nudged Roy in the leg when he didn't reply immediately. He was also staring. "It's no trouble," he finally replied. He gave me a dirty look, and I filed this under 'things to never tell Lilina unless she and Roy get into a stable relationship'. "But perhaps we should find a study to sit in? Elen mentioned you were trying to talk to someone of Lycia?"

"Yes, but please forgive me. I did nothing but sit in the cell, and I am quite enjoying standing." The woman laughed a little. I started trying to piece together her identity, but all I got was 'very high ranked', because there was no other way she was able to afford such well-made clothes. Plus, unless I was wrong, she was wearing a ruby circlet, which I think was reserved for the very high ranked. "But you are a lord of Lycia?" Honestly, the only thing that seemed 'strange' about her
appearance was the Sacaean pendant she openly wore. There was another necklace, tucked under her collar, but that pendant caught my attention. The wolves in it marked it as Kutolah. "Might I have your name?"

"I'm Roy, son of Eliwood, the Marquess of Pherae."

"Eliwood?" She looked startled, before smiling slowly, nodding. "I see. My name is..." Elen touched the woman's arm, eyes conveying her silent worry. "It's all right, Elen. I have heard much of him, and his father, through my letters." ...How? "My name is Guinevere." ...Did she just say...?! "I... am the princess of Bern." ...WHAT WAS SHE DOING HERE?!

"Clearly a trap then." Merlinus burst into the room, and I didn't even bother to hide my facepalm. Everyone always told me he used to be a cheery, prone to crying merchant prior to becoming Uncle Eliwood's financial advisor, but I had only seen him as the suspicious, really too good with money, capable of pulling much needed objects out of thin air, jerkish man. "They must be plotting to attack now," he snapped, eyes blazing. Roy and I exchanged a look, both of us a bit exasperated because if he came in so conveniently, then he had to have been eavesdropping. I knew it. "We must-"

"Hold a moment, Merlinus," Roy interjected. He gave him his best smile. "I wish to hear her out. Please wait outside as you were before?"

"My lord-"

"Please wait outside as you were before while Irene and I listen to her." Ah, there was the scarily polite smile. He inherited that from Aunt Ninian. As she adapted to her role as Lady of Pherae, she'd mastered the art of getting people to listen to her without ever once raising her voice. "Okay?"

"...As you wish." He gave Guinevere and Elen suspicious looks before stomping out. That was... That was pointless. Great job, Merlinus. This was why we didn't get along.

"My pardon. He is very loyal to my house, and does his best to ensure my idealism does not get me killed." That was a tactful way of putting it. "Now, you are indeed the princess of Bern?"

"Yes, though I will understand if you do not believe me," Guinevere replied with a small, sad smile. "It is not as if I have proof." Actually, yes, she did, but Roy might not know the story. I did, though.

"Even if you are not, it is easy to tell by your clothing and bearing that you are someone of high birth. That said..."

"My pardon, but I do have a question of my own," I began slowly. Roy gave me a skeptical look, but I mouthed 'trust me', and he nodded. "The necklace you wear... it's Sacaean, yes?"

"Ah, yes!" Guinevere's smile was soft as she gently touched it. "When I was very little, Katri gave it to me," she murmured. The name alone told me she was who she said she was. Most people used Mom's full name; only close friends even thought to call her 'Katri' nowadays. "She visited Bern, and helped arrange a meeting between Zephiel and me." I had heard that prior to Zephiel's coming of age, he and his half-sister had lived in different locations. "She gave it to me then. Zephiel has a matching one, actually. He still wears it too, over his armor." Afterwards, though, for some strange reason, their mothers decided to stop such nonsense, and worked together to raise the two. "It has given me much strength and hope over the years." A shame Queen Hellene died from illness and Lady Morgana died during the same assassination attempt that killed the old king, Desmond.
Maybe things would've been different if they were still alive. "But I am rambling. I assure you, though, that I did not steal it."

"I know that. I was just checking you were who you said you are." I grinned at her confused look. "My name is Irene. Irene of the Kutolah. Katri is my mom."

"Oh! You're Irene!" She really had some of the prettiest smiles I had ever seen. "Goodness, you would think I'd guess based on how much Katri wrote about you, and Rath, and Sue!" I was now terrified of what stories she knew. "It is nice to finally meet you."

"I'm guessing the letters are also how you know Uncle Eliwood and Roy."

"Yes." She grew serious again. "That is why I chose to give my real name. She wrote of them so often that I feel silly to not trust."

"I'm flattered," Roy replied. He smiled briefly, before turning serious again. "Miss Elen told us you were wanting to speak with the Alliance." Guinevere nodded in reply. "Why?"

"I do not want a war." Her words were very soft. "I hope to speak to the Lycian Council in hopes of providing a solution to the madness my brother has started." If that was the case, why didn't she talk to Zephiel himself? Why come all the way out here? I felt like there was something a bit more to her coming to Lycia, but the only thing I could think of was that she was afraid. Mom had often told me how much Zephiel and Guinevere adored each other. Maybe she was afraid to confront her brother on how much he had changed. "I must do what I can."

"...I see." Roy nodded, closing his eyes briefly in thought. "Then, if you would like, we are on our way to meet the Lycia Alliance Army in Araphan. You can talk to Uncle Hector there."

"...Truly?" Her eyes were wide with shock, but her smile was bright with relief. "I do not even know if this will work."

"Even if the chance is small, there is a chance. And I believe there is another reason you came all the way to Lycia." He noticed how odd it was too. "I won't press, but you'll need protection. My group is small, but skilled."

"Thank you..." I could tell she was thanking us not only for the escort, but also for not pressing. "Truly, I... thank you. Just, thank you." She bowed her head. "I know I will be trouble, but..."

"The only thing I'm worried about is Merlinus grumbling about rooms."

"She and Elen can room with me," I volunteered. It wasn't like I was used to having a room by myself. Even in Etruria, I had shared with Sue. "Oh, wait, we have Shanna now. He reserved two rooms for the mercenaries anyway, right?"

"Yes," Roy confirmed. "So, you can room with Shanna, and-"

"Actually, might I room with Irene?" Guinevere requested. She sounded a little shy, and glanced guiltily at Elen. "I'm sorry, but... I do want to know how Katri and Rath are doing." Oh, she wanted to gossip. "Elen, if you don't mind..."

"Of course not, your highness," Elen reassured with a smile. "I can ask Shanna about the best ways to treat wounds on a pegasus, among other things." Well, this worked out nicely. "Shall we return to the village then?"

"Yes..." Guinevere brought her hood up, eyeing it with a little grimace. "I might... need something
a little less blatantly 'I can buy everything in the world and still have change left.' Ha!

"You can borrow one of Irene's cloaks," Roy suggested. He glanced at me, and I nodded. "It might be a bit big since she's taller, but that might just help it seem more like a hand-me-down." True. "Let's go, then."

This was… just getting really weird. What were the chances of us running into the princess of Bern anyway?

Notes on Merlinus

- I understand he served as a merchant during the Campaign of Fire? Apparently, Mom, Uncle Eliwood, and Uncle Hector saved his life.
- Now, he's the master of the wagon convoy… thing. Which means he's staying in the back, very back, with guards in case of attacks from the rear.
- If I have to say one good thing about him, it's that he's loyal. He's as loyal as any knight. And he is good at managing funds.
- That said… he and I don't get along. I do my level best to avoid his company. Mostly because he can be a downright jerk sometimes, and I'll call him out on it if someone doesn't beat me to it.
- His affinity is darkness, like Dad. Which, honestly, just makes me mad.

Notes of Elen

- Lady in Waiting to Princess Guinevere. Despite the title, though, and very contrary to the norm, she's commoner by birth.
- I think she's only recently taken up healing, as she has a very poor magical output. Very. Poor. Might be fixed with more training, but still… ah, well, it's better than nothing.
- She's outrageously lucky, has to be to run into us right when she needed to, but I worry about her ability to move quickly.
- I think she'll be the 'in the back' healer? The healer we send the heavily wounded to, I mean. Mom didn't have one of those, usually, but if… if we're fighting a war-war, then we'll need one… right?
- Wind affinity. Doesn't Aunt Lyn have this affinity too?

Notes on Dieck/Deke

- Former gladiator for House Reglay. Uncle Pent hired him after he saved Klein from getting mauled by a lion when a trip to the market accidentally led to us getting pushed by the crowd into the arena, away from our parents.
- When he was a gladiator, he fought primarily with axes, but now he's a sword user. …He really did just... discard everything from then, huh?
- He's easily the best fighter we have right now, and even if the others train, I think he'll still remain one of the strongest.
- I feel like I'm a child again around him, the 'Little Lady' who couldn't walk three steps without tripping, and was just… clumsy and foolish. I should try to avoid him. I know I'll just lash out in frustration on him, and he doesn't deserve that. Even if his sudden departure still hurts.
- His affinity is thunder. Like Uncle Hector, if I recall correctly.

Notes on Shanna

- A pegasus knight on her year's training in the field. It's kind of like how Aunt Florina joined
in with the Legion, actually. That's… a little amusing. And weird. Mostly weird.

- She doesn't seem to have a lot of strength, and I somehow doubt she's going to get much stronger without a lot of luck.
- That said, she seems ridiculously fast, and accurate, and is only going to get faster and deadlier. With training.
- She's got a rather chipper personality, and she lights up when people praises her. She also has a tendency to work alone, though, I think, since she's the lone flier.
- Her affinity is wind.

Notes on Lot

- Calm and quiet, the exact opposite of Wade. I'm reminded of the stories of Dorcas, from the Legion.
- He and Lance mentioned something about chess.
- Has a lot of endurance, possibly because he's careful about his hits. He's certainly the more accurate of the two axe users we have.
- His affinity is anima.

Notes on Wade

- Boisterous. Bruiser. Seriously, he's happier than a horse on the plains when in a fight. Reminds me of the stories of 'Bartre' from the Campaign.
- He's possibly even more hotblooded than Allen. This worries me. Greatly.
- That said, when his hits do connect, they hit hard. If only we can get him faster, and more accurate.
- His affinity is fire.

There's already so many people... how am I supposed to keep all of them safe? I guess I just need to keep trying...

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: So, since this game was never really localized, there's not a lot of 'official' translated names. Some do, thanks to Awakening, but others… not so much. I'm more or less going with the ones used in the patch I'm using to play, with one or two exceptions (Miredy vs Milady, for instance). That said, I figured it would be a fun thing with Deke/Dieck to have them technically both be his name, he just took up a different one. His past as a retainer of Reglay is mentioned in his supports with Klein and Clarine. Allen and Lance’s convo during the fight is based off their C support.

Ah, yes, Guinevere is technically playable via the trial maps, unlocked by beating the game... nine times, I think? She's a sage.

Next Chapter – Interlude, to Araphan
Interlude - To Araphan

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude – To Araphan

Araphan is located in the northern part of Lycia, on the border with Sacae. I've been there quite a few times when visiting Uncle Eliwood or Uncle Hector and Aunt Lyn. The Marquess always gets the funniest look on his face when he sees Mom and Dad. I don't know why. I've heard it's got something to do with the Caelin Inheritance Dispute.

That's off topic though. The point is that we're heading there, to meet with the rest of the Alliance and discuss what to do. With us is Princess Guinevere, who hopes to be able to help stop the war. I still think there's something else to her running to Lycia, but I won't press. She's a kind girl, though the way she chatters about the past tells me she feels horrifically guilty.

Regardless, though, we're about a day's march out from Araphan. We thought to push forward, but Roy decided against it. One more day wasn't going to make much of a difference, after all.

"You want to head to the church in the nearby village?" I was a little startled by Guinevere's request. "Is… this something special to the Church of Elimine?" I asked, leaning back in my chair so I could look at her better. She and I ended up deciding to just share a tent too as we marched. I could guard her a bit better than Elen, and she seemed to relax more when it was just us. "I never did learn much about it, despite the trips to Etruria."

"It is not exactly," Guinevere answered, pausing in brushing her hair to smile at me. "When I was little, Lady Mother… sorry, Queen Hellene used to take me to the church whenever I was feeling upset or fretting about something." She called Queen Hellene 'Lady Mother'? "It was a safe place to 'let go', so to speak. While Mom wanted Zephiel and I to act our ages, Lady Mother focused more on helping us grow into our roles as Crown Prince and princess, and tricks for not breaking down when things got bad."

"…Off topic, but Lady Mother?"

"Ah, yes!" Guinevere laughed a bit. "Well, it was weird to me, when I was little. I didn't quite get why Zephiel's mommy wasn't my mommy or why mine wasn't his. So, I took to calling her 'Lady Mother', after some story Zephiel read to me. She never corrected me about it, so it stuck. Mom was always Mom, though."

"Did… Zephiel call her that? Your mom, I mean."

"He requested it after I started calling Lady Mother… well, Lady Mother. Mom took to it well. She was 'Mom' to him too, and Queen Hellene was 'Mother'." She sighed, drooping a little. "I miss them. There were some awkward times, but the two worked hard to make sure Zephiel and I knew we were loved."

"I can't even imagine the pain." Losing two mothers had to be rough. "But, basically, you want to head to the church because you associate it with 'venting' and a place of safe haven, and you're nervous because tomorrow is the day we're talking to Uncle Hector."
"...Yes, that's a scarily accurate summary." She laughed, though, and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. I'd lent her one of my hair ornaments to keep it out of her face, and so she wasn't relying on that ruby circlet to do the same. "Do you think it'll be all right? Elen will want to come with me, I know, and I will gladly accept any escort..." I could already hear Merlinus's grumblings. Surprisingly, though, he was the only suspicious one. I would have thought Marcus would be too, but he just seemed to accept it with this little air of 'oh, wonderful, here we go again'. I wasn't entirely certain why, but I somehow doubted I'd get an answer out of him.

"Take Shanna with you." I went back to my desk, reading over the training schedule Marcus proposed for everyone. Well, 'proposed'. It was more 'here is what I am doing, so here are the abilities they will have for your future tactics and yes, they will have them or I will know why'. "She'll be an adequate guard." I think.

"Shanna and not one of the Pheraean knights?"

"Elen mentioned being shy, especially around males, so I'm sure she'd be more comfortable with a female guard if she's accompanying you." I started cross-examining Marcus's training notes with Mom's tactical notes, working on potential strategies. "Shanna is rather obviously Ilian, which means her association with you will make people less likely to think you're Bernese. Bern doesn't hire pegasus knights very often. That'll keep your identities safer. She's not bad in a fight, and if worse comes to worse, she can ferry you three out without any negotiation with the pegasus."

"...Yes, that makes sense." I heard her giggle, and glanced back to see her smiling warmly. "Thank you, Irene."

"You thank people a lot."

"I have a lot of people to be grateful to." She stood up from the cot with a stretch and a squeak. "I'll go check with Shanna and see if she's available."

"I'll handle telling Roy, and we'll handle informing Merlinus and Marcus."

"I am very gracious for the assistance." ...She went the formal route just because I teased her. I know she did. "We will be back by sundown. I promise."

"Then I won't send anyone to search until then."

"Very well."

I stayed in my tent for most of the day, leaving briefly to have lunch with Roy before going right back inside. The cheerful chatter of the army filled the air as I studied. I focused on the more basic lessons, since Deke had reminded me I didn't even really know them, and I napped during my breaks to make sure I wasn't overdoing it.

But apparently, there was a problem with my method. I could think of no other reason for Deke to be in my tent, sighing as if I was five again, and had released mud-covered dogs through the Reglay estate. Again.

"You have been here all day, Little Lady," he said. I checked the sky outside, trying to guess the time. It was not quite yet sundown, so it wasn't dinnertime yet. "I've been wondering why I couldn't hear you laughing and causing terror."

"I haven't pulled a prank since I was eight," I replied. I bit off the bitter words of 'You would know that if you hadn't just disappeared'. "I focused more on my lessons after that."
"Is that so?" He glanced at my desk, frowning. "Rest is a thing."

"I take naps. I've also eaten."

"But you're hiding here instead of going out and getting to know your people." …W-well… um… "Be honest-"

"Are you daring to suggest I lie?" My voice was very flat. Lying was horrendous. Lying was a betrayal to Mother Earth and Father Sky. Outsiders could lie if they wanted, but the nomads honored Mother Earth and Father Sky.

"Unfortunate turn of phrase." He shrugged and I had to fight off the urge to glare at how easily he dismissed it. "But seriously, have you talked to anyone besides Lord Roy and Princess Guinevere this whole trip?" Well, no, not really… "Did you get shy over the years?"

"No, I'm just busy."

"You're a leader."

"Roy is the leader. I'm just the tactician."

"And you need to bond with your soldiers to make sure they'll listen to you." But… "They'll trust you if they know you." But I was scared! I was scared of getting close to them! I was in charge of their lives! I was terrified of what might happen if I gave one wrong order! That was without knowing anything about them or their lives or their families! I… I couldn't… "Bonds are important in an army, Little Lady, and-"

I stood up abruptly, nearly knocking over my desk in the process. "Just leave me alone, Deke." I stomped past him, heading out of the camp. "I don't need to hear about the importance of bonds from someone who just left without a word eleven years ago, and thinks he can still give me lectures."

If he replied, I didn't hear it. Instead, I just focused on not crying, aggravated and annoyed at myself. I wished I knew the trick behind just… not crying. Mom rarely cried, unless something actually sad was going on. Dad and Sue were always so calm. Yet here I was, who would cry when I was just embarrassed, or frustrated. Both. I was both. I was embarrassed at how I lashed out, frustrated because it wasn't exactly his fault that Klein and I had just assumed he had cared about us. It wasn't his fault that Klein and I had viewed him like a brother we looked up to.

This was why I had wanted to avoid him. I knew I'd lash out. It would probably be a bit better if I could verbalize just how scared out of my mind I was, but the fear made it hard to get the words out. Besides, I doubted he'd want to listen to me ramble, like I used to. And I knew Roy was scared, so I didn't want to burden him with my fears. No way was I going to talk to Merlinus, and it felt wrong to complain to Marcus when I knew he was dealing with a lot…

Sighing heavily, I rubbed roughly at my eyes, getting rid of the tears pricking them. Noticing I was quite firmly outside the camp, I focused on calming my breathing, and worked on some hand-to-hand combat, punching and kicking at shadows to vent out my frustration. Dad taught me this, worried about how poorly I did with swords. This way, I had a means of keeping myself safe if I was dismounted and unarmed.

At some point during my impromptu fight against my inner monsters, though, I noticed something was off. The wind… the wind was howling in pain…

I glanced up to the sky, wondering if it was dark enough to see any stars, but there were none.
Whatever Father Sky was trying to convey, only the wind knew it for now. It was coming from down the path, though, so I carefully headed in that direction. Logic told me to go back, to get someone, but the wind was screaming. There was not enough time. That's what it told me. It told me that through how its pain made the trees shake and writhe, Mother Earth reacting to the message.

So, instead, I walked forward, trusting my instincts. As I walked, I heard heavy, uneven 'thumps' with the oddest 'plinks' that were almost too soft to hear. While I could guess the first were the sounds of someone's heavy footsteps, I couldn't figure out what the second sound was.

The wind whipped about, pushing at my back, so I started running. My heart was hammering in my ears. What had the wind so frightened? Father Sky, what had happened? What were you trying to tell me? I'm listening; I promise. Just tell me…!

My answer came when I rounded a corner in the path and found a person stumbling a distance away. Their steps were dragging, slipping in the blood that dripped down from numerous wounds. The 'plinks' I had heard were pieces of the armor flaking off like a bird's feathers. Part of the 'unevenness' in the 'thumps' was because they had some sort of walking stick, which thudded into the ground awkwardly.

For one second, I thought their hair was red, as red as Roy's, but then I realized that it was actually a graying brown, and that the red I saw was actually blood. I felt myself grow cold when I recognized the broken armor as 'Ostian', and I felt like screaming when they lifted their head, just slightly. Just enough for me to see their face, and know that I knew them. Because while one eyes was burnt shut, I knew the other one.

"Oswin?" I called, some part of me hoping I was wrong. But the person stilled, head tilting curiously, and I knew it was him. "Oswin, it's Irene! Just stay there! I'm coming to you!"

I bolted forward, the wind propelling me to run as fast as I possibly could. As I got closer, I could smell the infection in his wounds, and the scent of smoke and char that marked burn injuries. Apparently some very hot flames had struck him, considering the staff I had thought was a walking stick was really a half melted lance.

"Irene?" he croaked as I caught up, and slung his arm over my shoulder. He was too large, and heavy, for me to carry. "Lady Irene, what are you…?"

"I'm with Roy. I'm helping Roy." He was barely able to focus on me, and he leaned heavily against me. If I had not heeded the wind, he might have just… just died in the road! "One foot in front of the other, Oswin. We're not far from camp."

"Then… I made it…" He breathed a sigh of relief, and started coughing. I felt my heart stop when I saw he had hacked up blood. No fever meant that had to be from some bad internal injuries. "Thank… everything… I made it…"

"You're almost there. Just focus on walking. I'll keep you up. I promise. I won't let you fall."

"Thank you…" He twisted to look at me. I made myself look him in the eye, despite how unnerving it was. Seriously, the side of his face was all but seared off. I had no idea how he was still conscious. He had to be in so much pain… "Araphan has fallen." …What did he just…? "Please, Lord Roy… I need to…"

"I'll scream for him as soon as we get to camp. I'll get you there. You can tell him everything."
"…All right, Irene. I'll try to hold on a little longer."

What sort of thing did they fight in Araphan that made Oswin of all freaking knights fall?!

This was bad. This was bad, bad, very bad. Almost all of Oswin's injuries were infected and deep, and he had lost a lot of blood. I bandaged him as best as I could, used what medicines I had, but really, all I could really do was buy time for Lance to ride to the village to get Elen. The injuries were just too bad to be healed with anything but healing magic.

"The one healer in the whole damn group would be away at a time like this," I growled, taking out my frustration on the herbs I was grinding down. I was making another batch of healing poultices, partly so Oswin could get fresh ones, and partly because tending to him had used up all the ones I had made earlier. "And of course, I sent the flier with them."

"Irene, remember, I agreed," Roy pointed out. "So… wait, hold on, you're not even blaming yourself. Why am I saying that?" He sighed, slumping in the one chair we had by Oswin's cot. Marcus had given up his cot and tent for his old friend, and was currently out with Merlinus to watch the roads for Lance. He had left before Oswin had been properly set up. Allen, Wolt, Bors, Deke, Wade, and Lot were out seeing if there were any others stumbling about.

"You're saying it because that second sentence did sound like I was blaming myself." To be fair, I was kicking myself a little over it. I just knew this was something that no one, not even Mom, could have expected, so there was no reason for me to blame myself. It was beyond my ability. I was just a little frustrated. "Oswin, did you manage to get that concoction down? I tried my best to sweeten it, but…"

"It's fine, Irene," Oswin reassured me. He even smiled, though it looked… strange with half his face bandaged. He had actually passed out for a while earlier, but woke up when I shook him to take some medicine. "Thank you." I was just relieved it worked for now. Hopefully, Lance would get Elen here soon. "Lord Roy, my message…"

"You told me Araphan had fallen," Roy murmured. His sat perfectly straight, arms resting in his lap as he leaned in just a little. "Then you passed out."

"Yes, two of the three Wyvern Generals ambushed Araphan." I know the reason why they had those titles was because they were supposedly as fierce in battle as wild wyverns, but there was still no way, no way, they could have done this much damage to Oswin. "Lady Brunja and Lord Narcian." Oh, I had heard of them from Cecilia and Perceval. They were their Bernese counterparts, basically. …Okay, so I suppose Brunja might have had enough fire magic. Might. It didn't explain all the injuries though. "We weren't expecting an attack, much less one so vicious. During the fighting, Lord Hector bade me to come find you." Well, that made sense. Uncle Hector was protective of his 'family', and Oswin was his most trusted vassal. Who better to entrust a message to? "He didn't want you running into a trap."

"I understand. We'll be prepared when we continue on."

"You're… going to keep going?"

"There might be survivors. I won't abandon them."

"Lord Roy…" I could tell Oswin was silently pleading for me to convince him otherwise. But I wanted to go forward too. I refused to believe Uncle Hector wasn't doing anything but kicking the Bernese army's collective ass. I refused to just abandon anyone who might still live, just like Roy.
"Please, it's a lost cause…"

"Uncle Hector is strong."

"Lord Hector has been suffering from consumption." Wait, what?! "He must have had it latently, since it appeared during the stress of trying to organize the army and plan out ways to keep the civilians safe. We were going to head back to Ostia, to have Serra heal him up, when…" S-so, that would give him a handicap, but I still refused to believe he wasn't anything more than a little banged up. The illness probably did a lot more damage! "So, please…"

"I will not give up hope just because it burns, Oswin." I glanced up from my work to look at him, and smiled when I saw how firm and steady his eyes were. That was a trait he inherited from Uncle Eliwood. "I'm going to check in with Marcus and Merlinus, and work out a plan. Irene?"

"I'll remain here until Elen gets here," I promised. Roy smiled and left without another word. "I don't know what you were expecting, Oswin. He's always been stubborn."

"Stubborn, dutiful, and far too kind," Oswin groaned. He coughed a little and I went to sit in the chair beside his cot, since I had to let the herbs soak a little before continuing with my work. "He knows the pain of losing a parent." Aunt Ninian's death… While the adults had all seemed to expect it, it had hit us children like a sudden storm, threatening to drown us. It hurt still, despite it being six years since then. "He doesn't want Lilina to experience it." The idea of Aunt Lyn losing someone she loved, when she was helpless to help… she still carried the scars left over from the Lorca's destruction. Uncle Hector's death might rip them open again. "Not to mention what it would do to Lycia…" Uncle Hector was well-loved throughout the country. There would be a lot of chaos, and mourning.

"I'm sure he's busting skulls even now." Oswin's only response was to laugh bitterly, as if I had said something darkly amusing. "I'm sure once we get there, we'll figure out something. I do have Mom's notes, after all…"

"You have Katri's notes?" He looked startled. "Her logbook?"

"Yes?" I drooped a little. Was he asking because he didn't trust me to be able to help Roy without them?

"Irene, make sure you read to the end, or even just skip to the end, when you get a chance." Why? "Please?" Oh, I'd ask him later. He was much too wounded, and it was rare he made requests of anyone.

"I promise." I was tempted to ask anyway when I saw how relieved he was, but held my tongue just in time. "It's not like you to be vague, though."

"I'm hoping I was hallucinating." Hallucinating what? "And there other things more important to say, things I had always meant to say, but told myself that I would say them 'later'."

"Oswin, you sound like an old man."

"I am old."

"You're younger than Marcus."

"By a handful of years, sure." He laughed a little before focusing all of his attention on me. "Irene, how old are you?"
"I'm eighteen?" Did he take a head injury or something? That's something he should definitely know.

"How old are Lord Roy and Lady Lilina?"

"They're both fifteen, the same age as Sue."

"And how old are your parents?"

"Mom is forty, and Dad is thirty-nine."

"Lord Hector, Lord Eliwood, and Lady Lyn?"

"Thirty-seven for the uncles, thirty-six for Aunt Lyn." Why was he asking this? This seemed weird. "Why?"

"I want you to remember the age differences. Katri and Rath are over twenty years older than you, Irene." Well, yes? That made sense? They were my parents? "You shouldn't be comparing your eighteen year old self with how they are now." Huh? "If you must compare, look to how they were when they were your age. When Katri was nineteen and twenty, when Rath was eighteen and nineteen… Look to the logbook. Read how they were then, and compare yourself to those. That is… far fairer to you."

"Oswin…?" He had never said anything like this before. Really, no one had.

"I see you doubting yourself because you talents don't 'measure up', but…" He grimaced in pain, and I automatically took his hand. He squeezed mine reassuringly, telling me he wasn't quite dead yet. "But Irene, I promise. You're better than you think you are." I… "Lord Roy is better than he thinks he is. Lady Lilina is more skilled than she thinks she is. You three grew up with the end results of a long and hard path, and compare yourselves to it, before you have even had the chance to put in the work."

"…But…" I did work hard, right?

"Have patience. Work hard. You'll make it." He smiled warmly. "I promise. I can see the potential in you all, and I know you are not wasting it. You're fine."

"…If you say so?" I didn't quite believe him, but I also couldn't tell him he was wrong either.

"Just don't be afraid. Keep walking forward, with your head high, no matter what happens. Don't give up."

"I promise." That, at least, I knew I could agree on. "You're such a worrywart."

"I babysat you lot. I have a right." His smile softened. "Just remember, okay?"

"Yes, yes, and I'm sure you'll remind me if I do somehow forget." Footsteps caught my ear, and I turned towards the door. There were many, and they were rapid. "I think Elen's here." Oh, what a relief. "Everything is going to be fine, Oswin."

"Yes, everything will be fine. I believe in you all. You'll be fine..."

Oswin's grip on my hand suddenly went lax. Confused, I turned back to him and saw his eye was closed. "Oswin, did you pass out again?" I reached over to shake him, like I had earlier, but this time he didn't stir. "Wow, you must have wore yourself out giving the message and giving me
reassurances. That's just like you." I stood up so I could shake him a little harder, but he still didn't wake. "Hey, Oswin, this isn't very funny." I let go of his hand so I could shake him with both of mine. His arm fell limply over the side of the cot. "Oswin, come on, wake up!" But he didn't. He wouldn't wake up, no matter how many times I shook him.

When my hands brushed over his face, intending on poking him awake as I did when I was a child, I noticed he wasn't breathing. My hands dropped down his neck, and I hunted for a pulse. But, there wasn't one. No breath, no pulse, and he wasn't waking, no matter how many times I shook him.

I didn't need Elen's eventual confirmation to know the truth. Oswin was dead. Oswin, Ostia's finest knight, most trusted vassal of Uncle Hector, favored babysitter of us rambunctious kids when we were in Ostia… he was dead. He died, using his last breaths to fulfill Uncle Hector's orders and to reassure me that I would be okay.

…He died… and I could do nothing for him…

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: The opening of chapter 3 gives you the basics of the 'message' given, which helps set the plot rolling, but isn't it far more fun to show the message be given, instead of having that shocking news off screen? Deke's conversation with Irene is based a bit on his supports with Shanna (he makes similar references about bonds and trust there.)

(For those curious, Hector caught consumption from Uther, but it remained latent until unusually large stress kicked it into life, much like how Katri's was latent until the stress of the Campaign of Fire.)

Next Chapter – Latecomer's Sorrow
Chapter 3) Latecomer's Sorrow

Oswin is dead. I... never thought such a thing was possible, really. He died, from battle. That just... doesn't make sense to me. Neither do his reassurances, and his message... Araphan has fallen? Seriously? But Uncle Hector is there...

We travel forward, in hopes of finding survivors, and just... to try and make sense of it all. Father Sky, tell me what is going on?

When we reached the outskirts of Araphan, Marcus and Merlinus insisted on making camp. Deke, Shanna, and I volunteered to scout around, just to make sure things were safe, and Roy gave his permission. I wasn't sure exactly where Deke and Shanna went, but I went into the city itself. It was eerily quiet. Uncle Hector must have ordered the evacuations of the civilians to try and minimize casualties. I could see some signs of life, though, so I was certain not all had listened...

But that wasn't the reason why I went into the city. No, I went in because I remembered. Dad was once a guard here. He told me that, and he had told me stories of the place. Not only had he told me stories, but once, when we were visiting, he had shown me the passageways in his stories. I wanted to check them. If I could remember correctly, then we would have a way inside that any lingering Bernese soldiers would not expect. There was one in particular that I was certain they would not know about, the one requiring three triggers...

Slowly and carefully, I wandered the city, found each one of the triggers, and released them. The secret door inside the castle opened easily, without even a squeak. Someone had recently oiled this. I wondered if Aunt Lyn had told Uncle Hector about this door. I wondered if he had planned on using this. Had anyone used this? Was this how Oswin escaped? I would probably never learn the answer to that.

The castle itself was quiet too, surprisingly so. I had to be careful with my footsteps, to make sure they didn't echo. But it was not long before I heard the echoes of another's footsteps, and I carefully drew an arrow from my quiver and waited. Friend or foe? Don't shoot or shoot? Stay or go? After all, the only reason I came here was to check that the passage was viable, so...

"What's a savage doing here?" ...The answer was to 'shoot', even if this was technically a friend. So, I aimed and fired in one smooth motion, catching whoever it was in the shoulder. "Gah!" What... a strange looking person, though. I could not tell if he was wearing red armor or red ornamentation, and he was wearing the gaudiest purple gloves. "You... dare hit me? Me?!" Oh, look, a narcissist.

"Narcian, what has you yelling so much?" The gentle voice held a surprisingly amount of sarcasm. "Did a speck of dust fall on your shoulder again?" A woman with pink hair, and one very low-cut dress approached from behind the man. "Oh," she gasped, looking at me. "Hello there." She had a surprisingly gentle smile. "Pardon, are you lost?"

"Brunja, she shot me!"
"Oh, dear, that is a problem." Narcian. Brunja. These… were the Wyvern generals… the ones who…?

"What did you do to the Lycians?" I demanded coldly. I gripped my bow tightly, and hovered a hand over my quiver as they both looked at me. "You can't have killed them all."

"Killed most of them, the maggots," Narcian scoffed. He sneered at me. I struggled to keep my temper in check. "Maggots, worms, dogs. What a day."

"The 'dog' put an arrow in your shoulder," Brunja pointed out. He scowled immediately. "Regardless, this isn't a safe place, child. You should really-"

"Bah, why don't you do the same thing to her as you did to the other savages?" What was he…? "You obliterated that one tribe. The so-called most powerful? Ku… something?" …What did he just…?

"Kutolah." What did she just…? "I fought Kutolah when they came to Bulgar's defense. We barely won even with our advantages. It is not a shame to admit that they were skilled." Won. Were. Bulgar. Kutolah.

"What did you do to my people?" The words were very soft. I wasn't even sure I said them until they both looked at me. "What… did you do to my family?" I whispered. Narcian scoffed, while Brunja looked a little conflicted. Neither answered. "What did you…?" Something snapped in my head, and all I saw was red. "MONSTERS!" I fired two arrows, aimed right for their hearts. It was their fault they weren't wearing armor. "I'm going to break you!"

But there was a flash of magic, a spark of lightning, and the arrows were vaporized. I blinked slowly, trying to figure out where the man came from. He wore enough armor to clank, and his sword was large enough to scrape the ground. Who was this? How did I not hear him approach?

"I simply come to see what has distracted you two, and find you dealing with a rat with a bow," the man murmured. He didn't seem… anything. There was something flat about him, tired. It was like he had given up on everything, even feelings, a long time ago. "Narcian, you even let her hit you."

"Sire, she is a child," Brunja murmured. She bowed respectfully towards him. "Please, let me take custody of her." I will literally die first. "Things will be dangerous, and she is obviously scared."

"She should be.‖ I was more angry than scared, ac- "However, I would not call her demeanor 'scared'. I see anger and pride. I do not see fear."

"Should I take care of her?‖ My eyes flicked towards the pale slip of a woman I almost thought was the unknown man's shadow. She moved with little sound, most of it the rustling of her cloak. In the shadows of the hood, I could see blank eyes.

"No, Idenn, she is not worth that," the man refused. The hooded woman didn't even nod in acknowledgement. What a strange girl. It was like she wasn't even alive. "Girl. You chose a poor day to play adventurer in the hallways."

"It's not my fault you lot don't know secret passageways," I deadpanned. I was so beyond angry right now. "Move. I don't want whatever pathetic excuse you have for a heart. I want theirs."

"Well, that's troubling. I need their hearts to further my goal." The sword in his hand suddenly crackled with lightning. "I suppose I must wipe you out, if you are too stupid to take a hint."

All of my instincts screamed as he swung, and I ducked and rolled automatically. The strike
shattered the hallway, glass and stone flying around. Lightning jumped and danced, catching me in the arms and legs. One even went over my face, over my eye. How… how could one weapon do this? With a single swing, how could any weapon do this?

I wasn't even sure how I survived at first. Then I saw the blood seeping out of the joints of his armor, and his wince of pain. He was injured. That was how. That was the only reason that didn't kill me.

"Lord Hector certainly knows where to hit a sword user to incapacitate them," he sighed, pressing a hand to his shoulder. My breath caught when I heard Uncle Hector's name. He fought this man. He injured him badly. But where was he? "I'm amazed he could do that when he was all but dead." He shrugged and walked towards me. I checked my bow and arrows. My bow was fine, not even scratched, but I only had one intact arrow now. "I suppose it will take two strikes to-" I aimed and fired. Well, I tried to. With one eye injured, my aim was off, so it only grazed his cheek. "…A sneak attack. I wouldn't have thought you could even move. That injury is even worse than I thought."

"It takes more than that to break my spirit," I spat. I made myself stand up through the pain, just so I could glare at his face. He and I were the same height. "I really hope you don't expect me to be impressed." Amber eyes. He had amber eyes. Just like Mom. Just like me.

"Amber eyes?" For the first time, an emotion besides exasperation showed up on his face. Surprise. "…Girl. What is your name?"

"Irene." I did my best to stand tall and true. Everything hurt, and I was standing in a puddle of my blood, but I was… I would not let him see me fall. "Irene of the Kutolah, daughter of Rath and Katri, granddaughter of Dayan."

"…Katri's daughter…" He actually chuckled a bit, and stepped back. "Well, now I'm just curious. What can her daughter do in the face of all of this?" He turned away, and I could only stare in shock. He was… "Idenn, we are returning to Bern. Brunja, return to the subjugation of the Sacae. Narcian, continue the press through Lycia."

"If you don't kill me right now, I'm going to see you dead." The words, angry and bitter, fell out of my mouth. I was just… so incredibly pissed off right now. "That's a promise."

"I doubt that is a promise you can keep, but we'll see if you inherited a shred of your mother's genius." I had no time to retort, even if I could think of one. There was just a flash of magic, and all of them disappeared. As soon as they did, I collapsed to my knees, shivering badly, whimpering from all the pain.

The Kutolah were fine. The Kutolah were fine. Mom, Dad, Sue, Grandpa… they were fine. They had to be fine. They couldn't not be fine. Mother Earth wouldn't be… Father Sky would have… they were fine. They were fine. Bern was nothing compared to them. Maggots and worms. They were fine. They were fine.

…Please… let them be fine…? Oswin was already dead, and I had no idea about Uncle Hector. Please, let my family be okay, Mother Earth?

"Why did you go in alone?!" I didn't even bother to answer the question this time. It was all anyone asked me when I managed to make it back to the camp. Well, it was more like managed to make it out of the castle, where Deke found and carried me back to camp. "I cannot believe you're that stupid!" Yes, I know. Can we let it drop?
"Okay, that's it, everyone out of the tent!" Guinevere suddenly snapped. She actually stood up and shoved whoever it was this time outside, growling a bit in aggravation as the tent flap fluttered shut. "What do they think they can say that Marcus hadn't already covered?" She returned to the cot where I was sitting and went back to disinfecting my injuries. Elen had already taken care of the worse ones, but I had requested her to not do a full heal until after we had confirmed if there were any survivors. I would get a 'healing' after that.

"I suppose they feel like I am so stupid that the words must be repeated for me to learn anything," I whispered. Now that the anger had fled, I felt only shame, really. I went in 'alone' because I hadn't planned on staying. But I had gotten pissed off at someone calling me a savage, and instead of running after that, I stayed because I lost my temper. I was injured because I lost my temper. I only wasn't dead because Uncle Hector had injured the guy badly, and the guy knew Mom, and spared me to basically extend a twisted 'game'.

"It's not like any of them were able to figure out a way inside, and we have it confirmed that no wyvern generals." Guinevere was probably the only one who praised me for the stupidity, even though she was the one who was dabbing disinfectant on my injuries. "How is your eye?"

"The skin around it feels weird still, but my vision is back to perfect again." The injury to my eye hadn't actually damaged it, barely, so I wasn't going to have to adapt to a single eye like I originally thought. "Didn't Elen say it might feel strange for a while?"

"Yes, since you have a jagged scar running over it." She laughed a little, tapping the bottom of the scar, near the bottom of my right ear. "Jagged and diagonal." Yes, and it stopped at the middle of my forehead, based on the mirror Guinevere had let me use to show me. "In Bern, a warrior's valor is shown by the number of scars they have. It is the mark of a coward to not have any. Even I have one."

"You do?"

"Yes," she pushed back her sleeve and showed me the bite scar on her arm. "On a trip to the market, I tried to help a dog that was being terrorized by some unruly brats. The poor thing bit me in the confusion." She pushed back down her sleeve and returned to cleaning my injuries. "Father wanted to kill it, but I cried, so Zephiel took him in instead. We named him 'Bear', and loved him dearly. I was so sad when he passed away from old age a few years ago. Zephiel dug the grave himself."

"Hard to imagine, considering all of this." All I could think was what those people had said. The Kutolah were… Bulgar was…? Madness. Absolute madness. I was going mad. Yes, that's the explanation for all of this. "Why is all this happening?" I sighed, shaking my head at her sad look. "I know. You're just as confused." I glanced at her, and noticed something, now that I wasn't stuck in my own thoughts. "Oh, your hair…"

"Hmm?"

"It's the same color as that man's." She froze, eyes wide. "He had amber eyes too." Growing up, I had only seen a handful of people with amber eyes. Grandfather, Great-Aunt Amanda, Mom, and me. It just felt weird, seeing someone else with them.

"…" She suddenly hugged me, making me squeak. "You saw Zephiel." What did she just…? "Blessed… you saw Zephiel. You attacked Zephiel." Thinking back, Brunja had called the man 'sire', hadn't she? "You were attacked by… and you're alive…" She pulled away, noticeably shaken. "Thank Elimine that you still live."
"I think I need to thank my mom instead." That was the only reason. "He was injured, and he stopped when he realized I was Mom's daughter. That's all."

"Mmm, yes, that does make sense." She picked up some bandages and started binding up my injuries. "If there is one, living person my brother still admires, it's Katri." Her eyes were sad and she hesitated before continuing, "I know he's been actively looking for her for a few years. I suppose it was to prevent her from lending her tactical prowess to other countries." Yeah, if Mom could 'fight' him, then Zephiel would lose in a heartbeat. "He greatly respects her. It's... one of the few things that has stayed constant. I think he puts her on a pedestal, much like he does Lady Mother and Mom."

"I really should be dead."

"I'm glad you're not." She gave me a warm smile. "Because, I feel like Zephiel made a mistake today."

"And that was?"

"Not killing you, and not checking that there were others." ...Did she hit her head or something? "I really think that if he had done one or the other... well, I think it was a mistake on his part."

I might have replied, but I heard footsteps, and instead turned to the entrance. "Come on in," I called. Guinevere gave me a confused look, but I ignored her. "I'm getting bandaged now."

"Glad to hear you're all right," Roy said as he walked in. He smiled at Guinevere's startled look. "Irene has good ears." Good ears, good eyes, apparently not a lot of good sense though. "Found a thief named Chad, Irene, who knows of another way inside. I was thinking we could split the group into two? One to take your path, and the other to take his?"

"That sounds good." I closed my eyes, already thinking of who should go where. "You going to yell?"

"I think Marcus covered anything I might have said, and whatever he missed, you thought of." Still, he came over to hug me carefully, and I felt him cling a little. "So, instead, may I ask why?"

"The 'why' is simple. I didn't go in there for a fight, just to check that it was a clear path, as scouts do." I sighed as he pulled away. "I just... my pride and temper got the better of me, and you get visual confirmation of why everyone always told you to not emulate me."

"You're the only one who ever told me that." He laughed, though. "That makes much more sense, though. It's also much more like you."

"Yes, yes." I pointed him to the spare chair in the tent. "I've some ideas on how to do the splits, so while Guinevere is finishing up, let's discuss."

"Okay. And Irene?"

"Hmm?"

"When you're ready, tell me what made you lose it?" He smiled softly when I silently nodded. "So, what were you thinking?"

"Well, first off, split Allen and Lance up so that each group is guaranteed to have a cavalier to trample people..."
Chad was leading Roy and his group through one path, and I was taking the others through the secret passage. My group consisted of Allen, Bors, Deke, Shanna, Wade, and Lot. Why Allen? I trusted Lance with Roy a lot more than I did Allen. Simple. Besides, Allen didn't do too badly of a job keeping up with Shanna and me.

"Why must you two be so fast?" he grumbled anyway. Shanna and I exchanged a look and a shrug before continuing to ride. There wasn't quite enough room for her pegasus to take flight, but he could still gallop much like a non-winged horse. "How am I even helping?"

"By trampling some soldiers twice and giving less for Bors, Deke, Wade, and Lot to do," I replied, tossing the words over my shoulder. When I glanced back, I saw all the broken bodies. Never underestimate the damage a stampeding horse can do. "We're almost to the throne room. You'll be taking point them, while Shanna flies up."

"Oh, finally, a good charge."

"Yeah, you better not die."

"Worried?"

"Roy will cry, and I will break into Mother Earth's personal haven to hunt you down for that." I grinned at him. "That is a promise."

"You promise things a lot."

"Only when I'm serious."

"You can't be serious all the time. You'll get all old and grey like Marcus." Allen grinned. "Relax. Things work out."

"We're in the middle of a damn war, you idiot." Speaking of which… "Throne room. Shanna, fall back and let Allen go forward." She nodded and fell back with me, giggling all the while. "You're up."

"Let's go!" And he crashed into the throne room, straight through the doors. To be fair, the doors had been half-open anyway, but it certainly added to the drama of everything. It also did exactly as I thought it would: buy us a precious few seconds of shock to take command of the battle.

"Where did they come from?!" "How are the remnants this strong?!" Honestly, I was severely doubting the strength of Bern. Yes, everyone was fine. The Kutolah were fine. Mom, Dad, Sue, and Grandpa were fine. Uncle Hector was fine. There's no way people this weak, so weak that the three of us alone could control the flow of the fight, could do anything to them.

Deke and the others raced in behind us, generating more confusion to knock them off balance. By the time Chad led Roy and his group in, the battle was basically ours. It was just a matter of 'finalizing' it. Bernese soldiers did not like giving up, apparently.

"Excuse me?" I twisted and looked down at a young boy, younger than Roy I was certain, with bright green hair and surprisingly cheerful blue eyes. He looked familiar. "Are you with the Lycian Army, miss?" he asked me. I nodded slowly, wondering why he wanted to know. I also wondered how he even got in. Where had he come from? "May I join up?" …Wait, did he just…? "I can use magic, and I... well, I know enough about swords to not hurt myself. Mostly." He laughed awkwardly, shrugging. "Dad taught me some, in case I was fighting someone with high resistance. Well, sort of taught me. He and Mom disappeared about ten years ago, but…"
"You want to fight in a war," I deadpanned. My incredulousness only grew when he nodded. "Kid, how old are you?"

"Thirteen." WHAT?! "I turn fourteen soon, though!" THAT WAS WAY TOO YOUNG! "Um… you look ready to yell…"

"I have issues with Roy being in a war at fifteen."

"…Please?" He gave me a very serious look. "Bern… they destroyed the orphanage I lived in." … That… "I got the younger ones to a priest, but… please, I feel like if I don't…" If he didn't do something, then his anger was going to fester.

"You are an implausibly courageous child." I sighed heavily. "Okay, fine. But you're staying close to me, okay?"

"Okay!" He gave me the brightest smile. "My name is Lugh!"

"I'm-"

"It's… Irene, isn't it?" His smile turned shy. "I… think I know you. A little. I used to live in Ostia Castle." What was he…? Oh!

"Aunt Nino and Uncle Jaffar's younger son." I could only stare. They had just vanished ten years ago. Mom said that they'd had bad pasts, and bounty hunters came after them. All I knew was that Uncle Matthew couldn't find them no matter how hard he tried. He even contacted Uncle Legault to help, but came away with nothing. "…Where's your twin?"

"He left a while ago." That's… "Oh, I think Chad is around here somewhere? He's kind of like my older brother."

"Chad is with Roy's group." I nudged my horse a little closer and reached down to ruffle his hair. He laughed and squeaked, and it conjured up an old memory. Yes, I knew him. I used to tickle him silly, and let him curl up in my lap as I bugged Uncle Jaffar. "I'm serious. Stay close to me. I think you're too young for this, but I know why you want to fight."

"I will, Irene." His smile was soft. "So, where do you want me? I've a fire tome!"

"Give me a second to look over the field." I glanced around, hunting for the 'centers' of the battle. One was around Roy, of course. The centers were always the leaders. So, the knight right by the throne had to be the 'leader' of the Bernese soldiers here. He was certainly trying to rally everyone. "Lugh?" I glanced down and he nodded. "Are you absolutely certain?" He nodded again. "Then I want you to attack the man by the throne. I will knock him off balance for you."

"Okay." I waited until he smiled before riding straight for the knight. He tried to charge me, but I dodged easily, urging my pretty mare to leap clear over his head. Few people could keep their calm when I horse jumped them, and this man was no exception.

His yelp of surprise turned into a scream of pain as a fireball hit him. Three more quickly followed, boiling the man alive in his armor. Well, someone inherited Aunt Nino's magical prowess.

I dismounted as soon as the knight fell and walked over to Lugh. He smiled at me, but when I held my arms out in a silent offering of a hug, he took it instantly, shaking horribly.

"Does it get easier?" he asked me. I hesitated in answering. "…Should it get easier?"
"I think you're fine exactly as you are," I whispered. That was a question I could actually answer. "So long as you can wait until after the battle is over, you're fine. Don't change."

"Okay." He clung tightly to me. "Thank you."

"I'm here for you, Lugh. I promise."

With the knight boss down, Roy quickly seized the throne room, and control of the castle. Then we all split up, desperately hunting for survivors. We found a small handful, and countless bodies. But there was one person unaccounted for: Uncle Hector.

"Irene, do you remember if Uncle Rath told you about... about secret rooms or something?" Roy asked as we ran. He, Guinevere, and I were in one group together. "Secret dungeons?" We had just checked the 'regular' dungeons. Nothing but corpses.

"Believe me, Roy, I am doing my best to recall anything and everything," I replied, gritting my teeth. This was ridiculous. If Dad were here, he wouldn't have had to even rely on his memory. He could have just tracked Uncle Hector. "Damn it..."

"I'm sorry." Both Roy and I looked at Guinevere, who shifted uneasily. "This is all moving so much faster than I would have thought," she murmured, bowing her head. "I am so sorry."

"Princess Guinevere, dwelling over what's done never solves anything," Roy pointed out. He smiled gently at her. "Besides, Lycia has not fallen yet! Castle Ostia is still ours, and as soon as we find Uncle Hector, we'll rally behind him." Yes, but I wished I were a little more skilled. If Mom were here, she would have ended that battle sooner, and we would have more time to hunt for Uncle Hector. "So please, don't give up on us yet."

"...I will never give up on you." Her words were firm. "I am simply... no longer certain this can be solved without violence."

"We'll figure something out." Roy glanced at me. "Remember anything?"

"Mmm..." I closed my eyes as I hummed in thought. "Actually, perhaps I have," I began slowly. Where would you keep a powerful political leader? Perhaps not in the dungeons, but... "It's the room Marquess Araphan was held captive when Lundgren's forces attacked Araphan during the Caelin Inheritance Dispute, a private room not too far from the front gates of the castle." I was already moving, remembering the way. "Come on. Let's at least try it."

I heard the two of them chase after me as I navigated the hallways. I could feel myself shaking as I ran, scared. Would... no, he'd be fine. He had to be fine. Those people were liars. They had to be. Everything was fine. Everyone was fine. Everything was...!

I found the room and wrenched the door open, letting it slam against the wall. But as I looked inside, I could only stand and stare, unable to move. I doubted my eyes. I found Uncle Hector, but... but...

"Roy... Irene..." Uncle Hector coughed, staring in shock. He was propped up against the wall. A huge, still dripping splat of blood was next to him. "What... are you two doing here...?" Blood smears showed he had tried to move, and failed to get any further than a short distance, even with the wall supporting him. "Are you all right?" Blood speckled his legs, splattered his face. "Did Oswin not reach you?" There was a gaping wound in his abdomen, which he pressed against weakly. It was exactly where a 'joint' of the armor was. "Why are you...?"
"He got to us," Roy answered, sliding around me to run to Uncle Hector's side. "He… he died, though."

"I figured he would. He was badly hurt before I ordered him to go find you." Uncle Hector laughed wryly. "I'm not sure if you're as stubborn as your father or mother, Roy."

"Both." Roy's eyes flicked at all the blood, before turning to me in silent pleading. I could only look at all the blood. I knew… there was so much. There was too much. "Irene?" Still… still, I had too…

"Irene, keep back. I have consumption." Uncle Hector… were you seriously, seriously still being protective right now? "I was hacking up blood not long ago, and I don't think it's just from the injury, so…"

"I'll get checked later," I whispered. I darted over, and pressed my hands to the injury automatically. "At the first cough, I will get a full check up. I promise." There was so much blood. "So, please…"

"Irene, Rath trained you in field medicine," he chided. I grit my teeth. "You know how much blood I've lost. It's stubbornness that's even keeping me conscious." …But… no, it was impossible. This was Uncle Hector. This was the invincible general of Lycia, who laughed off attacks. "Damn it, Lyn, why did you have to show him that trick twenty years ago?" What was he…? "Oh well. I got him good. That'll cripple him for life, I think."

"That saved my life earlier." I reached up to my eye, to the scar. I tried to not shake at all the blood on my hands. "Your injuring him, I mean. I was… prideful, stupid-"

"Reckless. The word you want is 'reckless'." I felt the other ones fit better, but I was definitely not arguing right now. "Try not to emulate me, Irene. My recklessness here got myself and good people killed." No, Uncle Hector… no, that wasn't… "Now listen. You two must listen." He shifted, slowly, grimacing as he just lifted his arms and tugged us into weak hugs. Weak! A word I never associated with Uncle Hector! He always gave strong, reassuring hugs. "Bern has dragons."

"But it wasn't enough."

"No!" Roy snapped. His eyes blazed with determination, even as they shone with tears. "No, here, you can use my shoulder as a crutch. Irene and…" He trailed off, glancing at Guinevere. She lingered in the doorway, eyes wide. "Ah, Princess Guinevere…"

"I am so sorry…" Guinevere whispered. Hesitantly, she walked forward and knelt in front of Uncle Hector. "I am so, so sorry…” Her voice cracked, and tears started streaming down her face. "I think I know why he took such a… but dragons… I didn't…"

"Oh, you're his sister," Uncle Hector murmured. He laughed a little. "Don't be sorry. I've known this day would come for twenty years. This is the price I paid, way back during the Campaign of Fire. I just wish it had come a little later, so I could help more." Price? What did he mean by that?! "Irene, can you get my bracelet off for me?"

"You mean the gem?" I asked slowly. With shaking hands, I reached over to his wrist and slid it off. Guinevere gasped at the sight. "Why?"

"Guinevere, you give this to someone that holds your trust. Someone you want to thank or honor or whatever." I passed it too her, and she clutched it, shaking. "I take it you know what it is."
"My brother told me," she whispered. It was almost too hard to understand her through her tears. "Twenty years ago, when he was almost assassinated in the manse before his coming of age, some people came to save him. Two of them helped him directly, bandaged his wounds, and taught him how to defend himself. He gave them these gems in thanks." Wait, what?!

"Yes, that was Lyn and me. That was our group." You have… you have got to be kidding me! If he had just died twenty years ago…! "I don't regret it. It needed to be done." Why? If he had died back then, this wouldn't be happening now! "Roy, I… need you to go to Ostia…" Uncle Hector's breath was wobbling. "Near it is a cave that houses… Lilina knows it. I made sure to tell her before I left." Houses what? What would be hiding in a cave? "Please, Roy, help Lilina with Lycia. Take… take command of the army." Roy was fucking fifteen! He was barely out of puberty! It hadn't been so long ago that he couldn't speak two words without his voice cracking! "Irene, please, help them."

"Of course I am," I snapped. This was nuts. This was absolutely nuts! "I'll do whatever I can for them. I promise!"

"Good… good…” He laughed a little. "Ah, I finally get it… I finally get why Elbert could be so calm and content at the end of things…” Elbert? You mean Roy's grandfather? "Irene… tell Lyn that I'm sorry. I won't… I won't be able to take that trip to the Sacae with her after all…” He coughed, smile growing bitter as his eyes shut. "Lyn… Lilina… I wish I could see them… just one more time…”

"Uncle Hector!" But there was no reply. The arm around my shoulders, still hugging me, was limp, and oh-so-heavy. "Uncle Hector?" With a shaking hand, still covered in his blood, I reached up, trying to find a breath or a pulse. But there was nothing. There was absolutely nothing.

Guinevere was sobbing. Roy was weeping. I… was frozen in shock. This… this shouldn't be possible. It shouldn't be. But… but, I could not deny the facts. Uncle Hector, my proud uncle, who always did his best to protect anyone and everyone, who always had a smile and a hug for us… he was dead. Uncle Hector was dead.

Mother Earth… Mother Earth, why did you have to take him from us?!

Notes on Chad

- A thief skilled with lockpicks and daggers. He reminds me a bit of Uncle Matthew, though the personalities are very different. Very different. I don't think Chad could hide behind a smile if he tried.
- Eldest of the orphans in the destroyed orphanage, he fights to protect his 'family', and because Bern killed the Father of the orphanage.
- Surprisingly strong, and very fast. I'm a bit worried about his inability to take a hit.
- Has keen eyesight, as keen as mine. That'll be great when visibility is poor
- Thunder affinity, like Uncle Hector and Mom. …Uncle Hector…

Notes on Lugh

- Aunt Nino and Uncle Jaffar's son, he's been growing up in an orphanage on the outskirts of Araphan since their disappearance.
- His coloring, and facial features, reminds me of Aunt Nino, but there's a stillness to him when he fights that reminds me of Uncle Jaffar.
- Good magic, though not as powerful as Lilina. That said, I'm pretty certain that he's much faster, and the fact that he knows how to hold a sword means he has a back-up weapon.
Eventually.
• He's stubborn and kind. I think he's hiding some bitterness, though, and I hope he's right about fighting to not let it fester.
• Fire affinity

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: And so Armads finally takes its price. I had Guinevere around and talking just… because? (As a bit of a reminder, none of the FE6-only chars, like Irene and Roy, know much of anything about the Campaign of Fire, i.e. FE7, besides that's how their parents became friends.)

This chapter is the first of the 'bait and switch' boss chapters, where you have 'one' boss, and then it switches out for a different one. Zephiel appears, and is on the throne for a time, then he leaves Narcian in charge, and then Narcian decides to leave a flunkie in charge while he goes off to 'claim' his gift. Brunja is also there in the opening dialogue. I decided to play with it a bit and have Irene see, and charge forward to confront, them, almost dying in the process. I had Hector injuring Zephiel a) so that Irene could actually survive the encounter with Zephiel [and I wanted that encounter for reasons] and b) because Hector is a badass.

Lugh's C support with Elen reveals he is two years younger than Roy, putting him at the ripe old age of thirteen. His A support with Miledy reveals that he was about four when 'his parents died', meaning its been about ten years prior to the start of the game.

Next Chapter – Crumbling League
Uncle Hector is dead. I can't believe it. Bern... I hate it. I loathe it. It's stolen my family away. It's taken away the peace I grew up in. I hate it. I hate it.

Respecting Uncle Hector's last wishes, Roy leads us towards Ostia. Slowly, we cross, heavy with sorrow and shock. We decide to make an early camp in Laus. Marquess Erik had always been a strangely kind man to Roy and me, though that could be because he was more than a little afraid of our parents.

Laus is a beautiful territory, though. Calm meadows, clear streams... it has been peaceful ever since the Campaign of Fire twenty years ago, when someone manipulated and used the previous Marquess and turned him into the madness. But... but I can hear the wind whipping about. I can hear the warnings. I wish I could understand it, but grief has closed my ears.

I must get stronger. For Roy's sake. For Lilina's. I must.

We were stopping outside of a village in Laus. It wasn't really time for stopping, but it was difficult to continue on. Laus castle was within sight, but Roy didn't want to impose of Marquess Erik. We would go visit after everything was set up.

In my case, that was setting up the tent for Guinevere and I. She had tried to help, but... well, it was obvious she had never done something like this before. I had laughed, and poked her towards helping Wolt set up for cooking. She was a skilled cook herself, strange for a princess. Apparently, Zephiel taught her.

I wondered where Roy was, as I set up the poles. Was he crying? I hoped not. I mean it would be understandable, but I hoped he wasn't crying when someone couldn't hold him. It might be better if he was crying with someone else who could cry, but there... really wasn't anyone in the camp like that.

I cried when frustrated. I cried when embarrassed. But I couldn't cry for Oswin and Uncle Hector, no matter how hard I tried. Was I just in shock? Was there just something wrong with me? Something similar had happened with Aunt Ninian's death, and Mildain's. I could never cry in the moment. It always came a year or so later, when everyone else was moving on. ...Maybe there was just something wrong with me.

Footsteps caught my ear, but I didn't look up. Everyone was running around, trying to set up the camp. But these ones stopped right by me, and the person lingered.

Finally, I glanced up, and then went right back to work. Deke. Was he going to lecture me again?

"Here, let me hold this in place," he offered, crouching down and holding a flap down to make it easier for me to nail the pole in. "You've been extra reclusive." Yep, it was lecture time again apparently. "You don't leave your tent even to eat."
"Just leave me alone, Deke," I sighed, focusing on my work. Lycian tents were so… awkward compared to Sacaean gers. They were awkward and clumsy, with barely any room inside despite so much being involved. "I don't want a repeat of last time."

"Well, there aren't a lot of places you can run here." I suppose. I also likely wouldn't run into a dying survivor who would die on the cot despite our best efforts. Oswin… "You know; while we were traveling, I remembered something from Reglay." What was he going about now? "There was this beautiful cat that a certain Little Lady and Little Master loved dearly." Oh, yes, I became attached to one of the Reglay mousers, a beautiful tabby who purred loudly when I pet her. She would curl up with Sue and me to sleep. "But the cat got old, and eventually passed, a peaceful death to end a long and happy life. While the adults were expecting it, the Little Lady hadn't." No, I had been a child. I hadn't 'understood' death. "The Little Master cried and cried, but the Little Lady didn't. The Little Lady just sat by the cat's body, petting the fur as if trying to wake it."

"Her. The cat was a girl."

"Her." He helped me get the tent standing. "I never saw you cry. But you got reclusive. You hid. The only people you let near were your parents."

"Deke, what's the point of this?" Steady… steady… oh, good, it wasn't going to fall on me.

"The point is that your parents aren't here." I think I was very aware of this. "And I know them enough to know the last thing they want for you… they wouldn't want you alone. Those two had grown up alone."

"What? Did they confide that in you?"

"They didn't have to. Until Lord Pent took me in, I was alone. I knew their eyes because I had those eyes." He took my shoulder, and waited until I looked at him to continue. "The last thing I ever want for you and Little Master Klein is to get eyes like mine."

"Then why did you leave?" …Wait, that wasn't… "Never mind, forget I-"

"When things are calmer, I will explain." His grip on my shoulder tightened. "I promise I will. But right now, I think it will just result in you yelling and screaming, and focusing on the wrong things."

"What am I supposed to be focusing on?" What was I supposed to do? I had to get better, but you could only practice so much before your fingers bled. There was only so much studying you could do in a day.

"I think-" Shouts made him pause, and both of us looked up to see we were under attack. Their armor was 'Laus'. "Well, it looks like you need to focus on this for now." Yeah, I thought so too. "We'll talk later."

"Okay." I took a deep breath and stood up. "I am holding you to that promise by the way."

"I know you will." He smiled slightly. "You have always held promises highly."

"Promises are sacred to Sacaean." Right, but now I had my own promises to keep. "Let's go."

There were Sacaean. There were Sacaean mercenaries fighting us. I knew they would not fall back. Their pride would not let them give anything less than their best. So, all I could do was send them peacefully to Mother Earth. I did so. Repeatedly.
I shot one in the arm, giving Allen enough time to cut them down, and slowed to a stop to take a quick breather. "How many archers are still around?" I asked softly, eyes narrowing as I looked over the field. Shanna couldn't fly as freely with them around, so I had sent her to warn the southern village, edging the coastline. "It looks like just the ones by the cavalier guarding the gate..." From here, they looked a bit like Marquess Laus, but that had to be impossible. Surely, he wouldn't attack Roy, right? There was no reason to...

Shaking my head, I turned to the others. Marcus was warning the village near our camp, I sent Lance up to warn the village to the north... we were fighting mostly cavaliers, so Roy's rapier was getting a lot of use... I hoped it wouldn't break on him. We would have to spend a lot of time tending and repairing weapons after this. Wasn't there a decent armory and vendor around here? We had a lot of gold; we should stock up...

"Lady Irene!" I glanced down as Wade ran for me, tilting my head curiously at how frazzled he looked. I hadn't seen anything that looked like it required that sort of response. The battle's flow was favoring us. "Sorry, but do you mind going to Lord Roy?" he asked, panting heavily. I absently passed him my canteen, and he took it with a thankful smile. "Some girl showed up demanding protection?" ...Mother Earth, who did you lead to us?

"I'll head there," I promised. I glanced around before nodding. "Archers are dwindling, so focus on the lance users, Wade."

"Got it." He nodded, and I rode off, heading towards the north where Roy and Merlinus were talking to a blonde-haired girl. I couldn't see her face well, thanks to Merlinus blocking it, and yelling at her from what I could hear. Father Sky above, why did Merlinus think his opinion was ever wanted? It wasn't like Roy listened to him if it didn't involve something with supplies or finances.

"So, you're willing to help us?" I heard Roy ask as I got close. Who was he talking to?

"I suppose I cannot demand protection without repayment." ...I knew that voice. I knew that voice. What was that voice doing here?!!

"Clarine?" I called, dismounting to head over. Merlinus scowled as I approached, and Roy gave me a slightly pleading look. I, however, focused on Clarine herself. "Clarine, what in Mother Earth's name are you doing here?"

"Irene!" Clarine's eyes lit up when she saw me, and as soon as I dismounted, she bounded over to give me a hug. "Ah, a civilized person at last!" she cheered. I waved Roy to go on ahead, mouthing that I would take care of this. He nodded and headed off, dragging Merlinus behind him. "I've missed you. It's been a whole year." I hadn't seen her since Mildain's funeral.

"Clarine, I love you too, but you still haven't answered my question."

"Oh, that," Clarine popped back, eyes serious. "Klein went to the Western Isles after Mildain's funeral." Yes, I knew that. I got a few letters from him before they stopped suddenly. "But his letters suddenly stopped coming." Wait, that happened for them too? "Mom and Dad were doing their best to believe in him, making jokes, but it was so easy to see how much they were quietly panicking." She sighed, hugging herself. "So, I started looking, trying to find information. Marquess Laus contacted me, saying he had some information."

"Upon which, you rode down here to get information, or perhaps even see Klein." I sighed at her nod. While I wouldn't mind seeing Klein myself, for multiple reasons, this was just... "Clarine, sometimes..." I reached over to stroke her hair. "Do your parents know?"
"Yes, I told them I was coming here." Though, of course, I doubt Lycia had been at war when she left. They had to be frantic. Uncle Pent and Aunt Louise adored all 'three' of their children dearly. "I am most glad you are here. I had to deal with that loudmouth peasant, the slow lord, and then there was that boorish man inside…"

"Boorish man?" I was just going to focus on that for now. Much as I loved her, I didn't really like her insulting Roy. Merlinus was fair game, though.

"Some general of Bern. Horrible looking man." …What did she just…? "He said something about me enjoying his company more than Klein's." He… He did not…! "Irene, you look ready to scream."

"I'm going to fill that Narcian with so many arrows, I can use him as a quiver!" Before she had time to react to that, I hugged her tightly. "Did he touch you? Did he do anything to you?"

"Besides make me laugh hard enough to hurt my stomach? I mean; I'd sooner compare him to a disease-ridden mutt, but he kept going on and on."

"Yes, besides that."

"Well, he grabbed me roughly." She pulled away slightly and showed me her arm. I felt my blood run cold at the bruises blooming on her wrists. Oh, he was dead. He was dead, dead, deader than dead when I got my fucking hands on him! "What a loathsome peasant. I really don't get why Sacaeans are called savages when there's people like him around." She sighed heavily. "What a way to treat a la-EEK!" She yelped as I hugged her tightly again. "Irene? What is going-?"

"You're okay." I… I needed to focus on that. "You're okay." I needed to focus on what was here, right in front of me. "You're okay." Clarine was safe. That was the important thing.

"Well, yes?" She sounded so confused, and I did not blame her one bit. "Irene, did something happen?" She returned the hug. "Do I need to scold someone? I will."

"I know." I laughed a little. "But, really, I just need a hug right now."

"If you say so." She tightened her grip on me. "I feel like I am missing a great many things."

"I'll fill you in on the nightmare I've been living, and I'll explain why I got so mad here. Later." I pulled away, smiling wryly. "We're in the middle of a fight. Can you keep up with me?"

"Yes." She smiled at me. "Leave the healing to me!"

I almost replied, but I paused as I heard Marcus yell something about bandits attacking from the south. "Well, get ready, because things are about to get chaotic." Bandits? Really? This felt like a bad adventure tale. "Let's go."

Chad and Lugh did a wonderful job keeping the bandits at bay. I would ride close to make sure they continued being fine, but thanks to the trees, Chad hadn't even taken a hit, while Lugh was able to keep his distance. They both would smile at me when I passed by, and I would smile back before continuing on my way.

Clarine rode around too, handling the on-the-field healing. For those particularly hurt, like Wolt who nearly lost his arm, were sent back to Merlinus. I had Elen set up a field-infirmary with him, with stronger mend staves to deal with the worse injuries. This… ended up being a bit of a good thing for reasons I would never expect.
"Bors!" I wasn't sure who shouted, but it was easy to see why they did. Bors was falling, blood pouring out of the joints of his armor. Changing directions quickly, I skirted him and ran down the attacker, forcing him back. Okay, I needed to get Bors out of here and…

"I've got him!" I glanced back to see Lance tugging Bors into his saddle. "To Elen?" he asked. I nodded in reply. "Be back." And he was off, Bors barely staying in the saddle. Damn it… Mom wouldn't have had something like this happen…

My pity party had to be put on hold, though, as the swordsman attacked me again. I dodged back, my mare practically dancing to avoid the swings. I twisted and nudged her to kick up some mud, catching him square in the face and buying me the time to get some distance.

His eyes were broken. I could see that as he glared at me. What happened to him?

"Irene!" Oh, there was Clarine, peering at me worriedly. "Are you okay?" she asked. I nodded in reply, eyeing the boy warily. This was going to be difficult. "Oh, it's him!"

"Him?" I repeated, glancing at her. "You know him?"

"He helped me escape." She didn't look all that grateful with that scowl. "Just dropped me in the middle of a battlefield! Who does that?" While I was a bit mad about that, I was also really grateful he got her out of there. But I was also mad about him almost killing Bors. Well, this was conflicting. "He said he hates Bern with all his soul." Her eyes flickered with concern. "He sounded so… lost." She went right back to scowling. "But that doesn't excuse dropping a lady off without an escort. I'm going to yell at him." Wait, did she just…?

"Clarine!" She just rode off towards the guy who put our heavily armored knight in critical condition. CLARINE, SOMETIMES, I SWEAR TO FATHER SKY…!

I glanced back at the others, checking that they were all right, before riding after Clarine. She had already dismounted, and was scolding the boy. "I shan't allow you to abandon me twice," I heard her say as I dismounted and headed over. At the least, Clarine's skewed priorities startled the swordsman enough to not have her be instantly dismembered. "A gentleman must take responsibility for his actions." I felt the overwhelming need to apologize to this boy now. I really did.

"Responsibility? For what?" He sounded Sacaean. His looks were Bernese, but his garb and accent were Sacaean. He must be from Bulgar. …Didn't those generals say…? "I saved you from that twisted sadist." No, that was a lie. They had to be lying. They had to be.

"If a gentleman rescues a lady, he must also escort her to her home." …Clarine. Clarine. I loved you dearly, but Clarine. "In what fairy tale does some barf of a man abandon his princess?"

Clarine, this wasn't a fairy tale! Ah, I forgot how damn sheltered she was.

"What in the world are you on about?" He actually poked the side of her head, running his hands through her hair. "Did you take a head injury?" I could not blame him for thinking that.

"I did not!" She slapped his hand away, scowling. "Don't mess up my hair!" Clarine, it was already messed up thanks to all the crazy riding. "Regardless, you said you despise Bern with all your soul, yes? Bern is the country we are fighting."

He stilled suddenly, eyes widening slightly. "Is that true?"

"Yes, our leader, Floyd or whatever his name is, told me so himself." She pointed to me. "Irene confirmed it."
He might have said something. I wasn't sure. His hand dropped to his weapon, though, and my heart just… stopped when I saw it. It was a killing edge, not anything special, but it had Sacaean charms tied to the hilt. I knew those charms. I always got so damn embarrassed that Dad kept them on his sword, since I had been a child when I made them, and they really weren't all that good. But he always smiled softly when he looked at them. He called them one of his 'treasures'. So why…

"Where did you get that sword?" My words were quiet, threatening even. Clarine looked startled, while the boy looked wary. "Why do you have it?" I asked slowly, advancing on him. "Where is the original owner?"

"Dead, probably," the boy answered. Everything just… washed out. Dad… Dad couldn't be…

"Don't lie!" I snagged him by the collar, lifting him up. "Why do you have Dad's sword?! Tell me!"

"Irene!" Small, gentle hands were on my arms, pushing back. "Irene, he can't breath if you hold him like that, much less answer you." Clarine. Clarine was…

"A-ah…" I dropped him, stumbling back. I was shaking badly. "S-sorry…" I whispered. Argh, and I just accused him of… "I'm sorry for… and for accusing…"

"…How long have you been out of the Sacae?" the boy asked me calmly. His eyes were suspicious, but there was a hidden kindness peeking through the cracks. "Have you heard about Bulgar?" Ah…

"Clarine, can you return to the others?" She gave me a concerned look in reply. "It's okay. I won't… he's safe. I won't lose my temper on him again. Please." She nodded, gave the boy a warning look that basically screamed 'I am not done with the previous conversation', and left, riding off. "To answer your question, I heard… something, from the Wyvern Generals, but…"

"That Wyvern General, Brunja, led a force into Bulgar, during the height of the Sky Festival." During the…? But Bulgar was packed during then! "It was a purge. Everyone was massacred." His fists clenched at his side, and his voice shook, but there were no tears. Everything hurt too much. "I heard them laughing and screaming that they were going to wipe out the 'savages'. It was an attempted genocide, no chance of surrender."

The world just seemed to fall away. Genocide? Purge? Those things… those were things of the past, right? Yes, you had idiots, but they were… it was… "The Kutolah?" My voice was soft. "S-sorry, but I am of it."

"You're one of the Kutolah Princesses, aren't you? The older one, who has an outsider's eyes." I could only nod. "I don't know. I know the Kutolah came in to assist in pushing back Bern. I know the Kutolah prince, Rath, held open an escape path. I was frozen, and he picked me up from the corpses and helped me out. He gave me his sword to defend myself." Yeah, that… that sounded like Dad. That very much… but where was he now? Was he… of course he was fine. He had to be. "…I didn't see him die." Huh? "Rath of the Kutolah. I never saw him die." Very slowly, I focused on him again. "He wasn't even injured when I last saw him."

"Y-yeah, that makes sense." My voice was shaking. "He's fine. He's the best hunter of the Sacae. There's… there's no way Bern killed him." But they killed… Uncle Hector had consumption. He was handicapped. Dad wasn't. Well, I mean he was, because I had his best weapon, but it terms of skill and physical… Dad wouldn't… "He wouldn't leave Mom alone. He wouldn't leave Sue and me…" Dad was fine. Dad was fine. Dad was fine. "I'm sorry for…"
"You freaked out. Everything fell apart while you were away." He shrugged. I wasn't sure he should be forgiving me so easily, but maybe he did just because he was broken by everything. "Rutger." Hmm? "Rutger, of Bulgar."

"Irene, of the Kutolah." I needed to breathe. I needed to focus on the present. Dad was fine. I would hug him tightly when I saw him again, but for now, he was fine. I knew he had to be. "Did you say you would join us? I didn't really hear."

"Yes, I am. I have a score to settle with Bern." Yes, he did.

"Then a thousand blessings upon you."

"And a thousand curses onto our enemy."

With Rutger's knowledge, we routed the rest of the soldiers quickly, and discovered something horrible. Marquess Laus, himself, had betrayed the Alliance. Why had he…? I heard there was trouble twenty-years ago, but…

"I never thought Laus would betray us," Roy whispered. He, Guinevere, and I were in the throne room, reeling from the information. Marquess Laus had cursed us with his dying breaths after Rutger cut him down. This was... "To turn to Bern… I always thought the Lycia Alliance had a strong bond, that would not falter…" He punched the arm of the throne, shaking from anger. "Damn Bern! Playing dirty like this!" This was madness. The whole world was going mad.

"I'm sorry." Guinevere's voice was quiet. "You are suffering a lot because of my country," she whispered. Despite the guilty tone, she looked right at Roy, unwavering. "I apologize."

"...No, I'm sorry." Roy sighed, turning back to her. "I should have considered your feelings, Princess Guinevere."

"No, you are right. Bern is playing dirty." Did they have no pride? Did she have no pride?

"That's not..." He sighed, shaking his head. "No, we'll just get into a circular argument." He closed his eyes. "We will continue heading to Ostia. However, since we have traitors, there may no longer be a way to peacefully end things." I think that was decided when Uncle Hector died, Roy. "It might be better for you to return home, for your own safety. If you need any help..."

"No, if I am not a burden, I would rather stay." She what? "My brother is wrong. Dragging dragons into a human war..." She shook her head. If this is the liberation that he talks about, then I must do what I can to stop him. That cannot be done in Bern." Liberation?

"Liberation?" Oh, good, this wasn't me forgetting things. "What are you talking about?"

"It's what he says the purpose of this war is. To 'liberate' it." Liberate it from what? "I don't really get it. I always ran when he got into those sorts of rants. But he isn't really the type of person to take over the world. He must have some reason..."

"Is there a reason behind the obliteration of my people?" I could not help but ask, the words dry enough to spark a fire. "Bulgar was wiped out, during a festival. There would have been no one with weapons." The Sky Festival did not even have mock battles or shows of weaponry feats. Weapons were forbidden during it. "And my tribe..." My voice cracked, and I coughed to clear it. "Is there a reason behind it?"

"I did not mean to imply he had a 'good' reason," Guinevere whispered. Her hands shook, and she
reached up to grip her Sacaean pendant. "Just that there must be one, one that we do not understand." I honestly could not care any less than I did. He massacred my people. He desecrated the plains. I was going to rip him apart." I don't get why he would… he liked the Sacae." What. "I remember. He would beg Katri for stories in the letters, share them with me." She sighed, drooping. "That said, there is a high anti-Sacaean sentiment in Bern. Maybe he simply capitalized on it, to get people to rally for the fight." Oh. Well, that was just great to freaking…

"I am going to go practice." That was the best thing to do right now. "Before I do something stupid. Again." I didn't even wait for either her or Roy to reply, just stomped out, digging my nails into my palms to check the urge to just punch the damn walls.

I headed outside, gripping my bow tightly as I hunted for a tree to use as practice. There was one not far from the gates, and I took a deep breath while I aimed, released it as I fired. Aim on the inhale, release on the exhale. Dad taught me this trick to calm myself down, let myself be centered again, let myself hear the whispers in the wind, the murmurs of the earth. It was just me and the arrows, with the earth below and the sky above.

When I fired the last arrow, I went to tug, or cut, them out. However, when I ended up by the tree, I just… I just ended up collapsing, bruising my knees on the roots as I struggled to breathe, clutching Rienfleche to my chest.

Rienfleche. Dad's bow. Dad's precious bow, which he gave to me so he could continue to 'protect' me even though we were separated. He had to be okay. He just had to be. He was fine. Mom was fine. Sue was fine. Grandpa was fine. Everyone was fine. They just… they just had to…

I curled up against the tree, cradling the bow, shaking badly. I didn't even look up when I heard footsteps, but I did when someone ruffled my hair. Deke. He had come looking for me again.

"Come on, Little Lady Irene," he whispered, tugging me up. "Lady Clarine is driving everyone insane." Oh, she probably was. She had a forceful personality, and was rather spoiled. "Rutger is having difficulties getting along." That… also made sense. "To continue our earlier conversation…" Hmm? "You should focus on making sure the army is getting along." Oh, from before… "Focus on what you can do. You can practice. You can study. But you can also make sure everyone is going to work together."

I couldn't find the energy to reply. But I did not, and he nudged me to walk forward. The action reminded me of the promise I made to Oswin.

Father Sky, Mother Earth… please, look after my family. If You could do that, then I could… then I would walk forward. Just, please… please…

Notes on Clarine

- **Forceful and proud, more than a little snobbish, and horrendously spoiled as the Princess of Reglay. However, she has a very kind heart, and is incredibly loyal. I view her as a little sister.**
- **Out and about because she was trying to track down information on why Klein suddenly stopped writing letters.**
- **Several childhood illnesses as a baby and child, many very severe, led Uncle Pent to choose against having her properly learn her magic, out of fear that the stress would outright kill her. As a result, despite having inherited a great deal of magical potential, her magical output is stunted, and it's unlikely she will ever live up to that potential without a lot of luck. Admittedly, she likely has a lot of luck, but I don't think it'll extend to this.**
• That said, she's highly skilled, and is an expert rider. She's as evasive as a Sacaean on a horse, and no one is dragging her out of the saddle without her permission. Dad drilled her enough to ensure that.
• Her affinity is thunder.

Notes on Rutger

• Half-Sacaean like me, though his other half is Bernese. As I understand it, he is the child of two half-Sacaeans. Not unusual for Bulgar. What is unusual is, like me, he has 'outsider' features and coloring. Unlike me, it extends to both his eyes and his hair.
• Survivor of the massacre of Bulgar, he is severely traumatized and focusing on his hatred of Bern. I worry that this hatred extends to himself, for surviving. Especially since I'm certain he survived because he looked more Bernese, so the soldiers thought he was one of 'them', not a 'savage'.
• Wields Dad's killing edge, given to him as he escaped. He says Dad held open an escape route, so most of the people who survived, survived only to him. Sounds like Dad...
• He had training prior, so he is a very skilled sword user. Brutally accurate, I think he'll be one of the most reliable units we have.
• His affinity is dark, like Dad's. Fitting...

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: So, disclaimer, I absolutely love Clarine. Most of her dialogue here, such as her recruitment and the Rutger recruitment convo, is from the translation patch I have, which has some very different lines than the original translation patch. But she's great, she's a beautiful dodge tank, and she's one part of one of the most broken support triangles. Rutger, ftr, is another part of this triangle, and it turns him from a great unit to one of the best in the game, truth be told. With these supports, Rutger can easily get over 100% critical chance. (FE6 is basically the start of the support conversations as we know them, which means they hadn't learned how to balance anything yet.)

The Rutger-Irene exchange at the end of their little meeting is based on the exchange Lyn and Rath have during Chapter 6 of FE7. Bors being so badly injured was based on my playthrough, where I had Bors bait out Rutger, and proceeded to survive the encounter with 1 HP.

Next Chapter – Fire Emblem
Marquess Laus has been working with Bern behind the scenes. I wonder if this is part of the reason why there was an ambush at Araphan. If one good thing can come from this, it's that Laus still has a lot of soldiers. Soldiers that are practically bending backwards to assist Roy.

But this whole thing has hit Roy hard. Maybe it's because of the peace, and maybe... maybe it's a bit of my fault, but it shakes him that he can no longer trust the lords of his homeland. If one betrayed, who can say others won't?

To avoid castles, we make our way through a treacherous mountain pass. I think we're heading for Thria, Lord Orun's home. Surely he, half-brother to Uncle Hector, was still loyal. But, then again, the world is going mad. I think I'm going to read a bit more.

Lycian mountains were rather different from Bernese. There were many villages dotting the paths, old fortresses, and the paths were more than wide enough for an army to pass. Bernese mountains practically required fliers to navigate safely.

"Irene, you really have some of the prettiest hair." Clarine was rather gentle when she brushed people's hair. I always forgot that. "I knew that shampoo would work terrific in your hair." I also always forgot that Clarine was stupidly skilled at packing. She was the only person I knew who could bring a full Etrurian hair-care kit, plus extras, along with things such as clothes and other necessities. "And the conditioner. Your hair is so soft~" Really, I was surprised she didn't bring a make-up kit. I think she only didn't because she didn't really like them. "Irene, are you asleep?"

"No, but it is rather soothing having you brush my hair," I replied, focusing back on my book. While I was still hesitant to talk to people, and I still wasn't really sure I could 'help people get along' like Deke suggested, I did decide to at least take my studying outside of the tent. "Do I need to hand you anything?"

"No, not yet." So, instead, I was sitting by the fire at the temporary camp we set up for lunch, and Clarine was perched on a bucket behind me. I could only hope no one needed to use that bucket as they weren't getting it back anytime soon. Clarine had already refused to sit in the dirt like me. "Well, actually, can you pass me my tea?"

"Sure." I passed it back carefully, and then reached for my own cup. I'd ended up making tea for the camp, after gagging on Allen's earlier attempt at it. It... seemed to be popular enough? Certain, no one was complaining.

"As always, you make some of the best tea, Irene." I smiled at that. Dad was the one who taught me. He always enjoyed teaching me, and called my tea 'the best', even though it paled in comparison to his. Would I... no, I would. When I returned to the Sacae, I would find the Kutolah, give Dad a big hug, and badger him relentlessly. He was fine. *He was fine.* "Do you think Princess Guinevere will let me brush her hair?"

"You can ask her later, when we stop for the night." She was sharing a tent with Guinevere and me
for now, until we stopped long enough to pick up more tents. "For now, I think she's content with chatting with Elen." The sound of wood clacking caught my attention, and I looked up from my book to see Rutger and Deke sparing. Though, by my eyes, it seemed more like Rutger had ambushed him, and Deke was trying to make the best of it. "Well, it seems like they're sort of getting along."

"Perhaps." She sounded sour. "I tried to talk to him before, but he just walked off, the rude lout." Clarine… "That's not how a gentleman is supposed to treat a lady."

"Remember, we aren't living a tale."

"Just because we're not doesn't mean we can't bring those ideals into reality, though." She sounded rather firm. "Things are always rough when people are cynical. That's what Mom says. I'd rather be a little brave, and hope for better." Her hands stilled in my hair. "That's… um… that's okay, right?"

"Clarine, I love you. Don't change." Yes, it was okay to hope for better. Everything will be fine. Oswin… Oswin's last words had been that.

"Oh, but I must hurry up and become a refined lady. Like Mother, and Aunt Katri, and Cecilia." Oh, Clarine… "You know; Rutger doesn't have that bad of a face. Nowhere near as wonderful as Klein's."

"No, I suppose…” I trailed off, feeling a blush prick up my face. "Clarine!"

"Haha! You always turn red!" Ugh, why did I tell her I was crushing on Klein again? "Anyway, I think with a little bit of work, he can be truly handsome."

"I somehow doubt he cares. He's Sacaean, even if his face is Bernese."

"You're Sacaean, Irene." Yeah, and I was just humoring her in this. …And I liked having someone brush my hair. As I had mentioned, it was very soothing. "Oh, who is that?" Mmm?

I glanced up from my book, and saw a man, wearing ill-fitting clothing, bolt for Roy, who had been sitting by the fire too. Merlinus's undignified squawk made me snicker. "Pardon, but… are you Lord Roy, of Pherae?" the villager asked. Roy hesitantly nodded, eyes cautious. "Please, can you help us with the bandits?"

"Bandits?" Roy repeated. He stood up, brushing the dirt off his pants. "Is there a reason you do not go to the castle guards? I know there is one here."

"Our lord died in Araphan, and the guards fled as soon as we got word." Cowards. Where was their pride? "We villagers were left behind, and now we spend our days in fear." The villager ducked his head, half-bowing. "Please, help us…"

"Master Roy, we are on a mission," Merlinus harshly reminded. I glanced around for something to throw at his big head. "We must continue our pace to Ostia." Yeah, and Aunt Lyn would literally kill us when she heard we had abandoned people to bandits. Seriously, Merlinus, why were you so jerkish and stupid?

"But we cannot leave people who are in need of help," Roy replied easily, not even hesitating. Roy, I did love you so~ "But if you are truly so insistent, Merlinus, you can inform Aunt Lyn exactly why we let bandits run amok." Merlinus paled. "I appreciate your advice, Merlinus, but it is important to remember that, as a lord and a knight in training, I have an obligation to protect the people of my land. Uncle Hector is dead, so I must take up his burdens until Lilina can." …Roy, that was a bit too mature, and we were going to have a talk later. "Irene?"
"Even if I was somehow so pragmatic that I was willing to let innocent civilians die like some people…" I began slowly, unable to resist the bard at Merlinus. I just did not like him! "I'm not stupid enough to deal with Aunt Lyn and Lilina's wrath." I made to stand up. "So, let's just-" Only for Clarine to push me back down. "Clarine?"

"Plan while I'm finishing," she informed me, sounded a little sour. "You can't skip this!" …Clarine, seriously? "I mean it." Mother Earth, maybe you could give her a better sense of priorities. Then again, it did make me smile.

"Okay, okay." I sighed, and settled back down, tugging out some paper. "Shanna, you're going to have to come to me. It's apparently the end of the world if I move right now." I caught a ripple of laughter, and I felt myself relax. Maybe things… wouldn't be so bad.

One group through the gate, and one group to go up and around the mountains to warn the other villages of the conflict. Mostly foot soldiers in the former, and mostly cavalry in the latter.

I ran down a bandit, nudging my horse to kick back with her hooves to smash an approaching one's face in. As she settled, I shot a third, right through the neck. There were really an incredibly number of bandits. What bothered me was that there were Sacaeans among them. I made it my job to take them out first, so they could explain to Mother Earth why they were falling in with bandits. Where was their pride? Surely, bandits didn't pay enough for them to discard it?

I ducked under an arrow, eyes narrowed as I saw one Sacaean bandit had aimed right for me. The markings on his clothes marked him as one of the Djute tribe. I didn't know much about them, mostly seeing them in passing. Their chieftain, Monke, and Grandpa didn't get along. They were one of the larger tribes, larger than even the Kutolah, but not quite matching our might.

"Why are you here?" I called. He didn't reply. "I'm Irene, of the Kutolah." He tensed up, eyes widened slightly. "What's wrong? Were… were you displaced by the…" The words were hard to say. "The massacre of Bulgar?"

The only answer I received was an arrow. I dodged it, and charged forward, aiming and firing at him. He ducked under it and lunged out of the saddle, tackling me to the ground. Hadn't had… something like that happen in a long while.

He tried to punch me, but I twisted, hooking my legs around his waist to throw him off me. I scrambled up, panicking when I couldn't find Rienfleche. I couldn't lose it. It's Dad's. I need to return it, when I saw him again. I would see him again. I knew I would.

He lunged forward again, not even bothering to find a weapon. I dodged and feinted a sidekick, before switching it to an axe kick, catching him straight in the shoulder. I felt something 'pop', and I twisted to punch him in the face, breaking his nose, and then actually kicking him in the side to send him crashing to the ground, right on the swelling shoulder. I might have dislocated it. I might have also hurt my leg, or at least my hip.

"So, are you willing to answer my question?" I asked, crouching down next to the man. He was gasping for air, coughing and sputtering as some blood trickled into his mouth from his nose. "Why are you here?"

"…Kutolah…" he gasped out. He looked right at me. "The Djute… Monke betrayed Daylan." …Betrayed…? They… betrayed…? "Kutolah massacred… Bulgar destroyed… separated the granddaughter from the noncombatants." Granddaughter? Sue? Where was she?! "Fell on them. Tore them…"
"You attacked non…” I straightened and kicked him as hard I could in the gut. He coughed up blood, and I kicked him again. "Monster! Traitor! Kinslayer!" Each word was punctuated with another kick. "How dare you all betray…? To betray even Mother Earth and Father Sky!" I'D DESTROY THEM!

"Not all…” He was still coughing up blood, curling into a ball in an attempt to protect himself from my wrath. I tried to just focus on breathing and calming down. No matter how much the scum deserved it, it… really wasn't right to kick someone while they were down. Literally. "Not all were killed." Oh, well, that's great! "Katri…” Mom? "Katri, Lady of Kutolah… she did something. Made the Bernese retreat." Well, it was Mom. I wasn't surprised. But where was Sue? Where was Grandpa? Where was my family?! "Ran then. Ran far. Couldn't stand it. Couldn't support it."

"…But you didn't turn away at first. You still charged and killed." There was a bow nearby, though not Rienfleche. But there was one, and an arrow, and I picked both up and rolled him onto his back, aiming the arrow right for his skull. "Beg for Mother Earth's forgiveness, because you're not getting any from me!"

He smiled as the arrow hit him. Maybe he had been looking for a place to die. Well, I was most happy to oblige!

A whinny caught my ear, and I smiled as my pretty mare trotted up. She nuzzled my face, nudging my shoulder as if gently chiding me. Whether it was because I was stupid enough to be thrown out of the saddle or because of how I acted, I wasn't sure. It might have been both. This might be Mother Earth's way of scolding me.

"I know; I know…” I murmured. I glanced around and finally found Rienfleche not far away, picking it up and brushing the dirt off of it. Then I mounted up and closed my eyes, focusing on the wind. Father Sky's whispers of reassurance… I needed to calm down. I… really needed… to calm down.

But the Djute betrayed the Kutolah? Even if we had never gotten along, to betray? Were they mad? Mother Earth and Father Sky would never let such a transgression pass. They would be obliterated, by their wrath or by the agents of their wrath.

Plus, there was what he said… Sue had been separated? Mom had done something to make Bern leave the survivors alone? Where were they? Why had he not mentioned Grandpa or Dad? Where were they? Dad had been at Bulgar, but… everything was fine. Everyone was fine. I had to believe that. If I was to continue walking forward, I had to…

"Lady Irene?" I tugged the reins to make my mare turn, blinking slowly as I drew myself out of my worries and focused on the present. "Lady Irene?" There was Lance with… with a strange looking lance. "Are you okay?" …That sentence amused me far more than it should have. "Lady Irene?"

"Sorry, I'm a little…” I began, groping for words. I just shook my head. "No, never mind. It is not important for the present fight." I might need to have a talk with Marcus or someone, though. I felt like my head was about to explode. "What's up? What is it you have there?"

"Oh, this?" He held it up, smiling slightly. "The villagers gave it to me, stating that it is the lance of Sir Gant." Wasn't he a hero in some Lycian folklore? "I don't know if that is actually the case, but it seems like a good lance.” It did. "Regardless, the area is clearing up."

"I see.” I heard wings, and looked up to see Shanna swooping down. "Yes?"
"Bandits are coming out of the nearby fortresses!" she informed me breathlessly, not even bothering to land. I simply sighed, rubbing at my temple. So, they not only took over the castle, but the fortresses as well? We needed to get the castle secured quickly. "Gate group is at the castle. Rutger and Deke are dealing with the bandit boss person." Oh, that was nice. "Orders?"

"We'll leave them to kill and secure the castle," I answered slowly. "But we need to ensure the bandits don't take the surrounding villages, or meet up with the bandits at the castle as reinforcements." I looked to Lance. "Get me Allen, and we'll round things up here."

"Of course, Lady Irene," Lance replied immediately. He smiled slightly, though I had no idea why. "I will be back momentarily."

"Let's gets to bandit killing then."

As I suspected, Deke and Rutger were more than capable of dealing with the bandit, though from what I understood, it was closer than I would have thought. Apparently, the bandit leader had carried a 'killer axe', and there were a few close calls. Thankfully, both of them were good at dodging.

"Master Roy," Merlinus called. As was becoming our habit, Roy, Guinevere, and I were in the throne room while everyone else secured the castle. It looked like we were staying the night here today, if only to make sure there were no more bandits. "A priest of the Elimine Church has come to speak with you." There was an awkward pause as the three of us turned to face him. "And Princess Guinevere." …Wait, hold on a second there. Did he just say…? "Yes, by name." How?

"Go ahead and let him in," Guinevere answered. At my skeptical look, she smiled bitterly. "The relationship with my brother and the Elimine church has… not been very good, as of late. I do not believe I am in immediate danger." I was going to get an arrow from my quiver anyway, just in case.

"If you are certain," Roy replied. Still, one hand dropped to the rapier at his waist as he turned to Merlinus. "Please, let him in." Merlinus bowed and disappeared from the room. "What could a priest want with us?" It couldn't be a simple 'thank you' if whoever it was asked for Guinevere. "Irene, keep sarcasm to a minimum." I'd try.

The doors to the throne room opened again, signaling that our guest had arrived. "Lord Roy, what a pleasure to meet you at last." The man that walked in looked a little familiar. "I am Saul," he greeted. I knew that name. "I am a priest of Elimine."

"You're one of Yodel's students," I added. Though, I mostly knew him because… "Guinevere, get behind me. He's a horrible, horrible flirt." He even flirted with Mom. Yes, Mom was gorgeous, but she was married, and Saul often flirted with her in front of Dad.

"Lady Irene, as always, your words are as vicious as your beauty is striking." He sighed so mournfully. "But goodness, I believe the rumors downplayed your great beautiful, Princess Guinevere."

"Just get to the point." We would be here all day if we played his game. "Is Dorothy here?"

"She is waiting outside the door, being glared at by that financial advisor." Saul sighed. "Very well." His eyes sharpened, and I automatically tensed. Things like this reminded me that, while he was an acolyte, there was a reason why Saul was entrusted to missions from Yodel. "Your highness, Princess Guinevere, I wish to know the location of the Fire Emblem." That was…? "You
"...What makes you think that?" Princess Guinevere asked slowly. Her words were calm, but I saw her hand go up to her chest. She gripped her Sacaean pendant, but I thought she went first to the other necklace she wore.

"Bern's head of church informed us that the Fire Emblem mysteriously disappeared from the vault, a feat that has not been accomplished in twenty years." Twenty years ago? That was during the Campaign of Fire... did Mom and the others have something to do with that? "You, convenient, went missing at about the same time."

"Is that so?" Her voice got just a little colder. "I hadn't heard anything about it. It's rarely used nowadays except in the most formal of ceremonies. The last time it came out of the vault was during my coming of age ceremony."

"Oh?" Saul's eyes sharpened further, and I instinctively shifted to shield Guinevere a little better. "Perhaps I might ask a different question. Is there a reason why King Zephiel would be... distraught at losing the Emblem? Does it jeopardize him in some way?"

"According to the tales, there is a sword hidden deep within the Shrine of Seals. A powerful sword, more powerful than even the Divine Weapons of legend." That... was saying something. I wondered if it was as old as the Katti Blades Aunt Lyn wielded. "Hartmut is said to have wielded it, and when the Scouring ended, sealed it away, taking the emblem from the hilt to use as the key. The royal family of Bern guards it, just as we guard the location of the Shrine of Seals."

"And since there are rumors that Bern has brought out dragons, having such a powerful weapon in enemy hands would be... most troubling." He nodded, eyes closing. "Is there a reason you did not go get the sword yourself?"

"I thought about it, but a traveling dancer named Fiona told me I shouldn't." Roy and I exchanged a wide-eyed look at the name. Fiona... she had been an old friend of Aunt Ninian, a dancer who never seemed to get older, no matter how many years passed, and had played with us as children. She left when Aunt Ninian died, though, wanting to mourn her in private. We hadn't heard from her since. "She said that I would be unable to touch it, that the sword itself will kill me. I imagine it is for the same reason Zephiel doesn't obtain the sword." It would kill? The Katti blades just refused to be used. Why would the spirit inside this sword go so far to kill potential wielders? "Does it truly matter, though? Wherever the Fire Emblem is, its disappearance has not stopped my brother."

"Mmm, I will let it slide." He opened his eyes again. "So, what will you do?"

"I will remain with Roy and Irene. I still have not given up hope."

"If that is the case, then I shall come with you."

"If Roy allows it. I am a guest. He is the leader."

"I have no objections, so long as everyone plays nice," Roy answered. He and I exchanged another look. "Um... Princess Guinevere... this Fiona you mentioned...?"

"She appeared around the same time as the 'dark priestess' or whatever she is," Guinevere answered. She smiled slightly. "She appeared at the manse, looking for shelter. She encouraged me to come to Lycia. I don't know much about her, but she seems strangely young for how old her eyes are. Last I saw her, she was still in the manse, saying she had to 'watch Idenn and Jahn', whoever they are." I didn't know those names. But it worried me that Fiona was in Bern when all
this madness was going on.

"I see..." Roy sighed, closing his eyes. "Well, we should get Saul and... Irene, who is Dorothy?"

"His babysitter," I deadpanned. Saul dramatically gasped, looking playfully wounded. "More seriously, Dorothy is in training as a church guard, an archer, and most often has to be Saul's bodyguard when he gets sent on missions."

"Wolt will love having another archer to train with." I'm sure. "Let's just... get everything together then?" Yeah, that sounded good.

But that information about the Fire Emblem, and Fiona, wasn't going to leave my head soon. How would she know that Zephiel and Guinevere couldn't wield that sword sealed away? Was that going to be a constant thing?

…I should just focus on the immediate goal. Get to Ostia. Though, perhaps...

After securing the castle, ensuring that no one killed Saul, and making sure everything was running smoothly, I went to go find Marcus. Dad and Mom had always insisted that when things got too overwhelming, I should talk to someone. I was reluctant in this case, since there was so much going on, but at the same time, I did feel like my head was going to explode. That wasn't a very nice place to be, and I highly doubted my ability to perform properly when my thoughts were a giant mess like this.

I found Marcus out on a balcony, looking down below at Allen and Lance beating each other with training spears in a practice bout. He had a notebook next to him, and I saw him carefully writing down observations. Maybe I should observe training sessions too. Maybe that would help me figure out what strategies to give?

Still, that wasn't the reason why I was here. "Marcus?" I called softly. He glanced back and gave me a warm smile, the wrinkles in his face deepening with the gesture. "I'm sorry to bother."

"Lady Irene, I promise that you are not bothering me in the slightest," he reassured. He waved me to come stand next to him. "What is it? I would think you would hole up studying right now."

"I should, but..." I sighed, looking up at the sky. It was still far too early for stars, and honestly, I was a bit afraid of what I would find up there. "I was hoping you wouldn't mind talking?"

"Of course not." I breathed a small sigh of relief at that. "What is it? Is it about what happened in Bulgar?"

"Oh, you already know?"

"I spoke to Rutger, worried by how angry his strikes were. After a few pushes, he did tell me. I reassured him that he does not need to tell anyone else, and as far as I am aware, that knowledge is not known to the group as a whole." I see. "But it stood to reason that you would find out. I know the sword he wields."

"Yeah..." I drooped, resting my arms on the railing of the balcony, dropping my head to look at my boots. There was a rip in the sole. I'd need to fix that. "One of the Sacaeans we fought today told me a little more. How the Djute betrayed..." I felt so nauseous. I was almost certain I was going to throw up. "Bulgar is massacred, my tribe is at best scattered, and I have... no actual idea where my family is." My voice cracked, and I covered my face as the tears flowed. "I'm so scared. Oswin is dead. Uncle Hector is dead. The last I've heard about Dad is that he was in Bulgar, without his
preferred bow or sword." He had given the bow to me, and the sword to Rutger, so that we could be safe. "All I've heard about Sue is that she was 'separated' from the non-combatants before they were cut down. Mom apparently did something to make them retreat, but there's nothing on her."

"And you want desperately to believe that everything is going to be all right, but at the same time, you are fully aware that it is a hope that might be answered with nothing." I could only nod, still crying. "That is, of course, not even going into your fears of being a tactician during a war. You are well aware that you might have to give an order that leads to a soldier's death." Yes, I was. That made me scared to get close. Could I even give such an order? "You know… Katri had a hard time with that as well."

"She did?"

"Yes, her 'miraculous' keeping everyone alive was born from that same fear." He passed me a handkerchief to wipe my face. "She also had a horrible time talking to people about what was bothering her, until everything dramatically exploded, at the worst times." Mom did? "She told no one how she was faltering at what path she wanted to walk. She told no one her mother had passed. She never even really told anyone that she had a fear of horses." She did? I hadn't known that. "But that so-called miracle was born from that fear. She couldn't bring herself to sacrifice the one for the many, and ran her health deep into the ground in order to pull off that 'miracle'."

"She did?"

" Barely sleeping, barely eating… really, she worried a lot of us with her poor health choices." I finally looked at him in time to see him shake his head. "But we grow off topic. The source of your current trouble is that you are terrified by how mad everything has become."

"…yes…" My voice sounded so small, even to my own ears. "I mean; Dad is the best hunter, so he has to be…"

"You are aware that you used the same justifications for Lord Hector, and it makes you shake." Yes. Yes, it did. "Rath is skilled. If there is someone who could survive what I have heard, it would not surprise me if Rath would." Yes… "But you are also aware that he would have been up against an army. An army that ambushed innocent civilians during a festival."

"Why are Sacaeans so hated?"

"People can be stupid and blind, fearful of what is different." I loved how cynical he could be. I really did. It just made me feel better. "Irene, it is not a shame to keep hoping. It's not a shame to be afraid that you're wrong." He laughed softly. "Hope is… like a coin, Irene. It constantly flips between joy and despair, and you always hold your breath when it's flipping through the air, wondering what side it eventually lands on. Are you rewarded with joy or are you plunged into despair?"

"It just burns."

"Making it hard to hold onto. And you must hold onto a lot of it, to keep from falling apart." He reached over to ruffle my hair. "What is it that Sacaeans say about the dead?"

"They find peace in the meadows of Mother Earth, resting and watching over the living. Father Sky carries their messages of reassurance on the winds, and paints them in the stars."

"Meaning that, regardless of what happened, they are always with you, watching and protecting you." The words made me start crying again. "Though it hurts to no longer see them, or to get a
reassuring hug." Yes… "Perhaps you should hold onto that, instead of clinging so desperately to hope that blisters your spirit."

"But I can still be sad."

"Of course." He shifted to return to his notebook, letting me stand next to him to just… sob. "But do not use the tears to drown. Use them to clear your sight and move forward."

"Oswin said something similar."

"The greatest joy Oswin and I have is watching our lords and ladies grow into their full potential. Which, I must say, you and Lord Roy are doing very nicely." Ha… "Go ahead and cry for a while, Irene. I think you need it."

"Thank you…” So, I did, just sobbing into the handkerchief as he fell silent, making notes on the training people below.

The wind blew gently, almost like a hug, and, on them, I 'heard' words of reassurance and pride. Of love and care. I wasn't sure if they were from Dad's spirit or Father Sky sending me his living thoughts to bring me comfort.

But I did find comfort in them, and the strength to keep on walking. One step at a time. I would scream in joy or despair when I learned the truth. But I… I would not run away. I would keep on hoping, but also hold onto these reassurances.

One step at a time. I would walk forward.

Notes on Saul

- An acolyte, priest… whatever of the Elimine Church. Student to Yodel. He is quickly proving to be a horrible headache, as he has already hit on all the women in the army. Thrice.
- Skilled with staves, though, and is a good healer. What I'll probably do is have him and Clarine on the field, and set up Elen as the 'back up'/emergency' healer near Merlinus.
- I think he's horribly unlucky, based on some interesting accidents I saw in the past, but he's decently fast. Certainly more physically healthy than Elen.
- Strangely, his affinity is ice.

Notes on Dorothy

- Saul's long suffering babysitter and bodyguard, an archer who has been training from a young age to serve as a church guard.
- Rather reserved, shy and not very confident in herself. She also has a habit of talking to herself often.
- Likely due to having longer training, she is stronger than Wolt, but I think she's less accurate. Though, that could be because she second-guesses herself often. Regardless, though, it's going to take a lot of work to get her stronger, much like Wolt.
- Her affinity is fire.

Chapter End Notes
Author's Notes: Technically, Saul and Dorothy join next chapter in game, but we're putting their info here for convenience. Gant is an original character from the manga adaptation, and you get his lance in this chapter. I chose to go with folklore hero for… fun? References to Deke-Rutger and Rutger-Clarine C supports.

Next Chapter – Ensnared
Chapter 6) Ensnared

After taking Saul and Dorothy into our ranks, we made our way through the mountains and into Thria. It wasn't far from Ostia, just to the southeast, and was ruled by the kind-hearted Lord Orun, half-brother to Uncle Hector. I understand Thria was taken into Ostia's custody after the previous lord was killed by an assassin, leaving no heirs. Reminds me of how Caelin is also under Ostia's protection, with Wil as the steward, since Aunt Lyn was married to Uncle Hector.

If things are kind, then we will be able to get some rest. The thing is, I highly doubt it will be kind. Nothing else about this really has, so…

It has been a long while since I've been to Thria. Mom and Dad decide sometimes to pass through it on the way to Ostia, since apparently this was where they reunited during the Campaign of Fire, but we hadn't done that the last few times. My parents were such romantics sometimes. Most of the time, actually.

Shaking my head, I glanced back to Guinevere. She was riding with me, careful to keep her hood up. We had made certain she was in Lycian clothes, not Bernese, just to help her hide a little better. After all, there were people who knew she was traveling with us now. Even if it was 'just' the church, that didn't speak well to her safety.

When she saw me looking, though, she gave me a brave smile, even as her hand shook on my shirt. She hoped to talk to Orun when we arrived. I could only hope we would get the chance…

The doors to Castle Thria opened easily, and in we rode. I kept a wary eye on the guards, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary as we all entered the castle. I was probably being paranoid, but there was something off with the wind. It wasn't telling me anything, but it shook and shivered at something. It was frightened. That typically meant something was wrong.

"Ah, welcome, Lord Roy!" A man in a hooded cloak came out to greet us. I dismounted to silently stand near Roy, while Guinevere made certain to duck back, out of sight. "Such an honor to see you," the man greeted, voice warm and bright. "I don't believe we met. I am Wagner, steward of Thria. I was hired a few months ago." Oh, what happened to the old one? He'd been a nice old man. Maybe he finally retired.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," Roy answered politely. He smiled warmly. "I apologize for arriving so unexpectedly. Might I trouble you all for some rooms?"

"It's no trouble at all, I assure you. The guest rooms would love to finally be used." He laughed a little. "Here, I can show you to them."

"Oh, is Lord Orun busy at the moment? I thought I would greet him before resting, since I came so unexpectedly…" Roy trailed off, looking around a bit in confusion. "Actually, where is he? He normally greets guests himself."

"Tragically, he is unable." Wagner sighed, mood deflating. "You see… Lord Orun has the
consumption." He had… oh, ugh, I hated that disease! It almost killed Mom, it killed Grandmother, and you could not tell me it didn't play a part in Uncle Hector's death too. "It's so bad that he simply cannot see visitors at the moment." Oh… Ah, wait, I knew the medicines for that. Or, well, the medicines that helped with consumption. I could mix some up later for him.

"Oh, that's…" Roy sighed, drooping slightly. "I had hoped to speak with him…"

"I will let him know. Perhaps he will be feeling better in the evening." Wagner put on a smile. "But, come. You must be exhausted. Let me show you to the rooms."

"Ah, yes, thank you." Giving Wagner a smile, Roy followed him in. I glanced at Marcus, who waved me on in. He would ensure the horses were taken care of, so I was free to follow Roy. That made me feel a bit better.

As we walked through the halls, the wind suddenly burst through the half-open window, slamming the shutters against the wall. It blasted towards one room in particular that we were passing. Curious, I crept closer to it, peering at the door. It was well tended to, the knob tarnished from being used so much.

"Ah, that's a storage room, my lady." I glanced up to see Wagner walk up to fetch me. I also noticed something nervous about his demeanor. "Please, pay it no mind," he urged. "Your rooms are this way. If you need supplies, I will send the other servants to fetch them." Silently, I nodded, and he turned away, clearly expecting me to follow him. His sigh of relief, and small smirk, did not escape me.

Carefully, I reached over and twisted the knob. Locked. But there was something important in this room. I could hear it on the wind. But while I could get Chad to break in now, it was probably better to wait. I had a suspicion I would lose my temper when I learned what was inside the room.

This was not the time for me to throw a tantrum. I would be patient. I was on a hunt, and Wagner was the prey. I would figure out what was wrong before long anyway. We always did.

"Ah, Lady Irene, it is the blessings of God that we meet again!" Someone kill me now. Saul was flirting with me. Again. While I was trying to study in Roy's room. "Ah, God, thank you for granting me the honor of viewing one of your works of beauty," he dramatically gushed. I just did my best to ignore him. It was hard. I couldn't even listen in on the conversation Merlinus, Roy, and Guinevere were having. "Is it not wondrous?"

"I think Mother Earth sent you to me as a reminder that I must have patience," I deadpanned, flipping through Mom's logbook. Oswin had said to read to the end, or skip to it, but why? Why would he say that? It made me nervous to reach that section…

"Such a sharp tongue as always, but it simply enhances your beauty." Would I get in trouble if I threw him out the window? "Perhaps we might have a riveting discussion over dinner?"

"Saul, if you can hunt, and kill, the food for said dinner, then sure."

"Such a challenge!" He gasped, stepping back dramatically. I could only sigh. He was like… a worse Uncle Sain. Of course, Uncle Sain only really flirted with Aunt Fiora nowadays. I wondered how they were, actually… I knew their son was training to be part of the Illian cavalry, while their daughter was training to be a pegasus knight, same as Aunt Farina and Uncle Kent's daughters. But with the war… "But it might be worth it."

"Saul, I would seriously pay to see you attempt to hunt." Then again, they could choose their
contracts, especially since they were so successful. And I couldn't imagine them serving Bern, especially in light of what Bern was doing to Lycia. "Might be funny to see you get mauled."

"Your cruel humor helps make your sweet looks sparkle." I almost retorted, but a small 'creak' caught my ear. Someone was attempting to sneak over here. "If I did get mauled, would you kiss it better?"

"I'd laugh, and then throw you to a healer." I set my book to the side, and went to get my bow. The sound was getting closer.

"Aha! You do care!" Keep telling yourself that, Saul. "No, Lady Irene, might I call something to the attention of your wondrous eyes?"

"That is?" I strung my bow and tilted my head to the sound. Almost…

"The number of soldiers obscuring our lovely view of the beautiful horizon."

A quick glance out the window showed me what he was talking about. "Yes, there are too many. Yes, they should not be patrolling so close to the guest rooms. Yes, we are being spied on."

Judging the sound close enough, I whirled and fired, catching whoever was skulking about. And then froze when I realized it was a rather young girl. Who now had an arrow in her shoulder and was face down from the shock of getting hit. "I am so sorry!" I lunged for my pack and immediately brought out a small knife, numbing herbs, and anything else I would need. "Here, hold still, I'll get it out." Aunt Florina taught me.

"Ow… how did you even hear me?" the girl complained, pushing herself up slowly. She scowled as I went to work. "I was doing a great job being quiet."

"Only ghosts can move quietly enough that a Sacaean can't hear them."

"Prideful little."

I paused in my work and gave her a look. "You do realize that I could just leave the arrow in, right?" My voice was very dry. "I am sorry, but I am not so sorry that I am not perfectly willing to leave the arrow in and let you deal with the mess."

"Okay, okay, sorry." She sighed mournfully, and held still as I went to work. "This is what I get for being a good person."

"Please forgive her, miss," Roy urged. He got up from his chair and came to crouch down in front of the girl. "Irene was simply looking to protect us. It's been a rather long few days." You're telling me.

"Fine, fine. I wasn't expecting you all to notice the soldiers either, so I guess that shows me." She made to shrug, but when I held her shoulders still, she simply nodded. "Aaanyway, I overheard that Wagner creep chatting in the main hall about how he's going to ambush you guys." Of course.

"Lord Orun would not do such a thing." I didn't want to think that either, but we thought the same of Erik and…

"Oh, him? I think he's dead." Dead? But… wait, what? No, he couldn't… oh, Mother Earth, if he was, then Lilina was the only heir to Ostia's throne. She wouldn't have… uh oh. "Wagner assassinated him or something."

"Are you serious?"
"Well, that's just what I've heard. **Buuut** the lord really hasn't been around at all, and his rooms are still more than a little bloody." Oh, joy. "Plus, that Wagner fellow was all about how he'll capture the pretty little princess and turn the rest of you into Bern as a 'gift' to show his loyalty to the king." I was just going to focus on bandaging her up.

"Lord Roy, take what she says with a grain of salt," Merlinus urged. He sounded almost reasonable. "You can't trust people like this so easily." Oh, look, he now lost whatever modicum of respect I might have had for him.

"If we are worried about the truth of her words, then let us simply set a trap of our own," Guinevere suggested. She looked mostly thoughtful, and completely ignored the look Merlinus shot her. "Let us say we are leaving. If she is telling the truth, then we survive. If she is not, then we get a little closer to our goal at the expense of real beds."

"Trapping the trapper with his own trap," I murmured, smiling slowly. I tied off the bandage and turned to her. "I rather like that.

"Is it all right?" For? "I know Sacaeans view lying as abhorrent..." Oh, that was kind of her.

"You don't have to lie to pull off a trick." I shrugged, crossing my arms. "When you hunt, you let the prey assume there is nothing around. Lying is a betrayal to Mother Earth and Father Sky, but it isn't our fault if the enemy has false information, or a false interpretation of the truth." Sacaeans did not lie. But that did not mean that we went out of our way to correct people's assumptions. At least, that's what Grandpa had said, when I fretted over some strategies that involved trickery.

"Besides, we do not necessarily have to lie for this," Roy added. He frowned in thought, and I could see the gears spinning in his head. "Yes, I have a script already in mind." Roy was always good at this sort of thing. "But which way should we go to best escape?"

"You can head out the north!" the girl suggested. She jumped to her feet, bouncing a little on her toes. "That will lead to the courtyard, so you'll be out of here in no time."

"Ah, yes, and the courtyard would be a good place to set up a main camp should things turn out the worst." Very true. "Thank you, miss."

"No problem. Good luck!" She made to leave, but I snagged her arm. "Hey!"

"Easy," I sighed. "I'm not going to detain you." I tugged out some medicinal poultices from my pack and handed them to her, along with a some bandages. "You'll need to wash that injury later today, with as clean of water as you can manage. There's herbs to fight against infection in the poultice, but it's better to not rely on it. If you see any signs of infection, such as swelling, red streaks, pus, etc, get to a healer immediately." I ruffled her hair, smiling ruefully. "Change the bandage in the morning, and be careful of moving that arm for a bit, okay? If it reopens, go see a healer."

She stared at me a long moment before ducking her head almost shyly. "Yeah, thanks." And then she scurried off.

When I turned to the others, Roy was smiling indulgently. I gave him a curious look, but he shook his head, so I shrugged. It must not be important then. Time to plan all this out.

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After laying out the basic plan, we gathered everyone and moved to the courtyard. Clarine complained, but not too loudly, just enough to really give the impression that this was not something we were doing lightly. I knew it was unintentional, but it still made me smile anyway.
In the courtyard proper, Wagner met us almost instantly. Yeah, that just proved we had been watched. There's no way he could have met us so quickly otherwise.

"Lord Roy, what is wrong?" he asked, feigning concern. I glanced around and noticed the soldiers lining up the windows. Mages and archers. They were going to try a complete ambush. Clever. "Was there something not to your liking?"

"Oh, no, everything is perfect," Roy replied. He widened his eyes innocently, and gave Wagner a warm smile. I gathered Wolt, Lugh, and Dorothy to coordinate them against the attackers. We would not be able to get them all, though… "I just received an urgent report and must depart at once." I gestured for Bors and Marcus to join us, since they actually had shields. Thankfully, they came over immediately without me having to say anything yet.

"But Lord Orun would never forgive me if you did not spend even one meal here!" I gestured up, to let them know what was going on. Nodding slowly, and likely guessing what I had planned, Marcus silently pointed to Merlinus's convoy, reminding me that while it couldn't survive a mage attack, it could take arrows. The less armored could hide in there if we archers could take out the mages. "Is this so important that you cannot spend even one night here?"

"No, I cannot. But don't fret. I'll explain everything to Lord Orun myself." There were five. There were five mages. I could take out two of them. I would have to. I doubted Wolt and Dorothy had the speed, and while Lugh might, I was reluctant to force him to conjure and control two separate fireballs. "I need to pay my respects anyway."

"Lord Roy, as I said, Lord Orun is ill with consumption and cannot see anyone." Slowly, and carefully, I gave out silent commands. I gave targets to Wolt, Dorothy, and Lugh by tapping and turning them towards who I wanted them to hit. I pointed Marcus to Roy, 'telling' him to shield Roy. I did the same with Bors, though he would cover Lugh. "Is there nothing I can do to convince you to stay?" Allen and Lance could stay out thanks to their armor, and shield who they could. Merlinus could protect those they could not in his convoy.

"No, you cannot." Marcus moved to quietly inform the others what was going on. I let him, and strung my bow, cautiously pulling two arrows from my quiver. "If I cannot see Lord Orun, then there is no reason for me to delay further." I glanced at the others worried, wondering if this quiet ordering was effective enough. Next chance I got, I was hashing out a sign-language for us. "Please, let us be on our way." Thankfully, though, it did look like they knew what was up. Everyone was tensed, at least, prepped to go. Good, now we just had to hope…

"...Then I have no choice but to kill you now!" Here we go. "Everyone! Attack and kill them all, but leave Princess Guinevere alive!"

Before he had even finished the sentence, our group spun into action. Thanks to the element of surprise, we managed to snipe the mages, leaving only arrows to rain down on us. Marcus quickly covered Roy, shielding him with his body and his shield. Bors got Lugh, and dragged Dorothy behind him as well, taking advantage of how heavy his armor was. I dragged Wolt to the side, where the arrows couldn't quite reach, to keep us safe.

I grit my teeth as I watched the arrows fall. The plan mostly worked, perhaps better than it should. Allen protected Shanna, since they had been right next to each other. Lance had managed to shield both Wade and Lot. Saul, Ellen, Chad, and Guinevere made it into Merlinus's convoy, and Merlinus actually turned the convoy quickly enough to make sure the broadside was the most likely target.

Deke, however, took four arrows to his back, shielding Clarine and Rutger. Based on what I could
tell, the archers focused their efforts on those with little armor anyway, and while Clarine and Rutger had moved quickly, there were just too many.

It didn't escape me that Rutger had shielded Clarine prior to being protected by Deke, and his wide eyes made me wonder if something like this had happened in Bulgar, where someone protected him, and had perished.

"Everyone alive?" Roy asked when the arrows finally stopped falling. Deke, the only one injured, managed a tense smile. "Irene, thank you for the strategy that kept us from being killed." I was sad that it hadn't prevented all injuries. "How feasible is it for us to take the castle?"

"If we hit hard and fast, we can manage it, I think," I answered. I glanced up warily, noticing the archers had fled. Likely, they had shot their full quiver and ran to get more. "Set up, everyone." Wagner was nowhere in sight. He must have run, expecting the 'trap' to work. "Rutger, keep Deke still. I'll cut the arrows out." Everyone raced about, getting things ready, tugging the arrows out of Merlinus's convoy. As they did so, I knelt by Deke, and smeared numbing herbs around the wound.

Clarine crouched by me, staff in hand. "What will I need to do?" she asked me. Her hands were shaking, but her eyes were certain. "I remember Aunt Priscilla telling me to be wary of arrow injuries."

"Yeah, make sure they're cut out first. You can't tug them." I glanced at Deke, who was grimacing. "What? Not enough numbing?"

"I have a very distinct memory of a very clumsy Little Lady and knives," Deke deadpanned. I felt my expression blank, until I remembered what exactly he was talking about, and scowled. That had been ages ago! "Is this really safe?"

"Well, you could have someone else do it, but the only other person here who likely knows the best technique, like I do, is Shanna. It's an Ilian Knight thing. You want me to get her?"

"No, she needs to be up in the air."

"Then shut up and deal with it." Sounds caught my ear, and I knew the fighting had started. "Rutger, I need you to guard us." Rutger's only response was to nod, and dart out to quickly kill a soldier prepping to throw a javelin. His attack was rather… brutal. Yeah, something had definitely trodded on that festering wound. "Deke, you're sitting out this battle."

"I figured when the numbing kicked in." He sighed heavily, and I batted him on the shoulder. "What?"

"Don't. Move." Mother Earth, he was a horrible patient. "Or we're going to be adding a scar along your spine. Deep along your spine."

"Got it." At least from that point, he held perfectly still as I carefully cut the arrows out of him. I knew he was going to get some scars from this, though, and couldn't help but laugh a little. "What's so funny, Little Lady?"

"I was just thinking. You got horribly scarred while protecting Klein all those years ago." Four deep scars. "And now, you got scarred protecting Clarine." It was even the same number. "You shouldn't shield people with your body so much. Surely you had enough strength to pull them out of the way."

"Didn't think of anything but making sure they didn't die, honestly." Ha… that sounded like Mom. "Hey, is Miss Clarine all right? She's strangely quiet. I'm used to her trying to yack my ear off."
I glanced over at her to be certain, and saw how white-knuckled her grip on her staff was. But she was studying the wounds closely, clearly completely blocking out the world to make sure she didn't make a mistake. "She's fine. She's just hyper-focusing." And had that luxury thanks to Rutger killing anything and everything that got within a certain distance of us. I hoped the others were all right. "I'm almost done."

"Okay." He laughed softly. "You're really grown up. I remember when you scared of needles because they could prick people."

"Yeah, now I'm only scared of them because of how easily you can slide one into an eye." With the last arrow removed, I sat back, and let Clarine go to work. "I'm serious though, Deke, you're with the infirmary for the rest of this fight unless there's an emergency."

"Yeah, I get it." He waited until the healing light faded before standing with a little groan, rolling his shoulders. "Ugh, I'm feeling my age." Deke, you weren't that old. "Well, thank you, Little Lady, Miss Clarine." He reached down to ruffle Clarine's hair, and made her squeak, batting at his hand. "And… ah, Little Lady, I think you have someone wanting to talk to you." Confused, I turned and saw he was right. Guinevere was standing near. What was she…?

"I'm sorry to bother," she murmured, coming a little closer. A soldier tried to come close, but Rutger decapitated them. The head rolled and hit her feet, but she completely ignored it. "I wanted to ask permission before just… jumping in."

"Permission for what?" I asked, curious. What could be so important that she was asking now. "And you sure I can give it?"

"Well, I doubt Roy would say 'no' to anything you agreed to." …Okay, point. We had complete trust in each other. "I request… taking up some of the healing staves and helping Elen run the field infirmary." What. "I mentioned to you that I had training in tomes, yes? I also have training in staves."

"What brought this on suddenly?"

"It's not really… sudden. I've been thinking it for a bit." She sighed, slumping slightly. I nudged Clarine to help escort Deke over to the infirmary, and she took the silent hint without a word, dragging Deke off. When Rutger glanced back, I pointed him forward, to the main group, and he understood the command in the gesture, leaving to join them. "I keep seeing that moment in my nightmares. When Lord Hector died." Oh, Guinevere… "I keep wondering 'what if I had a staff that day?' Could I have done anything? Perhaps not, but I could have at least tried." She shook her head. "I don't… I want to help pay you back. I don't have the courage to fight my home country. I am well aware of how I am running away." Yet at the same time… "But I want to help. I can help, as a healer. So, please…"

"Stay close to Elen and the guards." What else could I say? It wasn't like I could say 'no' to another healer! "Okay?"

"Okay." She gave me the warmest smile. "Thank you."

"Not a problem, Guinevere." But now… "I have to head into the fight."

"Yes, I know. Stay safe."

"I'll try."
It was a rather hectic battle. Reinforcements from the south. Reinforcements from the rooms. Reinforcements from the north. But we secured the center area rather quickly, and that gave us room to maneuver, both figuratively and literally.

"Lugh, I want you and Allen to take those coming from the right!" I ordered, sniping an archer that tried to set up in a window. The worse case scenario would be for there to be enough mages or archers to trap us again. "Dorothy, cover Bors on the left!" North and south seemed to be working rather well. I just had to focus on sniping the 'potential' snipers for right now.

The wind batted at my hair, urging me to look in a certain direction, towards the southeast corner of the courtyard. I was confused for a while before I spotted a shock of orange hair, a hair color no one in the group had. But that girl had it, if I remembered correctly. The one who had helped us. I was confused as to what she was doing here, but then I saw the lockpicks flash in her hands. Ah, I see what happened. She was going to take advantage of the chaos to steal. Rather clever.

"It's that girl…" Roy breathed, coming up next to me. I gave him a concerned look at all the blood on him. "It's not mine. One of Rutger's kills spurted blood everywhere, and I happened to be next to it, which… wasn't helped by me decapitating a mage not long after." Ah. "By accident. He tried to jump over me when I swung." The mage tried to do what now? I wasn't even going to try and figure that one out. "But still, what's that girl doing here?"

"Likely, Roy, she's here to pilfer," I answered with a little shrug. I glanced up and smiled when I saw how nicely we were pushing forward. "That's all."

"But why would she steal?"

"Why do Sacaeans hunt?" I reached down to ruffle his hair. "It is a way of living, and regardless of her motivations, she did save us."

"Right…" Roy nodded. "I'm going to go talk to her."

"Okay." I waved him off, before I found Chad in the chaos nearby. "Chad, go with Roy and steal that girl thief's lockpicks, will you?" The only indication I had that he heard was a quick nod, and a quick run after Roy. "Now then…" Perhaps it was mean, but I wanted her to leave quickly. She had a badly injured shoulder, and if something happened… I wanted her into safer places as soon as possible.

"We've broken through the north!" Right, back to work. But since we had control of the field…

"Lance!" I called. It took only a moment for him to ride next to me. "Take a healer with you, Saul or Elen, and go check out the rooms by the entrance." Saul and Elen were both working the field-infirmary with Guinevere and Merlinus. "There's a supposed storage room that I think is hiding something. I want to know what. Kick the door in if you have to." He bowed in the saddle and rode off.

I went to join the group charging the north: Rutger, Clarine, and Shanna. Wade and Lot were somewhere behind us, I thought, to guard us. Maybe I should call Marcus and Wolt from their guard duty of the infirmary? Or maybe I should call in Deke? Well, it was an option, at least.

Still, it was a straight shot to Wagner, it seemed. Of course, he greeted us with a flux spell, but we all dodged. The second one, though, almost caught me off guard, and definitely got me a cut over the back. I hadn't expected him to be so fast… A shame we didn't have a monk with us to use light magic. Though, it's not like one would just magically show up right when we would need one. Ah well.
Pegasi were famous for their resistance to magic, and I had a healer and a Rutger.

"Shanna?" I called. She flitted down, giving me a bright smile. "You mind playing bait while Rutger and I get set up?"

"Nah, it sounds like fun," she laughed. She was already back in the air. "Just let me know when!" She… was a very enthusiastic girl. Father Sky, may she never lose her cheer in this madness. It was strange, sure, but oh so comforting to see.

"Rutger!" I waved my arm to catch his attention, and rode over to his side when I had it. "Thany will bait, I'll snipe to disorient, and you go for the kill?"

"Yes, that sounds fine," he told me. He made to move, but I reached down to touch his shoulder. "What?"

"Are you going to be okay?" I looked him right in the eye, so that he knew what I was asking about.

"…I am fine enough to fight." Well, that was a telling answer. "Let that be enough for now?"

"For now, yes." But perhaps when we had a breather, he and I should have a talk. Not quite sure about what, but we probably should. "Go on. I'll fire an arrow when things are good."

"All right." He ran off, ducking into the shadows. I saw Clarine look after him worriedly and waved to catch her attention. As soon as I had it, though, she gave me a determined nod. Okay, she wasn't so distracted that she wasn't ready to heal Shanna should the worst happen.

Shanna laughed as she darted about, creating a big show to annoy the living hell out of Wagner. He sent spell after spell to hit her, but she managed to dodge most of them. I saw some connect, but her pegasus took most of the 'damage', which wasn't much at all. What damage was there, Clarine healed up easily.

I breathed in deep as I notched my arrow and pulled it back. I waited until I saw his teeth grind in frustration, saw him tug at his hair in exasperation, and then I exhaled and let the arrow fly. It struck Wagner in the arm, the shock of getting hit knocking him off balance.

Rutger quickly darted out of the shadows and stabbed him straight through the back, ripping the blade out in a spray of blood, letting Wagner die with a gurgle, his tome falling into a puddle of his blood with a strangely loud 'splat'.

I sighed, and rolled my shoulders before dismounting. I always hated seeing a shaman who played to the stereotype, who was 'ambitious' and 'evil'. Many diviners of the tribes were druids, masters of dark magic, and I remembered an old friend Mom told me about, Canas. I never met him; he died a long time ago during some blizzard in Ilia, alongside his wife. But she had told me he had been a dark magic user, and a kind, if eccentric, man. It just… bothered me to see so many 'evil' dark magic users. It made people believe the darkness was something to be scared of.

Ah, this wasn't the time to be philosophical. I needed to go check on the others and…

"Lady Irene!" I glanced back and saw Lance running for me. Oh, he was back already? "Lady Irene, there was a Sacaean girl locked in that so called storage room," he informed me. I felt myself still. A Sacaean…? "Miss Elen is tending to her injuries. She had been bound up." Was that so? "She wears clothes similar to yours, more red and less blue." She did? "She also looks a little like you, so-"

I was running. I was already running. I didn't need to hear the rest. I could think of only one
Sacaean girl who would look like me.

The wind pushed me, urging me to run even faster. My heart hammered in my ears as I ran through the halls, heading back for that guest room. The one the wind had tried to send me before, but I had to wait. No, I chose to wait, because I had a feeling I would be pissed off and I did not want another incident where I was kicking that man while he was down. I did not want another incident where the only reason I lived was because someone wanted to play a twisted game.

I knew I had good reasons. But they seemed so worthless when I made it to that room and saw Sue. Sue had been trapped in that room. My baby sister had been bound in that room, struggling against the ropes until her wrists and ankles bled. I could see them even as Elen tended to her.

Sue looked up as soon as I approached, and her eyes widened. Without a word, she pushed herself up and bolted for me, crashing into a hug. I caught her easily, clinging tightly. When I felt her shake, I hummed one of the songs Dad would sing to us whenever we were scared. When I heard her cry, quietly, I switched to singing, stroking her hair.

"Sue, what are you doing here?" I whispered when I felt her stop shaking. She was still crying, but that was okay. I knew she had been scared, and now she was just relieved, and so she was just overwhelmed. "How did you end up here? I heard… I heard about Bulgar."

"Grandpa and Dad led the Kutolah into Bulgar to try and help," Sue mumbled. I glanced over her head and smiled at Elen when I saw her awkwardly standing back. Elen smiled back, and took that as a sign to leave. I was glad she read me correctly. "Mom and I were to lead the rest away to Lycia. I think Mom and Dad knew something was going to go wrong, though. They kissed, actually kissed, in front of everyone before we left."

"That is weird." While Mom and Dad were obviously in love, it was very rare they kissed each other on the lips in front of people. Cheek, hand, temple… those were fair game. But they kept kiss-kisses private, just for them. "I heard… you got separated. I heard about the Djute."

"I charged them, hoping to make them scatter, and buy time. Mom begged me not to, but I thought it would be okay. And I was. I just got a few grazes." Father Sky, thank you for guiding the arrows away from her. "But there was another ambush, one with not only Djute, but Bernese soldiers."

"But Mom chased them back or something?"

"Mom gave herself up." Did she just say…?! "I rode back, desperate to help, and Mom told me to go lead the others. She made a bargain with the Wyvern General who was with the groups. She would go with them, a willing captive, and he would let the rest of us go." Mom…! "She smiled, told me she loved me, and told me to run and lead the others away!" Sue's voice cracked, and I tightened my hold on her, even as my head was reeling. Mom was… Mom was a captive of Bern. "And I did. I knew I had to, for everyone's sake, but… but…!" But she hated it. She hated herself, for not seeing the trap ahead of time. She hated herself, for not being 'strong enough'.

"Where are the others?" Focus on that. Don't focus on how Mom was a captive, a hostage. "And Wyvern General?"

"Murdock. His name is Murdock." Murdock… "He was on his way to Ilia, but decided to help out with the destruction of the Kutolah." I hated him. I loathed him. I would see him ripped apart. "Mom knew him. That's why she made the bargain. She knew he could at least be trusted enough to keep his word." Yes, but now… Mom spent twenty years hiding from Etruria and Bern. And now she was… "I took the survivors to Pherae, to Uncle Eliwood, and then I came here on the way to Ostia, and Orun was so kind and reassuring, but now he's dead and… and..." Her grip tightened
"I heard about Araphan. I thought you were there. I thought you were dead." Sue...

"Grandpa and Dad are missing. There's no word about either of them. Mom is captured. I thought Mother Earth took you away from me too."

"I'm right here, Sue." I stroked her hair, resting my cheek on her head. Times like this reminded me that while I was the same height as Dad, she was the same height as Mom, and therefore smaller than me. My 'little' sister in both years and size. "I'm right here."

"Don't leave again." Sue... "Don't leave me again."

"I won't. I will never leave you again." I held her tightly when she started shaking again. "It's okay. I'm right here. Big sister is right here, Sue. We'll make it through this. Together. I promise."

She nodded, and fell back into silence, crying. I simply held her, singing Dad's songs to calm her spirits. And to calm mine. Mom was captured. Dad was missing. Grandpa was missing. The Kutolah were shattered, with the only known survivors hiding in Pherae.

But at least I had my little sister. At least I knew she was safe. That was enough. That would be enough for now.

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Notes on Sue

- **My precious little sister. I don't really want her to fight, but that really wouldn't be fair to her. After all, I'm sure she doesn't want me fighting either, but I am. We'll just have to look out for each other.**
- **Like me, she is a trained archer and horseback rider. She's very fast, very lucky, and very skilled. Her lack of strength worries me a lot, though. I think she has even less strength than Walt and Dorothy. Definitely less than me.**
- **I'm going to have to keep an eye on her health. I remember how, during our childhood, she was often getting sick, which doesn't help her strength situation. She's healthy now, but... well, Dad always warned of the dangers of stress on our health.**
- **Her affinity is wind.**

She's safe, though. She's safe. I'll take care of her, and she'll take care of me. We'll be fine. Thank you, Mother Earth, for leading her to me.

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Chapter End Notes

Author's note: So, Cath is an interesting character. You can recruit her, but it requires talking to her at three separate points before she will join (I think the earliest she will is chapter 12?). This is also the first map that lets you access the preparation screen. Saul's... Saulness is shown so well in his support, and I used those as the basis for his talk with Irene. Also, a little bit of a joke at how convenient Lucius's recruitment is in FE7 (fun fact: monks, that use light magic, only appear in FE7 and FE8. FE14 have monks as well, but they're more like 'priests'). As mentioned before, I think, Guinevere is revealed as a Sage when you win her in the Trial Maps. Technically, there's a bit more to this chapter but...

Next chapter – Interlude, Thria (that scene in moved to this interlude instead)
In light of... well... everything, Roy decided that we should ensure that the castle was secure before moving forward, staying the day as we had originally intended, and staying one extra day to just... try and settle everything.

I knew everyone was worried if we really had the time, but at the same time, we really did need the break. We had been moving and stressing out a lot since Araphan. It wouldn't do to forget how to relax.

During the early morning dawn, when even the birds were barely awake, Sue and I went out for a ride. Our 'daily ride' routine, a bit of normality when everything was so different. I could tell that it did wonders for her.

"You're looking better," I murmured, smiling at her. She gave me a curious look. "You looked so distressed earlier."

"I did?" she asked. She smiled wryly. "I didn't realize it."

"Oh, I'm sure others would have thought you stoic, but I'm your big sister. I've known you since you were born."

"True. Despite how Dad and I am, you and Mom always knew what we were trying to express." She slumped in the saddle. "Irene, they're okay, right? Mom and Dad?"

"I hope so." I shifted so we were riding a little closer, to make it easier to give her a one-armed hug. "Marcus told me to remember our beliefs of the dead. Even if the impossible somehow happens..."

"They are always with us." Sue smiled a little at that before drooping. "But in that impossible scenario, would Mom and Dad find each other?" Oh...

"Yeah, I doubt Bern gave proper rites to those they slaughtered..." I would be surprised if they gave any rites. "But then again, it's Mom and Dad. They always seem to know where each other is."

"True. Mother Earth whispers to them, delighted by their love." She took a deep breath and turned to me. "Do you remember their tenth anniversary?"

"Dad roped us into the surprise!" I laughed, the sound echoing through the crisp air. "We ran her around in circles so that he could finish up that hair ornament and that dinner for her!"

"And we ran and ran, confusing her so much. It was like playing tag, but she was constantly 'it'." Sue laughed softly. "But then we got back to the ger, and Dad had everything set up."

"She smiled so wide, bouncing in joy." I couldn't stop giggling at the memory. "She tackled him off his feet! We had to run to make sure they didn't destroy anything!"
"And then we 'gave' them our gift."

"Yeah, staying with Grandpa for the night, all because Amalda mentioned that maybe they would like 'alone time'."

"Mom went so red. Like an apple."

"Or a cherry. But she was smiling." Most of my memories involved Mom smiling. Most of my memories involved Dad smiling too. We were a silly, happy family. That… was not something that would change, if the impossible did somehow occur. "Do you remember attending Mildain's coming of age ceremony?"

"And all the servants and those nobles were trying to shame us into wearing 'proper Etrurian clothing' instead of the festival clothes we brought with us." Sue finally started giggling. "Mom got so mad."

"Forget a Mama Bear! Mom was far scarier!" I loved that memory. She spent two hours screaming at them. "Dad brushed our hair and braided beads in it for us, letting her handle it."

"Until that noble stormed in and started shouting, made us cry." I was cackling now, almost crying from how much I was laughing. Yes, this ride was a very good idea. "Dad just picked him up and threw him out! Almost straight out the window!" I would swear to this day that the only reason he hadn't was because he hadn't wanted to cause a mess in the courtyard.

"And then he wiped away our tears and reassured us that we weren't wrong." Dad was always encouraging us to be proud of ourselves. "Then there was the archery contest."

"Where most of the competitors were the same nobles who had insulted us, looked down on us." They had been so cocky. "Dad asked for permission to join up, and just destroyed the competition." We had been sitting next to Mildain during it. Mildain had cheered the loudest when Dad won. "You know he only joined up to make them pay for hurting our feelings."

"Yes, Dad is a wolf, after all. Just like Mom."

"Just like us." Wolves guarded their pack with their lives. That was the way of the Kutolah, descendents of the ancient wolves. "Let's gallop a little. Feel the wind on our faces." I smiled at her. "See what they have to say."

"Yes, that sounds good." She smiled back. "Thanks for suggesting this, Irene. Really. It's… it's good. To ride. To remind myself to listen. And to just… to remember our parents. Not how I last saw them, and how I am scared will be the very last time I saw them."

"Yes." That cheerful, excited farewell I had felt so long ago. Was that time really going to be the last time we were all together outside of Mother Earth's meadows? I hoped not. I just wanted one more hug, one more 'I love you'. One more reassurance. One more song. One more smile, one more lecture.

One more everything, really.

After Sue and I got back from our ride, I encouraged her to go socialize. Speak to Roy if she wanted someone familiar, or maybe someone like Wolt or Dorothy if she was willing to step outside her comfort zone a bit. I thought it would do her good, and make her less 'dependent' on me while she was still recovering from… well… everything.
When she went to do that, I went to check on Deke, and to chat with him about hand signals to use for the group. We ended up dragging Marcus into the discussion too, since it occurred to us halfway through that maybe there already was one for the knights. Then it was a matter of making things simple and distinct enough to ensure no signal was mistaken for another. We would still rely on mostly verbal orders, of course, but this would help for situations where we had to be quiet.

Towards the end, though, Deke and Marcus both shoved me outside, citing that I was going to hurt my eyes with how much I was squinting over papers. I made token protests, but I knew they were right. It would be dangerous if I completely threw myself into work to escape how crazy things were. So, instead, I decided to check on Lugh and Chad. Which… ended up turning into an impromptu sparring match between Chad and me? I wasn't sure how that happened.

"Yeah! Go Chad! Kick his butt, Irene!" And Lugh was adorably cheering for both of us. It was enough to make both Chad and me smile as we fought. Still, this fight was reminding me of something. I wasn't really good with swords, knowing really only the absolute basics due to Aunt Lyn teaching me a little. I never did take well to it. Sue was amazing with them, though she hadn't figured out how to translate that skill to horseback yet.

Still, I did have one big advantage. I was taller, I was stronger, and I had no qualms kicking out joints.

"Ugh…" Chad groaned as he went down, my practice sword pointed at his throat. "Damn it…” He sighed and slowly pushed himself up. "I lost."

"I have a few good years of training on you," I reminded him. I reached over and helped brush the dirt off him. "Even though I suck at swords, it still does mean I have a strength you don't."

"Yeah…” He still looked upset, though. So, I reached over and started tickling him. "WAH!” He burst into laughter, trying to squirm away, but I didn't let up. "I give! I give!"

"See, Chad? Irene's super nice," Lugh chirped. He hopped over and passed us both towels and cups of water. "Super, super nice."

"You say the same thing about Ray, though," Chad replied. He downed the water and rubbed roughing at his face with the towel. "But Ray's always got a mouth on him, and the like."

"Really?” I asked, a little surprised. The Ray in my memory was… "Aw, he was so shy and adorable when he was little though." I used to 'fight' the monsters under the bed for him, and he would never fall asleep for a nap if someone didn't sing him a lullaby.

"He's still super shy!" Lugh laughed. His smile was warm, but there was some pain in it. "But he hides it behind mean words. You just got to learn to not listen."

"Miss him?"

"Terribly. But I know he's all right. I can sense it. I'm fine, knowing that he's all right." I gave him a dubious look and ruffled his hair to make him squeak. "Hey!"

"No need to be brave all the time, little ones." They both gave me startled looks. "We're resting. You need to relax." I poked their cheeks, to make them make faces. "Do you know what happens to an overstrung bow?" They both shook their heads. "It snaps. That's why Sue, Wolt, Dorothy, and I are always careful to unstring our bows when we're not using them." Though, I had the distinct advantage of having a 'special magic' bow that probably couldn't snap easily.

"But we have to get stronger," Chad pointed out. There was raw anger and pain in his eyes. "Lugh
and I don't have training like most of you all, and I don't do anything but skulk around and steal."

"Steal very useful things," I reminded him. We got a few good weapons and a lot of money thanks to him. "You don't have to fight to be helpful. The healers don't fight, but many of us would be dead by now if not for them." I crouched down to look them both in the eye. "Don't focus so much on what others do. You're not them. You are yourself. Use others as guides, but don't compare yourself to, say, Bors. Or Allen." I made a face. "Seriously, don't use Allen as a role model." Chad snorted, and I smiled. "You're good at lockpicks. You're very fast. You might never be one for combat, Chad, but not everyone has to be. The information you find and the items you steal save us without a single drop of blood." He was silent. "Um…"

"You sound like the Father!" Lugh laughed. "So, Chad's embarrassed." Chad shot him a glare, and I did notice that his ears were red. "Hey, I'm being helpful too, right?"

"Of course you are, you silly." I hugged them both, Chad being awkward, and Lugh laughing and returning it. "Now, I want you two to go and rest. Read something fun, do something fun. That's enough fighting for the day."

"Okay!" Lugh snagged Chad by the arm and dragged him off, practically taking Chad off his feet. I laughed and waved them goodbye before stretching. That was a good workout. I should walk around to cool down.

Shrugging, I did just that, walking slowly and pausing every once and a while. I let the wind wash over me. I watched the wind dance through the leaves, smiling at the sun warming my skin. Father Sky's blessings, and Mother Earth's reassurance. I needed to remember to listen to them too, and to not let myself be so blinded and overwhelmed that I only heard my own voice.

"There you are!" That… sounded like Clarine. "I won't let you get away this time!" Yep, that was Clarine. What was going on?

"Knock it off." And that was Rutger. I visually confirmed that as I walked around a bend and into the gardens of Thria. He and Clarine were amidst the flowers, in what seemed to be an argument. "Just go away." His voice was a growl, and his eyes were sharp as he stepped away from her. Clarine just followed him. "You're getting on my nerves." Oh dear. What was going on?

"That's not how you should reply to a lady's kindness!" To my surprise, Clarine's voice cracked and she started to cry. "That is not… how a proper gentleman… should act…" Ah… um… okay, on the one hand, I couldn't blame for being annoyed. On the other, Clarine was crying, and I didn't appreciate that!

"…Don't cry…" Hesitantly, and strangely gentle, he reached up and used his sleeve to try and dry her tears. "I'm sorry, al right? Just stop crying, please."

"I-I'm not…!" Clarine, you were rather obviously crying, and I bet you were grateful you weren't one for makeup. "I…" She stepped away, and Rutger took that as a sign that he should leave, quickly walking away and leaving her alone.

I waited until he was gone before walking up. "Clarine?" I called gently. She turned to me, roughly trying to get rid of the tears. "Hey, you'll hurt your eyes doing that."

"I'm…" she whimpered. She then shook her head and ran for me, hiding her face in my shoulder. "I know he's not to blame. I know I'm annoying and bratty and…" Oh, Clarine… "So, why am I acting like this…? Why am I crying?"
"Because, in your own way, you're trying hard to befriend him." I stroked her hair gently as she continued crying. "And you're terribly worried about him, yes?"

"Yes…" Her voice cracked. "He's just… he's broken. He's hurting. I'm a healer! I'm supposed to help heal hurts!" Clarine… "But I don't know how! And I'm sure I'm just… he probably hates me. I would."

"You're okay." Ah, Clarine. I knew your heart was in the right place. "You'll figure something out. Just listen next time. Don't try to think you do know what you're doing."

"Okay…"

I worked on helping Clarine calm down, suffering through a proper Etrurian tea to make her feel better. She dragged Dorothy and Sue into it too, so it ended up being strangely lively. However, in the middle, Lance came to get me, stating that something had happened and I needed to report at once.

When I made it to the study, I knew something was wrong. Merlinus actually looked happy to see me.

"What's going on?" I asked, closing the door behind me. Marcus, Guinevere, and Roy were here too. "Lance said it was important."

"Merlinus was waiting until you arrived," Roy answered. He was sitting down, the only one who was. "But I understand it's dire?"

"I figured that out." Sighing, I leaned against the wall. "Well, I'm here. Merlinus, if you would?"

"Right," Merlinus sighed. I noticed his hands were shaking, and felt dread drip down my spine. What was going on? "I sent a message to Ostia, informing them that we were arriving soon, and to let them know of Lord Orun's demise." Okay? "He returned without delivering the message. Ostia is in anarchy." …WHAT?!

"Ostia is in chaos?" Roy asked, his eyes wide. It was probably good he was sitting already. My own knees wanted to buckle. "What… why…?" He shook his head roughly. "Lilina. Aunt Lyn. What are… where are…?"

"There's a revolt, among those who wish to surrender to Bern, and by my understanding, they have almost complete control." Mother Earth… Mother Earth, please… "I've little on Lady Lyn and Lady Lilina, and I've even less on people such as Lord Matthew, Lady Serra, Lord Raven, and Lord Lucius." This was bad.

"How could something like this have happened? Aunt Lyn is…"

"Apparently, Lady Lyn took ill not long after Lord Hector marched for the front," Marcus explained. I grimaced. Had she caught consumption from him? Wait, no, it would have been latent then. Maybe… maybe from Mom, all those years ago? "She steadily got worse, and her health took a bad turn when news of Lord Hector's death made it to Ostia. I imagine that with her illness, she wasn't able to fight to her fullest strength." Yes, that would be… wait a…

"Isn't that convenient?" I asked slowly. All eyes turned to me. "Isn't it really convenient that she happened to be really ill when a rebellion started up?" What if she didn't have consumption? What if…? "She steadily got ill, and then when her health was probably at its lowest, this revolt occurs?" I shook my head. "We know that there were people plotting to betray Ostia prior to Araphan. I… it
could be bad luck, but it could also be…” I couldn't say the word. It was just so… so incomprehensible to me.

Luckily, Guinevere was willing to finish the sentence for me. "Poison," she whispered. I could only nod. "You think she was poisoned, to make certain she could not defend her home when it fell around her." Again. Poisoned her to make sure she could not defend her home again. Poison killed her parents and tribe. Poison almost killed her grandfather. "A coward's tactic, but it suits."

"I take it Bern doesn't view poisoning kindly."

"It's viewed as cowardly, an admission that one is not strong enough to seize victory with their own two hands." She shook her head. "The poor woman… is there truly little information on Miss Lilina?"

"Lilina's probably fine." I sighed, reaching up to undo my ponytail. "The leader of this rebellion… who even is it anyway?"

"General Legance," Merlinus answered. I felt myself freeze. I knew him. He'd given me piggyback rides as a child, and was one of Uncle Hector's most trusted soldiers. That's why he left him behind to defend Ostia when he marched. "Yes, I know." How… how dare he?! How dare he betray the long years of trust given to him?!

Wait, no, temper. Temper. "Then yeah, Lilina is fine," I repeated, closing my eyes. Calm down, calm down. Nothing good will come from losing my temper right here. "Legance knows that Lilina is more valuable alive than dead. Especially if he forces her into a marriage."

"What?!" Roy's shout startled me into opening my eyes again and I caught him just as he leapt to his feet, eyes wide. "Force her into…?" he began before shaking his head. "Why would he do that?"

"Because Lilina is the ruler of Ostia. If Legance forces her into a marriage, then legally, his revolt no longer is a revolt. It becomes his 'right', by virtue of being the husband of the ruling lady." I sighed, running a hand through my hair. "Though, I'm not sure… what is the marriage age for Lycia again? It's sixteen in Etruria."

"Typically, it is here as well," Marcus explained. He grimaced. "But in the event that the lone heir of a Lycian province is unmarried, that age is dropped to fourteen. It is not usually recognized, except in the cases where the heir is female."

"Meaning that Orun was likely killed not just to hand the province over to Bern, but to make it so Lilina can be forced into a marriage." This was just a mess. "Right, so…"

"While this is troubling, more than troubling, I fear there is more to this crisis," Guinevere chimed in. She gripped her pendant tightly. "After all, Bern does have an active campaign to conquer Bern, with one of the Wyvern Generals leading it." Oh. Right. I had forgotten about that. "If we do not secure Ostia prior to their arriving..." Then Lycia was lost. "That is, of course, assuming we could hold our own against the Bernese army." Mmm, Ostia castle was built for a siege, but that didn't mean we had the supplies for it.

"...Then why don't we request Etruria's aid?" Roy suggested. I saw his hands shake as he clenched them, but his eyes were certain, screaming how rapidly he was thinking. "Miss Cecilia would be willing to help. I know it." True. She would.

"I would object, Master Roy!" Merlinus snapped. I rolled my eyes, rubbing my temple. Marcus
might be amused by this, and he was based on his smile, but I wasn't. "If we call on Etruria to solve Lycian matters, we'll-"

"Lycia will die if we don't. We don't have the army. Bern took it from us at Araphan." Roy's words were calm and certain. "So, we ask for help, or we don't have a Lycia to worry face about." Roy… "I'll write."

"Actually, Roy, let me take care of writing," I offered. "I might count myself first among the Kutolah, but the fact does remain that through Mom, I am of House Hanover. A request from me will hold a lot more weight."

"True." Roy gave me a smile, and I saw it shake. Okay, there was something really important to do right now. "Then Merlinus can ensure they're delivered and we can-"

"We'll leave in the morning. Meeting over." I reached over and snagged Roy by the hand. "Talk to everyone later!" And I dragged him out of the room after me.

"Irene!" he yelped as he tried to keep his feet under him. "Irene, hold on! There's a lot to-!"

"Roy, quiet," I ordered. I gave him a smile over my shoulder to lessen the harshness. "Just follow."

"Well, you're not giving me much of a choice." True. "Where are we going?"

"Up." Up the stairs, which I found fairly quickly. We took them two at a time, all the way up to the top. "To the sky." To the warm sunshine, and the fluffy clouds. "And fresh air."

"It's not all that different from the air inside." Still, when I nudged him, Roy leaned against the edge, looking out. "…Lycia is so beautiful…" From up here, it really was. It was almost like a storybook. "Why is all of this happening, Irene? Why is everything going mad? Why is it all falling apart?"

"Who knows?" I stepped next to him, gazing out too. "Maybe even Zephiel doesn't know." I glanced at him. "But Roy, I didn't bring you out here for that."

"Why am I here, then?"

"Because I saw you desperately trying to not fall apart in there." Silence was the only reply. "Roy, I know you're the leader. You have to put on a brave face for morale." I heard his breath hitch. "But Roy, it's just me. You've never had to hide around me. You never will, either. So, if you need to-"

He crashed into me, cling desperately. "I'm scared." His voice cracked. "I'm so scared. I'm not old enough to lead an army! Dad is so sick, Uncle Hector's dead, and Aunt Lyn… Lilina…” I hugged him as he started sobbing. "I'm scared, Irene."

"I know. I'm scared too. It's okay. It's okay to be afraid. Just let it out, Roy. Rant, scream, cry. I'm right here. I'm here for you."

"Do you hate being here?" Hmm? "Your people… the Kutolah…” Ah.

"I can do nothing for them. I doubt I could have done anything for them even if I had been there." Though, I might have more answers as to where everyone freaking was. "But I can do things for you. I can help you. I will help you. I promise. I will stand by you throughout all this mess. We'll solve this."

"…Thank you…” Roy dissolved into tears, just curling into me like he did when Aunt Ninian died.
So, I did just as I did back then. I held him tightly, and sang the songs Dad taught me. The sound danced on the wind, twisting and turning around us comfortably.

This was all I could do. But I would do everything I could.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: I think this chapter can be summarized as "Irene is a big sister". Rest chapter before we get into the final parts of the first 'arc' of FE6. Sue and Irene's conversation has elements from Sue's support convo with Dayan, and Rutger and Clarine's conversation is basically their B support.

Next Chapter – The Ostian Revolt (warning now: I will be making a few changes here)
Chapter 7) The Ostian Revolt

After hearing of the rebellion, we rested and made our way to Ostia in small groups. Sue, Rutger, and I went first. Sue and I knew many ways to sneak into Ostia, and Rutger was easily able to keep up with us.

This was an operation that would require planning, and a lot of it. If we weren't careful, all of Ostia would become a battleground, trampled and bloody. I just hoped things would be all right.

Ostia, on the surface, seemed to be in good cheer. The townspeople talked often about how 'excited' they were that Lady Lilina and General Legance were to be married, how pretty a bride Lilina would be. But I could see how false the smiles were, and it was clear that they were only pretending to be happy out of fear. Fear for their own lives, or fear for Lilina.

"This is not the Ostia of my memory," Sue murmured as we carefully walked through the streets. We had made certain to change into Lycian clothes, and kept our hoods up, using our cloaks to hide our weapons. "This is not the Ostia Uncle Hector died trying to save." No, this wasn't. Not at all.

"At least it's clear no one is happy about this," Rutger noted. He passed some coins to a street child, who stared after us in wonder. "It won't be like Bulgar."

"It wouldn't be like Bulgar even if they were. Mother Earth will not allow such a thing to occur twice."

"She let it happen once."

"And Bern will suffer for it. You cannot tell me you, at least, are not planning on it."

"Easy, easy," I urged. I glanced at the market, and noticed they had 'special sales' going on for the wedding. I wonder if we should take advantage of that to bolster our supplies? "I know your anger, and I want Bern to suffer as well, but Aunt Lyn always says-"

"You may be angry, and you may wish revenge, but you must never let that anger blind you to the damage you do to yourself and others," Sue finished. I gave her a smile and she gave me a weird look. "Normally, you're the one losing your temper by now. Are you sick?"

"Father Sky, Sue, I am just fine!" I reached up to touch the scar of my face. "I just had... I had two temper tantrums, and one almost got me killed, and I'm just not proud of how I acted during the second." I kicked someone while they were down. That was... "So, I am making an effort to be mature."

"Go back to yelling. I like it."

"Sue!" A strange sound, some sort of choked cough, made me turn and I realized Rutger was laughing at me. "Amused?"
"A little?" he admitted. There was an intense sadness in his eyes, a bitterness to his smile. "I was just... reminded of my own siblings." ...And they were dead. I could tell by how he said the words. They were dead, and he had no hope they survived.

I reached over and tugged him into a hug, loosening it slightly when he tensed. "If you want to join in the antics, you need only to jump in," I teased. How old was he anyway? He didn't seem much older that Sue, actually. Then again, for all I knew, he was older than me. "But be warned. I do tease."

"She also gives some of the best hugs," Sue added. She leaned around me to smile at Rutger, who I was pretty sure was thinking we were insane. "Besides, you are of the plains. We're all family anyway."

"Except the Djute who will be massacred."

"Though we will leave the noncombatants alone."

"Yes."

"You two are weird," Rutger noted. Still, he relaxed a little before pulling out of the hug. "Are you always like this?" Sue and I simply smiled in reply. "...Thanks."

"Not a problem," I murmured. I might have said more, but the wind gusted suddenly, tugging and pulling at our clothes. "The wind..." I could hear it. "Father Sky is trying to guide us somewhere." Though, maybe it wasn't 'Father Sky'. Maybe this was Uncle Hector, speaking to us from beyond, to help us save his city, his home, his family.

"I don't hear anything." I gave him a look, but he had closed his eyes. "But there is a... there's an urgency, but a reassurance in the air. I can still sense that." His smile was bitter. "Maybe Father Sky and Mother Earth avoid me for surviving."

"They would never. You are simply hurting too much to listen to anything but your own voice for now." He scowled, so I quickly added, "But that is okay. It's expected." To change the subject, I glanced at Sue, noting her eyes were closed. "You have the direction?"

"Not from the wind, but from the trees," Sue confirmed. I nodded, not surprised. She always heard Mother Earth's messages better, just as I heard Father Sky best. Strange, considering her affinity, but perhaps it was the wind that let her understand the earth. "That alley there." She pointed to a side one. "Let's go."

Slowly and carefully, we walked into the alley. The wind danced around us, clearly excited by something, so we kept going, even as we had to jump over heaps of trash, and avoid the rotting smells hiding in the corners. I didn't even want to look to see what was causing them. I had bad feelings about them.

Eventually, though, we had to stop. Cloaked figures barred our path. A 'hero', a 'bishop', and an Ilian 'falcon knight' based on the bits of clothing and weaponry I could pick out. Someone was also waiting above us. I could hear the stones of the roof creak under their weight.

Rutger hovered a hand over his sword, and Sue drew an arrow from her quiver. I almost did the same, but then I caught sight of the lance the Ilian was wielding. I knew that lance. The 'Rex Hasta'. But that was normally wielded by...

"Aunt Florina?" I called softly. There was a stillness to the air as I waited to see if I was right. "Aunt Florina, is that you?"
"Irene, it's so wonderful to see you again!" The hood of the Ilian's cloak fell, revealing Aunt Florina's smiling face. "Matthew, you were right!"

"Of course I was." I looked up and smiled when I saw Uncle Matthew grinning down at me. "I bet you heard me," he complained. I shrugged and he laughed. "Anyway, nice to see you. Please tell me that's Sue with you." Sue waved, smiling softly. "Awesome." He jumped down, nodding to Rutger. "I don't know you, I think. I'm Matthew, the Spymaster of Ostia, and very much kicking myself for letting this get so out of hand."

"Matthew, easy..." The bishop stepped closer, and I saw he was Uncle Lucius, hair braided back today. "Legance has served Ostia for so long," he reassured, smiling gently. "Ever since he was a child. No one would think he could betray." Yeah, that was true. "Regardless... oh, Raven, are you beating me to the punch?"

"Yep." Uncle Raven, the 'hero', caught me in a warm hug, so reassuring that tears pricked my eyes. "Must have been hard," he murmured, pulling back and ruffling my hair. He frowned as he tapped the scar on my eye. "Must have been more than hard." He moved to hug Sue. "So, what's up? Is it just you three?"

"For now," Sue answered. "The others are coming later, so as not to alert the enemy." She hesitated before continuing. "Aunt Lyn... is she...?"

"We'll take you to her. We've got her hiding in a house not far away." Then she was alive?! "Come on. Quickly. Matthew, you-" Uncle Matthew was already gone. "He'll cover the tracks then. Let's go."

"Oh, Irene! What did you do to your eye?!" I should have known Aunt Serra would yelp about that. She still helped about the scars Mom had, even twenty years later. "Poor dear... what sort of uncouth ruffian scars a lady's face!" she snapped, eyes blazing in fury. It was so over the top and comical that I just had to laugh. "You shouldn't laugh at something so serious." I exchanged an amused look with Sue, helping her fix her hair. Aunt Serra's hug had mussed it up. "Though, it doesn't look too bad. Healed nicely, at least."

"Elen healed it," I explained, glancing around the small little house. Small being the key word, but I could see why they hid here. It was easy to defend. "You might know her? Bernese cleric? Shy?"

"Oh, yes, she's such a dear." Aunt Serra beamed, but soon her cheer faded. She looked around the room, and I did the same. Uncle Raven and Uncle Lucius were watching the windows. Aunt Florina guarded the door. Rutger leaned against the wall, eyes closed. Uncle Matthew was still outside, making sure no one followed us. "Irene, Sue, do you two want to see Lyn?"

I glanced at Sue to make sure before nodding. "Please."

"Okay, she's this way." She led the two of us down a quiet hallway. "Just... don't be surprised by what you see. She's been bedridden for quite some time, and the poison has been harsh." So, it had been poison. Damn that I was right. "She was awake earlier, but we'll see..." She opened the door to a small room hiding in the corner.

Despite how small it was, though, it was cozy. But I couldn't focus much on what the room looked like, just how it 'felt'. My attention went straight to Aunt Lyn, resting in a small bed, covered in blankets, with pillows tucked behind her head, her hair down instead of in its normal ponytail. She looked so... fragile. I never associated the word with her before, but there was no other word to describe her.
"Who… is there?" Aunt Lyn's voice shook, but there was still a sense of 'command' about her. Quiet, but strong. That… that made me feel better. "Serra? That you?" she asked, squinting her eyes to try and focus. "You were just here… Did something happen?"

"A very good thing," Aunt Serra replied, fussing over the blankets. "Look who's here." She moved out of the way, so Aunt Lyn could better see Sue and me. Her face lit up with a weak, but beautiful, smile. "You cannot push yourself, Lyn, but I know you've been so worried…"

"Yes, I have been." Aunt Lyn reached up with a shaking hand, beckoning us closer. "Come here, you two. I promise; this isn't contagious."

"Yeah…" I murmured. I all but lunged for her, gripping her hand tightly. So weak… so fragile… "You're… you're going to be okay, right?"

"Yes, it seems Legance used the same poison Lundgren used on my grandfather, twenty years ago," Aunt Lyn reassured. "Serra has experience in treating it." A quiet click hinted Aunt Serra left to leave us alone with her. "It's just a matter of recovering, really. Legance tried to attack me, but Matthew and Raven got me out. I will be fine."

"Good," Sue said. She came to stand at Aunt Lyn's other side, taking that hand. "There's been so much going wrong already."

"I know." She squeezed our hands, and I knew she was using all her strength to do so. I barely even felt the pressure. "Ah, I am so grateful to that dream." Dream? "Last night, I dreamed you two came here, with Roy not far behind, bringing some soldiers." Oh, Mother Earth must have shown her the future, just to reassure her. I had never experienced something like that, but others in the Kutolah had. "I'm sorry to ask you two for a favor, but…"

"We will save Lilina." No question about that. "We will save Ostia. We will make Legance pay for his betrayal."

"With fire and blood and thunder," I added. I shifted so I could smile at her. "So, just rest. We'll reunite you two soon."

"Oh, I know that. You two have always been strong," Aunt Lyn laughed. Her smile was so warm. "I am so proud of you both. So, my favor is not to save Lilina or Ostia. I know you two will do so, and I know you all will do so brilliantly." Aunt Lyn… "Though, I do worry about Bern…"

"We contacted Etruria for assistance. It will… Ostia will become a vassal state, but…"

"But it will live. We can free ourselves later, so long as we live." Yes… "So, here is my favor. I want you all to believe in yourselves." What did she…? "I want you all to believe in yourselves, as much as I believe in you. As much as Hector did. And I can tell you; that's a lot." Sue and I exchanged a confused look. "Okay?"

"We'll try." What else could I say? But the words scared me. They reminded me of Oswin's last words. Oh, last words… "Aunt Lyn?"

"Mmm?" She was half-asleep. But I had to say this before I forgot again.

"Uncle Hector to tell you he was sorry that he couldn't take that trip with you." Aunt Lyn's eyes widened, filled with sudden tears. "He also… he wished he could've seen you and Lilina again. He was thinking of you both, at the end."

"…Of course he would, that idiot…" She managed a smile, even as she cried. "Oh, I will have…"
such a lecture for him. That idiot should've known better than to leave me behind. I'll have quite some time to come up with good arguments." Ha… "Thank you, Irene."

"It's no problem." I made sure to smile, though it fell when Aunt Lyn suddenly closed her eyes. "Aunt Lyn?!

"Easy, Irene," Sue soothed. She reached over to pat my hand. "She's just asleep." R-right… right… I just… oh, Father Sky, I was going to have a panic attack every time someone fainted for the rest of my life, wasn't I? "We should let her rest." Yeah…

Sue stood up, kissing Aunt Lyn on the cheek before heading out the door. I lingered a bit longer, just to confirm that yes, she was breathing, and yes, she did have a pulse, before leaving too, closing the door behind me.

When I returned to the main room, Uncle Matthew was back, and he gave me a warm smile when he noticed how sheepish I was.

"Just got back from checking on Alice," he explained. I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd been worried about her too. Alice served as one of Lilina's 'ladies in waiting', while unofficially helping her dad with the spy network. It always baffled me how she was a perfect mix of Uncle Matthew's sneakiness and Aunt Serra's… 'Serraness', but I suppose it made sense. She was their daughter. "There's some Ilian knights that the Young Master contracted prior to everything who, for some reason, still want to stay on." I would forever be confused by why Uncle Matthew called Uncle Hector that. "Baffles me, really. I'm sure they could get more money elsewhere at this point."

"If the employer dies while on contract, Ilian Knights are allowed to choose whether or not they keep with the contract or not," Aunt Florina explained. Her smile was warm. "Zealot was always a kind child, and he's somehow even kinder as a man. I would guess he would feel bad, leaving in the middle of a crisis. I think Lilina is about the same age as one of his sister in laws, too." Oh, that was nice… "Th-though, that really is just my opinion. I could be wrong."

"Now there's the shy Florina I love and adore." Uncle Matthew grinned as Aunt Florina made a face. "So, I was thinking I'd go meet Lord Elroy myself." It took me a full second to remember that Roy's first name was technically 'Elroy'. Uncle Matthew was one of the very few who used it. Ever. "Alice is going to get Zealot over here for a strategy meeting." Ah! "So, if Lady Pup would like to prep, I'm sure Raven has maps."

"I'd like that," I answered, making a face. 'Lady Pup' was his nickname for me. Sue was 'Little Pup'. I think it's because he called Mom 'Lady Wolf'. "Wait, how many people am I dealing with?"

"Oh, three or four squads of Ilian Cavalry, alongside any loyalist soldiers here in the city, which probably is another three or four there, and then your group." …My head was spinning. My head was spinning. "Have fun, Lady Pup!"

Uncle Matthew, some days, I really could hate you.

"Easy, Irene," Uncle Lucius chided. I could only give him a wan smile before returning to staring at the map. Thinking… thinking… I had to think. "You will just think yourself into an early grave if you don't take a step back."

"I understand that, but I can't help but fret anyway," I groaned. Aunt Serra was tending to Aunt Lyn, Sue was outside with Uncle Raven to gather information, Aunt Florina was guarding the place, Rutger went with Uncle Matthew to go get Roy, and Uncle Lucius was here chiding me. "I
have never coordinated so many people before."

"And you don't have to, remember?" He rested his hands on my shoulders and I tilted my head back to pout at him. "What was it you just said?"

"I just said that I would only deal with the squad leaders, because frankly, they know their people and how they fight better than I ever will." But still… "Uncle Lucius, I'm just eighteen. Mom was at least nineteen when she went through the Caeling Inheritance Dispute." Mom also never had to deal with so many people!

"Speaking of your mother, how is your health?" Out of context, I'm sure that sounded like a strange sentence.

But I knew what he was getting at. "I get checked daily, multiple times, to ensure that I am keeping healthy. I also make sure I eat three or four times a day, make a point to not skip meals, and get six to eight hours of rest every day."

"Good." He gave me a soft smile. "Now, then, what is it that you're fretting about?"

"You mean besides everything?" I sighed and looked back to the maps. "Well, I am worried about making a good impression. Good impressions go far in getting people to listen to you."

"I can assure you that you are making a very good first impression." I nearly yelped, startled that someone had snuck up on me. I must have been more caught up in my thoughts than I… well… thought. "You must be Lady Irene." The man who greeted me didn't seem all that old, really. Somewhere in his twenties, I would guess, maybe his thirties, with blue-silver armor. "Captain Florina spoke well of you," he murmured, bowing slightly. "I am Zealot, leader of the Ilian Cavalry Brigade."

"It's very nice to meet you," I replied. I stood up and held out my hand for a handshake. "I am relieved to hear I'm making a good impression. Somehow."

"Well, you acknowledge you don't know everything. I know some eighteen year olds who didn't recognize that. Namely me." He flashed me a smile and shook my hand. His grip was firm, sure, and he didn't try to test me. "I seem to be a little early."

"I think it's more that the others are late," Uncle Lucius murmured. He glanced out the window, nodding. "I am going to go check on everyone. Irene?"

"I will work on making some sort of sense to my fretting," I replied. He laughed softly, and gave me a little hug before departing. "Anyway, Zealot… Sir Zealot… uh…"

"Zealot is just fine, Lady Irene," Zealot reassured me. His smile was indulgent, but warm. He wasn't patronizing me. He was just genuinely amused. "Well, I suppose it is technically 'lord', as I rule Edessa when I bother being around, but I rarely use it."

"Well, in that case, then just call me 'Irene'."

"I understand that you are very high ranked on both sides of your family."

"…Thank you for acknowledging my dad." I smiled softly. "I am used to outsiders only acknowledging the Hanover side."

"Ilians are used to being looked down upon, just as Sacaeans are." Yes, that was true. "Regardless, might I see your plans?"
"Oh, yes, here." I gestured to the map, and leaned over the table. "I was thinking we could utilize you all to evacuate the civilians and to help define the boundaries of the battlefield."

"Control the battle by defining the borders." Zealot leaned over the map too, tracing out the edges. "Clever."

"Let's just hope my cleverness holds for getting inside Ostia Castle." Lilina was in there, getting ready for her 'wedding'. "You mind if I ask a nosy question?"

"Go ahead."

"Why are you staying?" I looked up at him, curious. "I'm grateful, but…"

"…Lord Hector was kind." Zealot's eyes were pained. "He talked to me directly, made a point to have at least one chat with each of my men." That did sound like him. "He made sure we had a good salary, which is a rarity. He was a good man. I was honored to have him as an employer. I cannot stand the thought that these people tried to kill his wife, are abusing his daughter, and destroying the city and country he loved."

"So, you stay for that." I smiled warmly. "Thank you."

"He was an easy man to like. Reckless yet charismatic." Yes, that was Uncle Hector. I loved him dearly. "What's this note here?"

"Oh, I'm expecting Bernese soldiers." I sighed, sitting down again. "Also, I don't suppose you have a training manual or something?"

"Actually, in my pack." He smiled at my incredulous look. "When I have men who skip out on chores, I make them copy passages as punishment." …That was so brilliant and I loved it. "Why, though?"

"I have one, got it from Mom, but I'm pretty sure that things have changed in twenty years since she got hers."

"Well, yes, we had to update them to account for Lord Erk's spell." I still remembered the day when Uncle Erk unveiled Aircalibur, the first new spell made in 1000 years, utilizing the power of the wind. Mom had been so damn proud, and I remember cheering loudly. Uncle Pent starting crying because he'd been so happy. It was a good day. "You can read through it later."

"Thank you." Sounds on the staircase made me glance over. "Sounds like someone is angry. You might want to duck by the window." Zealot listened to me, and I closed my eyes, waiting for the fallout in three… two… one…

"Lady Pup, could you have warned me that Princess Guinevere of all people was traveling with you lot?!" Ah, there was Uncle Matthew. "Did it just slip your mind or something?" he bemoaned, moving out of the doorway. Roy and Guinevere trailed behind him awkwardly, Roy waving a little when he saw me. "Of all the damn heart attacks…"

"I suppose it must have," I replied, twirling my pen over my fingers. I was so used to her being around now that it didn't occur to me to warn him. "Guinevere, can you tell me more about Narcian?"

"Narcian?" she repeated. She slipped past Uncle Matthew to stand next to me, tilting her head curiously. "Why him?"
"Because he's the general we're going to be facing down if the Etrurian Army doesn't give us reinforcements in time." I leaned back in my chair, studying the ceiling. "I vaguely recall something about that when Zephiel and I... well, when Zephiel chose not to kill me." I heard a strangled yelp. I knew it was Uncle Matthew, though, so I ignored it. "But even without that, he makes the most sense."

"Oh?"

"The three Wyvern Generals are Murdock, a general specializing in heavy armor and weaponry; Brunja, a powerful magic user; and Narcian, a wyvern knight." I started sketching in the air, mostly to help me keep my thoughts organized. "Murdock was sent to Ilia. I remember Sue mentioning that and it really does make the most sense. Sending Narcian would result in a battle of the skies, skies that wyvern do not rule and pegasi do. They could win, but it would take a ridiculous amount of time and it isn't a guarantee. Pegasi are also famous for their ability to resist magic, meaning that sending Brunja's forces would put them at a disadvantage, especially when most mages don't wear armor, leaving them wide open for Ilia's cavalry. Murdock's forces, however, while slow, are very defensive. They can outlast the speed of Ilia's forces, taking away their chief advantage, fast attacks from above, easily, while also being able to withstand a cavalry charge with their own."

"Meaning Murdock is the best choice for Ilia." Yes. "The others?"

"Again, Narcian is a wyvern knight. His forces are filled primarily with cavalry and wyvern riders from my understanding. It would be the height of stupidity to send a force like that into the Sacae." I started twirling my pen again. "Bern's cavalry is filled with Hanover horses. Powerful, strong, but that's not advantageous when you're in an open field like the plains. They can't change directions quickly, and they can't handle the unexpectedly harsh terrain the grass hides with grace. And almost every Sacaean, combatant or not, knows how to shoot. Wyverns and arrows don't mix well."

"Narcian wears a talisman known as the 'Delphi Shield', which blunts the effectiveness of wind spell and arrows. It was a gift from Zephiel when Narcian received his title." Of course Bern would have something so annoying.

"That won't save him from an arrow to his heart, and if I can hit the guy in a shoulder with a blind shot by catching him off-guard, I can bet you that a skilled hunter could easily make a heart-shot." If anything, a talisman like that would make him cocky. Cockier. "So, it would still be a stupid decision to send him. Mages, however, can strike from multiple distances and, really, the plains are made of grass. Grass is flammable, and grass fires are terrors." It made me ill to speak of my home this way. It really did. "Of course, the bastards still had to ambush Bulgar during a festival, and had to rely on the Djute betrayed, but if Brunja is to believe, they still almost lost, which serves them right." Yes, I was still pissed off and I forever would be, and if I saw Brunja, I was going to snipe her. It wasn't my fault she didn't wear anything to protect her heart, after all. "So, process of elimination leaves Lycia to Narcian, which is also very tactically sound."

"Is it?"

"Yeah." I sighed, reaching back to undo and redo my ponytail. "The only way one can say Lycia has 'fallen' is to make Ostia surrender. Ostia castle is strong, but it is weaker by air. It might have survived dragons, but dragons are supposed to be large. Wyverns, not so much. Plus, Lycia relies a lot on their alliance when it comes to external threats, like Bern. Someone like Narcian, who is an arrogant asshole that I will turn into a quiver for bruising Clarine, is still a wyvern general. He's strong enough to at least half-back his words, in theory, and then is obnoxious enough to humiliate the losers, forcing them to retreat. Which leads the neighboring provinces wide open."
"I see." I glanced at Guinevere and noticed she was smiling warmly. A quick glance around showed Uncle Matthew and Roy looked strangely proud, for some reason, and Zealot looked damned impressed. What did I do? "So, information on Narcian?" she murmured, eyes closed as she nodded. "He bears no scars." I could hear the confusion from the rest of the room. "None whatsoever."

"So, a coward." I remembered that conversation, though. That I did make her smile grow. "Arrogant, a textbook definition of narcissism…" So, honestly… "Basically, if we rile him a bit, he'll fly off the handle, and not properly coordinate his soldiers."

"Yes, I think so." Guinevere giggled. "You can also play on his inferiority complex." Did she just say inferiority complex? "Narcian was not Zephiel's first choice to take up the title." Was that so? "Galle, Murdock's right hand, was. Frankly, Galle is better suited to it. He's Narcian's exact opposite, and is easily the most skilled wyvern knight of all of Bern." I think… I might have heard of him, actually. From Uncle Heath. Ah, a shame that he went to Ilia with Uncle Kent and Aunt Farina. I would have loved to have him here.

"So, why is it Narcian?" I should focus on the present."

"Galle is half-Sacaean." …Well, I suppose that would do it. "Though, as I understand it, he was from a tribe known as the Lorca, which was slaughtered twenty years ago." …LORCA?! That was Aunt Lyn's…! "So, he was raised in Bern, adopted by some merchants, and considers himself Bernese more than Sacaean." Guinevere sighed. "Still, Narcian raised a fuss, and Zephiel had to bow to the will of the court. Galle doesn't care, but it still makes me a bit mad."

"I can imagine…" Shaking my head, I focused back on the map. "Okay, I finally have an idea for the damn Bernese reinforcements. So, that means I have an idea for everything." Maybe.

"You do?" Roy finally came over, standing on my other side to peer at the map. "What is it?" he asked. "How are we getting into the castle?" He tapped at the gates. "If these could just open…"

"They have to for the wedding," I pointed out. I stood up and pointed to the Church. "They have to have a procession to there, meaning that the gates will be open. The trick then becomes holding them open long enough to secure the city and race into the castle."

"Legance will account for that," Uncle Matthew warned. He stood next to Zealot, opposite me. "I do have an agent inside the castle, one of my very best. He sadly can't get Lady Lilina out, but it's enough to get information. There's going to be soldiers guarding the gates."

"Soldiers absolutely loyal to Legance, as he wouldn't risk them helping Lilina at the last second. Meaning they're fair game to kill." I pointed to the gate controls. "We seize these, we control the gates, and bam, we're in."

"Any reason we aren't… I don't know… ambushing Legance in the church?"

"Uncle Matthew, you cannot tell me you haven't thought about Legance using Lilina as a human shield." His proud smile showed me he had, and he threw out the question just to test me. "You're mean. I'm telling Aunt Serra."

"No, don't. She'll nag me for a week."

"Well, that's half her job as your wife." Shaking my head, I returned my attention to the map. "So, here's my tentative plan, and I want everyone's help at tweaking it to be the most effective."
Waiting was agony. Waiting was sheer agony. Even though this was my plan, I desperately, desperately just wanted to charge in. Lilina was inside, probably absolutely terrified, and... ugh, I was terrified. I was just terrified. I was also incredibly pissed off that Legance, a man Uncle Hector had trusted so much, would attempt to destroy everything Uncle Hector had held dear.

"Remember to breathe." I shot Rutger a dirty look. We were all set up in groups. I was with him and Deke. Rutger and I were crouched, while Deke watched for anything unexpected. "You were turning blue," Rutger continued. "Remember that you need to breathe."

"I know; I know," I grumbled. Still, I did take a deep breath. "I'm just nervous."

"It's a good strategy, and one you made with everyone weighing in," Deke reassured me. When I glanced up, he flashed me a smile. "Remember, I saw that plan too."

"I know you did. You came in later, brought a fresh perspective, and found that big flaw."

"That you fixed nicely."

"But if something goes wrong..."

"You're the tactician. You can't think that way."

"A tactician's job is to deal with what-ifs."

"Your job is to lead the army forward." He reached over to prod my cheek, making me grimace. "Have faith in your soldiers."

"I have plenty of faith in them." It was me that I didn't. Still, Aunt Lyn had... she had requested that I believe in myself, as much as she did in me. As much as Uncle Hector did. That was a lot harder than it sounded though. "Oh, hey, Rutger, just thought of something."

"And that is?" Rutger asked dryly. His expression was blank, hand resting on his sword. "I suppose I am the focus on your distraction."

"Well, if I focused on things that bothered me with Deke, I'd start yelling and give everything away," I retorted. Deke smiled sheepishly and I gave him a dirty look. "I am still holding you to that promise, but for now..." I focused back on Rutger. "It's about Clarine."

"...What about her?"

"I'm just going to tell you that she's a lot more sensitive than her bratty, pushy personality lets on." He gave me a slightly confused look and I shrugged. "I love her dearly, but she has flaws. But because she has those flaws, a lot of people don't realize how sensitive she is. Just if you were wondering why she was crying."

"I knew I heard someone."

"To be fair, you two were arguing, or whatever that was, in a public place." He nodded, conceding the point. "You didn't really do anything wrong, though. Yeah, your words were harsh, and I am a little peeved because Clarine's my family, but you didn't really do anything wrong."

"...Good." I caught his slight smile. Her tears had been bothering him then. "The tension in the air..." It was reaching its peak. Even the wind held still in anticipation. "It won't be long now."

It still felt like forever until we heard the bells of the church chime, signaling the start of the
'wedding procession'. Time to be wedding crashers.

Deke leapt out from the alleyway we were hiding it, striking down a passing soldier before bolting for the walls, Rutger and I trailing behind him. There were screaming and yelps of shock from the rebel soldiers patrolling the area, but not the civilians. We had already gotten them to safety, in the church actually. The bishop there had been very, very happy to help us out, even letting Merlinus, Elen, Saul, and Guinevere set up a temporary field infirmary there.

When we got closer to the wall, I took point, leading Rutger and Deke to the hidden ladder, covered by ivy and moss, that led up to the ramparts of the castle, the ones left of the gate. I made a mental apology to Uncle Hector and Oswin as I climbed and heard Rutger and Deke following me. They had always said I should not show anyone, but I think they would forgive me for this. I hoped they did.

Besides, Uncle Matthew was showing Chad the hidden way up to the other side of the ramparts. Granted, he had wanted to just go alone up there, but I had put my foot down. Too many strange and impossible things had happened for my liking, so I was taking no chances. He agreed once I dragged Aunt Serra into my argument.

From above, I had a clear view of the field. Zealot had his people corraling the rebel soldiers, dealing with them easily. I saw one, with brown-purple hair and the blue armor of an Ilian squad leader, actually helping a young girl wearing Sacaean clothes exit the Arena. I wondered what that was about, but the girl quickly disappeared from sight, and the knight was in the fray with the others.

Shaking my head, I glanced up and smiled when I saw Aunt Florina and Shanna circling the city, guarding from above and watching for Bernese and Etrurian troops. It was easy to see how Shanna was still in training compared to Aunt Florina. Aunt Florina was just graceful, flitting to and fro, and leaving a trail of bodies in her wake. I should ask her for advice on how Shanna should get better. Ah, this wasn't the time…

I looked to the south, the entrance of Ostia, and saw Uncle Raven and Uncle Lucius holding their own easily against the soldiers there. They would keep any rebels from re-entering the city. I truly thought the only reason they hadn't busted inside already was out of fear of leaving Aunt Lyn with only one guard (Aunt Serra), and out of fear for Lilina's life.

I turned my attention down, to the center of the city, forming the most 'visible' part of the attack, all the more visible thanks to Roy's bright red hair. I was having him borrow my horse for this. That way he could keep up with Sue, Allen, and Lance as they led the charge straight into the gates. Gates that Chad and I were going to be opening… as soon as I got this mechanism unlocked. More difficult than it sounded, I soon discovered. There always had to be a problem, huh?

"This would be rusted," I grumbled as I fiddled with it. flakes chipped off with every touch. "Can I…?" I glanced up and saw Deke and Rutger fighting off soldiers intent on getting it. I didn't have time for this. "Oh, screw it." I grabbed the lock and tugged hard. It cracked almost instantly. "One more…” I set my foot against the wall to get better leverage and yanked. It broke entirely, making me fall back with a yelp. "Ow…” Ugh… I banged my head against the wall. So graceful.

"You okay?" Deke asked, glancing back at me as he kicked the last enemy off the wall. "That sounded painful."

"Sounded worse than it was," Though, I probably did have a knot on my head, and my ass stung from the fall. "By the way, before you ask, I am completely justified in breaking the lock if it was that easy to pull open, though." I pushed myself up and grabbed the lever. "Here we go!"
It moved slowly, making the left gate open with a loud groan. Half a second later, the right gate did the same. Gates were open. Gates were open! It worked!

Just in time, it seemed, as I looked down and saw Roy, Allen, Lance, and Sue charge inside not two seconds later. The soldiers hadn't expected something like that, and were easily scattered, easy pickings for our unmounted units bringing up the rear.

I saw Roy kill the knight who seemed to be leading everything, rapier sliding through the slots of the helmet to catch them straight in the eye, and nudged Rutger and Deke. "Let's go," I ordered. "There's a path down over this way. We've our foothold inside."

Lilina, can you hear us? We're here. We're coming to rescue you.

Notes on Zealot

- Leader of the Illian Cavalry mercenaries, and the Lord of Edessa. He's married, and I think actually has a baby girl, but hasn't met her yet since she was born after he was hired for this job.
- Paladin who is best in lances, not bad with swords, and decent with axes. By his own admission, though, he's likely not going to get much stronger very easily, but that should be fine. He's strong enough for now.
- He's clearly a skilled and beloved commander, though, which is invaluable anywhere, but especially when dealing with the harsh life of a mercenary. Dad told me stories of his jobs and some were just... not pretty.
- His affinity is darkness, like Dad.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: So, in game, you have the opening thing where Roy sends the letter to Etrura (done last chapter to make a little more sense time wise), before everyone just charges straight through and you're recruiting NPCs (just three), visiting villages, etc, etc. Which I changed a bit of. A lot of. Oh, and have it be mentioned that you're taking back Ostia with more than twenty soldiers. Also, I think Rutger is 'officially' listed to be in his twenties, but he's always come off as being younger than that to me (to the point that he remains the only FE char whose age startled me), so I'm having him be in his teens, around Irene's age if not a little younger.

Now, many believe that Lucius is the 'Father' of Chad and Lugh's orphanage (based on his solo epilogue), but since I had Raven and Lucius paired, they're still mercenaries, and still fight with Ostia. So, the Father is an unnamed char for my purposes here.

Galle is a char that we won't see for a few more chapters in game, and there's not much known about his past, just that he is 'not a native' to Bern. I chose to have him half-Sacaean, to give more reason for why that would be a 'big deal' to Bernese, and chose to have his Sacaean side to be of the Lorca, mostly because it was mentioned that Lyn was one of a handful of survivors, so why not?

Also, yes, Treck and Noah join in this chapter (and, in fact, Irene sees the tail end of Noah's interaction with Fir here at the arena), but Irene hasn't met them yet, which is why she doesn't have notes on them.
Chapter 8) Reunion

Ostia is a province that always focuses on defense, from its soldiers to its castle. It is known for its endurance, its ability to weather anything and everything. Ironically, though, the Lycian Alliance Army itself is shattering its reputation of invincibility.

Every suit of armor has a weak point. The joints. Rapiers take advantage of that to slide in. That's what we are right now. The point of the rapier, sliding through the 'joint' of the armored wall, the very gates.

To save Ostia, we must conquer it. Father Sky, this is a grand trick You're playing.

The city was secured. Our small group would charge inside and save Lilina. Aunt Florina, Uncle Raven, Uncle Lucius, Uncle Matthew, and most of the Ilian knights would defend the city from any and all potential reinforcements. This was the most basic of the plan, and I hoped and prayed that it was solid. If it wasn't, then this was all going to fall apart really, really fast.

"Thank you three dearly," I murmured, bowing to Zealot and his two squad leaders: Noah and Treck. "I know you would probably want to be inside fighting, but…"

"We go where we're needed," Noah pointed out. Treck simply yawned, apparently completely fine with just about everything. "Though, I think Lord Zealot is fretting already." He smiled slightly when Zealot gave him a playfully dirty look. "See?"

"It is good to fret and worry," Zealot defended, voice almost over-the-top dignified. I got the sense there was a lesson under the teasing and playfulness. "It means you understand the consequences of failure and have considered the possibility."

"And that's important."

"Yes, because by acknowledging the possibility of failure, you make extra plans and don't do stupid things like charge repeatedly when outnumbered." Noah's resulting sigh told me he had done such a thing once. "Lady Irene, we will be heading outside now. Do not hesitate to send for us if things become too great inside."

"I won't," I promised. Hesitantly, though, I glanced to Treck, who was just… well, he didn't react. "Um… is he okay?"

"Treck is always like this," Noah dismissed, waving his hand as if to wipe my worries away. "He's fine. Probably thinking about fishing, or sleeping." W-was this going to be okay? "We're off."

"Good luck." I waved them goodbye, and sighed, breathing in to settle my nerves. Here I was, attempting to conquer Ostia Castle. Father Sky, could You have saved some of the trickery for a time I would appreciate the humor?! I know the stories mention You were a trickster, but come on!

Shaking my head, I returned to the others, hunting for Roy. Guinevere, Elen, and Saul were
utilizing the courtyard as an infirmary now, with Merlinus's assistance, though Clarine had requested to continue being our 'on the field' medic. I made sure she stayed mounted. I dared someone to charge a horse in close quarters. …Well, I dared someone to charge anyone but Clarine? …Rutger, sorry, but you were definitely going to be her guard.

"Irene." I turned to smile at Roy as he came over. "I think everyone's in position," he murmured. His hands were shaking, so I ruffled his hair reassuringly. "We can head in soon." Yes… "So…" He fell silent when I held up a hand. I heard someone approaching, far too quiet for any of ours. "Oh. Great. Assassin?"

"Well, not for you." Oh, hello, random person who dropped down from the fucking ceiling. No wonder Mom and Uncle Douglas always encouraged looking up. "General Roy and Tactician Irene of the Lycian Alliance Army, I presume?" I tensed, not recognizing the man who appeared. "Easy, easy," he laughed, holding up his hands. "Put the rapier away." I snickered when I saw Roy had drawn his rapier. "The name is Astore, and I'm on your side." Astore… I knew the name at least. One of Uncle Matthew's most skilled and trusted operatives. "Greetings."

"Ah, yes, hello," Roy replied, looking some strange mix of startled and sheepish. "I'm… ah… sorry, this has been a very weird, very long day."

"I'm sure it has been." He had a strangely kind smile as he brought down his hands. "Been weird for me too, and I at least had a bit of warning. Now, granted, I heard when I was checking in on Caelin, so it took more time than I'd like to get here." A glint of metal caught my attention and my eyes went down to the brace on his leg. It was a twin to the one Mom wore. "Noticed, huh?" I winced, and bowed my head apologetically. "It's fine. You're not giving me a pitying look. I took a bad injury a long time ago, sneaking into Bern castle, and got the scar as punishment."

"So… ah… what are you doing here?"

"Well, as soon as I heard about Araphan, I raced back here as fast as I possibly could." He sighed heavily. "And what do I find but those muttonheads Legance and Debias inciting rebellion." I liked this guy. I had no idea who Debias was, but I liked Astore. "Of course you all killed Debias at the gates." Oh, wait, was he that knight guy Roy killed? "So, horses? Inside the castle?"

"What's wrong with that?" I demanded, feeling defensive. "Trampling is a legitimate tactic, and it's useful for startling people and controlling where they think we are."

"I thought Sacaeans were too prideful to tell lies."

"Lying is a sin." I bristled, and might have snapped if Roy hadn't snagged my sleeve. "We do have our pride, but the story that we are 'too prideful' is a fallacy concocted by self-important idiots who refuse to acknowledge that we have our own culture and beliefs."

"And, clearly, I hit a raw nerve. Makes me glad I never said that around Lady Lyndis. I like my head where it is." Grr… "But my point does still stand."

"You do not have to lie in order to trick people. It is not my fault if they believe a fallacy."

"Ah, point." His face became thoughtful. "Think there might be a few horseslayers about. Know I saw at least one knight wielding one."

"Well, I know who I'm going to target first."

He burst into laughter. "You're as fun as Lord Matthew said." He smiled, bowing slightly. "Then allow me to assist in this endeavor." Oh? "I couldn't save Lord Hector, but I'll be damned before I
just sit by and let them harm Lady Lilina." His smile turned wry. "Plus, I know where she was being kept. If you can secure the main area, I can lead you straight to her."

"Perfect!" Father Sky, thank you! "So, what's your training?"

"Spy, thief, and assassin." Assassin, huh? "Lord Matthew had Sir Legault teach me personally. I'm not too shabby if I may boast a little."

"Awesome." Okay, I… had a few ideas. "Come and join the strategy meeting please. I welcome your insight."

"On it."

The battle was harsh. But I did have one big advantage here. I grew up in this castle. I knew all of the hallways like the back of my hand. More than that, though, I knew almost all of the secret passages of the castle, since Uncle Hector had shown me them under the guise of playing hide and seek when I was a child. A way to protect myself, and to help show others the way to safety.

Now, I used that knowledge to try and save his home. I think he'd be laughing. I thought I could even hear that laughter on the wind.

"Rutger! The right is clear!" I yelled over the fighting. I saw him nod and slice open a path towards the right side of the room, getting Clarine to safety. She and Rutger had been surrounded, Clarine's riding ability and his dodging capabilities keeping them safe for the precious seconds it took to get some space in the room. "Focus on the left, everyone! Center is fine!" It honestly was. We were doing very well. "Ah, there you are!" I aimed and fired, grinning as I saw the knight wielding that damn horseslayer fall at last. Father Sky, that took too damn long. I was glad that Lance was good at dodging! That knight nearly got him thrice.

"Lady Irene!" There was Shanna, flitting down briefly. The ceiling of the room was high enough for her to fly. "We've got some unknown soldiers fighting the enemy to the side there." She pointed to the group, and I had to stand in the saddle to see them. Whoever they were, they were led by a man in Ostian armor, a girl in Ostian armor, and a boy who looked like a mercenary. "Bors knows the two armors. Barth and Wendy. The mercenary, Ogier, says they're fighting Legance."

"Get them to secure the halls, but also make sure some of ours are watching them closely." I was going to take all the help I could get, but considering the circumstances, it was better to be prepared. "If there's anything suspicious, I want them dealt with quickly."

"Okay!" She gave me a bright smile and flew off again.

Smiling slightly, I shook my head and focused on the battle. It didn't look like any of ours were among the dead, though I think I was going to send some back to the infirmary soon. There were a lot of injuries, more than Clarine could handle by herself. Maybe I should've brought Saul with us…

Noticing a knight approaching, I nudged my horse and clicked my tongue, telling her to rear up and lash out with her hooves, to drive them back or, you know, crush a skull. I was hoping for the latter, but the former was fine.

What wasn't fine was the arrow heading for my face. I automatically ducked to dodge, but that threw off my balance enough for me to slip off the saddle. Then I had a bigger problem. My mare was trying to defend me from an attack she couldn't see, so she was lashing out with her back hooves too. So, I had to dodge that, and the kick knocked Rienfleche clear out of my hands, my
palms stinging from the force.

Then the soldiers closed in, and I could only sigh as I realized what all was happening. My bow was one way, my horse was another, and I was staring down a soldier intent on skewering me.

I rolled out of the way of a lunge, glancing around for a weapon. There… weren't any, really. Oh, this was just great.

I yelped as I ducked under another lunge, but I took advantage of being within the guard to grab his arm and twist it, forcing them to drop the lance. I twisted it further, behind his back, and kept twisting until I heard a very distinctive 'pop'. That was a dislocated shoulder. Or maybe I broke something. I didn't know, and I didn't care, because there was another soldier coming right for me.

I let go of the first soldier, and grabbed their lance, using it to knock the second one off balance and get some distance. This… was fine. This was fine. I could deal. The bow was my preferred weapon, and my best. But Grandfather had taught me a bit of lance fighting before he died three years ago. I at least had an idea of how to fight with one, and honestly, I was better at it than a sword. I was really luck this wasn't an axe. I had no experience in that whatsoever. Uncle Hector refused to teach me.

They tried to chop down, but I parried it, letting it slip off the side. They tried to strike at my leg, or groin, but I parried that one too before feinting to their head. As they reeled back to protect themselves, I feinted another hit to their hip. Then, when they tried to block that one, I seized the opening in their guard and thrust the lance into their neck, partially decapitating them as I ripped it out, spinning the lance to bleed off some of the momentum.

Movement caught my eye, and I whirled, bringing the lance down hard before thrusting up. Blood sprayed, catching me in the face, and dripped down the shaft, bloodying my hands. It took me a second to realize what had happened. The first soldier apparently had hidden a dagger somewhere in their armor, and had tried to kill me in the aftermath of their comrade's death. Instead, I killed them, and… well, the lance was kind of stuck in their skull now.

"Irene!" I let go of the spear and looked up to see Sue riding for me, eyes wide. My horse was next to her, and she held Rienfleche in her hands. "Oh… you're okay…" she breathed. She visibly slumped, tearing up slightly. "I saw the bow on the ground, and then I saw your horse…"

"I dodged an arrow right as I ordered her to rear up and smash a skull in," I explained. "Then I got separated because her desire to protect me nearly led to my own skull being kicked in." My pretty mare trotted up and nuzzled my cheek, as if to say 'I am so sorry'. "I'm fine, Sue. Remember, I'm not leaving you."

"Yes, I know." But it was another matter entirely to believe that. "Oh, yes, Dad's bow…"

"Thanks for snagging it." I checked my saddle for damage and, upon finding none, mounted up. "Feels wrong to hold it with so much blood on my hands."

"Dad killed more people."

"I meant literally, Sue." I laughed when her expression became a little sheepish. "Oh, how I love you so, my darling little sister."

"Just take the bow." She all but threw it at me. "It feels wrong for me to hold it. You're Dad's heir." Um… Sue? Sue, no one talked about who was 'heir' or not. …At least… I had never heard anyone… talk about it… "I'm…" Sue? "No, never mind. It's nothing to be concerned about."
"I somehow doubt that, but I will concede this is probably not the time." I was… really confused right now. What was said when I wasn't around? Had I unintentionally done something to hurt her? Oh, the very thought made my stomach turn. "So, get back to your position. I'm fine."

"Okay." She hesitated, though, and brought her horse alongside mine. "I know this is a battle, but can I hug you?"

"You can always hug me, Sue." I reached out and gave her the biggest one I could. "Don't mind the blood. Little of it is mine."

"Good." She squeezed back. "I love you, sister. I'll… talk later, when my thoughts are more sure."

"Then I will wait until you are ready." I pulled back, smiling warmly at her. "And I love you too, little sister. Let's get this place secure so we can share stories with Lilina."

"Yes." She nodded, giving me a slight smile, and rode off, rejoining Wolt and Dorothy to harry the enemy and make it all the easier for us to kill and capture them.

I looked over the field, taking note of everyone. I did a headcount, and confirmed that, yes, my earlier assessment was correct. Everyone was still alive. Somehow. I was really glad I had discussed and tweaked my strategy with Deke, Astore, and Marcus. It helped things run more smoothly.

A strange bit of calmness near one of the treasure rooms caught my attention, and I rode over to there to see what was going on. To my surprise, it was that girl again, the thief we met in Thria.. Roy was talking with her, again. It was clear, however, that this conversation was… well, it wasn't going well.

"We always had enough, just enough, to eat and survive…" I heard her growl as I rode up. "And then our marquess, who you claim taxed us in exchange for protection, burned our village down, and all the crops." That… "He needed to prepare for Bern's attacks, he said, so fwoosh! Up everything went! Our homes, our food, everything but what we happened to have on hand!"

"I…" Roy's voice shook so much with that single sound. "Miss, I'm…" he began, visibly groping for words.

"And you dare tell me to not steal from other people! Ha!" Her laughter was raucous and bitter, an ugly sound fitting for ugly hurts. "You noble bastards live up in your nest and just do whatever the hell you want, leaving us commoners to suffer!"

"I…" Oh, Roy… he looked like the ground gave out from under him. "That's…"

"Ugh, this sounds like one of those 'boohoo, pity me' arguments." She tugged roughly at her hair, eyes narrowed. "You started it, though." That sort of argument reminded me she was likely a young child. She didn't look older than Roy. Hell, I wasn't sure she was older than Lugh or Clarine. "Meh, enough of this. It's no fun sealing after a talk like this. Ta-ta!" She made to leave, but I noticed something. She was heading right for the thick of the fighting.

"Hey, child," I called. She whirled on me, eyes blazing despite her earlier lighthearted words. She was mad. She was hurt. So, I needed to change the conversation and get her to calm down. "How is your shoulder?"

"…It's fine," she murmured. She softened slightly. "Thanks for asking, but it's healing nicely."

"I'm glad to hear that." I pointed to the north. "If you're heading out, that way will get you clear of
As she ran off, Roy could only stare after her, eyes still wide from shock and horror. "Her own lord..." he breathed. "The person who was supposed to protect..." Oh, Roy... "Am I... I am such a child." His voice cracked, and he smiled at me wryly. "You must think I am so stupid, Irene, to be shocked by something like this."

"I think you are a kind child, Roy," I gently corrected. I looked over the room and noticed how things were calming. This would be a good time to... "A kind child who was raised to take his duties seriously. You are a knight's son, the son of a good noble during a time of peace. It's easy to be 'good' when everything is going well."

"It is during times of crisis that people's true nature gets revealed." Unfortunately, that meant we got to see a lot of ugliness in the world now. "I..."

"Roy, we still need to find Lilina before something happens to her."

"Right..." He brought a thunder tome out of his pack, looking at it. Why did he have that? Where did that even come from? We didn't have a chance to buy things prior to the fight in the city. "I hope... she's in a state to use this. She deserves to free her home herself."

"Where did that even come from?"

"The vendor in town. He asked that I give it to her, when he learned what we were doing." Ah, I see. Lilina, you were so well loved by everyone. Please, still be safe. "Irene, if Legance... if he's..."

"If he has harmed a single hair on her head, I will rip him apart, and you may watch." I reached over and ruffled his hair. Belatedly, I realized my hands were still bloodied, but he didn't seem to care. It was... eerie how well it blended with his hair. "The others have this area. Let's get Astore and try to find her."

"Yes."

Astore, Roy, and I raced through the secret passages of castle Ostia. I left my horse with the others, sacrificing the bit of speed to take some of the narrower and shorter passages, and I reluctantly allowed Allen to ride her because his own horse had strained something. Sue and Lance were keeping a close eye to make sure he didn't get himself or my mare killed.

"The location might have changed because of the fighting," Astore warned as we ran. I didn't bother to reply, just made sure Roy didn't trip or something. His night vision was atrocious and this passage was darker than night. "You two okay back there?"

"We're fine," Roy answered easily. Times like this reminded me that Roy actually had a remarkable stamina. Uncle Eliwood said he inherited from Aunt Ninian, and she agreed, but I wasn't so sure. I mean; Aunt Ninian was always so frail. Though, maybe she had a better stamina before the Campaign of Fire. "Are we close?"

"Yeah. This leads right next to it."

"May I ask why you didn't use this to get her out?"
"Too many guards for me to kill by myself and ensure Lady Lilina's safety." That made sense. "Here's the door."

"Okay." It opened easily, making me wonder if Astore had greased it or something to ensure it would, and we basically just went two doors down to the room where Lilina had been prisoner.

'Had' was the key word. There was no sign of her anywhere in the room. I recognized it as the room where Aunt Lyn and Mom would help Lilina, Sue, and me get ready for parties, chatting all the while as they braided our hair and made sure there were no tears in our clothes. It felt wrong that she'd been locked up here, and it felt even more wrong that she'd been locked up here and forced to dress up for a sham of a wedding.

"It doesn't look like it's been that long," Astore murmured, glancing around the room. He rested a hand on the seat of the vanity chair. "Still warm." Then, yeah, it couldn't have been long at all. The room was a mess too, suggesting Lilina had tried to avoid whoever had dragged her out. "There's another secret passage that leads out to the city a little further down. We can still catch them. Let's go!"

He and Roy bolted out the door instantly, but I lingered a bit, staring at the room. The wind practically wept as it floated through, wailing over how this fun place had been so… so violated. It made me scared to wonder… no, Lilina was fine. She had to be.

If she wasn't, then Legance was going to learn very quickly just why you don't anger a wolf.

I tore myself from the room and followed Astore and Roy down the hall. They were far ahead, but I could catch up easily. But when they rounded a corner and stopped, I slowed down, focusing much more on ensuring my footsteps were quiet, drawing an arrow from my quiver as I reached the corner and peered around.

There was Legance and Lilina. We found them. But, just as I feared, he was using her as a human shield, a sword to her throat. Oh, Father Sky…

"Put the weapons down," he growled, snarling. There was a smugness in his eyes as he pressed the sword a little closer to Lilina's throat, actually nicking her. "If you want her to live, put your weapons down!" Slowly and carefully, Roy and Astore obeyed, clearly setting down all the weapons. Roy made sure the thunder tome was by his foot, just in case. I hesitated to do the same, most because… "Good, good. We know who's in command now." He couldn't see me. I was just out of his sight, or perhaps he simply saw my hair and thought that a Sacaean wasn't worth notice. "Now, on your knees."

"Why are you doing this?" Roy asked, even as he did as Legance instructed, still careful to keep the thunder tome near his dominant hand. Astore followed half a second later, tense enough to shake. "You always served so faithfully."

"Times are changing, and I'm just making sure I don't get left behind. I'm not like Lord Hector, too foolish to recognize the change." My grip on my bow tightened, and I drew an arrow to aim. How dare he…! "That's all there is to it." Wait, no, temper. Temper. I could hit Lilina instead. No matter how angry I got, it was worthless if it got someone innocent hurt. That's what Aunt Lyn always said. I would die before I hurt Lilina. "You know the power of Bern. Why do you fight?"

"…Invincibility is an illusion, a lie made up by children." Roy's eyes were pained and harsh. I knew he was thinking of Uncle Hector and Oswin. "We've proven that by conquering Ostia."

"And I will enjoy ousting you out of my castle." I almost shot right then, seeing red, but I checked
myself in time. I could hit Lilina. If I missed, I could hit Lilina, and I... I... "So, you sit there like a
good little lord and his pet thief while I go and make things official with my new wife." Damn it...
he was going to get away, and I could shoot, but Father Sky, if I missed, if I was off by even one
hair...!

I almost gave up, but then I realized Lilina had seen me. She was looking right at me. I was not out
of her sight, and I was not beneath notice to her. I saw her mouthing words to me, and while I
could not read her lips, I still knew what she was saying. I saw them in her eyes, and I heard them
on the wind fluttering through.

'I trust you. Shoot.'

So, I took a deep breath in, pulled back the arrow, and let it fly as I exhaled.

It caught him right at the bottom of his neck, where there was only cloth and no armor to bounce
off of. He screamed in pain, jerking back automatically. The sword sliced across Lilina, but even as
the blood dotted her dress, she was already lunging forward, reaching out. Roy slid the thunder
tome to her, and by the time Legance righted himself, eyes blazing with fury, she already had a
spell prepped.

"Legance...!" she hissed, the air sparking around her. In that moment, she was not a girl, a hostage.
She was the Duchess of Ostia, and the incarnation of Father Sky's wrath. "How dare you do this to
your own home?" Magic cracked the floor around her. "I am Lilina, daughter of Hector of Ostia
and Lyndis of the Lorca and Caelin, and I will not suffer your presence in my castle any longer!"

She threw the spell at him, the thunder magic lighting up the air. It hit him with enough force to
actually lift him up in the air, sending him crashing out the window, shattered glass plinking down
in the silence that followed. Carefully, I walked over to that window and looked down. All I saw
below was a big red splat.

Well, if the spell hadn't killed him, the fall definitely did.

"Lilina!" I turned and smiled as Roy threw his arms around Lilina, clinging to her tightly. "You're
okay!" he said, eyes misting over with relieved tears. "You're okay. Oh, wait, your injuries!"

"They hurt, but I think they're already scabbing," Lilina reassured. She had a blush on her face, and
I thought about teasing, but decided against it. I was too relieved to see her all right to tease her.
"Astore, you led them to me, didn't you?"

"I did, Lady Lilina," Astore confirmed. He was still kneeling, but it was clear that he didn't mind
kneeling to her. "I'm relieved to see you're well."

"I'm just glad to see familiar faces. It's been very trying." She hesitated before adding, "Um... do
you know where my mother is?"

"By my understanding, Lady Lyndis was poisoned, but she will recover. Lord Matthew protected
her from Legance, and Lady Serra tends to her. Lady Florina, Lord Lucius, and Lord Raven guard
her, and the city, right now."

"Oh, Uncle Lucius and Uncle Raven were supposed to take a break. Mother found out they never
got around to taking a honeymoon after they wed." It could be that they didn't want to draw
attention to themselves. It had been a quiet wedding. Fun, though. It was one of my first memories.
"I must make it up to them."

"Your smile alone will do that." True. "With your permission, I will inform the others that you are
safe and Legance is dead."

"Yes, please do. And Astore, thank you again!" She waved him goodbye as he ran off, and slumped. "Oh, goodness, I am tired."

"You must have been scared," I murmured, running a hand over her hair. Now that I was paying attention, she… really did look pretty all dressed up. She wore a dress of silvers, creams, and whites, with lace over the skirt, and ribbons on the hems. The silver, jeweled headband looked nice in her hair. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, no, don't be sorry," she replied. Her smile was warm. "Besides, I wasn't really all that scared." Oh? "I knew I'd be okay. I heard it on the wind, you know? I heard Father reassuring me that you all would come save me." Uncle Hector… "Though, it really confuses me. I'm glad he didn't have to go through the trouble, but I would have liked to see him come to the rescue. It would've been funny seeing him fight Legance." Any good cheer I had faded away when I realized something horrible. "Not that I'm not grateful, of course. I'm so glad to see you two. My knights in shining armor!" Lilina… she didn't know… "Though, neither of you are very armored, but that doesn't matter."

"Lilina, have you not heard?" Roy asked slowly. His eyes were wide. "Have you not heard about Araphan?"

"No?" She tilted her head curiously. "There was a missive, but Mom collapsed not long after receiving it, and then Legance launched his rebellion not too long afterwards. I've heard nothing since." So, Legance hadn't… was that a mercy? A point of consideration? Or had he been planning on telling her after making her hope, as a means of breaking her? "Why? What happened?"

"…Uncle Hector… was killed, Lilina." Lilina froze at the words, and I saw her world breaking in her eyes. "Lord Orun… is also dead, killed by an assassin. We were… we were too late to save either of them."

"I… I see." Her voice shook and her head drooped. "I… I was prepared… for something like this." Lilina… "I am the daughter of warriors. I know… I know they might not come back." She forced a smile. "D-don't worry about me, okay? I can be strong too."

"Lilina…" Roy reached for her. "I'm…"

But she took a step back, breathing in deeply. "Later, Roy." Her voice evened out, but her eyes still shimmered with unshed tears. "Later, give me a hug, and let me wail." Lilina… "My people… I rule them. I have to…"

"…Bernese soldiers are likely on their way." It broke my heart to see them have to swallow their pain for duty. They were both just fifteen. They should be allowed to be children a little longer. "We contacted Etruria for assistance."

"I see." The words shook again, but she shook her head almost violently, nearly making her earrings fly out of her ears. I knew those earrings. Aunt Lyn had apparently worn them for her wedding, a gift from her grandfather. Something that had been in the family for generations, but that he had withheld from Aunt Lyn's mom when she eloped. Probably a good thing, considering what happened to the Lorca. "We need to move the civilians inside the castle. It's much safer than being out in the open." Yes… "Was there any messages from Father? Something I would need to do?"

"There was something about you knowing where a weapon is?" Roy shrugged. "He mentioned
"Oh, Durandel. Yes, I know where the cave is." Durandel? The Divine Weapon Roland used? "If Bern is fighting with dragons, then they are going to be after that, if only to protect themselves."

"Not to mention the morale boost it would give the troops," I sighed, brushing my hair behind my ear. I noticed how much my hand shook, and bit back a grimace. I was still absolutely terrified. All the things that could have happened when I shot floated through my head. "Well, that's where we go. Lilina, you want to change?"

"No, there really isn't enough time," she replied. She shrugged. "Besides, isn't it very proper for a lady to fight in a fairy tale wedding dress?" The words were said so lightly that I couldn't help but laugh, and Roy soon joined in. "Um… though, if I could address the troops and thank them for saving me, I'd like that."

I think they would too. "Yeah, come on. We'll show you the way, and we'll get a healer to tend to your injury before you collapse. I want it confirmed that it is going to be fine, even if I can see the scabbing."

"Okay." She casually took Roy's hand and mine, squeezing them gently. "Thank you, for coming to save me. I'm glad we're friends, and I'm glad you're both alive."

"Of course, Lilina. We will never leave you." So I swear. "Let's go address the troops, and then snag that sword before the Bernese come. Oh, and make sure you say 'hi' to Sue. She's been worried."

"Sue's here too?" Lilina laughed, and it almost sounded real. "Yay! We're all together! We'll be fine." So I hoped. So I hoped and prayed.

Notes on Treck

- Carefree, laidback Ilian mercenary, one of the squad leaders. He's… I think even those who meditate often will think he's too calm.
- Despite frequent bouts of sleeping on the field, he not only survives, but fights well.
- Insanely lucky, seems rather balanced everywhere else. I can't see him surpassing Allen or Lance anytime soon, but it's clear he'll be a valuable member.
- His affinity is wind.

Notes on Noah

- A rather aloof person, but I think it might be from an unconscious fear of getting close to people. I bet it's because he grew up in Ilia. Things seem harsh there.
- He's rather close to Zealot, and I gather he is also close to Zealot's wife, Juno. I think the two see him as part of the family, like Zealot's little brother.
- I think he's the only cavalier we've got that specializes in swords over lances. Balanced like Treck, though I think he'll be able to take a hit and keep going easily.
- His affinity is anima. Like Grandpa. …Father Sky, please let him be okay…

Notes on Astore

- Spy and assassin for House Ostia, and is clearly highly loyal to the house, and to Uncle Hector and Lilina in particular.
- Fast, defensive, and skilled, it's clear he's trained for a long while. I'm not sure how good he is at direct combat, but assassin's don't have to be.
There's some old pain in his eyes, and I've seen him play with what looks to be a wedding ring when he thinks no one is looking. I've a feeling he sacrificed a lot for his duty.

Affinity is dark, like Dad's. ...Father Sky, can you not give me some news about him?

Notes on Barth

Well respected and well revered knight of Ostia, who Oswin was considering to make his successor when he retired. Possibly because he helped train them, he works well with Bors and Wendy.

Calm and serious, who holds nothing back when he scolds. Which means I'll be avoiding him because the last thing I need is someone else scolding me. I get enough of that with my own head.

Powerful and strong, but is very much the definition of a stereotypical Ostian knight. Defensive, and not fast.

His affinity is ice.

Notes on Wendy

One of the few female armor knights in Ostia's army, and very much still in training. I think she just swore her oaths when all this hell started. Oh, and she's Bors's younger sister.

That said, I think she has a lot of potential. If we can manage to train her up, she could be a good unit.

She has a cute little rivalry with Ogier, that's very friendly. ...I'm wondering if they might be a good couple as well. Would I get in trouble for matchmaking my soldiers?

Her affinity is fire.

Notes on Ogier

A former mercenary who joined Ostia to help his family. Grew up in intense poverty from my understanding. How sad... I know Uncle Hector tried hard to fix that... he was preparing some laws before the war...

Anyway, he's a reserved person, shy and overly respectful, who is very kind and moral. Really, I'm glad he joined the army instead of becoming a straight-up mercenary. He's too kind for that sort of life.

He fights similarly to Deke, so I think I'm going to throw him at Deke for training. Balanced, and maybe a little faster, though he best stick with swords, with that build.

His affinity is wind.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: All right, Ostia is liberated, and Lilina is rescued. She technically joins in this chapter in game, but I'm moving Irene's notes on her to next chapter. If Roy talks to her in game, he gives her a thunder tome out of nowhere, so yay, free thunder tome. Treck and Noah joined last chapter, but Irene met them here, so their notes are here. Astore having a scar on his leg that partially cripples him comes from his supports with Wendy. Based on how he hesitated in that support, though, and his supports with Igrene where there's a mention of it, I'm pretty sure the story about it being an injury from a botched mission involving Bernese castle is a lie.

Assassins don't exist in FE6, but since I'm working from FE7, I'm sliding them in.
Mostly just Astore though, as he's a professional spy, unlike Chad. This is the second map you can potentially talk to Cath. In game, the most reliable way to kill Legance (who is a general, on a throne, with a good speed stat, in FE6 where hit rates HATE YOU and thrones give +30 to avoid and, seriously, FE5 and FE6 is just a long string of 'I really hates the player') is to utilize the triangle attack between the three armored units, because not only is it a guaranteed crit, but it's a guaranteed hit (though, if you use this strategy, be careful because Legance can one-round Wendy on normal). Since I didn't have to worry about such BS, though, I had Lilina showcase her magic skills. Speaking of Lilina, fun fact, in my playthrough to check over the map, Lilina's first level up was speed and defense. Clearly, my game knew who her parents were. (Also, to have an idea of how ridiculous that is, her defense growth is 10%, her speed is 35%, and her magic [which I had been expecting] is 75%.)

An interesting thing about the gaiden chapters, but since they're required to reach the 'good/true' ending of the game, you don't get a prompt to whether or not you want to go, like in FE7 or FE8. You just roll right into them so long as you fulfilled the requirements. The first one is, of course, the easiest.

Next Chapter – The Blazing Blade
Chapter 8x) The Blazing Blade

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 8x) The Blazing Blade

*Uncle Hector's words are revealed at last. He wanted us to obtain Durandel, the legendary weapon. With rumors of dragons among Bernese forces, it's definitely for the best. Even if these dragons are somehow exaggerated, the morale boost of having a Divine Weapon is indescribable. And the potential loss of it is enough to make may shake.

I just hope things go smoothly? Uncle Lucius looked almost frightened when we told him where we were going, and Marcus made Roy swear to not get too close. Was there some sort of secret involving this sword?*

We only brought a handful of us for this. Rutger, Clarine, Lugh, Chad, Sue, Roy, Lilina, and me. The rest were prepping for the coming attack, such as moving the civilians into the castle for protection, just in case Etruria didn't arrive in time. However, there was one little complaint about all of this. It was minor, of course. …Actually, no, it wasn't really.

"It's so damn hot," I complained. This was not helped by the fact that I was wearing pants and boots. "I think my necklaces are melting into my skin." They weren't really, of course. I'd probably cry if they were. "Sue, I'm just imagining my ears are blistering, right?"

"Yes, though they are red," Sue answered. She had removed her headband in an attempt to cool her head a bit, so her hair clung awkwardly to her face and neck. "The horses…"

"I just checked the hooves. They're doing no worse than us." I think we should have brought more water, though. "You okay?"

"I'm wondering if bringing in Etruria is really going to help." Sue… "I do not… want to see another slaughter, Irene." Yeah… "I do not want Ostia to share Bulgar's fate."

"Narcian is a coward. I doubt he'll want to fight Etruria even if his life was on the line." She still looked uneasy, though, so I went for a distraction. "This cave reminds me of one of the stories Mom told us."

"Oh, yes, about the dragon and the prince." Sue smiled slightly. "It had a surprisingly happy ending. I was certain it would be tragic when the prince accidentally killed the dragon, not knowing she was the woman he loved."

"But a sorcerer heard his pleas, and brought her back since the prince had worked so hard to save the world." I had loved the story. Uncle Eliwood and Aunt Ninian had always gotten strange looks on their faces when Mom told it to us. Dad always looked like he was about to laugh. "The setting of the kill was a cave of fire, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was. But that's a story." Yes. "...It's still nice to remember, though. I miss them."

"I know. We're going to cling to them so much when we see them again."
"Yes, and we'll make them tell us stories."

"Maybe we'll even finally get out of Dad just when, how, and why he fell in love with Mom."

"Or the same questions from Mom about Dad." Hee~ "I feel better now."

"I'm glad." Laughing softly, I gave her a quick hug, and then checked over the others. Rutger seemed completely fine, despite wearing long sleeves, and Clarine was clearly focused on staying on her horse, using a handkerchief to try and keep the sweat off her. I smiled when I noticed Chad giving Lugh some shoes, and wondered where they might have come from. Wherever it was, Chad seemed embarrassed, and Lugh seemed grateful.

Noticing Roy and Lilina had paused up ahead, I gave Sue a smile and rode up to meet them. They both smiled when they saw me. Lilina's would-be-wedding dress was already turning grey from the ash, adding an almost eerie look with the patches of blood. Her injury, thankfully, had been easily healed. Guinevere had tended to her herself.

"You can see the shrine from here," Lilina told me, pointing in the distance. The shrine itself looked… it reminded me of the Shrine to the Mani Katti. I wondered if they had been built at around the same time. "Across the flaming crevice."

Yes, it was. "So, why is it a flaming crevice?" I asked dryly. This was ridiculous. Did Roland want to hide Durandel for some reason? Why?

"They say that some of the warriors during the Scouring hide here while the dragons attacked Castle Ostia." Lilina paused. "Well, it wasn't Ostia back then." Of course. "Anyway, the crevice apparently is the result of some pits dug during that time. They destabilized the ground and it fell below, into the flames that are a natural part of the environment here."

"Well, that was smart." What did they fight here to require such… unconventional tactics? Was this place large enough for a dragon? "Oh, look, there's movement up ahead."

"It might be bandits." …Bandits. "Father got word of some setting up here prior to hearing about Bern." Of course there were bandits. Why wouldn't there be bandits? It wasn't like this was a cave hiding a legendary weapon, and a place where the air itself was so hot I felt like my lungs were on fire.

"I suppose Bern took priority," Roy murmured. He roughly wiped his face with his cape. "Will bandits have stolen the blade?"

"No, I don't think so," Lilina reassured with a smile. "Father and Mother always said the sword has its own means to protect itself." What sort of spirit slept inside a legendary weapon, I wonder? "Roy, are you okay? I know you don't take well to heat." He did look a little pale.

"Yeah, I inherited that from Mother, apparently." He shook his head. "That said, I am… mostly fine?" Lilina and I both gave him looks in reply. "It's… difficult to explain." He sighed, closing his eyes. "I just feel uneasy, here. There's just something off here. I swear I can hear crying." Crying? I couldn't hear anything, though. "Uncle Hector, Aunt Lyn, and Father… and others too. I feel like I can hear them crying."

Noting how unnerved he looked, I closed my eyes and listened. After a moment, I noticed there was… something. "The wind does not flow through here easily," I murmured. For the first time in my life, I felt cut off from Father Sky. "There is blood in the soil. Ancient blood, and blood not quite as old. Mother Earth holds onto those tragedies, never forgetting, and She tries to warn." I
opened my eyes again, looking at Roy. "I think you're feeling it. Though, I do think the 'crying' is more of a…"

"It's probably more of me latching onto a familiar sound," Roy finished. I nodded and he sighed. "True. I mean; why would I hear any of them crying? Especially now." Right… "Still, I don't hear Mother Earth like you, Lilina, and Sue."

"No, but you have always have a keen sixth sense, like Aunt Ninian."

"Right, Mother could practically predict the future, somehow." Roy smiled slightly. "Haha, maybe it's her way of helping me."

"It could be." I shook my head. "You two go talk with Sue. She can always hear Mother Earth clearer than I. I looked around the area, eyes narrowed. "For now, I'm going to get us through this, okay?"

"Thank you, Irene."

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The bandits attacked us almost as soon as they saw us, though some actually held their ground, baiting us into moving forward into rather poor traps involving fire and pits and pain. This was just maddening, really. I was so done with fighting for the day, and I never wanted to fight in the heat again. I could easily see why Uncle Douglas always said that heat killed more than weapons during campaigns. Father Sky, a cool wind would be so nice right now.

At least the others were getting some experience in fighting. If the heat didn't kill us first, that experience would be useful.

I grit my teeth as arrows rained down. The focus of them was Clarine, but she dodged most of them easily. She did have to duck her head as once flew past her face, and her hair fluttered down as that arrow took her hair ribbon as its prize. I expected her to pitch a fit, but she kept on riding without even looking back.

…I wasn't used to a meek Clarine, and I wasn't sure if I liked it. But perhaps she had just reorganized her priorities. After all, she rode to Chad's side to heal him, and only then did she seem to even notice her hair was down.

"Keep pressing forward!" I yelled. My throat strained at the force, dried out by the heat. I never wanted to fight in a place so hot again. "We're almost there!" In fact, we were basically here. I could see the sword resting on a pedestal, almost glittering in the pale firelight.

There were some problems, though. Guarding the pedestal was the bandit leader, who was fast. The leader was stupidly fast, almost as fast as a Sacaean. Thankfully, he also seemed to have some heavy weapons, so his speed was mitigated by it, but you have got to be kidding me. Was he a former soldier or something? Why was a bandit so skilled?

Not even wanting to deal with it, I just sent Rutger and Sue to harry him while Lugh and Lilina prepped a giant fireball to engulf him. It made things easier, and Lugh's skill helped keep Lilina's magic from spinning too out of control and catching us in it too.

As the ashes fell, Lilina darted to the shrine, unafraid of the fire lingering in the dust. When I saw her struggle to pick up the sword, I went to help her. It was surprisingly heavy, but I wondered if it was only so heavy because the spirit hiding within had judged us unworthy.

"So, this is Durandel?" Roy asked. He peered at the sword with curious eyes, smiling slightly.
"Wow…" Lilina and I exchanged an amused look over his head. "But is it really so heavy? Can any of us wield it?"

"The legends state that while Roland was the primary user, others could use it as well," Lilina noted. She laughed a little. "I imagine that a swordsman of sufficient skill can wield it without problem." Yes, I think this weapon was forged by a similar hand as Rienfleche. The spirits weakened the weapon until the wielder had the skill to properly handle it.

"So, if I improve my swordsmanship, I will be able to use it as well?"

"Well, maybe."

"Just maybe?" Roy made a face, and Lilina laughed. "At least say 'probably'!" Lilina simply laughed some more, and Roy smiled softly. "You laughed. I'm glad." Lilina's face went red at that. "A-ah! Are you all right? Do you need anything? Water?" Of course he mistook it. Ah, Roy, I love you, but sometimes…

"No, I don't need anything." Lilina's voice was squeaky. "I'm fine."

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine." Lilina shook her head. "Thanks for worrying, but I'll be fine. I promise."

"Well, if you're sure..." Roy sighed. "But if there's anything you need, tell me, okay?"

"Okay." Lilina glanced at the sword. "What should we do with this?"

"I'm going to see if Rutger has the skill to make the sword accept him," I explained, hefting it up and letting it rest against my shoulder. I wasn't sure if it was just because it was in a hot place, or if it was inherent in the sword, but it was strangely warm. "You two just take a moment to rest, okay?"

"Chad went to go check the entrance," Lugh explained through a yawn. He rubbed his eyes sleepily. "Sorry, I'm tired."

"I know, Lugh," I replied. I gave him a quick hug, ruffling his hair. "Hopefully, we can all have a long nap and bath after this."

"Mmhmm…" Oh, dear, he was barely on his feet.

"Go help Sue, okay?"

"K…" He yawned again and toddled off towards her. She looked confused for a moment, but shrugged and just let him sleepy help her. Laughing a little, I continued looking for Rutger, and hoped to find Clarine too.

I found them both at the same time, actually. He was standing in front of her, and though his expression was stoic, I could tell he was trying to figure out what to say to her. Finally, though, he seemed to just give up, and pulled something out of his pocket: a purple ribbon, not even marred by ash. That… was the ribbon Clarine lost earlier. He had caught it?

"Oh, my ribbon…" she murmured, taking it from him. She held it tightly, bowing her head slightly. "Thank you…" He simply remained silent and she laughed bitterly. "I just realized. I never even
thanked you for saving me. It is no wonder you don't like me..." She shook her head, and curtseyed. "I thank you for rescuing me in my time of need." Her voice was so soft. "I still do not understand the danger I was in, but I do understand it was very great. I need only to look at how angry Irene is, still, at that turkey of a man who bruised my arm." ...Turkey? "I know it is far overdue, but I do hope you will accept my thanks."

Rutger remained silent for a long moment before shaking his head. "That's not like you," he told her bluntly. It was enough to make her jerk her head up, eyes wide. "Don't try to be someone you're not. Quiet and meek and all." Well, I now felt like laughing, for some reason. This was amusing. "You're good at screaming, so stick with that."

"Excuse me?!" Her yelp echoed through the area, making me snicker. "Wh-what do you mean by that?!" Well, considering you were yelling right now, Clarine...

"That's it..." To my complete shock, Rutger smiled at her. It was a small smile, a little broken, teetering on his face like he couldn't believe he was smiling either. But it was one. It was a very real smile. "Give me your company once in a while, Clarine. Make me smile. It seems, despite what I thought, I do still remember how."

"Rutger..."

"Just be as you are. You're fine." ...I... wanted to matchmake them. Could I do that? Would I get in trouble, doing that? Hmm...

"Lady Irene!" Shaking my head, I turned at Chad's call, and noticed his eyes were wide, hands shaking, as he ran up. "Bern is here," he reported. I grit my teeth. I had hoped for a bit more time. "We need to get going."

"I think there's a way to sneak around back," I replied. Lilina might know it... "Get everyone rounded up. Now!"

Lilina did know it, so we made it inside the castle easily, and ran to join the others on the ramparts to meet the enemy as they approached. The wyvern knights were so numerous; they almost blotted out the skies. This was... going to be very interesting.

"Lady Irene!" Shanna landed her pegasus next to me in a flurry of wind and feather. "Lady Irene, Etruria is almost here," she told me, breath uneven. She must have been flying a lot, checking every other second. "We just need..." We just need a little more time. "I've informed Captain Florina, and she is telling the others." I glanced over and saw Aunt Florina whisper something into Roy's ear as he walked up with Lilina, the two of them taking 'center stage' for this. Sue followed them for reassurance. "But..." But we needed the time for this plan to work. That was the issue. I could see Narcian's stupid smug face from here, and my skin crawled.

I bit my lip, thinking rapidly. We could probably hold them off with Uncle Lucius, Uncle Raven, and Aunt Florina, but I wanted to hide their weapons. I had no idea if Bern knew of them or not, but they would be powerful trump cards if they didn't. Etruria was close as well, and I definitely didn't want Etruria to know about these weapons. Mom had always been very careful at who she told. I wasn't sure if she had even told Uncle Douglas, who she trusted so much.

We needed to buy time without their assistance. I... knew of a way to do that. I just had to play on his arrogance, his narcissism, and that inferiority complex Guinevere mentioned. I could do that. More importantly, out of everyone here, I had the greatest chance of pulling off a gamble like this, thanks to Araphan.
I wasn't sure if I was grateful for that or not. But, I knew it was the best strategy given everything we needed to accomplish in this brief moment. So, I smiled at Shanna, urged her to join the others, and walked a short distance away, bringing my bow up to aim. It wasn't hard. My target, Narcian, had flown right to sneer down at Roy and the others.

"Are you little Roy?" he asked, voice dripping like too sweet, poisoned honey. Disgusting. "My what a nuisance you are, but I simply must thank you for dealing that that idiot Legance for me." He held a spear in his right hand, and there was a sword buckled to his left hip. He was right handed. Thankfully, that was the side closest to me. "Now, leave Ostia to me, and we can all go home with our limbs attached, yes?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Roy instantly retorted. I was proud at how little he hesitated, since I knew he was afraid. Even when surrounded by so many allies, I knew he was afraid. "Who would give Ostia to the likes of you, anyway?" I love you, Roy.

"Oh?" Narcian laughed, and it sounded so fake that I almost laughed myself. "So, you intend to fight with that sad little group of yours?" I ground my teeth, forcing myself to keep steady. I would only get one shot, so this needed to aim this just right. "That's fine by me." I almost had it. "I will cut you open, just as I did to Hector!" LIAR! I loosed the arrow, smiling as it slammed into his arm. "Zephiel was the one who killed Uncle Hector," I declared firmly, letting my voice carrying on the wind. I ignored the flabbergasted looks the others gave me. I was running a gamble that I could not afford to lose. "Even then, he landed a crippling injury to your king, so great that he had to retreat to Bern!" Narcian turned towards me, eyes wide. "Oh, hello again, I seem to have misplaced my arrow in your arm. Again." He was shaking. I almost had him. "You're nowhere near as good as you think you are, if I can catch you off-guard twice." He shifted his wyvern to face me, ignoring Roy as he shifted his spear to his other hand. I guessed he was best with swords, and figured he would not 'degrade' himself to using his best weapon. "Though, I suppose that's no surprise. You couldn't even get the title of Wyvern General through your own merit. You had to utilize the prejudice Bern has against Sacaeans to remove your betters!"

"I am ten times the person Galle is!" Well, I had him. He was flying for me now. "Know your place, you filthy, maggot ridden savage!" So, he thought I was the walking dead or something? I suppose that was rather neat.

Still, even with an injury, and possibly a weaker arm, his lunge almost hit me. Really, if I hadn't already been moving out of the way, he probably would have gotten me. In the few seconds I had before he darted away, I took note of where everything was, and jumped up, swinging onto the wyvern behind him.

The wyvern, not liking an extra rider, started to thrash, knocking Narcian off-balance. I took advantage of that to hook my arms around him and twist, dragging him out of the saddle with me as we fell. I noted our trajectory and flipped him, throwing him towards the ground and getting him to fall on his wounded arm.

I kicked off him, twisting again to bleed off some momentum before I hit the ground too. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite enough. A shark crack followed by a wave of tear-inducing pain told me what happened even before the shock caught up and let my brain put the pieces together. I had broken my arm. I had really broken my arm, since I could see it jutting out through the skin.

Well, this sucked.

"You… you dare…!" I forced myself up as Narcian limped towards me. The right side of his body
was bloody, and I think his arm was broken too at this point. But he limped towards me, spear raised threatening. "You dare mar me?!" he growled, lunging forward. I dodged the strike to my leg, but grimaced as he caught my side. Oh, this was going to be bad in a few seconds. "I will show you your place, one agonizing second at a time!"

"What? Are you going to keep talking to me?" I asked dryly. How much more time did I need to buy? Knowing the normal pace, I didn't think it was much. "I can guarantee you that listening to your voice is the highest form of torture." Honestly, it was probably a couple more seconds, providing Shanna's version of 'close' was anywhere near my meaning. "Though, looking at your face is a pretty close second."

"Die!" Oh, now how was he going to torture me if he killed me in one strike? Idiot. "Die, die, die!" Arrogance always did breed fools. That was how I could pull something like this. "Die!"

The spear stopped just a hairsbreadth from my stomach as the wind swirled and churned, sharpening into razor sharp blades. "I love breaking it to you, but I just beat you." This was great. I loved this. The look on his face, of utter horror, was the best thing ever. "Idiot."

"Well, well, what do we have here?" A calm, lilting voice drifted on the wind, accompanied by the sound of hooves. "Desist at once, General Narcian." I glanced up, and smiled when I saw the familiar face, and the even more familiar sight of her green hair fluttering in the wind as she called on her Aircalibur tome. "Or don't. I won't mind getting rid of a buzzing fly right now." Cecilia, I love you.

The sound of hooves beating on the stone paths caught my ear, and I turned to smile as I realized it wasn't just Cecilia to the rescue. I held out my hand to Perceval as he passed and he easily dragged me into the saddle behind him, getting me safely out of range of Narcian.

"My knight in shining armor," I teased, resting my forehead against his back. I knew he was smiling, even if he didn't say a word. "Before you say anything about recklessness, I knew you guys were almost here." The wind died down, telling me Cecilia had never meant to cast the spell. She had just prepped it just in case it was the only way to keep me safe. "I just needed a little more time."

"Then I won't say a word," he murmured. I heard him unsheathe his sword, readying for a fight. "Except that it is good to see you again, Irene. It's been a bit."

"Yeah, it has. I looked around him, and saw Cecilia ride to our side. "Hey, you're slow."

"I'm sorry, Irene," Cecilia whispered. Her eyes were soft, and pained. "I tried to get things moving as fast as I could." I knew. I just had to tease. So, I smiled to let her know it was okay. "Are Roy and Lilina fine?" I nodded, and she breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank goodness." She shook her head, serious again. "Well, we are here now, and that Narcian fellow looks like he swallowed a live fish." That he did. This was great.

"What are you lot doing here?!!" Narcian yelped. He looked so offended and he also looked like he was about to wet his pants from fear. This was fantastic. I loved this. "This is Lycia, not…" He tightened his grip on his spear. "What are you doing?!!"

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," Perceval replied, stoic expression turning the polite greeting into a jab. He shifted slightly, to make sure that if Narcian did throw his spear, it would not hit me. He was as protective as always. "I am Knight General Perceval of House Caliburn." He paused a brief moment, just long enough for Narcian's eyes to widen. "Mage General Cecelia of Eir informed us that Ostia requested Etruria's protection." He paused again, but I think this time, it was
Narcian's face was turning purple. "In accordance to the good relations we have, and wish to continue to have, we have answered. Ostia is our protectorate. Attacking it is the same as attacking Etruria."

"We are prepared for battle, if you wish to try that, though," Cecilia added easily, with a kind smile. She held up her tome with the clear implication. She would use it again, and this time, she would not call it back. "Though, I do warn. We are only the first front." She gestured to the other Etrurian soldiers gathering in the streets. There... were a lot more than I expected. "House Hanover has its armies preparing to cross the mountains as we speak, in defense of the land Count Hanover's younger sister loves dearly, and in defense of his niece who asked him for help." She gave me a warm smile, and I knew why. It was telling Narcian who I was, who I was related to. "Caerleon and Reglay are not far behind them." I remembered that in my letter, I mentioned Clarine was here, so I knew that was how Uncle Pent got his army moving so quickly. I wondered if Uncle Raven asked Aunt Priscilla for aid, since Caerleon was also moving quickly. Even if Aunt Priscilla was only Caerleon by adoption, the house did consider Uncle Raven as part of the family too. "Will your army stand a chance against such numbers, and the defensive might of Castle Ostia? It withstood dragons during the Scouring, after all."

Narcian's face purpled even further before he barked, "we're leaving!" Haha! Success! "You three..." His voice was a growl and he was shaking. "You should watch your backs from now on!"

"I am absolutely terrified," Perceval deadpanned. It made me laugh, though I leaned forward to muffle it in his back. "Have a pleasant ride back. I understand Bern has been burdened by unusually strong storms as of late." Father Sky was delivering his revenge for their attack on the Sky Festival.

"Bah!" They were off. They just turned and left. I could tell the Etrurian soldiers were almost disappointed. I, however, was relieved. It was much better to not have to fight at all.

"Well, that worked out nicely," Cecelia murmured. She rode a little closer, and tugged her staff out from the holder she had on her saddle. "Irene, I'll heal you, but your arm..."

"You have to set it first, don't you?" I groaned. At her nod, I just hid my face in Pervecal's shoulder, like I always did when I had to deal with a painful healing. Big brothers were good for that. "Go ahead."

"Okay." My vision grayed as she took my arm, so I just closed my eyes. "On three. One... two... three..." Even with the warning, I still almost passed out. "One more, Irene." Seriously? "One... two... three..." I wished I had passed out that time. "Okay, just hold on a little longer." The gentle light of a healing staff danced in the corner of my eye, and the pain dulled enough for me to whimper. "There we go." The light washed over me, focusing on my other injuries. "Now, let this be a lesson!"

"Don't got breaking my arm," I groaned, straightening. I was definitely swaying. "I never want to get so close to fainting, and not." I felt dizzy and sick. "I think I need to get down."

"Here," Perceval murmured. He dismounted first and then helped me down easily. "Sue is going to kill you." That... that she was. I think everyone was, actually. At least I had logic behind me this time, unlike the last time I broke my arm. "Will she be able to continue archery?"

"Yes," Cecelia reassured. She smiled up at me warmly. "Though, I would recommend doing only light exercises for a week or so, and get checked before doing anything more." Yes... "You now also have... another scar." I glanced down and noticed I did have one. It almost looked like a star. "Irene, where did the one on our face come from?"... Ahaha... ha... Oh, there was no way I was
telling her! "Irene~" I squeaked at her scarily calm smile and ducked behind Perceval.

"Cecelia, is now the time?" Perceval shrugged off Cecelia's stern look. He was always the more indulgent of the two when it came to us younger ones. Cecelia handled the lectures. "I think your former student is running here." Oh, Roy was coming up. A quick glance above told me the others were dispersing, though the looks on Uncle Lucius and Uncle Raven's faces promised far scarier lectures than Cecelia's. Well, at least we were alive for me to receive them.

"I'm glad to see you," Roy greeted. He looked a little… frazzled. "Ah, sorry, that could have ended so badly." Yes. Yes, it could.

"Nervous, were you?" Cecelia gently teased, smiling at him. "How are you doing? You look tired, but…"

"I'm fine, Miss Cecelia." Roy returned the smile warmly. "Thanks to Etruria, we averted disaster."

"There's really no reason to thank us. It's beneficial for Etruria, after all." Was it? "Bern's… well, this whole thing has been reproachable. We have been desperately wanting to do something, but could not without being directly invaded." Cecilia shook her head, crossing her arms. "I imagine that's why Bern did not come after us, even though we are in a weakened state." Ah, yes, that did make sense. Even with Etruria weakened, its army had many advantages. Zephiel would have to try other means besides direct assault to conquer Etruria. "But Ostia's plea let us respond with our declaration." She sighed. "If only our relations with Ilia and the Sacae were as strong. It took forever to get the King to agree even with such a good relationship with Lycia."

"Then you yelled and bluntly told the king that if he didn't give authorization, you would do so without his permission," Perceval sighed. He gave her a droll look. "If Lord Mark, Lord Pent, and Lord Jacob had not thrown in their weight then…" Wait, what about-? "Since your brother was away on his estate." Ah, that explained it. I suppose Perceval could have done the same, since he was also the ruler of Caliburn, but as a general, it really wouldn't have been proper.

"I knew they would. They were just waiting for a scene, and I don't mind." Cecelia smiled. "I would not have taken the post if I was not prepared for danger, Perceval."

"You are surprisingly reckless for your personality."

"Are you two about to flirt again?" I deadpanned, mostly just to see them both jump and squirm. It was always hilarious to tease the two of them. "You should wait until later."

"I should introduce you to everyone too!" Roy gasped. He jumped a few steps back. "Come on. I'll show you around." He took off like an arrow, heading for the gates. Oh, Roy.

"Heehee, he's growing up well," Cecelia laughed. She smiled indulgently. "Ah, I feel old." Cecelia, you were twenty-five. You weren't that old. …Then again, that was ten years older than Roy.

"Well, enjoy yourself here, Cecelia," Perceval murmured. He moved towards his horse. "Give my regrets, but I must be off." Excuse me? "Etruria calls, and as her general, I must answer." Hey!

"You're just going to leave, without giving me a proper hug?" I demanded, scowling. I didn't care if he was Knight General of Etruria. He was still basically my older brother, and I wanted a hug, damn it! This was stressful. "Sue is also here, and she would love to see you as well. We've gone through a bunch of nightmares! Be the big brother and give us hugs, damn it."

"…" He sighed, but he did hold out his arms and give me the hug I asked for. "Yeah, it must be
bad. We heard about Bulgar." Ah! "We're trying to figure out who survived and who didn't, but it's difficult due to Bern holding control." I... was happy they were even trying. "So, there's nothing on Uncle Rath yet, but we're trying." Yeah...

"That said, it seems this Brynja took crippling injuries during it," Cecelia noted, face thoughtful. "Far worse than she originally thought, based on the report I got. One of her own spells nearly killed her because it ripped open her injuries. She's forbidden to fight for a while." So, one of the Wyvern Generals was essentially out of the war for a while. That was good news. I was very happy about this. "Still, Perceval, she is right. Just for a few hours, let's not be generals for a bit." Percevel gave her a look as he let go of me. "Come now. Aunt Katri will give us a scathing lecture when she learns we left Irene and Sue alone without reassurances." Did they...?

"She won't learn until we rescue her from Bern," Perceval pointed out. The words reassured me. They were going to try. Father Sky, thank you... "But, I suppose I can stay for an hour, if you send a message to tell Lord Mark he should call off his army."

"Yes, I'll do that at once." Cecelia smiled warmly, laughing lightly. "Well, let's go meet everyone, then, since Roy wants us to." He was waiting at the gates even, giving us curious looks. I smiled and winked at him, to let him know there was just teasing going on, and he smiled back. "Afterwards, we'll snatch Clarine for a lecture, give Sue some hugs, and just sit and chat. It's been too long."

"I'm sure Irene would prefer Klein were here with us." I hated that I had told him of my crush. But I accepted the teasing with relative grace, because I knew he was covering for the other missing person in our group. Mildain... it was still so hard to believe he was dead. "Let's head inside. I am curious about the group that retook Ostia anyway. Irene?"

"I am not telling you how we broke in," I replied with great dignity as we all walked towards the gates. I noticed the ramparts were completely clear. Everyone must be inside now. "But I'll tell you everything else, okay? I'm... actually a little proud of it!"

You know... looking back... I didn't think I did that badly, huh? I made mistakes, but in both tactics and fighting, I think... I did all right? Maybe I could live up to Mom and Dad's legacy after all? Maybe. It was a big maybe. But, for the first time, I... think I might have understood why Oswin, Marcus, and Aunt Lyn believed in me so much.

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Notes on Lilina

- A magical genius, with a power output that startles many. According to Kieros, he believes the last time someone wielded as much magic as she, it was before the Scouring. If she reaches her full potential, she could easily be a match to Athos himself, or so Fiona once predicted.
- That said, there are some consequences. Since she's strong, she often has difficulties aiming and, really, since there doesn't seem to be anyone with as great of a magical output as she, there is no one to really teach her how to control so much. Cecilia gave her the basics, though, and that seems to be working.
- She is practically my little sister. A kind and sweet girl. I often worry she is a little too sweet, just look at what Legance did, but she's aware of her flaws and, really, her ability to trust and not judge is one of her best traits.
- She has a huge complex over how frail she is, worsened by how everyone always commented on how she wasn't as fast as Aunt Lyn or as strong as Uncle Hector. I know the feeling well, so I try to boost her self-esteem as best as I can.
- Her affinity is light, like mine. Maybe that's why we've always gotten along.
Author's Note: And this ends the first 'arc' of Sword of Seals, which marks Narcian as the only one of the three wyvern generals to **fail** to conquer his assigned territory. There's no mention in game of Brynja being crippling injured, but she actually is the last of the wyvern generals fought in game, so I'm using that as a partial explanation. And other reasons. Ah, right, in order to unlock this sidequest chapter, Lilina just has to have survived chapter 8, iirc.

Chad gives Lugh shoes in their B support. Roy and Lilina's conversation after talking about Durandel is based on their C support. Rutger and Clarine's interaction is basically their A support, with some minor additions. (hey, I have them at an A in my game already.)

Due to being a female sage, Lilina's magic cap is 30, which is the same magic cap as Nino from FE7 (whose average stats as a 20/20 Sage is 25, and has a 50% magic growth without afa's drops), and Athos (who JOINS with this maxed magic). Barring some really bad luck, Lilina will hit that magic cap as a 20/12 Sage on average. Hence Fiona's prediction.

Next Chapter – Interlude, Ostia (there's an implied time skip in the game, so we're going to have three Interludes to cover that time skip.)
Interlude - Ostia

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude – Ostia

After driving of Narcian, we braced ourselves for further attacks. Strangely, though, all aggression seemed to cease. A tentative peace offer came from Etruria, but it was met with silence. Uncle Matthew got a report of horrible storms in Bern, so maybe that is why. Still, the sudden lack of activity was eerie.

In the wake of that silence, Lycia began rumbling over what to do. Uncle Hector was dead, and his only heir, Lilina, was still a minor, old enough to fight, but not old enough to rule apparently. But all thoughts of what would happen paused by a simple announcement.

"We are bringing him home."

"I don't have to give a speech, right?" Lilina asked. I was carefully brushing her hair, making sure it shone in the sunlight. It was a beautiful day outside, not a cloud in the sky. Father Sky was assuring us that the dead had reached Mother Earth's meadows peacefully. "I just have to…"

"No, Uncle Eliwood will give the eulogy," I answered. In Lycian tradition, she would be expected to give a speech, but in Sacaean tradition, such a thought was abhorrent. "You just have to be silent as you lay the flowers down." Lycian tradition was that the heir would lay three flowers down on the coffin before it was lowered into the ground. "Have you picked the flowers?"

"Yeah, I told Uncle Lucius this morning." He left this morning with Uncle Raven to ensure the wreath would be ready in time. "Gladioli, for strength of character, sincerity, and moral integrity. Pink roses, for love and appreciation. Scarlet poppy, for peace." How nice… The language of flowers was one of the few things I did like about Etruria's masks. "They say that there are a lot of scarlet poppies blooming in Araphan now. Do you think Mother Earth is saying that the dead are resting peacefully?"

"Yes, I think so." Done with the brushing, I set about braiding her hair, carefully threading beads into it. She wore a Lycian mourning dress of blacks and silvers, so I made sure the beads were red, because Sacaeans wore red as well as black at funerals. They were striking in her hair. "Do you want to go over again what will happen?"

"When the bell rings, we will meet the retrieval party at the gates of Ostia." Led by Wil, steward of Caelin. He had, apparently, spearheaded the retrievals. They had even managed to retrieve Oswin's body from where we had buried him. "It will just be Mom and me at first, but then you and Sue will fall in beside me. Aunt Florina will fall in beside her." Truthfully, Aunt Lyn should have two people as well, but everyone knew the missing spot was for Mom, and no one wanted to step into that empty space. It was like admitting she was dead, and she… wasn't. She wasn't. She was just captured. We'd save her as soon as we could. "And then… um…"

"Then we will walk forward, leading the funeral procession. At the town square, Roy and Uncle Eliwood will meet us, and fall in." I finished a braid and started another. I thought of Aunt Lyn, getting ready alone. Was she having trouble, putting in the braids? In Sacaean tradition, the widow
would have no visitors as she prepared for the funeral. If Mom was here, I knew she would have been sitting outside the door, making her laugh. "When we reach the gates, we will go to the crypt, and the funeral for Uncle Hector will begin."

"Yes, and then the funerals for the others." Funerals like this were being held all over Lycia. Araphan's destruction had devastated the entire nation. "Oswin is after Father, I think. He is being buried with full honors." Yes, he was. There were many who scoffed, citing that he left Uncle Hector, but I- "Thank you for screaming at those lords."

"Of course I did." Oswin had only left at Uncle Hector's orders. He had left to give us warning, so that we did not go into that situation unprepared. I had no doubts that saved our lives, many times over. "I could see you and Aunt Lyn wanted to, but you're both so tired."

"I haven't been sleeping well." I knew that. She often crawled into bed with me, so that I could hug her as she shook and cried. Legance's betrayal hit her hard, and she had nightmares of what could have happened. She came to me because Aunt Lyn was still recovering. "Mother is still so tired from the poison." I worried if she would have enough strength to go through with this, but she wanted to try. Uncle Lucius and Aunt Serra would be on standby, just in case. "Irene?"

"Yes?"

"...Will you sing?" Her voice shook, and I spared a glance up from my work to look at her face in the mirror. We both looked... so tired and worn in that reflection. Sitting here at the her vanity, we both looked too old and too young for any of this. "For Father's funeral, will you sing?"

Sacaenans sung at funerals. It was a great honor to be asked. "Of course." Besides, I remember, at Aunt Ninian's funeral, Uncle Hector saying he much preferred Sacaean singing to Lycian speeches.

For him, I would sing my very best.

________________________________________________________

After the funeral, I lingered in the crypt, just... staring. I could only stare at the tombstone. It seemed so... bland. Uncle Hector had been larger than life itself, a boisterous and laughing man who always had a hug and a sympathetic ear. A wolf, just like Mom, just like Dad, who guarded his 'pack', his country, with everything he had. But his tombstone was just... it was just a grey stone in a sea of grey stones, hidden deep below the ground. It was so impersonal, even with the flowers resting against it, and I wondered if he could even find Mother Earth's meadows, lost in the dark. Maybe that was why Father Sky made certain to give such a beautiful day for his funeral. That was the only reassurance I had.

Carefully, I crouched by the tombstone, just to read the writing better. Carved meticulously into the stone was his name, his birth date, his death date, and the words 'Wolf General of Ostia, Loving Husband and Father, Beloved Ruler.' No one, reading this, would know that his favorite thing in the word to do was take naps beside Aunt Lyn, that his favorite place was wherever she was. No one, reading this, would know that he relentlessly teased Uncle Eliwood, even as they grew older and wiser, always making sure neither of them were taking themselves too seriously. No one, reading this, would know that he gleefully let himself be subjected to all manners of girlish play, including letting his fingernails be painted when Lilina was experimenting, laughing off anyone's odd looks. No one, reading this, would know that whenever I cried, no matter where I was in this too large castle, he would find me in an instance, and spin me around in circles until I was laughing too hard to cry. No one, reading this, would know that he defended Sue from some nobles who tried to make fun of her silence, carrying her about and telling her jokes until she smiled again. No one, reading this, would know that he cheered the loudest the day Roy landed his first good hit during a practice bout, beaming with pride and shouting tips for how he could get the next one. No
one, reading this, would know how he laughed with Mom over something called a 'sigh tally', the two bantering as easily as blood siblings. No one, reading this, would know how he made a point of sharing drinks with Dad at every visit, and how their talks ranged from serious advice to quiet teasing.

No, they wouldn't know any of that. All they would know is his name. They would know his name, know that he was a 'general', know that he might have had an association with a horse, know that he was loved, and they would know he died at only thirty-seven years old.

The age made me pause, and I walked over to another tombstone in the crypt. I stopped briefly at Lord Orun's and whispered a prayer for him, before I stopped at the one nearby. The words there still gleamed, despite being over twenty years old. Uther of Ostia. Yes, that was why the age stood out to me. Uther had been only thirty-six when he died. Elbert, Uncle Eliwood's father, had been thirty-five, if I recalled that grave correctly. I had lingered in the Pheraean crypt too, after Aunt Ninian's funeral. Her gravestone was just as bland and impersonal as Uncle Hector's.

"I wonder what you would think about all of this," I whispered to the stone. I had never met him. He died before I was born. But I heard stories. Uncle Hector talked about him often, as did Uncle Eliwood. I heard about him most from Great-Aunt Amanda, though. I glanced over at her grave, placed next to his, as if she were his wife. But from what I understood, no one ever seemed to know if they were even lovers or not. Uncle Matthew had even mentioned, at her funeral ten years ago, that there was still a betting pool over it, and I did not think anyone had won it yet. The answer was likely in her personal items, but Uncle Matthew admitted that it was still hard to go through them. Maybe he would now, just to see if an answer to our problems was somehow in there.

With a sigh, I stretched, looking over all the dead. I thought about singing again, but my throat closed up. No, I had sung for the funeral, and now, my mind and heart were too sad. I would sing again when I was a little calmer, a little happier. For now, I should just let the first song echo, and let the dead rest.

So, I left the crypt, making my slow way back into Ostia castle. I took one of the side entrances in, wanting to be alone in my thoughts. But while I was strangely cold and calm, that did not mean the rest of the world was. I realized that as soon as I made it inside, and shut the door behind me.

"Why does everyone say that?" I stopped short at the screech. It was hoarse, raw with pain, and it took me a second to realize it was Lilina's voice. What had her shouting? What was going on?

"Why does everyone say that I'll be a good ruler!?" …I think one too many well-wishers made her crack.

"Because they believe you will be." That… that was Aunt Lyn. I walked down the hall and rounded the corner just to confirm it, but it was. She and Lilina were having an argument, it looked like. That… was such an odd thing to watch. While all three did have tempers, the family had always been careful about yelling at each other. "I believe in you," she replied, voice even. It was easy to see she was not really calm, though, just thoroughly exhausted. "Why is that not enough, Lilina?"

"We believed in Father, and look where that got him!" …Okay, ow. That hurt me. "We believed in Legance, and look where that got you!" Lilina… "Belief doesn't mean anything during a war, does it?!" I needed to intervene. Now. "So why does it mean anything when it comes to me?!" Now!

"Hey, easy!" I called, stepping in between the two. Aunt Lyn looked ready to cry; Lilina already was. "Let's just." Oh, how I wished Mom or Dad were here. They could solve this more easily. "Let's just shelve this talk for another time, when you're less exhausted." I couldn't tell them to calm down. That was too much, clearly. But I couldn't tell them to ignore it either. "Okay? There is
"Quite right." I nearly breathed a sigh of relief as Uncle Eliwood walked up, Aunt Serra and Sue behind him. "Lyn, you were supposed to get a check up," he chided gently. Aunt Lyn didn't even reply, just ducked her head and nodded. Lilina's face crumpled further, and I knew that guilt had been added to her pain. "Go on." He nudged her off with Aunt Serra, and Sue took charge of Lilina easily, making sure to take her the opposite direction. "I had a feeling something like this might happen..."

"Is that so?" I stepped to his side, peering at his face. He looked... well, he looked healthier, but drawn and drained. "Are you tired from just the funeral?"

"No, I... actually just got out of a similar thing with Roy." Was that so? "Not nearly as much yelling, of course, but he got word that the remaining Lycian lords were wanting to keep him as the head of the Lycian Army, in accordance to Hector's dying wishes." ...Roy was too young. I would maintain that for the rest of my life. "I tried to reassure him, but the smile he gave me reminded me of my own smile when I don't believe the person who is talking. I worried for Lyn and Lilina then, as I knew the same sort of talk was going to come up with them too."

"...I think after all of this, I do finally get why you all believe in us. Maybe." I sighed. "But it's so hard to feel as if we're measuring up."

"Clearly, this is something we all should have had talks about earlier, but I thought..." He shook his head. "Well, no matter. If you are not too tired, then why don't we have a talk in the study here."

"Are you too tired?"

"I am wide awake after all of that, and I fear sleeping for now." He nudged my shoulder, steering me to a room. "Besides, with luck, this can help be gather my thoughts."

"Well, if you're certain." I skipped over the first study he tried to steer me into. There was only one chair there, and I didn't feel like having an argument over who got to sit. Instead, we went to a different one, with two chairs, and I plopped down with a sigh, tilting my head back to just... relax.

Eliwood sat down slowly, with a grimace. "Formal clothes are always too stiff," he murmured. I just shrugged awkwardly in reply. Formal Sacaean clothes were always comfy. "So, where do I even begin? I can tell you time and time again that I believe in you, and that greatness is made, not born, but based on Roy and Lilina, it's clear that such reassurances became meaningless a long time ago."

"Well, I do like hearing it," I answered slowly. I straightened in my seat to look at him. "But I guess... why do you all believe in us so much?" There. That was it. They had so much belief, but I couldn't see why. The reason I thought I might, might, understand now is simply because... because I thought I had a 'why' now. "I know we pulled off this whole mess in Ostia, somehow, and it's... not something you all did alone." I paused. "I'm sure you could have, of course."

"But it might have taken longer, and it might not have been so decisive. And, even if we did, we would not have been able to deal with Bern so quickly." His eyes fell to my arm, to the scar. "How are your injuries?" His eyes flicked up briefly to the scar on my face as well. He had been near tears when I told him about 'fighting' Zephiel. "Are you in pain?"

"No, I'm perfectly fine, and my ears stopped ringing after Uncle Lucius and Uncle Raven's lectures." They had really lain into me, though Uncle Raven did stop when I gave my reasons.
Uncle Lucius got madder at them, though, so it all balanced out. "I can resume my full practice routine… well, I probably could today, but I don't feel like it."

"No, I imagine not." Uncle Eliwood sighed, closing his eyes to think. "Now, how to explain…" I bit my lip as I waited for an answer. I hoped it was something concrete, not… "I suppose, among other things, it's because I feel like you all have already surpassed us." …WHAT?!

"B-but we haven't done anything!" This was…! "We couldn't save anyone at Araphan, we couldn't save Thria, we only barely saved Ostia, and we've just been so helpless!"

"Exactly as we were during the Campaign of Fire." …Well, that shut me up. His smile was gentle, but there was an old pain in it. "I remember when my father died. It haunts my nightmares even now. I remember how, even at death's door, he still had to be the one to save me, to save my friends. I remember holding him in my arms as he gasped out his last breaths, giving me apologies and telling me he was proud." Uncle Eliwood brought up his hands, and I wonder what he saw when he looked at them. "I remember wondering how could he be so proud of me? I was weak, horribly reliant on others. I had a talent for fighting, but it was one I hated to cultivate, because I always saw the blood. I did not have Hector's reckless abandon that carved new paths. I did not have Lyn's serene steps as she danced across the battles. It was so easy to see them as strong, and constantly I wondered if I held them back, if I held the others back."

"…Do you mind… telling me more?" The Campaign was a guarded secret. I only really knew that it was how so many of them met. "What made you think…?"

"I didn't. Not consciously. It just occurred to me, later, that moving forward despite those feelings might be just why he was proud of me." I see… "But I still remember that feeling. There was only one other time I felt so helpless."

"What time was that?"

"It was…" He hesitated before sighing. "Forgive me, Irene. It remains one of my worst memories, and the story behind it is long and emotionally taxing. This was not a day for such a story. "But it involved Ninian. It involved a time where I heard her greatly, on accident, and to this day, I do not know why she forgave me." …What did he do? Accidentally slash her while trying to slash an enemy?

"Then something else." Something like… um… "Please, just…" I wanted… I wanted to hear this. Perhaps it was mean, but hearing that once Uncle Eliwood, one of my role models, had felt just as helpless was… it reminded me of Oswin's words. He told me to compare myself to them when they were my age, and that's… what this was. So, I just… wanted to hear more.

"Well, I can talk a little about Katri." Mom? "I remember when we found Leila's corpse. "Leila… I knew the name. She had been a skilled spy of Ostia, and Uncle Matthew's lover, but she died on a mission. It took Uncle Matthew years to recover enough to be in a healthy relationship with Aunt Serra. "I remember Katri took that death on herself. It was her fault. She had been too slow, too cautious, too… whatever. It was her fault we had not made it in time." I stillled at the words. I knew those thoughts. I had them at Araphan. "She never said it, but I knew she felt the same over my father's death. Any time anything went wrong, she blamed herself, and worked tirelessly to try and keep another thing from going wrong." Mom… "During… that incident I can't talk about… she felt helpless then too. I am certain there are others."

"…Do you have one about Dad?" I could not imagine him being helpless. It just… he was the best hunter, and…
"Well, he had to watch Katri slowly deteriorate from the consumption." That startled me. I knew she had once had it, of course. It was impossible to not know. But I had always thought… I knew it had happened during the Campaign, but I had always thought it was rather… quick? Severe but quick, nothing slow about it. "I remember fretting, and that was without knowing she had anything worse than a cold. She kept it quiet. Rath, Serra, Lucius, and later Matthew… they were the ones who knew for longer than a day ahead of us."

"Why didn't she just get healed?"

"We weren't in a safe place to do so." Where had they been? "And so, she was faced with a choice. Leave the army to save herself and possibly doom us to deaths, or stay to save the army and possibly doom herself." …Mom picked the latter. There was no way she wouldn't have. "She made sure Hector, Lyn, and I didn't know, specifically because of that choice. But it does not change the fact that she was dying, and it does not change the fact that Rath had to watch the person he loved above all else fall apart, cough by cough." Dad… "He had to watch as she hacked up blood, as she became too tired to even stand for more than a few hours, as she lost weight and became as thin as a skeleton." The consumption was a horrifying disease. That's why I always had to be careful if I started coughing. "He could do nothing to stop it. Only give her medicines in the hope that it would buy her enough time. And it did, but only because of a skilled healer, and a powerful magic user who quietly helped." …It was very sobering to hear how close I had been to not being born at all.

"That… had to be hard…" A thought occurred to me, a little mystery I had always shrugged off, in the past. "Is that why, when Aunt Ninian was dying, Dad rushed us here?"

"Yes." Uncle Eliwood's smile was sadly nostalgic. "I sent word that she was dying, deteriorating, and the next thing I know, there's a note from Rath returning with the words 'we will be there soon'. It remains the only time he replied instead of Katri." There had been nothing we could do for Aunt Ninian too. We could only watch. Dad knew that feeling better than anyone. "It helped. A lot. I will forever be grateful that he was here." Uncle Eliwood laughed. "And it did Ninian good too, to look out the window and see you all playing. I think she actually hung on a few extra days, just so she could see you all smiling one more time." Aunt Ninian… I missed her. "But yes, Rath knew helplessness too."

"…I still don't see how you think I am already 'better' than them." The sentence just felt weird in my mouth.

"Ah, yes, we did get on a tangent." Uncle Eliwood hummed a little in thought. "Katri could only ever protect people with her tactics." W-well, yes, I suppose that was true. She knew a little of self-defense, knife work, and archery, but generally only enough to keep herself safe. "If there was ever a threat to one of us, the best she could do was shout. Shout orders, just shout in general so someone knew what was going on. She was reliant on others to keep her people safe." Yes, that made sense. "But you can protect people yourself. In fact, you have. You shot the arrow into Legance that freed Lilina, yes?"

"Well, yes, but…"

"And if you are in danger, you can get yourself out of it. As you have. Repeatedly." He smiled warmly. "You can use more than tactics to defend people. So, by my eyes, you have surpassed Katri because you have more than one way to protect the people in your care."

"…And Dad?"

"Rath is the exact opposite of Katri. He could protect others, and himself, with his arrows. If he
was in trouble, he was not reliant on others to stay alive. But he could never come up with such large tactics, like Katri can. Like you can. He could be one piece in the plan easily, but he would have never been able to coordinate so many people to a single goal."

"...What you're saying... is that I have surpassed them... because I have both their strengths."

"Exactly." He laughed a little. "You also benefit from such an interesting childhood. You're used to balancing many different beliefs." That was true, I suppose. "That makes you much better suited to working with such a diverse group. It's that same reason that I think Roy will make a great leader of the armies, and why I, and Lyn, think Lilina will be able to rule well." ...That... that did actually make sense. "That is why I believe in you all. I see what you have already done, and think, I never would have been able to do that at their age. I know they will be fine."

...It was really difficult to wrap my head around all of this. But... well, I knew at some point, I would be able to think more on it. Of course, I would probably find the holes in the logic then, but... but I could have another talk then, maybe with someone else, to help me with it.

So, instead... "Thanks, Uncle Eliwood," I murmured. I made sure to smile. "I appreciate it."

"I hope you will be able to follow my logic one day," he replied. I should have known he would see how I was having trouble. "And thank you. As I hoped, it did help me settle my thoughts." He sighed. "Though, now is certainly not the time for such talks with Roy." No, it wasn't.

But, I did get an idea. "Uncle Eliwood, there's going to be some big council or something right? To talk about what's going to happen with Lycia?"

"Yes." Uncle Eliwood closed his eyes, clearly in thought. "Many provinces lost their ruling lords. Some, like Laus and Thria, have no heirs to take over. Lilina is a minor, and with so much else going on, I would not want her to take up ruling just yet. She is so shaken by Legance; she needs to find her grounding again." Yes... "So, we must hold a council, though I imagine Lyn and I will co-rule Lycia until she comes of age." He opened his eyes again. "Why do you ask?"

"Do we have to be there for all of that?" I waited for an answer, but got only a blank look in reply. "I was thinking... none of us have really had a break since all of this mess started. I doubt that's helping with anything anyway, and it's not like we'll be allowed to contribute anything to the political discussions. So, what if our group, the group that went to Araphan, and went through all this, go on a vacation?"

"That... is certainly a thought." Uncle Eliwood slowly relaxed, smiling slightly. "But where would you go?"

"Hanover is just over the mountains. I know Uncle Mark will let us all stay there. It might not be staffed, but none of us will care." Actually, I think many of us would prefer that. ...In fact, I think Clarine is the only one who would complain. "We would be close by in case of an emergency, but it's still far enough away that we can relax."

"Thus let you all have a bit of fun, actual fun." His smile warmed. "Yes, that sounds like a wonderful idea. It will also buy time for Lyn and I to come up with better ways to talk about this with Lilina and Roy." Yes, exactly. "I'll make sure it gets through. You just write your uncle."

"I will." I leapt to my feet, full of purpose now. I had a goal and I would see it through! "I'll go do that now, actually."

"Yes, go ahead." He was laughing now, and I was glad to hear it. "Ah, but I almost forgot."
"Hmm?"

"Your song was very beautiful, Irene. You truly are a gifted singer."

"Thank you." I smiled back at him. "Mom says I got it from Dad. Something about how she can't hold a tune to save her life."

"Yet more evidence to my point." Mmm… "Think on it later, Irene. After your vacation. Just focus on having fun there."

"I will." I think we all would need it. "Talk to you later, Uncle Eliwood!"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Lyn mentions, in Tactician's Testimony (I think the interlude after Dragon's Gate), that Sacaeans sing at funerals. In that same chapter, Hector replies that he likes it better than the speeches. So, of course I have Irene sing for his. Uther and Elbert's ages at their deaths are based off their ages in Thief's Testimony, meaning there is no canon basis for it. The second event Eliwood mentions in his talk with Irene references Ninian's death in FE7.

Also, much needed arguments and talks shown, or so I think. Yay for references to FE7. And, seriously, long overdue talk.

Next Chapter – Interlude, Hanover
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude – Hanover

Uncle Eliwood was true to his word, and our group was packed up and heading to the Hanover Estate. Things were hectic in Aquelia, so none of the family could come down to greet us, but I reassured them it was fine. What we needed was a break. We needed time to just relax and have fun. We didn't have to be spoiled by servants. We could take care of ourselves.

Hanover was just beautiful this time of year, and I was certain the others could rest here.

"Irene!" I looked up from my book to see Clarine poke her head into my room. "Sorry to bother you," she began, squirming slightly. I thought it strange that she was still in her nightgown, even if she did have a robe over it. "But do you have any moonday pads?"

"Oh, yeah, in here," I answered, setting my book to the side and heading into the bathroom to tug out some from one of the shelves. "Did you not get enough during the last market trip?"

"I did, but Dorothy miscounted how many she got and ended up being short." She gave me a grateful smile when I handed her one and she ducked into the bathroom, making sure I was out before closing the door. "I gave her some of mine, since I wasn't due for a bit, but…"

"But then yours came early." I went back to sitting by the window and reading my book, taking notes on the strategies listed. It was really nice of Zealot to lend me this manual. "It's probably because we're all relaxing. That can make it come early."

"Yeah, I figured that after the initial 'what just happened'." She paused and then briefly opened the door again. "Do you mind if I take a quick bath here?"

"Go ahead, Clarine. How messy are your sheets?"

"I got them soaking already." The door shut again. "The bedding underneath is fine." Oh, good. That was always a pain to scrub, and we were on our own. "Thanks, Irene."

"It's no problem. Want to borrow one of my shirts to wear under your robe?"

"Please."

"One second." I got up again and hunted through my closet for one that wouldn't look too ridiculous on her. When I found one, I plucked it out and heading over to the bathroom. "I'm tossing it in."

"Thank you!" She already had the water running, and based on the steam, she was going for a hot one. I should get her some tea ready too. I think she tended to have some horrible cramping. "You're the best!"

"Remember that there might be others taking morning showers and might want warm water." I smiled when I heard her laugh and went back to trying to study.
It was interrupted by a knock and a cheerful 'good morning!' courtesy of Lilina. Two months here in Hanover had done wonders for her mental health. Her smiles were no longer sad, and her laughs did not sound bitter. "Hey, do you know where Clarine is?" she asked me, coming over and taking the book out of my hands before plopping down beside me. "I wanted to ask her if she wanted to have afternoon tea with me again, but she isn't in her room, and I saw some sheets soaking."

"She's taking a shower," I answered, pointing to my bathroom. Clarine's half-singing, half-humming nonsense drifted through. "She would have a very good singing voice if she stuck to one song." I heard three just right there and then.

"Oh, but I like it." She giggled. "Okay, I'll wait then." I should give up on studying anymore this morning. "Did you eat breakfast yet?"

"I ate with Sue, as usual." Sue and I would wake up early, before the sun was even up, and make ourselves something quick before going on a morning ride. Rutger was the only other person awake at those hours, and it wasn't odd to see him practicing in the courtyard, waiting for us to return. "This is why I am fully dressed, unlike someone."

"I have my dress on!" She also had no stockings or shoes. "Besides, we're on vacation."

"Yes, yes." I ruffled her hair and she laughed warmly. I was so glad to see her doing better. "Are you certain you want to wait here, though? I would have thought you would be running about with the others."

"Yes, but when I do that, I don't get to spend time with you." This was true. I was… slowly… losing my fear and worry. Uncle Eliwood's words did a lot to reassure me, even if I could find some little holes in them. But everyone was so loud. They were far more hectic than even the market in Aquelia. I just preferred being apart, watching and enjoying the quiet. If someone came to talk to me, I didn't mind, but I just didn't like sitting in the loud group.

"Sorry, Lilina." I wonder if I got that trait from Dad. Dad also was never really keen on being around big groups of people. If people talked to him, he'd do his best to talk, but he preferred the silence. Mom, in contrast, was often in the middle of the bustle, laughing and cheering.

"Oh, it's fine. I would hate it if you forced yourself for my sake." She giggled. "I just want to spend time with you this morning."

"...You are too adorable." I snatched her up in a hug, and tickled her until she shrieked with laughter. "This is what happens when you're too cute in the mornings!"

"Haha! I can hear you from down the hall." We looked up to see Guinevere in the doorway, laughing softly and warmly. It was decided that until Lycia was settled, it was best for her to just stay with us, so here she was, on vacation with us. I think she enjoyed it. "You all doing okay?" she asked, smiling brilliantly. She smiled a lot more around here than she did before.

"Yeah, we're fine." I reassured, waving her in. To my surprise, she produced a tray from behind her back, covered in sweets. "Did you bake again today?"

"Yes, and I wanted you to taste test before I served them to the others." Well, I wasn't going to say no! Guinevere was an amazing baker. "This is one of Lady Mother's personal recipes." She handed Lilina and me one each. "It's been a while since I made it, so give me your honest opinion."

I took a big bite, smiling. It was really good. But if I had to give a critique… "You might want to lose less cinnamon next time." I liked the taste, but this was probably a bit much. "It's hiding the
other flavor, whatever it is."

"It really must be. It's ginger." Oh, yeah, it was definitely masking it then. "I'll double check my measurements for the next batch." Yeah, that sounded good. "Lilina? You... ate it all already?"
She didn't even leave crumbs!

"Sorry, I love cinnamon," Lilina answered with a sheepish smile and little laugh. "So, it was super good." Haha! "Oh, but it does make me thirsty."

"Here, I'll whip up some tea," I offered, standing. Clarine would probably be in the shower for another five minutes or so. "We can eat the rest with it, and share with Clarine when she gets out."
Mornings like this were common here during our stay. I loved it dearly, almost as dearly as a morning with the Kutolah, watching Mom cook breakfast and Dad gently tease her.

...No, there would be no sad thoughts right now. I was going to have fun, damn it. I should tease Lilina about Roy. That was always enough to get me laughing.

After a cheerful morning tea, I went to say hello to Grandfather. It was probably a 'sadder' thing to do while on vacation. After all, Grandfather died three years ago, so visiting him involved going into the family crypt. It was cold down below, and it was dull. I had thought so when Grandfather was laid to rest, and I thought so now. But the place was filled with fresh flowers. I made sure to bring some from the meadows each day, when I visited.

"I'm back, Grandfather!" I noted cheerfully, setting some flowers down on his grave. His gravestone said as much about him as Uncle Hector's said about him. I had never known, until his death, that he had once been a knight of the highest caliber, though. He apparently retired, and didn't like talking about it. "I had a fun morning, just as usual!" I laughed, the sound bouncing eerily off the walls. "It was a morning tea with Lilina, Clarine, and Guinevere. Well, we dragged Sue into it later. I made tea."

Of course, there was no response. But if I closed my eyes, and listened to the wind, I could almost hear his indulgent laugh. I had only good memories of Grandfather. Though others tried to look down on Sue and me for being 'half-savage', Grandfather had simply smiled, encouraged us to have pride in our heritage. He always beamed when I insisted I was 'Irene of the Kutolah' first, not 'Irene of Hanover'.

"I'm really happy right now. Things are still chaotic, but having some time away from everything helps me get my mind on straight." I still didn't know where Dad was. I didn't know where Grandfather was. Mom was still a captive of Bern. The Kutolah were still scattered. Uncle Hector was still dead. Oswin was still dead. Aunt Lyn and Uncle Eliwood were dealing with unexpected burdens. "...Okay, maybe things are really chaotic." Bern's silence continued. It was impossible to know what they were thinking. "But still, I'm happy right now." Yes, that was fact. "Sue is too." She still felt the weight of the deaths heavily, and Mother's capture would sometimes lead her to sprint for me...

"Irene?" It seems to have done the same today. "Irene, are you down here?" I heard Sue call down. "Irene?"

"Give me a moment, Sue!" I called back up. I could almost hear her sigh of relief. "Some days are easier than others, of course." I touched the gravestone, tracing the letters. Nicholas of Hanover, knight of Etruria. He was fifty-eight when he died. Grandpa was about that age...

The reminder of familiar ages made me look to Grandmother's tombstone. I had never met her. She
died before I was born. She had been forty years old when she died. That was the same age Mom was now. It made my stomach twist into knots. Surely, it would be fine. Surely, Mom would remain fine, and not die, and… and…

"Irene?"

"Be right there!" I shook my head violently, and looked at the tombstone again. I had no idea what to think of her. Mom had few good memories of her. Uncle Mark, Aunt Maria, Aunt Anastasia, and Uncle Nicky had better memories, much better. Grandfather talked of how she had been a kind and gentle person, who would stand in front of a mother bear if it meant keeping the people she loved safe, but who also had a horrifically awkward way to communicate. 'Safety' had been Grandmother's priority for her children, apparently, but Mom had never wanted to be 'safe'.

As always, I could find no words to say to her grave. Instead, I left a single flower, the same as the one I gave to Grandfather's, just as always, and then made my way up, leaving flowers on all the graves I past.

Sue was waiting for me when I came up from the crypt, and she smiled in relief when she saw me. "Sorry to bother," she murmured, giving me a hug. "Did you hear anything on the wind?"

"Grandfather's laugh," I answered, returning the hug. I stroked her hair before pulling away. "I think he's glad we're no longer floundering."

"Yes, that makes sense." She gave me a warm smile. "You're looking better. You were so frazzled."

"Considering everything we went through, I think 'frazzled' is an understatement." Slowly, we walked away from the crypts, entering the family gardens. I loved them best when the chrysanthemums bloomed. They were the house flower, after all, and I loved their meaning. Aunt Anastasia said that they, in general, meant 'happiness and joy, rest and recovery, and enduring life' in Etruria's language of flowers. Red and white were the most common, and they had their own specific meanings… "Do you remember what red and white chrysanthemums mean?"

"Red is a symbol of love, while white is a symbol of loyalty, devoted love, and truth." Yes, that's right. "Didn't someone once try to convince Dad to give Mom a yellow one?"

"Yes, and that means something like slighted or neglected love." I think that someone had been trying to break up Mom and Dad in order to angle for a marriage with Mom. "So, what's up? Did you just need the reassurance that I was around?"

"That wasn't the original intention." We found the center of the gardens, with a beautiful fountain and benches all around, and sat down. "I wanted to come talk to you, but then I couldn't find you." At which point, she panicked.

"So, do you still want to talk?" When she didn't answer, I smiled at her. "I can wait."

"No, I'm just trying to think of how to start." She fell silent again, and I looked up to the sky, studying the clouds. I picked out colors and shapes, admiring the beautiful blue the sky was today. The wind blew comfortingly, rustling up a storm of petals to dance in the air, bringing a fresh, beautiful scent to the air. "Many of the Kutolah think you'll succeed Dad as Chieftain."

"Really?" I turned to look at her, a little startled. "I've never heard them talk about it."

"They learned not to. Someone made the mistake of commenting it around Dad, and he got really mad. Thunderstorm angry." That… I hadn't remembered this? "You were having lessons with
Mom at the time. Dad went out to shoot and calm down before returning home." Oh, wait, I might remember this day. It was a long time ago, eight years ago, when Dad was late for dinner. "But I could see how they all thought it still."

"But why me? Is it because I'm the eldest?"

"You're also a skilled archer, and you knew tactics from Mom. You were always the 'heir' to them both." …But… "You also had strong ties to Etruria."

"You do as well."

"You were more open about it." …Well, I had to concede that point. "So, they thought the Kutolah would be safest with you. You could protect them best." That… "I talked to Grandpa about it. He always said that whichever one of us becomes chieftain, the Kutolah would be in safe hands, and that we should just walk our own path." Grandpa was rather lenient with us. I think it's because he couldn't spoil Dad as much as he had wanted to. "But as we got older, that incident still stuck with me."

"Sue…"

"I think you would be a good chieftain. I think you would also be a good 'lady' in Etruria." She laughed when I gave her my most skeptical look. "Well, Lady of Reglay, maybe."

"You would use a heart to heart to tease me." I debated bringing up Sin. While she had never said anything about him, I could see the looks he at least gave her. But since we had no idea… well, I suppose we didn't know that either about Klein, since communications disappeared. "Watch it, or I might bring up Sin!"

"There is nothing there!"

"Those red ears tell me otherwise!"

"Sister!" We maybe maintained teasing glares for two seconds before bursting into laughter. We laughed and laughed, unable to help it, almost to the point of tears. "Regardless, Irene, you're just… good. You're bright and cheerful, and I love you dearly for it."

"…But you also love me dearly despite it." I sighed, slumping slightly. "I've been worried for a long while that you might feel trapped in my shadow."

But she shook her head. "I don't feel trapped, exactly. I feel scared." Scared? "No small part of me wants to prove to the rest that I am just as capable. That I can, eventually, become a worthy successor to Dad and Mom too." Sue… "But, at the same time, I'm scared. I'm scared to take that leap. I'm scared to leave your shadow, because in your shadow, I feel safe. I know I am happy here."

"But?"

"But I also feel like it is a happiness that cannot last, especially now. If I don't find my own path, then I'm just going to drag you down with me. I don't want that." She looked right at me. "I… also want to be stronger so you feel you can leave the Kutolah if that is where your own path takes you. That you can leave the Kutolah to me." Sue… "I don't want you to become stuck because I'm too scared."

"Sue…" I took her hand. "It's okay. Take your time."
"I don't think the war will give me it." I hated how right she was. "But I get the feelings behind the words." She squeezed my hand back. "I don't feel worthy of Rienfleche now. But one day, I will be."

"...We'll both work for the day Rienfleche acknowledges us both." We shared a smile and another laugh. "Do you feel better?"

"Yes. I hated not being able to figure out how to verbalize this."

"Good." My smile warmed and I looked up to the sky. "It feels like we're back in the plains."

"Yes, talking and laughing in the grass." She stood up, tugging me up too. "Let's run." Seriously? "Let's pretend we're children again and just run."

"...Yes, let's do that." I grinned and picked a direction. "Come on! Let's see if we can make it to the river!" My grin widened. "But take it easy on me. You're much faster."

"You're stronger." But that was fine. We had our own strengths. We just... needed to learn how to walk our own paths. "To the river!"

"I'm right beside you." That would be how we walked. Side by side, until those paths parted. But that wouldn't be for a while, and I was glad for it.

I loved watching Sue grow up. It always made me smile to see her reach new heights. I should let her know, later, when we were up for another heart to heart like this. For now, it was time to run, kicking off our shoes and pretend we were back in the plains for a brief moment, and that the war wasn't looming over our shoulders.

In the evening, after dinner, the group went on our evening ride. I couldn't even remember how it started, but it just... was something we fell into. Those who could ride, but didn't have a horse of their own, would borrow from some of the gentler stock here in Hanover's stables. Others would pair up. Some pairs stayed the same, no matter the night, like Clarine and Rutger or Roy and Lilina. Others would switch up. Yesterday, for instance, I had Deke as my passenger. Today, though, I had Lugh.

"This is so much fun!" he kept laughing as we galloped. Sue, Clarine, and I had pulled our horses a little ahead of the others, mostly so that we had the room to ride faster over the rolling hills. It wasn't a 'top' speed, of course. That was more of an emergency thing. But it was as close as we would get in non-emergency situations. "It's like I'm one with the wind!"

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself," I yelled. I had to, in order to be heard over the wind. "You want to do a jump?"

"Yes!"

"All right!" I glanced around and found a short one not far. I signaled Sue so she knew what I was doing and changed directions slightly. "Hold on!" With a nudge of my heel, my mare easily jumped over the river, and kept on thundering ahead. "Fun?"

"Yay!" Lugh was so easy to please.

A whistle made me look up, and I saw Shanna circling overhead, Deke waving to catch our attention. I knew this signal well by now. We had ridden out far enough. Now we needed to let the horses rest.
I eased my mare from a gallop to a canter, to a trot, to a walk, and then to a stop. I could have just stopped her, but Lugh was laughing so much that I couldn't help but drag it out.

"All right, everyone!" I called as I dismounted. "Break time!" That, of course, meant Wolt breaking out the snacks he snuck along. Guinevere, who had ridden with Elen on one of the stable horses, added some of her pastries to the mix. Saul pulled out juice and wine from his saddlebag. "No underage drinking!" I wasn't going to deal with that little mess.

"That was so much fun!" Lugh giggled, jumping down. "Thank you, miss horsie." He gently pet my mare's nose, and fed her an apple slice he had apparently stashed in his pocket.

"Do you want to learn?" I smiled when he looked up at me. "I don't mind teaching you, and Uncle Mark really won't mind you taking one of the horses."

"Really?" His eyes went wide and his face practically split with a grin. "Yeah, I'd love that!" Well, I was adding that to my daily list then. "Thank you!" His eyes turned serious then. "Hey, Irene?"

"Yes?"

"...Do you think I can learn to fight on a horse too?" Did he just…? "I want to learn swords too. Can I?"

"Lugh..." I sighed, trying to think of how to go about this as I checked the saddle. "Tell me your reasons. You should know that you can't learn everything perfectly."

"Well, it seems to me like if you need a magical powerhouse, Lilina has it covered." He smiled when I gave him a concerned look. "No, no, I'm fine. I know I can be strong. But I heard Marcus say that it's more helpful for a tactician to have variety, right?"

"That is true." I glanced over at all the cavaliers and paladins we had. I did honestly fret over balancing all of them. I should sit down and have a talk with Marcus and Zealot about that. "Is that why you're thinking of being mounted?"

"Yeah, then you'd have a mage that can ride and keep up with the knights." That was true. "I guess it's like a valkyrie, but I can't heal."

"You could learn."

"I could! But... I think I want to learn a sword instead." He tugged a bit at his cloak, smiling sheepishly. "I'm using my anger at Bern to fight, which doesn't sound really... healer-y." He laughed when I pointed to Saul. "Hey, he's nice! And he's serious when healing." I would give him that. "But if I had a sword, that means I could switch between magic and strength."

"Splitting your skills would mean that you would never be the best at either."

"But it means that I could deal with enemies with high resistance, which Lilina can't." That was true. "It also means that I can deal with the heavily armored people that Allen and Lance can't." That was also true.

"Yes, that is true. You would not be the best, but there would also be fewer instances where you are at a complete disadvantage." I crouched down to look him in the eye. "If you can accept that, Lugh, then I will get you those lessons."

"Really?" He smiled brightly and all but tackled me with his hug. "Yay! You're the best, Irene!"
"You're being too cute for the hour!" So, I proceeded to tickle him relentlessly, just as I had Lilina earlier this morning. "Let's join the others." It was already so loud, though…

"Do you need help?" Lugh was tearing up from laughing so much, but he took my hand. "Is there a question you want to know? I'll ask for you!" Well, if he was willing…

"I want to know if anyone else has had thoughts about their further training, like you." I smiled at him. "No matter how crazy it 'sounds'. If they can give me good reasons for it, I will do my best to get Marcus to accommodate."

"Okay!" He raced off, going to Chad first. I laughed a little, before hunting around the group, checking on them. Deke caught my eye and waved me over. I took the seat, of course. It was just where I ended up during this nightly little parties.

"Here's your cup of wine," he told me, passing me a mug. "Good vintage, even if I'm not really a wine person."

"You're more of an ale person, right?" I asked dryly. He smiled wryly and I laughed. "Well, I don't mind wine. Though…"

"I will not forget the day those nobles tried to get Lord Rath drunk at some party Lord Pent was hosting." His bright grin sparked my giggles. I remembered it too. "He drunk them all under the table, and said something about wine being like water."

"By my understanding, a high tolerance for alcohol is actually not uncommon among Sacaeans." Mom refused to drink at parties for precisely that reason. She would be plastered before anyone else was even buzzed. "Still, it was hilarious."

"It was absolutely hilarious." He smiled indulgently as he watched everyone's antics. I noticed Rutger was careful to not let Clarine drink too much, and she was rattling off stories. "I think she's telling the same story."

"I think so too." I glanced at him. "How much trouble would I get into if I matchmake?"

"I think so long as you watch well, don't force anything, and be prepared for the inevitable dramas, you'll be fine." He gave me a look, though. "Warning you now. Don't even try with me."

"I will do so only if you ask." I laughed as he grimaced. "No, it was simply… I know Lilina has feelings for Roy, and he might have some for her. Rutger and Clarine get along quite well." Though, I could already 'hear' the drama for that pairing. "Wendy and Ogier are adorable together."

"Like I said. I think it's fine." He ruffled my hair. "It means you're paying attention. That's what you need to do, more than anything."

"Yes." I sighed, slumping a little. "Though, I did just learn that I might have been making things difficult for Sue."

"Of course you did. You're her big sister."

"Excuse me?" I gave him my most skeptical look. "What do you mean by that?"

"Irene, what's a reason you practice so much?" He held up a hand to stop my answer. "I mean originally. When you were little."

It took me a long while to answer. "I... wanted to be one step ahead of Sue." Yes, that was why I
had always practiced so hard as a child. "I felt it was my job as her big sister to be one step ahead. If I made the mistakes, then I could show her the safer way. I could teach her." Why did I forget that? When… did my reason for studying and practicing shift from being a role model to Sue? When did it become about Dad?

"Exactly." Deke smiled warmly. "I remember how excited you were at being a big sister. You declared you would be the best one ever, and that you would be a step ahead until she could find her own path." Yes. Yes, I remembered that now. "But I doubt you ever explained that to her. So, instead, she saw you simply excelling, and forgot that there was three years difference between you two. But then she became proud of who you were, and felt safe in the shadow you cast."

"Yes…" Oswin's words echoed through my head. I… was getting it, I think. Slowly, but surely, I think I was. "…Thanks. I needed that reminder."

"I figured." He finished off his wine, and tossed me a cookie. "So, what is it that has Lugh talking to everyone?" Oh, Father Sky, Lugh really was talking to everyone!

"I want to learn what everyone wants for their training." I sipped my own wine, and the cookie. They were surprisingly good together. "I want to hear what their aspirations are, and then make plans accordingly."

"Not confine yourself to what the tactics books say. Be a little unconventional, and gain a whole array of tactics." He smiled. "That's a good choice. It'll be difficult. You will have to balance a lot."

"Well, I have practice at that." Uncle Eliwood's words floated through my head. I still had some holes in the words, but this part… this part was one I could not deny. "That was my childhood."

"That it was." Deke's smile turned proud. "Now, if you want my insight…"

"Always."

"Then, honestly, you'd be good at seeing who all can learn healing staves…" Deke rattled off suggestions easily, bringing up some battles he fought in to explain.

I listened carefully, making mental notes. Walk my own path… yes, I think… I think I could, slowly, find the courage to do that… maybe…

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Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Well, I hope this is a little less sad than the previous chapter! So, as implied above, unlike in Tactician's Testimony, classes are going to be more… branching. Lugh, for instance, will 'promote' to a Mage/Dark Knight, while Lilina will become a Sage. There will be other branching paths, or even some weapon combinations that do not have game-equivalents (yet). Oh, and in one of the interludes in Tactician's Testimony (After the Dawn, I think?), I had Zephiel mention that Hellene baked. She's the one who taught Guinevere.

Next Chapter – Interlude, Valkyrie
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude – Valkyrie

Sadly, all good things must come to an end. Our group needed to leave before the heavy training of the horses started up, since we'd just be in the way. So, after a few months of vacation, we returned to Ostia. Bern still hadn't made a move, no word or anything.

Lycia had quieted in our absence. People were slowly rebuilding, and were hopeful again. Businesses were recovering. Uncle Eliwood and Aunt Lyn were voted the new leaders of Lycia, until Lilina came of age. A new Lycian Alliance Army was established, just in case, and Roy was chosen as the leader because of the victory at Ostia, and because it had been one of Uncle Hector's dying wishes. I was asked to be the 'official' tactician, for my own part in liberating Ostia.

There was still no word about survivors of Bulgar and the Kutolah, and there was nothing on Dad, Mom, or Grandpa. I was beginning to fear the worse…

Managing and leading required a lot of paperwork. I felt like I was about to drown in a sea of paper and letters, and I honestly could not remember the last time I got a decent night's rest. The worst part was that this was with me delegating things out so that I had less to do.

"Ugh, I can't do strategy," I groaned, temporarily giving up on trying to figure out logistics and collapsing on my desk. "I simply can't. I can do tactics, but this strategy stuff is just making me want to tear my hair out."

"Now, that would be a shame." A gentle hand stroked my hair, and I looked up to see Uncle Lucius smiling down at me. He'd come in to check in on my health, and was checking my math. I adored math, but Father Sky, this was all ridiculous. "I think that's a sign you need a serious break," he chided gently. "Shall I tell you some gossip while you eat?"

"Is that blackmail or bribery?"

"I wouldn't know. I am a bishop." He laughed when I gave him a look. "I'm sorry. I used to say the same with Katri that I fell into old habits."

I sighed, leaning back in my chair. "If Mom was here…" She'd have been done by now. "She would have collapsed by now, and made me very cross." His smile was gentle. "I used to get on her a lot about her health. I am relieved that you are doing what you can to take care of yourself."

"I feel like I need to sleep two weeks in order to catch up on missing sleep." I had never been one who needed a lot during the night, but I was feeling my exhaustion catch up. "But there's so much going on…" Working on training things, working on compromises with Marcus over that, dealing with Merlinus and money, working on supply lists and injury reports… "How did Mom not go mad?"

"Stubbornness, an inability to relax without prompting even when things were peaceful, and by
refusing to acknowledge the damage she did to her health." The almost clipped way he said it told me this remained something that aggravated him, even after twenty years. "I had more luck convincing Raven against pursuing his revenge." I still didn't know much about that. No one talked about it.

"Did you convince him with kisses?"

"Eventually." Ha! "Regardless, Irene, I can see that is not all that bothers you." Once again, I was reminded that Uncle Lucius likely had the 'empathy' magic and, perhaps more importantly, was just really observant. "What else is weighing on your mind?"

"It's…" I debated trying to change the subject, but figured it was better to just surrender with grace. "It's not exactly anything 'new'." No, it wasn't at all. "It's simply… I get why Uncle Eliwood believes in us, but what if I fail those expectations?" I sighed, twirling my pen around. "What if, no matter how hard I work, I will never be 'great'?" It weighed heavily on me, and made it hard to sleep those few hours I could snatch. "That's all."

There was a long moment of silence before he replied. "Is there something wrong with not being 'great'?" I had no answer. "Irene, why did you take up tactics and archery? I know the latter is not necessarily common for women among the Sacae." He rested a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Why did you want to learn?"

"I…" It took me a long while to answer. "…I thought it was fun." Yes, that was why. I would watch Dad practice and think it cool. I would watch Mom come up with strategies and be fascinated. "When Sue was born, I wanted to be her role model, so I worked hard. But it wasn't bad, because it was fun. It was interesting. I loved it. I loved how the lessons let me spend more time with my parents. I loved how Sue, all tiny, would watch me with wide, sparkling eyes, as if I was the most amazing person she had ever seen." I… had forgotten that. I had forgotten all of that.

"I do not know when you became so fixated on us adults, Irene. It is, clearly, something all of us missed." He rested his hands on my shoulders, crouching down to look me in the eye. "But Irene, are you so certain that you should measure your 'worth' based on others?"

"How else am I supposed to know I'm living up to expectations?"

"By looking at what you have done, perhaps?" I… "You created tactics for a very varied group, and successfully ended a rebellion with no lives lost on your side."

"Mom did the same."

"She never dealt with a rebellion, Irene, and she dealt with less people." Mmm… "Comparing your skill relative to others might be good for determining where you might improve, but your worth…" He shook his head. "Do you know what the people say of you?"

I glanced at the paperwork, and then returned my attention to him. "No, I've not a clue. I've spent most of my time trying to get things organized."

"They call you 'genius'." They… they what? "The calm Sacaean princess who took on a Bernese General to protect Ostia, and won. The beautiful Etrurian noblewoman whose tactics saved Ostia and her most precious treasure, the Lady Lilina." He laughed a little. "If you open your window, you can hear the bards singing," I… did he seriously just say…? "Just think on it, Irene. And think on just why you lost sight of things so important." Why I wanted to do any of this in the first place. "But for now, up and outside, little miss."
"Um… work?" I pointed to the papers. "I need to finish this."

"You need to clear your head. You're becoming too focused, and frustrated because you are aware you are capable, but you have lost your way." …I think he just turned that into a metaphor of my life. "Outside."

"Oh, fine." I sighed, standing with a stretch and a squeak. "If there's an emergency…"

"I will make sure someone finds you. But please." His smile was warm. "You must take care of yourself. Rath and Katri will be most cross with us if we let you get away with bad habits. Especially their bad habits."

"Fine, fine." I wasn't going to win this argument. "…Thanks, Uncle Lucius."

"Anytime, Irene." He laughed softly. "Anytime."

I went on a ride. I went on a long ride through the countryside, by myself. Ostia was a gorgeous province, especially once you left the city boundaries, and there was something soothing to it. When I returned, though, I discovered that my study was locked. I had the suspicion that this was Uncle Lucius's very 'subtle' way of going 'you are done working for the day'. So, debating on what to do, I decided to climb up to the ramparts, where we had confronted Narcian.

When I reached the exact spot, I noticed I wasn't the only one who had decided to climb. Roy was here too.

"Did you get locked out of your study too?" I asked lightly. Roy turned and smiled when he saw me. "I think Uncle Lucius locked me out of mine."

"I think Uncle Matthew did the same with me," he replied with a laugh. "I think there's a conspiracy."

"Well, you know what they say about all work and no play, right?"

"You get things done?"

"Well, you do, but you also hasten your chances of going to Mother Earth's meadows prematurely." I ruffled his hair, laughing as he made a face. "Remember, Roy, you're fifteen. You're still growing."

"I'll turn sixteen soon." That was true. But he was still growing. If not 'taller', then 'broader'. "I'll be taller than you! Just you wait!"

"I highly doubt that." Both Mom and Dad were tall, Dad being the same height as Uncle Hector and Mom being only a little shorter, and I had been taller than Uncle Eliwood for three or four years now. I doubted Roy would end up much taller than Uncle Eliwood. After all, Aunt Ninian had been tiny too.

"You could at least play along." He sulked, but it faded for a smile when I laughed. "Sorry to be childish."

"Roy. Fifteen. Child."

"…Yes, you are one of the few who will still let me." He sighed, looking out over the city. "I think the Council broke laws making me the leader."
"They didn't, but that is only because of a technicality." I snickered at his incredulous look. "Hey, I researched, and so did a bunch of others. You're really too young for all of this."

"Yes, I know." He slumped. "Too young, and too weak." Roy… "I wonder what Mother would think, if she were still alive."

"She would probably be freaking out that her baby boy has had too much stress thrown at him, and start channeling dragons to make the Council submit to her." The very few who managed to make Aunt Ninian lose her temper learned very quickly how stupid of an idea that was.

"Oh, yes, I have no doubts. But what would she think of me?" Roy… "Would she still be proud of me? I don't have any of her strengths, and even less of Father's." What was I supposed to say? "I know that the great are made, not born, but Irene, I do not think that I will ever reach that, no matter how much I train." His gaze shifted to the horizon, the wind ruffling his hair. I thought it was Aunt Ninian trying to reassure him. "And that makes me sad. Would she have been disappointed? I would not blame her."

If there was one thing I knew about Aunt Ninian, it was that she would never have been disappointed in any of us. "Roy, you did lead a very varied group through countless of strange and dangerous situations, and you survived a bunch of battles."

"That was only due to the help of my friends, though." He gave me a wan smile. "Any strength I have is an accident of birth. Any power I have is happenstance. If not for everyone, I would be dead in Araphan, if I even made it that far." He shook his head. "Even here… even here, Irene, if not for you taking such a huge risk, we would have lost Ostia."

"I could only set up the shot because you held your ground."

"I only held my ground because Lilina, Sue, Father, Aunt Lyn, and everyone were with me." That was still a strength, though… that's what I thought. "I am hopeless without them."

I thought about how to reply, but I couldn't think of anything. I could give him all the reassurances in the world, tell him that I believed in him, even tell him just why, but none of it would have mattered. He would hear the words, and even as he would acknowledge that it was my truth, he would not acknowledge it as his. I also could not tell him he was wrong, because so much about us were just… accidents of birth. The talents and skills we might have inherited, the care and nurturing we got, the multicultural environment we grew up in… that was just happenstance. We happened to be born to our parents, and while that gave us skills they never had, potential they never had… it was hard to call it 'ours'. It was hard to say that it was 'our' strength, especially when we had never really done anything with it until now. It wasn't ours yet, and many times, it was hard to think it would be.

So, instead, I just sang. I sang bright, cheerful songs, any and all that I could think of, to lighten the mood. I sang until my throat hurt, and until he was smiling and even dancing a bit to the music.

I thought of how Uncle Eliwood came into the realization on his own, and I thought that, maybe, that was just what Roy had to do as well. It hurt my heart, but I could not force him to believe in himself. After all, I couldn't even believe in myself.

Sometime while I was singing, we got a visitor. Cecilia had come from Etruria as a messenger, and she did not look happy about it.

"I wish I could just throw away this nonsense, but I fear the consequences if I did," she began, not
even bothering for a polite greeting. I glanced around the room, noting who all was here. Roy, Lilina, Aunt Lyn, Uncle Eliwood, and me were clustered around the main room. Guinevere, I knew, was in a side room, listening in. "Etruria would like assistance in the Western Isles."

"They want us to send our only standing force all the way to the Western Isles?" Aunt Lyn asked, visibly startled. I winced at how tired and thin she looked, and how she had to sit to remain any sort of 'posture'. She had been napping prior to this, after a sudden bout of tears. I think she'd been having nightmares of the Lorca, and the rebellion. "Why…?"

"There are 'outlaws' terrorizing the area." The way she said 'outlaws' made me remember all the curses Mother shouted about the Western Isle Campaign. Were they actually outlaws, or were they just people trying to cling to their way of life? "The few reports we've gotten indicate they are looting the mines." So, this was different from Etruria invading and killing the locals for the minerals and natural resources… how? "I'm sorry. As I said, I wish I could just throw this to the side."

"But you cannot, as we are indebted to Etruria," Uncle Eliwood sighed. He looked so incredibly tired. "Just as we cannot refuse for the same reasons. It would give Etruria cause to invade."

"And High Chancellor Roartz would," Cecilia grumbled. She crossed her arms, tapping her fingers on her arm in agitation. "If you would like, I might be able to find a loophole, but it will take time, far more than I think you have."

"Was this made with King Mordred's permission?"

"No, which is why I say I can find a loophole."

"How can this happen?" Roy asked. He frowned, looking confused. "I would have thought the king should be involved in such discussions."

"Normally, yes, but Mordred has been in another world ever since Mildain died," I sighed. I remembered how he looked at the funeral. Mildain… if you were alive, things would have been better. "I remember the letters from Etruria. Roartz is taking advantage of Mordred's shock, and is basically ruling the country. Since Mordred isn't paying attention, he just goes along with whatever Roartz says."

"Exactly," Cecilia confirmed. She was tapping her foot now, extremely agitated. "He even makes sure to keep us Generals away from him. I don't think even Douglas is allowed near." That… was saying something. Uncle Douglas had been Mordred's best friend since they were children. Even when Mordred was being poisoned by some fallen noble, Douglas stayed by his side. "Perceval and I were able to ram things through for Ostia, thanks to the other lords, but…" The thing was that there was no time, and Cecilia did not have enough clout on her own.

"But if we simply finish our mission in the Isles, then we can return, yes?" Lilina asked. Her words were soft, and sweet. "Then we can use that as a negotiation platform for discharging our debt to Etruria, and work on a proper alliance again." That… was true. "We also have many Ilian knights who chose to renew their contracts with us!" We did? When did that happen? The last I heard, they were still in discussions. "I talked to Zealot about it, and he got his group to agree. So, we can leave some skilled soldiers behind." Thus giving us enough forces to deal with whatever was going on in the Isles, and still leave Lycia with some defense. "So, please, don't fret, Cecilia." She clapped her hands. "Ah, but we've been here much too long. Here, let me show you to your rooms to rest."

"Very well." Cecilia laughed, relaxing, and I could see her proud little smile as she followed Lilina.
out of the room.

That left the rest of us to stand awkwardly in the serious silence until Guinevere opened the side door and stepped inside. "I... am going to assume that I should not accompany you all to the Western Isles," she murmured sadly. "Yes?"

"I think so," Roy confirmed. I could see him fighting off the urge to just sigh in frustration. "We don't know what's going on in the Isles and, thus, no idea what dangers there are. It will just be safer for you to stay here."

"Actually, Guinevere, if you like, you can stay with Cecilia," I offered. If I was remembering the map correctly... "Her home territory of Eir is the part of Etruria closest to the Western Isles, and likely where we're going to set sail from. That way you'll be able to see us off, and welcome us back." Plus, barring something unexpected, Cecilia was probably better equipped to protecting her than Lycia at the moment. "I think no matter where you go, you will be in danger, mind. But there's less chance of you being found in Etruria as well, especially now."

"I understand..." Guinevere mumbled. She looked so saddened. "I'm sorry to be so much trouble." She curtseyed. "If it is all right, might I leave? I want to make some safe travel charms we give in Bern for you all." Oh, Guinevere...

"It's probably a good idea for us to disperse anyway," Uncle Eliwood sighed. He looked so tired. "Lyn, I know you're going to hate me for saying this, but..."

"No, I agree," Aunt Lyn interrupted. "I think it will be good for Lilina to go with them." Really? I had thought Lilina would remain here. "Especially since those rumors have popped up again..." What rumors? What did I...? Wait, hold on.

"Are they the rumors I think they are?" I asked dryly. The only response I got was a pair of wry smiles, but that was all I needed. "Father Sky, give me the patience to deal with fools, and to not break people's faces over them. Again."

"That's right. You did attack some of the nobles who voiced them." Of course I did. I'd hurt anyone who dared suggest that Lilina wasn't Uncle Hector's legitimate daughter. The very idea that Aunt Lyn would have an affair was maddening. "I need to go rest..."

"I can help you to your rooms," Roy suggested. He even offered his arm to her, much like a gentleman 'should', and it was enough to lighten the tension in the room. "Come on, Aunt Lyn. You can tell me stories."

"Well, I could explain that sigh tally." Oh, if she did, I wanted to know too. "Let's see..."

The two of them left easily, and Guinevere followed them out, leaving only Uncle Eliwood and I in the study. He looked so tired that I almost asked if I needed to fetch him a pillow and blanket so that he could just sleep here.

"I thought we were done with such rumors," Uncle Eliwood sighed. Again. He did that a lot. ... Wait, I wonder if the tally had anything to do with him. "We looked into it already..."

"You did?" I asked, surprised. I shifted to Aunt Lyn's vacated chair to sit beside him. "I would have thought..."

"Oh, Hector nearly killed anyone who insulted Lyn and Lilina with the suggestion. He looked into it because he was genuinely afraid Lilina's magic was going to kill her." That... made sense. "We had a couple of near misses, but between Fiona's knowledge, Serra and Lucius's staves, and Rath's
herbal remedies, she survived just fine." I remembered those times. I remember holding her hand, and thinking she was burning as fiercely as the sun, and that I would char my hand holding hers. "We got the answers. We let it be known. That quieted them."

"I suppose people are just trying to grab power now, or trying to make you all concede on issues." They could simply just be trying to tire out Uncle Eliwood and Aunt Lyn to take advantage of their exhaustion. "So, where did the magic come from? I'm assuming Aunt Lyn's side of the family."

"Actually, it's both." …Uncle Hector had magic? "Oh, don't give me that skeptical look, Irene."

"Magic and Uncle Hector."

"Hector had an uncanny knack of just knowing where things were, was always able to tell when someone wanted him dead, and sometimes dreamed of the future." He… that did not… that was hard to believe. In fact, it was only because it was so ridiculous that I knew it had to be true. "Apparently magic has always been in Ostia House. Roland's wife was a powerful magic user, and her magic potential was passed to practically every child. The first half of Ostia's rulers was filled with magic users. It's really only in the past couple of centuries that non-magic users ruled."

Clearly, I needed to read up on history. "So, the bulk of it is that, but Lyn's side of the family does play a part."

"It does?"

"Yes, though it took some looking to figure that one out." Uncle Eliwood sighed. Again. Yes, I was willing to bet he had something to do with that sigh tally thing. "Lord Hausen was deceased by the time the rumors started up, so we had to do a lot of investigating, and then cross-referencing, but his wife, Lyndis, had actually been a teacher at Reglay's magical academy." So, like Uncle Erk and Aunt Priscilla? Well, Uncle Erk was the headmaster, not really a teacher-teacher anymore, but… "So, Lilina also inherited magic from her maternal grandmother too."

"That's why she's so strong, then." It was the combination of both of her bloodlines. "Does Lilina know?"

"I don't think so?" He looked confused. "As I mentioned, we looked into it solely to shut people up. Why?"

"I think it would do Lilina a world of good to learn that her magic isn't just random. It's because she is the child of her parents that she is so strong, magically."

"I suppose that would be nice to know, considering everything." Uncle Eliwood smiled wryly. "How do you feel?"

"I think I'm slowly starting to get, and understand, it." I shrugged, smiling sheepishly. "Sorry…"

"No, don't be, Irene. We, as parents, should have seen sooner that our words were not having the intended effect and change our approach." He stood with a groan, and ruffled my hair. "But, Irene, if you don't mind helping me get to my room? I am not quite recovered from my illness, and I don't want Harken nagging my ear off."

"Oh, but that's fun to watch." Despite the teasing words, I stood up and wrapped my arm around his shoulders. "Come on, old man."

His snickers echoed through the hallways, and I couldn't help but smile. As the wind blew, I could almost hear Uncle Hector guffawing along, and that just made the world a little brighter.
I had no idea what was going to come, but… but I think we were all finally starting to take our own paths.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: There is nothing about Lyn's grandmother, and namesake, Lyndis, so I made up the idea of her being a magic user, specifically to have this conversation about Lilina's power. Lots of little callbacks here to conversations Katri had with the FE7 crew (or maybe 'Krew'?). The first part of the third scene is based off of the opening scene for Chapter 9.

Chapter 9) The Misty Isles

The Western Isles are the various islands off the western coast of Elibe. The home of Durban, they were a rather isolated area even during the Scouring. But now, they are mostly colonies of Etruria, who invaded due to the rich minerals and other natural resources that fill the place.

Etruria has called on us to defeat the 'bandits attacking the citizens' and 'restore order', and for that purpose, we march through Etruria and take the ships they provided to a country not even Dad went to during his days as a mercenary. This is completely new territory for everyone in the group. I can only pray Father Sky and Mother Earth watch over us.

The trip was long, especially because half of our number got seasick. Rutger and Sue had particularly bad cases, enough that Clarine was basically assigned their sole healer, leaving Elen and Saul to take care of the rest of us. I… somehow managed to escape seasickness. In fact, there was something beautiful about the water. It was calming, gentle, and the wind rushing about, through the waves, was comforting. You could almost pretend there wasn't a war.

But, of course, you could pretend all you like. Reality won that battle, every time. So, we disembarked from the boats, told something about 'be back in a month' or something, and then were basically left to do whatever. Roy decided we should go to the nearby villages and try to figure out what was going on.

That was where we learned something startling. There were actually bandits running about. You mean there was some truth to the bandits? The Etrurian Court hadn't been lying through their teeth. The world truly has gone mad.

I sighed, walking through the village, my thoughts weighing me down. Apparently, there were some pirates not far from here, and among them was 'a skilled nomad'. I was getting a little tired at seeing so many Sacaeans on the enemy side. I could understand, in theory, the idea of 'swallowing pride to survive', but was that really a life worth living? Wasn't it simply a trap? I didn't know. I didn't understand, and the more I thought about it, the lesser I felt.

I felt all the worse because I knew Dad had been a mercenary, so I felt like I should understand. Then again, Dad rarely talked about his time as a mercenary. He never talked about why he'd been away from the Clan in the first place. I knew, because I had asked, among other things, but I had gotten awkward silence and bitter smiles as a reply. Dad was never one for words.

Small 'clacks' caught my attention, and I followed them to see Lance and Lot playing chess next to the village tavern, using a barrel as a table, and some boxes as chairs. It was an interesting setting, but I noted how they moved their pieces more so. Both were quite good, but I could see how Lot made a mistake. He moved his 'hunter' instead of his 'druid', and that led to Lance trapping him for checkmate.

"You play well," I noted, walking up. Both looked up and… well, Lance at least smiled. Lot was a bit more wary, but that was to be expected. He and I had never really conversed. "I'm impressed,
really. Where did you two learn?"

"I learned as part of the requirements of being a knight," Lance answered. I frowned at that; Pherae didn't have that as part of their requirements. "I was a squire in a different province, Lady Irene. I found myself disagreeing with my lord, though, and left. Lord Eliwood took me in from there, and I completed my training." So, he was a bit like Harken then. "Lot? Where did you learn?"

"There was this old…" Lot began slowly. He frowned in thought. "I think he's a war veteran, though he always says that he is a 'scholar'. A traveling scholar, who often stayed in my village, in the empty house next to mine." Why would a scholar travel here, though? "He taught me. I couldn't find anyone to play with in the mercenary groups, though." He smiled wryly. "Against those who can actually play, I don't stand a chance."

"Well, you can point out your mistakes, so that shows you have skill." Lance shook his head. "I played with Allen the other day, but it was over in two turns."

"I am pleased by the compliment." Lot glanced up at me. "You want to play?"

"If this is how you're trying to get a feel for my tactics, it is a poor way," I pointed out with a little laugh. Mom's lessons had always made it clear. "There are tactics you use in chess that you would not use in the real world, and vice versa."

"That is true, but it is useful in determining what type of strategies you favor," Lot replied easily. I nodded, conceding the point, and he smiled slightly. "I can also tell you more about the lay of the land. Wade and I are from here, though our village is to the north of here."

"If we pass by, let me know. I'm sure you both would like to see your family." A flash of envy washed through me, though. I… wanted to see mine too. Uncle Legault had sent a message shortly before we left that he was infiltrated Bern Castle. I could only hope…

"Yeah, thanks." He pointed to the board, and Lance actually got up so I could sit. "Wait, I thought you were going to play her."

"I'll play second," Lance replied. He grinned, looking more mischievous than I thought him capable of. "So—" Shrieks cut him off, and I could feel all three of us just sighing and thinking 'oh, great, not again'. "I suppose the games will be postponed for now."

"Yes," Lot agreed. He picked up his handaxe and threw it, right at a bandit trying to attack some children. "The village…"

"We'll secure it first, and then rout these people," I sighed. Well, look at that. It was an ambush. "The wind is so calm…" This wasn't a coincidence. The wind would be shrieking otherwise. "There are too many attackers, and all well armed." I had a feeling these bandits had a supplier, and someone was trying to use us to cover the evidence.

Etrurians being manipulative? Maybe the world hasn't gone quite as mad as I thought.

I. Hated. This. Place. There were too many mountains and rivers, and not enough people knew how to ride, and jump, the waters, leaving us stuck on too many bridges, surrounded by people trying to chop our limbs off. To top it off, there were two villages under siege to the north, that only Sue and myself could really reach. Why? The river was too wide for anything but a Sacaean horse to jump, and there were archers all over the place, ready to snipe a flier. That wasn't even including the fog making it hard to see.
They definitely knew we would be coming here. This was all far, far too perfect.

"Ilians knights, I need you to charge for the north! Shana, go support them from the air, but beware of tactics!" I yelled. I ducked under a handaxe, and shot the thrower. Yelling made me a horrible target, but there were so many people that I had to yell. Otherwise, this would be complete chaos. "Lycian cavalry, you need to head south!" This was really far too insane. How did Etrurian Master Tacticians not go mad? "Wounded need to fall back and get out of the way!" Having Elen and Saul at the infirmary, I mean Merlinus, was proving very useful. But I could see the bodies. This was war. This was a campaign.

I felt like despairing. Mom didn't lose anyone. But Mom had been a single tactician commanding less than fifty people. I was a single tactician commander over two hundred. It would be the height of silliness to expect that I wouldn't lose people, and it wasn't something anyone in the army expected either.

I ducked under an arrow, and saw Lugh take out the archer who shot it, so I just looked over the field, trying to figure out what all was going on. Of course, towards the north, I found myself very baffled by something. Noah, for some reason, had dismounted, and was now trying to avoid being cut down by a Wo Dao. It was strange to see that sort of blade here; you rarely found them outside of the Sacae. Father Sky, what the hell?

"You may be a mercenary…!" the girl growled, keeping up her attack, even as Noah kept dodging. "But selling your service to pirates?!" …Um… "You should be ashamed!" Hold on. I was confused.

"Ah, Fir, can I have a moment?" Noah asked, dodging another strike. "Please put down the sword and stop attacking me so that we can talk."

"Don't play dumb!" The only thing that was 'dumb' about this was the situation itself. "You're working with a band of pirates to attack innocent people living on his island!"

"Yeah, see, Fir?" Noah twisted and caught her by the arm. "There we go." The girl struggled to break free, but Noah kept his grip firm. "Now, tell me about these pirates you're talking about? We're fighting to protect the villagers from them."

"…Huh?" The girl looked confused. "But Scott said that this group were the pirates."

"Scott… Scott… I think that's the name of the pirate leader we're supposed to kill." Was it? I stopped trying to keep track of names a while ago. We killed too many people. "Though, if you don't believe me, you can just ask the main hiding in the bushes there." Oh, there was a person there, barely even hiding.

The pirate leapt out of the bushes with a shout, but I shot an arrow clean through his neck. "That takes care of that one," I noted lightly, riding over. "So, Noah, who is this girl?" She wore the garb of a Sacaean, but I didn't see any clan markings on them. Her features were also Sacaean, but her colorings wasn't. Was she half? Was she from Bulgar?

"This is Fir, Lady Irene," Noah introduced. Fir was still staring at the dead pirate, looking a little startled. No, she wasn't a survivor of Bulgar. Her eyes were too clear and bright for that. If she was from Bulgar, she left prior. "You seriously didn't suspect anything?"

"Mother used to say to never judge people by how they look," Fir answered slowly. She still looked a little lost. "Sir Scott was very kind to me, so…"
"He probably wanted that Wo Dao," I answered, pointing to it for emphasis. "Etrurians would pay a fortune for one, because they're so rare, and we never let any escape the plains."

"Oh." She almost seemed to fold into herself. "Um…"

"Lady Irene, might she come with us?" Noah asked. Though the words were light, there was a bit of pleading in his eyes. "She has quite a bit of potential. I've seen her fight." Yeah, it looked like he just had a first-hand look.

"Keep her with you for this battle, Noah," I replied. He nodded, and I thought he smiled slightly. "Fir, stay with him. My name is Irene, and I am the tactician for this army." Fir's only response was to nod. "We'll talk later." I needed to get back to things…

When I turned, though, I got a shock. Lilina was almost killed by an axe user and Roy saved her with a block and a slash. "What are you doing, spacing out?" I heard him actually snap. Lilina just blinked slowly, as if not quite registering him. "You could get killed!"

"I'm sorry," Lilina murmured. I debated riding closer, even as I did ride away to give Noah and Fir some space. "I was just… dumbfounded, I guess."

"By what?"

"How far we are." Her eyes grew sad. "Do you remember five years ago? We were all at Ostia Castle."

"Our parents wanted to discuss something, but we didn't care. You had just gotten a pony from Lord Mark, and wanted to show us."

"Yes, and Sue was teaching us how to climb trees, and Irene was waiting below, hands out to catch us, just in case." Oh, I remembered this. It had been the first time I had seen them since Aunt Ninian's funeral. "Father was still alive. Mom wasn't crippled by poison and sadness. Uncle Eliwood wasn't recovering from a horrible illness. Aunt Katri wasn't captured. Uncle Rath wasn't missing. They were all there, watching us, laughing with us." Yes, I remembered that. I had shown them a riding trick I had just learned. "Lycia was so peaceful. No one would have imagined a war."

"Lilina…"

"It was only a few years ago, yet it feels like an eternity." To be fair, Lilina, five years was one third of your life. "Ah, I sound so foolish. There's no way to go back, and yet, all I want is to do so." She shook her head. "Sorry, I'll be all right. It's back to work for me!" She glanced back and smiled at me. "Irene! What should I do?"

"Rain fire onto the enemies," I deadpanned. It made her laugh and I smiled at her. "Coordinate with Lugh so that there's a constant barrage, will you?"

She laughed again, and waved as she raced off. Roy stared after her, looking almost a little dazzled, before shaking his head and returning to the fray. I watched him fight for a bit, just checking that he was all right, and then I turned my attention back to the field, focusing on the north. Some pirates were swimming that way, attempting to ambush. Should I have Lilina and Lugh electrify them? It might be a good idea.

My thoughts clunked when I realized I couldn't find Sue, even though I knew she went north, and I rode in that direction, trying to keep calm despite my rising panic. To my relief, though, I found her quickly. She had dismounted, for some reason, and was chatting with someone. I thought I recognized the scarf, but… wait, hold on! Sin! That was Sin! What in the… Mother Earth, I thank
you, but what the hell?!

I rode over to them, just to make sure I wasn't seeing things, but Sue beamed at me when she saw me approach. This was real. This was really happening. I reunited with one of the Kutolah.

"Lady Irene…!" Sin breathed, eyes wide as he saw me. "Lady Irene, you are safe as well!" Clearly, the events of everything had bothered Sin if he was showing his relief so openly. He was perhaps the only person I knew who could match Dad in being stoic. "Lady Sue was just explaining how you came to fight here."

"Of course she was," I laughed, dismounting. I hesitated before seizing him in a hug. He stiffened instantly. I wasn't exactly in a habit of hugging him. Honestly, it was only recently we could have cordial talks. …He teased Sue a lot as a kid, and I would always retaliate when the teasing turned to 'bullying'. "Father Sky and Mother Earth, I thank you for your mercy. Sue and I have been worried witless over everything."

"Then it will be no surprise to you that Bern overwhelmed us." Awkwardly, he stepped away, head bowed. "My apologies."

"Sin, I am just grateful you, at least, still live." I smiled slyly at Sue, whose eyes widened. "I'm certain Sue is too." I snickered when she glared at me. Yes, I was teasing. Deal with it! "But what are you doing here?"

"The chieftain bade me to find you and Lady Sue, Lady Irene, and I heard a rumor that the Lycian Army was heading here. I thought to intercept you." Grandpa did? Then, he was okay? "The last that I saw him, he was injured, but continued to harry and harass the Bernese and Djute, along with other survivors of the Kutolah." That was just like him… but still…

"Not that I am not grateful to hear about Grandpa, but I would have expected Dad to be the one asking you to look for us." I glanced at Sue, who simply nodded. She had not heard an explanation for that either, then. "How is he? I heard he was in Bulgar." Sin… didn't reply. He just kept his head bowed, and would not speak. "Sin? Sin, what's-?"

"I'm sorry." The words were soft. "But Lord Rath is dead." Everything just sort of… stopped. "When we were overrun at Bulgar, he ordered us to retreat. The chieftain had been knocked unconscious, so we followed his orders. We didn't even think to question it." Nothing was… making sense. Dad was…? "He had us focus on the wyvern riders as we escaped with what survivors we could grab. We didn't realize until it was too late that he wasn't following." Dad was gone? Dad was dead? I wasn't…? "He shut the gate behind us, trapping the Bernese inside. He sacrificed himself to make sure every survivor could escape." I wasn't going to see him again? I wasn't going to ride back home and give him a hug? I wasn't going to hear him tell me that I did a good job, that he was proud of me?

"…His will." My voice was treacherously even. "Is he…? Did anyone find it?"

"It was among his saddlebags. His horse died in the massacre, but he gave the bags to the chieftain, and thus, it escaped." But Dad's body… "We made a return trip to Bulgar, in an attempt to rescue him, and anyone else we had to leave behind. Using hit and run tactics, we were able to rescue a few more, and retrieve some bodies. His… was among them."

"Where?" Where was he buried? Where did his will indicate he wanted to be buried? That was what a Sacaean's will was. A dictation of where they wished to be buried, where they thought they would best be able to reach Mother Earth's meadows, and reunite with lost loved ones.
"The border between Lycia and the Sacae, not far from Araphan. I buried him on the way here." Why there? …Why not there? It was in Araphan where Dad met Mom. It was in Araphan where Dad met all of his friends. Araphan was where the Campaign of Fire began for him. Of course it would be special.

"How?" How did he die?

"As near as we could tell, the ultimate cause of death was, simply, a loss of blood. He made them earn the right to kill him. Amalda thinks that the last injuries he received were the terrible burns on his torso and neck." Burns… Burns hurt. Injuries hurt. He might have made them 'earn' the right to kill him, but he had been in pain. Dad… had been in pain, all the way until the end.

The wind surged then, and I could not tell if it was the wind screaming in my place, or Dad reaching out to ruffle my hair like he always did.

"I see," I whispered. My voice was still horribly even, and I hated that my brain slowly turned itself back on. I was processing everything. Dad was dead. Dad was gone. I would never see him again. I would never hear him say 'I love you' again. "Sue?" I glanced over, and then down. At some point during the conversation, she had collapsed to her knees, just staring in shock. "Sin, please, look after Sue." She turned to me, eyes slowly filling with tears. "I'll be fine." She still simply stared at me. "I'll stick with the Illian knights." Only then did she nod, but she still didn't move. I wasn't sure she good. "Sin?"

"Please, leave her to me," Sin promised. He lifted his head, eyes hesitant yet resolved. "There… in Lord Rath's saddlebags, there were boxes with your names on them. I have them with me."

"After the battle, and after we have settled into camp for the night."

"Of course." He bowed. "Father Sky watch over you."

"Mother Earth guide your steps, Sin."

The box was both heavy and light. In terms of actual weight, it was light, but it was heavy with its implications. This was something Dad left behind. Whatever was here… whatever was here would be my 'inheritance'. Dad was dead, and this was all I had left of him in this world. This box, and his… my… bow were all that was physically left.

"Lady Irene?" With a start, I dragged myself out of my thoughts. I was in the middle of a war council. Roy, Lilina, Deke, Marcus, Astore, and Zealot were all here. I was physically here too, and I needed to be here mentally as well. "It seems we lost you for a bit," Zealot whispered, helping me ground myself further in the present. He was quietly nudging me to focus, not drawing the attention of anyone. "You missed them talking about how this was clearly an ambush." Oh, so it was nothing I hadn't figured out already. "Do you need a break?"

"I do, but I can't take one yet," I replied. Yes, I very much needed… "I need a long one, and we can't pause this long enough."

"All right." He rested a hand on my shoulder reassuringly. He had asked no questions on the field when I fell in with him and his soldiers, and he asked none now. I very much appreciated that. "Noah says thank you for letting Fir join, by the way."

"I'm legitimately terrified of the trouble she'd get into if we let her go off on her own."

"Yes, I understand that." He flashed me a smile before growing serious again. "This is where we
need to focus again."

"Thank you."

"Ever since Bern began this war, the continent has changed," Marcus was saying. The mood of the tent dropped. "Many strange things have occurred."

"Dragons reappearing, Bern invading, the Lycian Alliance collapsing around us," Lilina listed off easily. She sighed, shaking her head. "So much is different now. But we must keep moving forward, right? There's nowhere else to go."

"Exactly," Roy agreed. I exchanged a weary look with Zealot. Roy and Lilina really should complain more about how stupid this all was. "I was thinking we would head west at first, and then make our way north. There's a resistance group fighting there, and they might have more information." I could almost guarantee it. "But we should let the meeting end for now." I had barely been present, mentally, for all of this. "Though, Irene, think we can talk strategies?" I… "I noticed one of the Kutolah joined us." He gave me a bright, cheerful smile. "So I figured you would want to chat with him, so if we can go ahead…" I was at my limit.

"Actually, Roy, what I really need is to be alone for a while," I answered slowly. The box was so heavy in my bag. "I talked to Sin on the field, and he brought me news." It took everything I had to look Roy in the eye. "Dad is dead." Roy's eyes widened in shock. Lilina covered her mouth to muffle her gasp. Marcus's jaw dropped. Deke dropped his cup of water. Astore and Zealot didn't react, but I could see the sympathy in their faces. "So, I will talk strategies later, but I…" I needed to be alone.

"Of course." Roy took a step towards me before hesitating. "Um… is there anything…?"

"I just need to be alone for a bit, but if someone could check in on Sue, I'd be really grateful." Sue had gone straight to the tents. "Sorry."

"No, please, don't be." Roy's eyes were pained, and I knew he was remembering Aunt Ninian's death. The tears in Lilina's eyes told me she was remembering Uncle Hector's. "Just… post word if you leave the camp."

"Of course." I smiled wryly, waving awkwardly. "I'll be back later, and I'll bring my bow, just in case."

"Okay." Roy braved a smile for me as I left, even though I knew he just wanted to cry too. I wasn't sure if I appreciated it, or if it just made me sadder.

The wind rustled as I left the camp, and I covered my ears, too scared to listen to what messages it carried. I was just out of sight of the camp when I collapsed, shaking and whimpering, still covering my ears.

Was it my fault? If Dad hadn't given me his bow, would he still be alive? …Ah, no, I couldn't think that way. If I thought that way, then I would place blame on Rutger. After all, Dad had given Rutger his sword, and… and it would be so much easier to use him as a scapegoat instead. I shouldn't think this way. Dad gave me this bow to protect me. That's just how he is. Was. That's just how he was.

It was so much easier to think that than to force my heart to believe me, though. But I knew, logically, that I needed to think this way. I… should talk to someone later about this. I think trying to solve this mess of thought would just result in me snapping at a very bad moment.
The wind died down, and I slowly uncovered my ears. I waited for a moment and then, with shaking hands, I reached into my pack and tugged out the box. The light yet heavy box was a decent size. It wasn't something you could easily hold in one hand, but it wasn't really large. It was tied off with a ribbon; I recognized it as one I wore as a little girl. I bet Sue's was also marked with one of her old ribbons. It marked whose box was whose, even better than the carefully written name in the corner.

Carefully, I tugged the ribbon and, after hesitating a moment, reaching back and quickly tied it around my ponytail holder. It was a pretty blue, and I remembered where I had gotten it. Dad had bought it for me in the Aquelian market. Wearing it made me feel a little closer, as if I could almost go back to that time. But I only had patches of memories. I wished I had more. I wished I had more memories in general. The ones I had just... didn't seem enough.

After checking to make sure the ribbon wouldn't fall out, I stared at the box. It was hard to move my hands even that much. It was so hard to breathe. Whatever was inside... I...

I closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. I pretended I was shooting an arrow, just like Dad taught me. I shot one arrow for each dark thought, an extra three for the thoughts trying to make me feel guilty, and an extra five for the ones that tried to make me blame Rutger. When I shot all the thoughts, I opened my eyes and made myself open the box.

Agate earrings caught my attention first, and when I picked them up, I realized I knew exactly what they were. They were Dad's old earrings, the ones he wore while a mercenary, and the ones he had been wearing during the Campaign of Fire. He wore them until he and Mom celebrated their first anniversary, when Mom gave him a new pair that she had designed.

Carefully, I took out my own earrings, and slipped his in. They were heavier than mine, cooler to the touch, but I like the weight. It was very steadying, and thanks to them, I found the courage to look at the rest of the box's contents.

Portraits were the next thing to catch my eye. I picked up the first one, and recognized it after a moment. It was a picture of Mom and me, when I was a few weeks old. The story went that Dad had woken up in the middle of the night, unable to find Mom or me, and had stepped outside to find Mom had taken me outside to stargaze since I couldn't stop fussing enough to go to sleep. He'd drawn what he'd seen: Mom with the moon almost like a halo around her head, smiling gently at me as I gurgled up at her, the sky and plains stretching in the distance.

I recognized the second portrait in the stack more quickly. It was of Dad, Mom, and me, drawn by Uncle Legault. It was drawn at Uncle Eliwood and Aunt Ninian's wedding, and it had been the first time I had left the plains. I was a few months old, and had been frightened by all the strange sounds and smells, so Dad cradled me against his shoulder, singing softly to me as Mom cooed over me. I never did learn why Uncle Legault had chosen to draw such a scene.

The third in the pile I knew in an instance. It was of Sue and me, just a few weeks after she'd been born. We were playing peek-a-boo. She had loved the game, and I had loved watching her face light up with a silly little smile. Grandpa was the one who drew this one. He'd been babysitting us, since Mom and Dad had to take care of serious things in Bulgar, and had drawn a lot that day so that Mom and Dad would have some idea of what we'd gotten into while they were gone.

There were a lot more in the pile, and I realized that these were his 'treasures'. Sue probably had the ones that focused more on 'her', but these were things to help prompt memories. They were things that would help prove that we hadn't imagined things. Dad had... given us...

Shaking my head roughly, I set the portraits back in their 'slot', and looked to the other side. My
breath caught when I realized what they were: letters. They were letters, all written by Dad to me. The top one was dated the day I last saw him.

'Irene,

I just saw you off. It's hard to believe you're riding on your own now. It seems like it was just a few days ago that you couldn't even mount without help. It feels like it was only a few months ago that I carried you everywhere, because you were determined to never learn how to walk. You grew up too fast.'

The camp is a lot quieter without you, and I catch Sue looking for you every other minute. Katri keeps sighing, and I know I can sympathize. Perhaps this is the 'empty nest' syndrome I heard about in Etruria. It's not a concept most Sacaeans are familiar with, but I imagine that this is close. I can still hear your laughter on the wind, and I can only hope you will continue smiling and laughing once you get to Pherae.

You're probably wondering why I'm writing this. I've never been one for words, written or verbal. But I cannot help but worry. Long ago, I heard a prophecy foretelling of great danger. 'An evil star will rise in Bern' and 'a demon controlled by a broken child'. I listen to the wind and hear its fear. I watch the earth and see it tremble. The stars above do not give messages of hope. I fear that prophecy might be coming true now.

I'm certain you're now wondering how, if I had heard a prophecy, I had not mentioned it before. It relates to a question that you once asked me. 'Why were things awkward between Grandpa and you, Dad?' I could never answer that question verbally. The pain is still raw, and while I had forgiven my father for it, it does not erase the scars I bear.

There was a prophecy when I was young, around four, about a great calamity where the earth would be scorched by flames, and I was thrown out, alone, to combat it. I never wanted you to feel as I did. I never wanted you to feel as if you were bound to a fate you barely understood, that your only purpose in surviving was to try and fulfill a prophecy you barely remembered because otherwise, everything you went through was meaningless. Out of the fear of you gaining the same scars, I ignored the memory, and prayed that someone else, something else, could fix things. That way you and Sue could live simply and happily.

But I no longer think that is a luxury we can afford. I fear you will be caught in the middle of this mess. And if you are reading this, then it is because I can no longer be there for you physically. Please, do not feel any guilt. I would rather die a hundred deaths than take the chance that you would be without a good bow while in so much danger, Irene. Rienfleche is a bow that cannot break. Perhaps it might have helped me survive, but there would be no point in surviving if I lost one of my girls. I am glad you wield it.

That does, however, bring me to the point of this letter. As I saw you off, I felt as if I never said enough. I did not tell you 'I love you' enough times. I did not say 'I am proud of you' enough times. Perhaps you saw them, as you and Katri always do, in my smiles and actions, but it does not change this feeling that I did not say them enough, and that I might not have said them the 'right way', so that you would believe and take comfort from the words.

I also realized that there were questions you had asked so many times, but that I always avoided answering, such as why my father and I do not have a close relationship. Sadly, the only ones I can remember right now are that one and 'Daddy, when did you fall in love with Mommy?'.

The answer to that one is not simple, Irene, as I am not entirely certain 'when' I did. I remember admiring how she stood up for Lyn when the marquess of Araphan insulted her. I remember
admiring how she had the courage to change, and how she braved horses time and again, despite having a phobia. I remember being in awe when she chose to ride, alone, simply to help her best friend, a ride that ended up being through a terrible storm. I remember being fondly exasperated when I realized how poorly she took care of herself.

My clearest memories of the Caelin Inheritance Dispute are of her, though. One was after we killed General Eagler, and she and I talked under the stars. I had shown her The Huntress, and she had chatted about her family. The other memory was when I tried to slip away after Lundgren died. I remember hesitating, realizing that I did not really want to leave, but feeling I had to, because of that nebulous destiny that had caused me so much pain. I remember realizing that I did not just want to slip away, that I wanted to at least say goodbye to Katri. I remember being relieved when, by chance, I was able to.

So, I think the 'when' was sometime during that Dispute. But I did not realize it until we met again in Thria, and I saw her, tired and worn but still standing firm, smile at me. Katri has always had a dangerous smile. It's like the sun, but you don't mind that you burn. Regardless, though, that was when I realized my feelings. I discarded the notion that she would ever return them, and even if she did, that she would turn away from the path she had been walking to walk beside me.

Of course, she proved me wrong. She has a habit of doing that.

I think that I will end this letter here. I will write another when I remember a different question you had asked. I'll be certain to write of what is going on here, so that you know, and perhaps some stories of the past.

But, first, I want to make sure to write down what I never said. It has been my life's joy, and honor, to have you as a daughter, Irene. Thank you, for being born, for letting me be your father. You have always been the light of my life, reminding me that good things can be born from even the darkest of circumstances.

Love, Dad'

I set the letter back in the box, my fingers tracing over the others. I peeked at them, and realized they were exactly what he said. They were all stories, gossip, and answers. I thought about going ahead and reading them, but decided against it and, instead, returned the letter to the box, and put the lid on it. I… did not have the mental strength to keep going today. Everything just… hurt.

The wind surged again, but this time, I did not cover my ears. It danced around me, wrapping around softly and surely. When I closed my eyes, I could almost sense Dad, and knew this was him giving me a hug. This was him reassuring me that things would be okay, one day. One day, this pain would ease.

All I had to do was walk forward, on my own path. I just wish… I just wish I could run to him, one more time, and ask dozens of questions. I wanted one more smile, one more teasing remark. I wanted one more hug, one more song. I wanted one more cup of tea, and one more lesson.

I wanted one more of everything. But I would never have it.

Notes on Fir

- A beginning swordmaster who is has a lot of potential, but I worry about how she's going to reach it without a lot of extra training.
- The daughter of Karla and Bartre, and I know the names from the Campaign of Fire.
Marcus says this also makes her the niece of Karel, the Sword Saint. So, swordsmanship definitely runs in the blood.

- Stubborn, and a bit single-minded, and despite traveling, she is still clearly out of her depth
- I think she's faster, and luckier, than Rutger, but he is definitely stronger. I think they'd work well together, if we can get her up to everyone else's level.
- She has the fire affinity.

Notes on Sin

- A Childhood friend, though he's more of Sue's friend than mine. He was a bully as a child, especially to Sue, and I paid him in kind.
- Calm, always alert, and these traits have just been... well, I think Bulgar traumatized him, and made him even more stoic and alert.
- He's always sort of been 'in the middle' when it came to us three. He was stronger than Sue, but weaker than me. He's faster than me, but slower than Sue.
- He's a bit less accurate at times, and less lucky if I have to be honest, but he's always had greater stamina than either of us.
- Regardless, I owe him. He actually gave me answers, even if they were not ones I wanted to hear.
- His affinity is ice.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: So, if anyone is keeping a timeline, Rath died during the Bulgar Massacre, meaning he is technically the first FE7 casualty of the story, dying prior to the ambush at Araphan. The idea that Sacaeans keep a 'will' dictating where they wish to be buried is my own creation; there is nothing in game that suggests it. The letter is here as a callback to the one Katri read from her mother during chapter 31x. Yes, something I want to emphasize is that unlike Katri, Irene is commanding a lot more people, not just the named playable characters.

The conversation with Lance and Lot is based on their B support. Roy and Lilina's conversation after Fir's recruitment, and before Sin's, is based on their B support, though the visit they mention in it is based on the epilogue, instead of what is actually said in the B support.

In terms of gameplay, FE6 is interesting in that it has branching paths at two separate points. This is the first point, which determines which of two sets of chars you get. But this is a novelization, where I can do things impossible in game, so we're actually doing all four maps here, getting all four of these 'exclusive' chars... and we will later be doing both the Illia and Sacae routes after chapter 16x (though, I believe one Sacae chapter will be removed). The point of me mentioning this is to let you know that from this point forward, chapter numbers will not match up with the game chapter numbers (I'll write down the in-game chapter number in the Author's Notes likely).

Next Chapter – Amidst a Struggle
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 10) Amidst a Struggle

So, surprise, surprise, the bandits knew we were here and were trying to kill us. Roy decides that we should go and talk to the resistance force, in hopes of learning more about the truth of the Isles. I've been doing my best to help, learning about the Isles from Lot and Wade, especially things like weather and typical terrain, and potentially safe places to get supplies. The local flora and fauna. The work helps to ground me, though I am careful to take care of myself. Dad would be upset if I worked myself sick just because... I still can't believe he's dead. My brave, strong Dad, always there with a hug and a song... he's dead. He's dead, and I have to continue the fight. I have no time to sit and mope.

That's fine. I'll just sing when the sun sets again, to steady my nerves, and to 'sing' with him like I used to.

"We're stopping here for now," I called, reining my horse to a stop and dismounting. We had been traveling all morning. "See if any of the villages want to share in our lunch!" It was just something Roy and I had decided on a whim, noticing how hard off some of the villagers were. It proved to be popular among the army, and it earned us good favor with the people. Hopefully, it would help make them realize we were here to help, even if we were a very large, very armed group.

Since this was so common now, the group easily fell into their habits. Some cooked; some scavenged. Some went to the villages; some went to get injuries checked. I watched the meander about the temporary camp we set up, biting my lip as I noted the people who were gone. According to Marcus and Zealot, having 'only' fifty dead, and twenty crippled, was 'incredibly and wonderfully low', but it still made my stomach turn a bit. It made me remember how Mom did a campaign with no deaths, even as I could logic that I already had way more people than she did and this was not a campaign done in secrecy.

But I couldn't help but remember that there were fifty people who would never make it home. That was fifty letters to families that Roy and I had to write. We wrote even for the Ilian Knights, which Zealot had been so startled by. Apparently, it wasn't a thing normally. But we had wanted, and he had kept them close to be sent when things were a little less hectic.

I could help but remember that was twenty people who could never fight again, a travesty especially to the Ilian knights. That was twenty people we had to watch for suicide attempts, out of despair or a feeling of uselessness. That was twenty people we tended to carefully, but I could see in their eyes how much they hated themselves because they felt they were getting everything for nothing. Perhaps we... armies typically had things like aides and pages, right? We could put them to work as that, and streamline a few things. Maybe that would help them...

I shook my head, and looked back over the group, my eyes falling to Roy and Lilina. I walked over them, curious as to what they were talking about, but I paused as I got close enough to eavesdrop.

"Perhaps all of that is true," Roy was saying. His eyes were resolute and his smile was kind. "But
some things will never change."

"Oh?" Lilina replied. She tilted her head curiously. "Like what?"

"Like us." …Um… um… Roy. Roy. "We'll always be together." Roy, were you purposely trying to flirt or were you being oblivious? "We can't go back to the past, but perhaps we can build the future. A future as good as… no, better than the past." Okay, he was obliviously flirting while… saying something I had never thought of before. "So… ah…" He trailed off as Lilina suddenly burst into laughter. "Hey! What are you laughing at?"

"You!" She was laughing so hard she was crying. "Talking like that! Are you trying to charm me?"

"U-um…" Roy coughed awkwardly, glancing away. "$I guess it was a little overly grand." Oh, yes, it was only a little.

"Yep!" She gradually calmed down to just giggling. "But really, thanks." Her smile was bright. "And you're right. We'll be together forever." Guys. Guys. I love you two, but guys!

"Of course." Roy returned her smile just as warmly. "Always."

"Hey, if you two are done proposing to each other, I need to talk to Roy," I deadpanned. Both of them squeaked, and actually jumped apart. "Lilina, you mind checking in on Fir for me?"

"Y-yes!" Lilina agreed. Her face was bright red, though she gave me a grateful smile. She knew I was giving her a chance to escape. "$I'll see you later!" She was off like a shot, easily navigating the crowd.

"Um…" Roy's mumbling just made me start laughing. "$I wasn't…" he stammered. His face was also bright red. "$Um…"

"So, where did you come up with that thing about building the future?" I asked, deciding to have mercy for now. His grateful smile told me that I would tease twice as hard next chance I got. "$I wish." Slowly, his blush calmed and he pulled something from his pocket. It looked to be a letter. "$While we were vacationing in Hanover, Father remembered that Mother had left me a letter. I was to get it when I came of age, but considering everything, he decided to give it to me sooner. I read it on the way here." So, Aunt Ninian was still trying to help her little boy. I wondered if she and Dad were chatting now in Mother Earth's meadows. "$The words are hers, mostly. I like them, though. They resonate a little better than 'I believe in you'. I mean…" He shrugged. "$I think their priorities are skewed."

"Roy, this really shouldn't be a surprise," I deadpanned. He made a face. "$It really shouldn't. You'll note there are very few in the army who are."

"Clarine is."
"Clarine is a tad sheltered, but even then, her surprise is the extent, not that it is happening in the first place."

"I suppose." He sighed. "Can we help the resistance? Can we help these people?" He looked out over the village. "It's small, and it's poor, but you can tell its theirs. It's a wonderful place."

"If you're willing to oppose Etrurian nobility, then sure, we can." I frowned when I noticed him looking at me. "Why are you staring?"

"You, Sue, and Clarine are of the Great Houses of Etruria, yes?"

"Yes?" …Father Sky! "You're going to use us as plausible deniability and bait to get out of trouble." I groaned as he started snickering. "Damn it, Roy!"

"I might as well use my advantages!" Yes, but still! Still! "Regardless-"

"General Roy! Lady Irene!" A soldier ran up to us. I recognized them as one of the scouts. "We received a report that the lord of this area, Zinque, has dispatched troops to destroy the villages!" they informed us breathlessly. Was that… it sounded like 'Zinc', but… oh, goodness, I was getting too caught up in the name of a soon-to-be-corpse. "They're looking for a bard!"

"For a musician?" Roy asked, visibly startled. I glanced around and noticed that there were a lot of soldiers showing up. This was… "Why?"

"He is apparently the tactician for the resistance." The lord here was trying to flush him out, then. "The villages…"

"Call everyone to arms! We must help them!" Roy glanced at me, but I was already moving, signaling for the scouts to get me a map of the area as soon as possible. "We'll deal with the consequences later! Our cause is just, and we must follow it!" Well, that was a little bombastic.

I might have tossed a joke over my shoulder, but I saw Lot push his way through the crowd, and noticed something startling. He was normally stoic, but now he was quite visibly afraid. "What is it?" I asked softly. This was clearly important. "Tell me."

"I…” he began. He was so afraid that he could not quite think of the words. "…The villages to the north, just within sight…” I could tell it was difficult for him to say this. "They're home." Oh! "They're-"

"Go. I'll make adjustments. You head to your family, and make sure they're safe." The smile he gave me was worth every bit of trouble I might have. "Take Deke, Shanna, and Lance with you, along with a squad of the Ilian knights." Actually… "Treck is easygoing enough, so take his."

"Thank you."

"Always."

These were really cramped quarters. It didn't help that we took up more space due to making sure every village had at least a squad to defend them. I refused to do any less, and Roy agreed completely.

"Zealot, spread out your cavalry! You're going to get boxed in by the enemy archers and mages!" I yelled. I needed… "Wolt and Dorothy, take the archers and retaliate!" They knew the area. They had the advantage. I might have the layout, but I didn't know where they might be hiding exactly,
or what they were armed with. "Wounded, you need to fall back!" Things that I realized often was that the Ilian knights were not used to their employers actually giving a damn about their continued living. "Noah! You've three who aren't listening! Get them out of there! Have Fir cover their escape!" Fir wasn't very strong, but she was very fast, and her Wo Dao was perfect for destroying joints.

"Here." Startled, I glanced down and smiled when I saw Rutger was passing me some water. "East is cleared," he informed me as I sipped. He'd sweetened it with mint, and that made me smile. "Do you want us to remain there in case of reinforcements?"

"For the time being, yes." Having drained the canteen, I smiled sheepishly as I passed it back. "Sorry…"

"Do you need more?" He held up another one. "You've been yelling a lot."

"This is a battle where it's needed. Too many changes, too quickly."

"Watch your health." He tugged my arm, and I ducked automatically, dodging a fireball. "Wasn't Allen guarding you?"

"I had to send him to reinforce the southern village. They got ambushed from behind." I shook my head. "Regardless, please return there."

"Stay safe."

"Father Sky watch you." I watched him leave and smiled at his back before returning my attention to the field. I frowned when I noticed Sin and Sue had pulled out of combat and rode over, worried by how they seemed to be arguing.

But it had calmed by the time I made it over, apparently to Sue's defeat. "Very well," I heard her sigh. She shook her head, smiling wryly. "You sound like Grandpa when you argue with me."

"That is the highest praise you could give me, Lady Sue," Sin replied with a small smile. I knew it was because he highly respected Grandpa. "So, will you fall back?"

"This time." Sue sighed again before glancing up at me. "Oh, Irene."

"Mind going to cover Fir and Noah?" I asked, smiling innocently. She smiled back, well aware of what I was doing. But she rode off without another word, and I focused on Sin. "I'm warning you right now. I am not falling back." He immediately drooped. That had been his next action then. "Please save your breath, as there is nothing you can say to make me change my mind."

"The Silver Wolf asked me to protect you both, though," he protested. His eyes were pained. "Please…"

"…Then let me make a change to that order." I leaned forward a bit, looking him right in the eye. "Guard Sue. Just focus on protecting Sue."

"But."

"You will still be fulfilling his request by protecting one of us, Sin. If you have even a quarter of the respect for me as you do for Grandpa, then please, do as I ask, and just focus on guarding her."

"Surely you can be the tactician from the back lines."
"Sin, I am no leader." I shook my head. "I am woefully out of my depth, and I'm not really a charismatic person." He gave me the most skeptical look, but I refused to be distracted. "If I am on the field, I can see what needs to be changed immediately. If I lead from the field, then they are more likely to listen. I remain because I am the tactician, and I want no delays due to misinformation and distrust."

"…I understand." He sighed, drooping. "It is times like this, Lady Irene, that I am reminded you are Lord Rath's daughter."

"Thank you for the compliment." Mom would say that I got my stubbornness from Dad too. According to her, Dad and I were the only people in the world more stubborn than her. "Now, return to your post. You're pulling double duty, mister."

"Understood. Mother Earth guide you."

"Father Sky watch you." I watched him leave, and took another glance around. Noting things going well, I let myself relax for a brief second. I wouldn't get much more, I knew, but for a brief moment…

"Reinforcements!" Shanna came swooping down, and I gave her a worried look. "Oh, everything is fine up north. Wade and Lot's folks are all nice and safe." Oh, thank you, Father Sky. "But there's enemy reinforcements from the south, a whole bunch of them." Of course they were. "Their leader is an archer with blonde hair." I see… wait, hold on. "I think it's the Archery General of Etruria. He's in charge of the military forces here on the island, and he looks like the person who contracted my sister."

"Your sister?" I was going to focus on that because I…

"Tate. She's the middle of us." Oh, so she was like Aunt Farina then? "…Um… do you think we can make it so that I don't have to fight her?" She gave me a pleading look. "I know the Ilian code and all, but…"

"Ilian code?" That was… yes, I read that in the manual. It was the 'rule' that all Ilian mercenaries swore by. The job superseded everything, even ties of blood and friendship. If we fought, then Shanna would be bound by the code to fight, and kill, her sister. "…Archery General, you said?"

"I think so."

"Then get me Clarine, and tell her to meet me towards the south." The archery general… it was a more recent post. Mildain had fought for it, citing that a fourth general was needed for proper division of tactics for the whole Etrurian Army. He had won the fight just a year before he died, and the person he appointed to it was… "If you see your sister, distract her and her forces. I might be able to do something."

"Thank you!" Shanna's smile was bright and cheerful as she launched into the air again. "You're the best, Irene!" Well, now I was determined to succeed.

I started galloping towards the south, shouting orders as I went. This was a gamble, and while I might win, I was also aware that I could lose. Things had been so strange lately, but…

I made it to the south a little bit behind Clarine, and I reined in my horse to gape at the forces. Someone was taking no chances with us. Thankfully, though, Shanna had been right. Klein was the leader of the forces, and sending his little sister first was perfect for shocking him into a standstill."

"Clarine?!" I heard him yelp as he ran over to her, glancing back to make sure his troops stopped
the attack. "Clarine, what are you doing here?!"

"It's a long story!" Clarine laughed, full of cheer despite being splattered with blood and muck. She dismounted and hugged Klein tightly. He hugged her back automatically. "Oh, but why did you stop writing? That's what led me to it all in the first place."

"I... uh... didn't?" He stepped back. "But, never mind that. The trouble you get in..." He sighed, ruffling her hair. "Well, you're safe, and that's what matters." He glanced around, smiling awkwardly at his soldiers. I was amused how cheerful and fond they looked. Someone had been charming. Again. "So, why are you out here in the Western Isles? Did you find a trustworthy mercenary to hire?"

"Oh, no, I joined the Lycian Army in exchange for their protection." Clarine, that was way too cheerful.

Klein's expression completely blanked. "You joined the what."

"The Lycian army." She pointed to the others, who were still fighting, and I noted with some amusement that Rutger wasn't far away, keeping a wary eye. "My healing staves have been most useful! Irene praises me all the time!"

"Irene?"

"Yes, Irene is here. She's the tactician for the entire army!" She tugged his sleeve sharply. "You should see her as soon as possible. It'll do her good." Clarine, can you not intervene in my non-existent-? "Uncle Rath is dead, and she just found out. Sue is here too, but Irene goes off on her own a lot, so I think you should see her first." ...Ah. "Also, you should very much ask to court her, Klein." CLARINE!

"This is neither the time nor the place for such teasing, Clarine." ...Of course, hearing how calm he was didn't really do much for my self-esteem at the moment. "Might I ask something?"

"Yes?"

"What kind of individual is General Roy?"

"Hmm..." Clarine frowned in thought. "He's a tad rough around the edges for a noble." Um... "His hair especially is an absolute mess. He really needs a better comb." Clarine, I love you.

"Let me rephrase that." Klein, on the other hand, looked exasperated. "Is General Roy working with the bandits?"

"No, of course not." She said it so easily and nonchalantly that I couldn't help but smile. "His looks aren't the best, but his heart is. It's really easy to see why Lilina is head over heels for him." Ha! "But Klein, why would you even ask? You know that Roy is practically Irene's little brother."

"Things have been very strange lately." Ah, so he had no idea if Roy had changed too.

"Oh, because of the war?"

Klein's expression blanked again. "What war?" Did he... really not hear about...?

"The war Bern started, of course." Clarine waved her hand, and Klein could only stare. No, he hadn't. He hadn't at all. "Anyway, no, we've been sent here to vanquish the bandits, but it seems like the real ones are the Etrurians here. They're so malicious; it's absolutely embarrassing, really."
She paused, tilting her head. "Oh, wait, Klein, why were you here again?"

"I am tasked with the protection of the villagers." Klein's eyes hardened. "So, if that is what your army is doing, then allow me to assist."

"Yay~ I love you, Klein!" She hugged him again and bounced back. "This is going to be great! I'll show you how grown-up I am now!" Oh, Clarine… "Ah! Irene!" Clarine waved at me. "Over here!"

"Yes, yes," I called, riding over. I dismounted to better look at Klein, and I couldn't help but smile. "I was most put out when you stopped writing."

"I am still confused by that, as I very much did write," Klein grumbled. Still, he smiled warmly. "I was most put out at not receiving replies!" He bowed a little, and took my hand to kiss it, as if we were in Etruria's court. "A pleasure to see you again, my lady."

"You are a complete dork." But I couldn't help but laugh. "I'm in the middle of a job."

"Of course, and now you have to command my forces." …Oh, Father Sky, help me. "Shall I tell you what they're trained to do?"

"No, I'm going to tell you what I need done, and you're going to do it."

"I suppose that's fair, but I do have a request." He smiled sheepishly. "We… ah… need to head north. I had my pegasus knights…"

"You were going to catch us in a pincer." I sighed. "Well, get on, Klein." I mounted up and pulled him with me. "Clarine, stick near Rutger." Clarine's response was to giggle, and walk over to him. "Oh, by the way, Klein, I'm setting her up with Rutger."

"You're what." He grumbled something under his breath when I didn't reply, but simply started galloping for the north. "You're not."

"I definitely am. I'm playing matchmaker. It's fun."

"I'm sure it is, but leave my little sister out of it!"

"No way! They're adorable together!"

"Irene!" He yelped as I nudged my mare to go even faster. "Whoa!"

"You have to hold on, silly!" I glanced at him over my shoulder, and gave him a bright smile. He stared a bit, as if startled. "You're going to fall!"

"R-right…" He wrapped his arms around my waist, and leaned into my back. "It really is good to see you. A year is too long."

"…Yeah…" I smiled and felt more relaxed now than I had in a long, long while. "It really is. Let's chat over drinks later."

"Sounds good."

With Klein's forces, we quickly took command of the battle, blocking off every route. However, there was one thing troubling.
"My pardon, but you are certain you saw wyvern knights here, Tate?" I asked, frowning. Wyverns… I suppose it could be wyvern riders who left Bern and turned to mercenary work. "It couldn't have been anything else?"

"No, I have three separate groups give me the same report," Tate replied. I could see the physical resemblance between her and Shanna, but while Shanna was smiling and laughing, she was stoic and calm. "A female wyvern knight in red armor, and a male wyvern knight in blue armor. They did not seem ready for combat. More like a search party." Who would they be searching for? Could it be Guinevere? I should ask Elen later if the descriptions match anyone she might know. "My apologies. Should I have waited to report it?"

"No, I'd rather have it now before memory makes you question twice." I smiled at her. "Thank you for telling me. Do you mind harrying the enemy from above as before?"

"As you wish." She saluted and took off easily. Well, that was…

"She's a very serious soldier, but few I would trust more on the field," Klein explained, walking up. He watched the sky for a bit before looking to me. "My group cleared out Lord Zinque's guards."

"I see," I murmured, turning to him. "You sure you're good for it?"

"If we catch him with his guard down, and without his helmet, we can take him down within four arrows." Yes, that was true. That was why I had decided to do this. Though, it did feel a little odd. I normally was coordinating everyone until someone else dealt with the 'boss'. "Shall we, my lady?"

"Klein, you are a dork." Still, I relaxed and he smiled at me. "Yes, I've got you."

He nodded and left, heading for the boss guarding the gates of the castle here. I dismounted and set up close by, drawing an arrow, but careful to not aim yet. Maybe Klein could charm the guy into giving up.

"Lord Zinque, might we speak?" I heard Klein call. I tensed, waiting as this Lord Zinque person approached, taking off his helmet. Now I aimed, but only because the sneer he had. "Are you certain you are attacking the right people?" Klein, for his part, pretended to be completely relaxed. I knew, however, that he was prepared for a quick draw and fire. Aunt Louise taught him that trick. "It seems the people are suffering here?"

"What of it?" Lord Zinque immediately replied. He actually rolled his eyes. "The people are suffering?" He scoffed. "Why should I care? They live to serve me." He settled his spear, aiming for Klein's head. "Their wails are meaningless."

I took the opportunity to shoot out one of his eyes. "You are a fool for thinking an archer would come speak with you alone," I taunted, leaving my perch to come stand next to Klein. He snarled at me, but I smiled. "It is very nice to meet you lord whatever the hell your name is. I am Irene of the Kutolah, scion of House Hanover." He paused, lone eye widening. "You just admitted to abusing your power and your people to Klein of Reglay." His eyes widened further when Klein helpfully waved. "You're dead, sir. You're dead, and no one will care." I drew back another arrow, and saw Klein do the same. "Enjoy that thought. It's the last you'll have."

Klein and I both fired at the same time. His arrow caught the guy in the neck, while I shot out the other eye. Well, that was that. Now, should I return to the battle or…?

"Irene!" Roy ran up, blood splattered but smiling. "We're routing the enemy," he informed me. I breathed a sigh of relief. "It won't be long at all." Good, good… "Oh, I don't believe we've met,
"No, but I believe I have heard quite a bit about you," Klein replied. He smiled and bowed to Roy. "I am Klein, Clarine's elder brother, and Archery General of Etruria."

"Oh, I know you. Irene talks about you often." The smirk he gave me also made me remember that I had told him that I had a crush and I knew he was going to bring it up. "So, regardless-"

"My pardon." We all paused as someone approached. He looked… like Mildain. I shared a wide-eyed look with Klein, just to confirm that I wasn't imagining things. He thought the same. This person looked like a frailer version of Mildain. "My name is Elphin," the man continued, smiling gently. "Might I speak with General Roy?"

"You may," Roy replied, smiling back. "I am him. What do you need?"

"I wanted to thank you for defending the villages here." Elphin's expression, however, was worried. "But now you stand against Etruria."

"Even so, I have no regrets." He pointed at Klein and me. "Besides, I have them, and their siblings."

"Scions of Reglay and Hanover as shields." Elphin laughed softly, clearly amused. "You're much more politically savvy than one would expect for your age." Elphin closed his eyes, nodding to himself. "Might I ask a question?"

"Sure."

"Don't you find it unusual that Etruria sent you here in the first place?"

"Well, yes…?" Roy sounded confused, and frowned. "Why?"

"I would take a guess and assume it was High Chancellor Roartz and Lord Arcardo who requested your aid?" He waited for Roy to nod before continuing, arms crossed. "I wonder why they were so eager to get your army off the mainland. Perhaps something to do with the rumors?"

"Rumors?"

"They say Roartz and Arcardo are working with Bern." They might be what? "It would be very beneficial for the army that stopped Bern's invasion to suddenly be away, yes?"

"They could be after Lycia…!" Roy's eyes widened, but he quickly closed them to think. "Lycia, by their knowledge, is wide open…"

"Perhaps you should make arrangements to return for your country's safety?"

"…No, we will stay." Roy's eyes were firm and resolute when he opened them. "It's difficult to judge what may be hearsay and what is truth." He looked right at Elphin, eyes narrowing. "Just because you worded things so that I may jump to conclusion does not mean that conclusion is correct." I couldn't help but beam at him, and I saw his stance firm up when he saw it. "I am concerned, yes, but there are many, many strong and skilled people n Lycia, far more than Bern or Etruria will think." That was an understatement. I pulled my gambit on Narcian specifically to keep that hidden. "But the people of the Isles truly only have us to rely on, since the resistance force has taken such losses." Roy paused and glanced at Klein. "Though, how much of a threat would Etruria be right now?"
"The various nobles have their own personal forces," Klein answered easily. He crossed his arms, and shook his head. "I command those from the Etrurian Army directly, which means that I have taken away their chances of reinforcements, and I have taken away Al…” He paused. "I'm about to mispronounce his name again. I can tell."

"Were you going to call him Alucard or something again?" I teased. He made a face and I laughed. "I still remember you saying that to his face."

"I was six. I could get away with it then." He shook his head. "Regardless, you gain forces, and they lose some, but there will still be many, many battles."

"I see…" Roy murmured. He smiled and then turned back to Elphin. "I'm sorry. I appreciate your information, but I will not leave." His smile fell when Elphin started chuckling. "Um…"

"Ah, my apologies," Elphin murmured, using his hand to muffle the sound. "I was simply thinking what a good upbringing you must have had, to be so wise at such a young age." He shook his head. "You have no need to apologize to me, General Roy. I purposely said that in order to test you."

"...I can't say I appreciate that."

"Few would. But the fate of the Isles cannot be left to those rash enough to jump at rumors." His eyes were clear, and I definitely got the impression that while he was manipulative, he had a good heart and was careful about when and where he pulled such tricks. "Please, allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Elphin, a bard, and the strategist for the resistance force." Oh, he was the bard the villagers mentioned… "If I might ask for your assistance in helping the people?"

"...Okay, but I still don't like the test thing." Roy sighed, glancing at me. "That okay with you, Irene?"

"He specifically mentioned 'strategist', despite everyone else calling him the 'tactician'," I replied. Roy's expression blanked and I grinned when I saw I'd caught him off-guard. "Roy, he said that specifically because he and I can work together for our army. I can leave the strategist stuff to him, and he can leave the tactician stuff to me. I'm assuming he's a bit poor in the latter."

"I am indeed," Elphin admitted easily. He looked a little disgruntled about it. "I am better than many in the force, but I do not have the head for it. I like my planning, and do not react well to sudden changes. It was my mistakes that led to the losses you mentioned."

"Pulling double duty wasn't helping matters." I smiled reassuringly at him. "Basically, Roy, yes, I'm okay with it, because he can handle that stuff, and I can handle the tactician and field stuff, and we're both fully in our element."

"I can assist on the field as needed." Elphin's smile was warm. "I have the Bardic Gift. I only know a handful of songs, but they can be useful." That would be useful indeed. "If I might make a suggestion on where to go?"

"Where were you and your group planning?"

"The plan was to head towards Eburacum, the Mine of Death. I imagine if there are survivors, they're heading there."

"You were heading to the mines?" I bit my lip as I thought. "Ah, I see. You'll head there, cut off the head of the operation, and then backtrack and free people along the path."

"Yes." Elphin nodded. "I am not certain how good of a long-term plan it was, but Ekhidna, the
leader of the resistance, insisted on it. Something about promising a little girl she'd bring her father back."

"Then we'll head that way in the morning," Roy decided. "For now, we should help the villagers here." Yes, we should. "If you can tell me more as we do so?"

"As much as I can. I promise."

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I liked looking up at the stars when everything calmed down at camp. It didn't matter where on Elibe you were, the stars remained constant. It was as comforting as an old, worn blanket, and that was a comfort I sorely needed with everything. After all, no matter how much I worked, everything still hurt. Everything from Mildain's death to learning about Dad's just hurt. But under the stars, they all seemed just a little more distant, and I had the time to focus again.

It was also nice for singing. It had started simply singing for Dad's spirit, since I could not sing for his funeral. But now, I simply sang. I sang and I listened to the wind for his voice, humming a harmony to my words. We had sung a lot under the stars while I was growing up.

A string of notes caught my ear and made me stop the song mid-note. I turned to see Elphin walk up, and realized not only had he played along, but he had purposely played to not startle me.

"Ah, I did not mean to disrupt the song," he murmured, smiling gently. "But I hear often of the good hearing Sacaeans have, and thought you might be unnerved by not noticing my approach."

"I expect it when I am focused," I replied with a little shrug. I shifted to a higher rock and let him have my previous perch. "I was listening more to the wind than the living."

"I have heard that Sacaeans can hear spirits on the wind."

"Father Sky brings their messages to us as they rest in Mother Earth's meadows." My smile softened. "I sing in hopes that Dad does too. He's been humoring me these past few nights."

"I see." He finally sat down, looking up at the stars. "How kind of him."

"Yes…" You know, looking at him right now, I could see the resemblance more heavily. Could he really be…?" "…Mildain?"

"Lady Irene, did you already forget my name?" His voice was gently chiding. "It is Elphin."

"Ah, I'm sorry." Of course… of course, it couldn't be him. Mildain was dead. "I suppose I had a faint hope. You look like him."

"Do I?"

"Yes." I smiled wryly. "Same delicate features, same coloring… you both even have the Bardic Gift." I thought I saw his grip tighten on his lyre. "Elphin?"

"Ah, my apologies." He sighed, shaking his head. "I simply grieve that I put such a sad look on someone who was already so melancholic."

"Oh, it's not your fault." I waved off his concern and made sure to smile. "I was… just being a little foolish."

"Why not tell me about him?"
"Mildain?" I laughed as he nodded. "Well, truthfully, I used to have a huge crush on him." I scowled when he started coughing suddenly. "What's with that reaction?"

"I suppose I was a little startled."

"Hey, I'm allowed to have crushes. It was a stupid one, though." I shook my head, sulking as he struggled to not laugh. "I liked how he listened to me. It wasn't something I was used to in Etruria." I relaxed, closing my eyes as I thought of him. "He was always kind and gentle. The storybook perfect prince, though he had silly little flaws that made him more real."

"Such as?"

"He hated peas and carrots, and would always slip them into the nearby plants." I snickered, remembering. "The servants would get all confused. It was hilarious."

"You miss him a great deal." His smile was kind when I glanced over. "It's easy to see by your smile."

"He died a year ago, and for a while, I cried every morning and every night. My eyes would get so puffy." I sighed. "Of course, so much is going on that I find that I can't cry. It's stupid, really. I cry when frustrated and annoyed, but I can't cry over really sad things until it's long over with."

"I think it's admirable how you have the courage to wear your heart so openly." He started tuning his lyre, and I couldn't help but smile. Mildain had that habit too. "But I think the reason why you do not cry during 'serious' things is because your focus is ultimately not 'how could this happen?', but rather 'what do I have to do to make things right again?' and 'what do I do to make sure nothing like this happens again?'." Hmm? "Crying is a natural response to sorrow, but you prefer to use that time to creating more tactics, or checking over things. Or simply sitting alone to ensure that you are grounded in the present, so that you may continue to work."

"...That's quite the analysis for someone who just met me."

"I might have asked around the camp. After all, we will be working together." This was true. "But that is perhaps a discussion for a different time." He smiled up at me. "Do you know the words to the folk song 'Long, Long Ago'?"

"Oh, yes." It was one of the songs Mildain taught me, actually, the very first one. We spent a lot of time in the gardens, performing. "Let's see..." I hummed the melody a bit before starting. "Tell me the tales that to me were so dear~ Long, long ago, long, long ago~" He started playing, and the night seemed a little brighter. Music had that effect. "Sing me the songs I delighted to hear~ Long, long ago, long, long ago~"

We ended up performing quite a few songs, and it was nice to simply relax. The wind blew gently as we did, and I thought of how Dad would always sit near to listen, a smile on his face.

Are you listening, Dad? I hope you like this one too.

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**Notes on Klein**

- A childhood friend of mine, heir to House Reglay, and the first Archery General of Etruria.
- He inherited Aunt Louise's talent at archery, and is a highly skilled sniper. Like Clarine, he tends to be stupidly lucky, and he's not bad in the strength or speed department.
- He likes acting the 'Etrurian gentleman' around me, because he knows it makes me laugh. We're very close, and always have been.
• His gentle manner and handsome looks earns him the admiration of a LOT of people (… myself included… urgh…), but he seems completely oblivious to it all.
• His affinity is ice, which always surprises me.

Notes on Tate

• Shanna's older sister, though I understand she is the middle of three, and a talented captain. A calm and stoic fighter, who follows orders precisely.
• I get the impression, though, that she follows less because of the code, and more because she trusts Klein, and thus the people Klein trusts.
• Stronger and has more stamina than Shanna, though I think she has poorer resistance to magic. I think she's a little less 'skilled', but it's difficult to say since she has clearly trained hard.
• Like Klein, her affinity is ice.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: so, this is, basically, chapter 10B, the route where you get Elphin the bard. Klein and Tate are chars that you get no matter the route (and if you do not recruit Elphin, he simply appears as an NPC). If you go the B route, then you get them in chapter 10. If you go the A route, you will get them in chapter 11. There is another shared char between the routes, Gonzales, who is normally recruited in 10 during the B route, but he is also recruitable in chapter 10A, and thus, it has been pushed to there.

Also, can I just say that 10B and 11A are REALLY BS chapters. Not quite to chapter 14's degree (oh god), but it's a little ridiculous. Anyway, Sin and Sue's conversation is based on their C support. Roy and Lilina's conversation is based on their A. If you visit the top two villages in this chapter with Wade or Lot, you get extended conversations and, perhaps more importantly, very different items (Elixir vs speedwing in one, and door key vs a swordraeaver in the other)

I found the song Long, Long Ago via a google search on Folk Songs.

Next Chapter – Western Resistance (Chapter 10A)
Chapter 11) Western Resistance

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 11) Western Resistance

The largest of the mines in the Western Isles is the one at Eburacum, in the northern part of Fibernia. According to the many rumors, though, the mines have an ominous name: the mines of death. It's only mentioned in whispers, but those few whispers make my stomach turn.

At Elphin's advice, we head towards there in hopes of reuniting with surviving members on the resistance, to learn more of what is going on. To get there, though, we have to pass through a valley firmly in control of the Etrurians. Roy sent a messenger, thinking that word of our 'defection' had not traveled yet, but I am not so certain. We had been ambushed when we arrived, after all.

I had a feeling the only way we were getting to those mines was by making the rivers run crimson and yellow with blood.

The noise outside my tent was strangely comforting. I had the flaps pinned up so I could look out easily, and so that people could come in to talk without feeling like they were interrupting. After sending the messenger, we decided to stop for lunch and await his return.

Music caught my ear, and I glanced over to see Elphin was, once again, performing for everyone by the campfire. There was even some dancing involved, silly ones and not-so-silly. I smiled when I saw Clarine trying to teach Rutger how to dance a simple Etrurian one, and laughed as Wade flailed about and called it 'dancing'. Well, it could possibly be how those of the Isle danced, but Lot's annoyed expression hinted it wasn't.

I focused on Elphin, and could only frown a little. He really did look and act like Mildain. But if he was Mildain, he'd tell me. He wouldn't lie to my face. Mildain knew how Sacaeans viewed lies. So, he couldn't be Mildain. He was just someone like him. It was also entirely possible that I was imposing my memories on my observations…

I shifted my attention from Elphin to a little further away. I saw Lilina and Wendy chatting about something, Roy and Shanna not far away. In the distance, I saw Noah and Fir prep for a spar, but was surprised to see her trip. Strange, she was normally rather light on her feet… maybe I should sit down and have a serious talk with her. I hadn't done that yet. I also hadn't yet had the opportunity to talk to Elen about those wyvern riders Tate saw…

"Irene, you need to stop moving your head so much," Klein chided, poking my cheek. Sheepishly, I returned my attention to my notes and held still. "It is much easier to brush your hair when you're not moving about."

"Yes, I know," I grumbled, playfully annoyed. Klein had dropped in after lunch to make sure I wasn't overdoing it, and we'd fallen into an old habit of my studying, and him playing with my hair. "I was just marveling at our group."

"Yes, it is an incredibly varied group." The core of it was Lycia, but we had Ilian Pegasus Knights and Cavalry, all the Etrurian forces Klein commanded, Deke's mercenary group… we even had Elen to represent a bit of Bernese influence. Plus Rutger, Sue, and I to represent the Sacae. …
Honestly, the only country that didn't have representation in this army was the Nabata desert. "I remain impressed with General Roy to balance everything. There's no way I could do that. I had difficulties enough with simply balancing Etruria and Ilia."

"Yeah, Roy has a talent for it." He really did. Perhaps he was not the strongest, but he was the best leader a group like this could have. I was certain of it. "Though, that reminds me…” I hesitated before continuing. "Did you see Dieck?"

"…I did." Klein’s hands paused on my head, but when I tried to tilt my head back to look at him, he kept my gaze forward. "So, he goes by Deke, now, huh?" His voice shook a bit. "…He's okay. I'm… really glad he's okay…"

"Klein…"

"It's okay. If he's okay, then it's fine. I can… handle the rest." He laughed softly, and it sounded so sad to my ears. "He avoids me, though. I can't say I like that."

"I'll tackle him down for you, and sit on his back."

"Just like the old days!" That time, his laugh was a little happier. "I miss those days sometimes."

"Yeah, but we can't go back to them." We really couldn't.

"No, but we can seize the little moments that reminds us of them. Like now." That was true. "How did we get into this habit again? You studying and me playing with your hair?"

"You wanted to practice brushing and braiding hair because Clarine was just born." I remembered that day. Klein had been so excited about being a big brother. "I volunteered, but got bored just sitting there."

"Ah, that's right. So you read, and told me the interesting things, and I practiced all sorts of braids." The tugging on my scalp hinted he was putting some in now. "How did I forget that?"

"We all forget things as we get older and get more responsibilities." I thought of the talk I had with Deke and Uncle Lucius. I had forgotten even why I started on this path, and why I had wanted to work so hard at it… "That's all."

"I suppose. But some things remain the same." Klein laughed. "After all, here we are, together again, in a place neither of us ever imagined being, but still going through the same motions."

"And you are still overprotective of Clarine."

"Exactly." Haha! "Which means you are not allowed to matchmake her."

"Too late. I've already laid the plans. It's being done."

"No."

"Can't stop me."

"Irene!" He tugged a little on my hair and I laughed. "Irene, she's not old enough."

"Would you be complaining if it was someone besides Rutger?" There was no reply. "Klein?" I… had expected an immediate denial…

"I am uncertain if Clarine is mature enough." He leaned forward to look me in the face. "He's
severely traumatized, and that's not something that magically goes away. He can get 'better', but it's not something that heals. I'm not sure if she's mature enough to realize and understand that."

"She makes him smile, though. He relaxes around her."

"Oh, no, I do not doubt she is good for him, at least for now. I worry for the long term." He sighed. "Also, I don't think she's emotionally secure enough to withstand the social backlash. You know how much she values what other people say about her, no matter how she acts." Mmm… "Plus, I have no idea what he thinks or feels. He's angry, stoic, and I worry he will unintentionally lead her to her death while pursuing revenge."

"That's why I don't matchmake via locking them in a closet." I finally smiled at him. "Trust me."

"Trust really has nothing to do with this." He sighed, leaning back to draw my hair into a ponytail. "I'm threading the ribbon through the holder a couple of times to lessen the chances of it falling out."

"Thank you…" Some sort of commotion outside made me sigh. "Ugh… time to return to the real world."

"Seems so." He tied off my ribbon and stood up, offering me a hand. "My lady?"

"You are a dork." I laughed as I took his hand and pulled myself up, and laughed again when he bowed with a little flourish. "Seriously."

"If it makes you laugh, I'll gladly take the dorkiness." His smile was kind, and he squeezed my hand reassuringly. "I'm off to check on my group. I'll meet back with you soon."

"Have fun." He waved me goodbye, and took my notes from me as I left. I knew he'd put them exactly where I needed them to be.

So, instead, I followed the commotion, and found a few soldiers shaking by the part of camp closest to the castle. Noticing some of the shaking soldiers were battle hardened veterans, I walked past them, curious as to what made them look ready to throw up. For some reason, though, I only found a bucket, and the signs that someone had ridden up, dropped it down, and then ridden away.

Confused and curious, I crouched by the bucket, and noticed it had a pretty white cloth covering it. When I pulled it back, the first thing I noticed was brown hair. It was a head full of brown hair, and when I tilted it back, I recognized the face. Well, this was… definitely a message.

"Irene!" I covered the bucket again and turned to face Roy as he ran up. "They say that we got something from the castle?" he asked me, tilting his head. Lilina joined us soon after, coughing a little. "What is it? There look to be soldiers leaving the castle, but…"

"Yeah, they're here for us," I replied. I glanced down at the bucket, frowning. "At least, I assume that, based on their 'present'."

"What was it?"

"Our messenger returned, or rather, his head did." Roy's eyes widened, and Lilina covered her mouth in horror. "Prepare for a fight. We're not getting out of this."

You know… the only good ballista was one that was on your side. Thankfully, Klein and his archers were specially trained on ballistae. Also thankfully, it… really didn't take much to steal one
or twenty when you had a bunch of cavaliers who were trained to deal with ballistae. Ballistae were incredibly damaging to pegasus knights, after all, so Ilia's cavalry liked being able to take them out quickly.

"Keep out of the ballistae range!" I yelled. Things would be infinitely easier for Klein if we weren't there. "Pegasus knights, mark the range and warn anyone who steps inside!" Pegasus knights were specifically trained to be able to judge trajectories. Leaving that to them would be a much better use of my time.

"Message from Master Elphin!" I glanced down and saw Astore appear next to me. "Scouts came in to report bandits heading for the village nearby," he informed me. Elphin and I were using the two thieves as messengers in this fight. "A lone man with an axe is fighting them, but he'll need reinforcement."

"Understood. Thank you." I nodded to Astore and turned my attention on the field. Let's see…

"Roy! Your group needs to head to the village now!" The only indication I had that he heard me in the mess was the flash of a bloody rapier being waved over his head. "Lilina! Bandit reinforcements to the south! Your group is going to take them!" A fireball to the sky told me she had heard. "Sue! You and Sin lead your group to take their extra space!" Sue stood up in her saddle to smile at me, letting me know she heard. "Rutger! You and Fir spearhead your group through the castle defenses!" There was no helpful indication that either heard, except two seconds later, Rutger and Fire were bursting through the enemy ranks. "Deke, take care of stragglers they leave behind!"

This was how we ran fights. Roy would give the overall objective, and Elphin and I would work together to achieve that objective. Elphin would watch the big picture, and I would manipulate the little pictures. The other military leaders, such as Zealot or Deke, would weigh in on potential strategies.

I had been worried about how well it would work, but considering this battle, it seemed to be working quite well. There were some things that clunked, but we could smooth those over with some talks later. It was nice to see something go our way.

"Irene!" I had to fight down panic as I heard Roy call for me. After all, he was coming over with a smile, even if he was splattered with blood. "We got a new recruit!" he informed me cheerfully, gesturing to the man who followed him. I… tried to figure out how going to reinforce a village resulted in recruitment. "His name is Geese." The more people I met, the more varied the names got. "He can join my group for now."

"Yes, that sounds good," I replied. I made myself smile. "I am Irene of the Kutolah, tactician for the Lycian Army here."

"Yeah, he told me that already," Geese replied. He was definitely older than me. I'd put him at late-twenties, early thirties. I could also tell he was almost amused by how young Roy and I were. "I'm a former merchant, so I know the waters around here better than just about anyway, and that includes rivers safe to sail in." Oh, now that would be a good thing. You could bypass a lot of defensive barriers by taking the water-route. "Though, from what I understand, I think I'm one of the people you were told to hunt."

"Oh?"

"I'm a pirate, but I only go after the rich." He shrugged. "They have more than their fair share anyway."
"Now I definitely know you're one of the people Etruria wanted us to kill."

"Hey, hey, at least I'm not a famous pirate like the Davros crew." He relaxed a little, even as his eyes narrowed. "Tactician, huh? You've a strategist or you pulling double-duty?"

"Yes, a bard by the name of Elphin is the strategist."

"Elphin?" Now he looked curious. "I wonder if that's the same one I know."

"You know Elphin?"

"Sort of." He shrugged. "He and this girl. I brought them here from Etruria." Etruria? "Some knight by the name of Douglas asked me to take them to the Isles." Uncle Douglas? "Something about assassins." Why would he…? "Anyway, nice to hear that you're not pulling double-duty. That sucks even when you're older." Hahaha… ha… "So, split heads?"

"Roy will direct you. I move the groups; group leaders move the people." I glanced at Roy who nodded with a smile. "Speaking of which, head south to reinforce Lilina, okay?"

"We're on it!" Roy reassured. He tugged Geese after him, shouting orders as they rejoined the group. I couldn't help but smile sadly as he left, though. I was proud that he was adapting well to his role, but at the same time, I wished he didn't have to be in it in the first place…

Shaking my head, I returned my attention to the field, eyes narrowing as I took in everything. It looked like the enemy had decided to avoid the ballista range, so I needed…

"Tate!" I yelled. She swooped down so quickly, I honestly thought she'd been waiting overhead. "Tell Klein to advance his archers, please?" She nodded and took off again. "Shanna?" She took a little longer to come down, but she greeted me with a bright smile. "Elphin will need an aerial viewpoint." She laughed and then took off as well. All right, that was taken care of. So, now…

"Irene!" I twisted, startled to see Lilina running for me. I… did not know the person standing a short distance away, though he was dressed similarly to the other bandits. "Irene, that is Gonzales," she informed me, pointing to him. "He was a bandit, but I convinced him to come with us!" … HOW DID GOING TO DEAL WITH BANDITS RESULT IN A RECRUITMENT?! "He's rather timid, and scared, but he's really nice!" Father Sky, Lilina, sometimes, you scared me. "So, please, Irene?"

"Lilina…" I sighed. I glanced up at Gonzales, noting how he acted. He was taller and bigger than anyone, but he flinched away from everyone who passed by. Father Sky, help me. "He's been abused." I could think of no other reason why he was acting that way. "He needs help. And that is a help I know I, at least, cannot give him. But he needs it. He needs it if he is going to stay, and feel comfortable following orders."

"I'll do what I can!" She looked determined. "I'll recruit others too!"

"…So long as you're aware, it's fine." I ruffled her hair. "Your group sits out the rest of the fight with him, okay?"

"Are you sure?" She now looked worried. "The battle…"

"It's almost won." I pointed to the castle gates, where Rutger, Fir, and Deke were fighting with their groups. "You can take the break."

"Okay."
We seized the castle with relative ease. It appeared that the lord here had sent all of his soldiers out to kill us, but the reason 'why' escaped us. Had they heard about the lord we killed before? Had something been set up prior to us arriving? Had we'd been attacked just because the person was looking for a fight? I suspected it was the middle one, but there was no proof.

"Are you certain you don't mind some of your pegasus knights being used as messengers?" I asked Tate as we walked through the halls. She was, after all, the current leader of our pegasus knights. "I don't know if it'll mess up your strategies."

"It's fine," Tate reassured. It was hard to take her seriously, though. I wasn't sure if it really was, or if she was just used to agreeing to whatever her employers required. "I thank you for considering the dangers and insisting that none travel alone."

"In my opinion, that is simple common sense." Klein's messages never made it to us. Our messages never made it to him. Clearly, there was something wrong. "Well, if you're not bothered, then please, accept my thanks."

"It's little trouble." Her stoic face softened with her smile. "If you will excuse me?"

"Yeah, and again, thanks." I waved as she walked off, before sighing. We were sending messages to anyone we could think of. Something was rotten here, and the depth of it seemed to be beyond even Mom's predictions.

"Sorry to burst in!" That cheerful voice came from the main hall, where I was supposed to meet Roy. "You're General Roy?" …Hold on a second. "Please! Save my friends!" I… didn't I know this voice?

"C-calm down, please?" I heard Roy stammer as I stepped into the room. I could only stare at the girl with him because… "What's this about your friends and… Irene, help?" …Why was Lalum here?!

"IRENE~" She tackled me with a hug, knocking me clear off my feet. "Oh, it's so wonderful to see you!" she cheered, nuzzling my cheek affectionately. I forgot how much like an overly affectionate dog she was. "You doing okay? Not hurt, are you?"

"I'm fine," I replied, trying to escape her hug. She laughed and clung all the tighter. Mother Earth, I forgot how affectionate she could be. "Lalum. Air? Please?"

"Oops." She let go of me, but sat back on her heels instead of standing up, meaning she was sitting on my legs too. "Sorry. I was just so glad to see a familiar face."

"I'm sure." I glanced up at Roy, who looked confused. "This is Lalum. We're friends."

"I'm a dancer~!" Lalum popped to her feet and spun, scarves trailing with the movement. I couldn't help but smile. Lalum had the Dancer's Gift, but more importantly, she was just skilled at dancing in general. "We met because of that." Well, that wasn't technically a lie. We did meet because she was a dancer. But… ah… "More importantly, at least for now, is that I am part of the resistance here." Oh, okaaa… WHAT?! Okay, never mind, I definitely got why she was going with technically true things now.

"You are?!" Roy yelped, looking startled. He immediately grimaced. "Sorry, that was…"

"It's okay," Lalum reassured, laughing brightly. "One of my jobs in the resistance is to act as a messenger and weapon supplier, which is a lot easier if, you know, I don't look the part." It was
basically the same as being a spy. If you could tell what she was, she would be in a lot of trouble.
"But anyway, your army is here to deal with the bandits, right?"

"Yes, but…" Roy glanced away. "There seems to be something… odd here."

"There's nothing 'odd' about it. The real enemy is Etruria!" I called it. "They're working with the bandits to squeeze every bit they can out of the people!" I wasn't surprised at all, and Roy's resigned look implied the same. "And while they do that, they send the able-bodied, who could rebel, into the mines, where they work and work them. They're allowed no rest." Her eyes filled with frustrated tears. "Even if they're sick or injured. When they drop dead, they're thrown into emptied shafts." That's… okay, even I didn't think they'd go that far, and I grew up with horror stories of how Etruria used to hunt down Sacaean bands was part of knightly initiations.

"That's… horrific…" Roy's hands shook, but his eyes blazed with determination. "We were heading to the mines to free the people there."

"You were?" Her eyes lit up. "Oh, thank you! We need to save my friends!" She tackle-hugged Roy, nearly knocking him off his feet. "Thank you so much!"

"Ah, yes?" He glanced at me, and I only snickered. This was Lalum when she was in a great mood. "Though, because of the battle, we can't… um…"

"Oh, I get it!" She jumped back, bouncing on her toes. "You have to move slow for your army."
Yes. "And you probably can't move immediately because you have to treat injuries." Clearly, Lalum had picked up a lot from Uncle Douglas. "I completely understand! But, I'm just…" She smiled warmly. "I'm just so happy to have help."

"You're welcome." Roy smiled back. "We'll leave in a few hours. Even at a slower pace, it'll be better to get closer."

"Yay~!"

So, we stole the castle for a short bit. We decided to raid the supplies, medicines and food and whatnot, and take advantage of having baths and showers, and easy places to wash clothes. Lalum and I decided to take advantage of a big open room to do what we normally did when we hung out together: sing and dance.

"Ah, I missed this~!" Lalum laughed as she twirled to a stop. I couldn't help but laugh along. She was always good for picking up my spirits. "Though, I do miss hearing Father clapping."

"It does sound a little odd," I agreed, leaning back on the bench I was sitting on to rest against the wall. Uncle Douglas was always the best audience. "He doing okay?"

"He was when I last saw him, but it's been about a year." Really? "I wrote him letters, but Lord Arcardo started blocking messages in and out of the Isles." I guessed that. "So, it's been about six months since I've heard from him." She sighed heavily. "Oh, I hope he's eating all right. I can't make him anything from here."

I was convinced Uncle Douglas had a stomach made of lead to be able to tolerate Lalum's cooking. She… really wasn't the best. "Well, I didn't hear anything off before I left the Plains."

"That's good." Her cheer faded slightly for a forlorn look. "I heard about your parents." …Ah… "I'm sorry."
"When a war starts, it's something to consider." I couldn't help but droop, though. I... really hadn't thought that Bern could kill Dad. Uncle Hector... Oswin... the Kutolah... "But, I do think Uncle Douglas is still fine." I could only hope that the messengers Tate sent would bring back good news...

"...Yeah!" She smiled warmly, but I knew the worry didn't go away. I couldn't blame her that, though. I... knew the pain. I hoped she wouldn't have to experience it. "Hey, Irene! Remember how we met?"

"That..." Um... "That is completely random."

"I have a point!" She dramatically pointed to the ceiling for some reason. "So, do you remember?"

"Yes, I think I remember most of it." We had both been young. She had been about eight, and I was ten. "I was trying to find Mom in the Aquelia market. I wanted to ask if I could buy some sweets for Sue and I to share."

"And you found her and Father crouched by a shed, talking to the scared little girl inside." Yes, I had. That little girl had been Lalum. "I had been part of a troupe, but they had wanted to sell me to some pedophile, so I ran. I got injured in the escape, though, and was feverish from infection when I crawled into that shed to hide."

"Uncle Douglas heard you whimpering, and tried to help you, but you were scared, so you retreated deeper in the shed." I had heard this part much, much later. "The shed wasn't well organized, and he was worried about scaring you more, so he just tried to coax you."

"Yes." She nodded, eyes slightly unfocused as she became lost in the memory. She absently danced in place, a habit I knew she was trying to break. "Lady Katri passed by and he recruited her, hoping that a woman might be a little less scary than an old war veteran."

"But that didn't work because you saw her as intimidating too." To be fair, Mom could cut an imposing figure. She was tall, and held herself with utmost confidence. "So, they both just worked on coaxing you out, but you were just becoming more and more scared."

"Then a bright voice went 'Mama~!' and hugged Lady Katri." Back then, I had called Mom, 'Mama', and Dad, 'Papa'. "Then the little girl with a bright voice peered inside the shed, with eyes as bright as the sun, and a smile just as warm."

"I saw a little girl hiding, and thought 'Oh, what a great hiding place!' I had sincerely thought she had just been playing hide and seek. "So, I crawled in, not really thinking much about it."

"I remember being scared, thinking you'd burn me." Lalum laughed. "You sat next to me and babbled on and on about how I had found the best hiding spot. You gave me your name, and I stumbled over mine."

"For a full day, I sincerely thought you name was Lalalum." I couldn't help but giggle a bit. "I told you about my mom, and Uncle Douglas, pointing to them for emphasis."

"'He looks scary, but he gives some of the best hugs!'" Lalum pitched her voice up to mimic a young child's, and I could only laugh again. "I flinched away when you tried to take my hand, though. You were so bright; I was certain you would burn me."

"That's when I noticed you were hurt." It hadn't been a bad wound, all things considered, but it had gotten very dirty and very infected. Thanks to how short her top was, I could easily see the scar that resulted from that injury, an almost crescent moon shaped cut on her waist. "I remember telling
you that I could get you to help, that Mom and Uncle Douglas could get you help."

"But you didn't force it. You just held out your hands to me and smiled." As if to emphasize the memory, Lalum smiled herself. "That smile was so comforting, so reassuring, that I took your hands without thinking about it, and you led me out of the shed."

"You got so scared whenever I tried to let go that I held your hand the entire trip back to Uncle Douglas's estate, and while you were getting treated by Yodel." I had actually held it even after she had fallen asleep, worried that she would be scared when she woke up. "Yes, I remember, Lalum. Why bring it up?"

"The smile." Hmm? "Now, an entertainer's job is to make people smile! Laugh and enjoy life." Yes, that was why she had liked dancing, and even the life of a traveling dancer. It was the people surrounding her that made her feel worthless. "But I think a leader's job is to give their people hope and courage."

"My smile is related to this?"

"It gave me hope and courage, even back then." She giggled, and I finally figured out what she was trying to say. "I know you are hurting, and that is fine, but please, do not forget how to smile. Get it now? 'Your smile is like the sun, bright and reassuring. It leads people to their homes.' "I think so." I smiled at her, and she laughed, clearly pleased. "But I do have a bit of an advantage than most leaders. After all, some days, it feels like this army is mostly led by my family."

"Really?" She looked confused and started counting on her fingers. "Me, Roy, Lilina, Marcus, Merlinus, Wolt… wait, did you know Wolt?"

"Sort of. I knew of him."

"Meh, I guess that counts." She went back to counting. "Deke, Lugh, Clarine, Rutger-"

"Not Rutger. I didn't know him prior to this." But what confused me most was… "How do you know names already, or whether or not I knew them?"

"I am good~" She giggled and I rolled my eyes. "So, Clarine, Saul, Dorothy?" I shook my head. "Clarine, Saul, Sue, Sin, Klein, Mildain…" She nodded, but I felt my thoughts clunk to a stop. "So, that's… let's see… fourteen or fifteen out of… um…" She started counting again, this time silently. "Thirty-five? Wow, that is a lot. But it makes sense, given your background, and you've always been the type to-"

"Lalum, why did you count Mildain?"

"Oh, oops!" She laughed, unbothered. "Right, I should've said 'Elphin'. Thanks for catching me!" Wait, hold on… "Irene? You look confused." She skipped over and peered down at my face. "Why? He's been here for a bit, so surely you know?" I…

"Lalum, are you here?" Both of us turned to the voice, and I realized it was… "Ah, Lady Irene," Elphin greeted. His smile was kind, but everything was just… not quite… "Pardon, but might I steal Lalum for a-"

"You're Mildain," I whispered, making myself stand. Lalum was looking between the two of us, completely confused, and Elphin's smile faltered. "You're really him. You…" Anger flashed through me. "You lied to me? You lied to my face?"
"I…" He winced, flinching away, and I couldn't decide if my anger was more burning or cold. I felt like it was both. "Irene…"

"...I understand." I glared at him, to stop whatever half-baked explanation he had. "I get it."
Stupid. How could I be so stupid? Outsiders lied. That was simple fact. Outsiders lied, because they did not consider it a sin. Etrurians especially lied as easily as they breathed. "You and Lalum talk, Elphin." It was stupid for me to think Mildain would never lie to me. It was stupid for me to not think Uncle Douglas would not lie either. "Have fun."

"Irene." He reached for me as I passed by, and snagged my hand. "Wait, hold-"

I used the grip as leverage to twist his wrist, jerking my hand from his as I snarled."I. Get. It." I am an idiot, for thinking that he would not. I am an idiot, for thinking that my friendship and trust was reciprocated. Just because I trusted did not mean others did. Just because I thought we were friends did not mean we were.

So, I left, fighting back the urge to cry. When I got away from the room, I punched a window as hard as I could. It cracked and shattered under my fist, the shards biting into my hand as I slid to my knees, unable to keep from crying as the pain filtered through.

He was alive. Father Sky, Mildain was alive, and had been this whole time. I was happy he was alive, but I was also angry. I was angry he had been alive for a year, and told no one. I was angry that he hadn't told me. I was angry he had even lied to me.

But, Father Sky above, that was one person I thought dead who wasn't. Maybe… maybe I wouldn't lose anyone else? Maybe this, at least, was Mother Earth's way of saying 'your loved ones will survive this'.

Then again, maybe it was just supposed to be a kick to the stomach at how stupid I was.

Notes on Geese

- Well-rounded. Surprisingly so, since I don't know many axe users who make an effort to be anything but strong and fast
- A former merchant, whose business went bankrupt thanks to all the fighting. He turned to piracy to feed his crew, and used his ship to transport food and supplies to the villages here.
- Apparently his older brother, Geitz, was supposed to inherit the business, but left for reasons unknown. Marcus says Geitz was a member of the Campaign of Fire, but I can't find many notes on him.
- His affinity is fire.

Notes on Gonzales

- He's strong. He's strong and he's fast. But he isn't very skilled, and there seem to be some… mental deficiencies, which don't help matters.
- Has been abused. There's no other way to say it. He's been abused, and I believe it's contributed said mental deficiencies. Based on his language, I'm assuming he was abandoned as a child, and thus did not properly learn how to speak.
- He's kindhearted, and is eager to help. I'll leave his adaptation to others, though. I… do not have the time or mental strength.
- His affinity is thunder.

...Should I write notes on Lalum and… Elphin? Ah, maybe I will next time.
Author's notes: Yes, Elphin really is Prince Mildain. It's not something really hidden in the game, especially once you leave the Western isles. Lalum is your dancer, and her conversations with Etrurian chars reveal that she is the adoptive daughter of Douglas. There is no mention of how he ended up adopting her, only that she'd been on the streets until then, so I added in an explanation. The light imagery is because Irene's affinity is light. Lilina-Wendy, Roy-Shanna, and Noah-Fir all can support each other, and the Noah-Fir moment specifically references their C support.

This chapter, in game, is 10A.

Next Chapter – Interlude, Graveyard
Interlude – Graveyard

After resting, and raiding the castle, we moved onward, heading north to the mines. However, at our slower pace, it became obvious we were not going to make it before sundown. We hesitated over what to do. There were no castles or forts nearby to use, and we dared not spend the night in a village, for fear of what would happen.

Lalum and… Elphin came up with a solution, though. One of the resistance's hideouts was not far away, and it was one of their larger ones with multiple entrances. We would overnight there.

I had to admire whoever built this hideout. Few would look for anything but corpses in a graveyard.

"We created this hideout as a way of reminding ourselves what we're fighting for," Lalum explained, practically skipping along the path. The rest of us moved far more slowly, and I couldn't help but notice the dates on the graves. There were some very, very small ones, and the dates only confirmed it. "And also so that we can feel like our fallen friends are still protecting us, even now." She skipped around the grave of a two year old before stopping. "This is the entrance." She easily pushed it aside, revealing a staircase below. "Everyone good?"

"Everyone but those who went with Elphin," Roy whispered. Most of the mounted units followed Elphin to a larger, if farther, entrance. I opted to remain with the foot soldiers, partly to stick with Roy right now, and partly to stay away from Elphin. "Will there be room for everyone?"

"Yeah, we lost a lot of people." Well, that was… very suited for the location. "Well, then everyone inside. I'll close it behind us."

"Let me go first," I offered, glancing at Roy and Lilina. Both hesitated before nodding. "That okay, Lalum?"

"Should be~" she giggled. "Go on. It's a straight path once you're here." I guessed that was because there was a very low chance of someone finding this entrance.

Nodding, and moving slowly, I descended, noting how well maintained these stairs were. The tunnel itself was also carefully tended to, with supports all around. Someone spent a lot of time making sure this place was safe. Some part of me still felt nervous. After all, we were walking deep into Mother Earth. There were tales of those who ventured too deep within, and were incinerated by her molten blood seeping through the rock...

But there were no such things as I reached the end of the tunnel and came out in a large cavern. It was filled with scurrying people, all dirty covered and far too thin under threadbare clothes and even thinner blankets. They paused when they saw us, eyes wide with fear.

They relaxed, though, when Lalum popped out from behind us. "Hiya, everyone~!" she greeted. Her laughter warmed the room. "Elphin will be by later with some others too. This is the Lycian Alliance Army. Etruria sent them, but you see, Lycia has nice people in charge." She snagged Roy and Lilina by the arm, dragging them forward. "This is General Elroy of Pherae, and Duchess
Lilina of Ostia!" Uh… "Though, I think Roy likes being called Roy." Yes? "And over here, we have Irene of the Kutolah tribe, though she's also the niece of Count Hanover." I waved awkwardly. "And over here…!" She dragged Klein forward. "This is the Archery General, Klein of Reglay! But he's super nice and is going to be helping us!" She giggled, and I sighed. She was a force of nature. "So, everyone, let's mingle and introduce everyone, okay?"

She might have said 'mingle', but it soon turned less 'casual hanging out' and more 'doing what we could to help'. Helping move things, treating the injured and sick… What supplies we had to spare, we gave freely. We couldn't do anything less. Father Sky, there were babies here…

"Here, drink some of this," I murmured, passing a woman a mug of tea I made up quickly from the herbs in my pack. She had three little ones near her, and I was almost certain only one of them was actually 'hers' by blood. I imagine she was helping feed the others. "It will help make them less stressful on you."

She laughed a bit and took the mug with shaking hands. "You're kind," she whispered. "Fennel and anise?"

"With coriander and fenugreek."

"My mother would make the same, before the soldiers razed everything to the ground." She sipped the tea with a smile. "These two have sick mothers who can't breast feed them. But a mother's milk is the best thing for a baby, so I volunteered." Of course… she was basically being their wetnurse. "You know herbs?" I nodded. "Colic?"

"Give me but a moment, and I will mix you something up." I was so glad I brought a bunch of herbs with me. "Are there any allergies?"

"None with these three. Thank you."

"I am doing nothing more than what should be done." If I looked over the room, I saw the rest of the army also doing what needed to be done. These people had suffered through so much to survive. It was only right to give them what aid we could, so long as we did not assume that their needs match what ours would be in similar circumstances. "Would you like to watch?"

"Would you be insulted?"

"Never. You only have Lalum's word that you can even trust me."

"No, I have another." Her smile was wry. "Even here in the Isles, we know Sacaeans never lie." Yes, but poison was not a lie. "But yes, I would like to watch."

"Then let me bring my things over here."

After treating the baby… well, 'treating' was a strong word. You really could just help alleviate the symptoms, but I went with a remedy used among the Kutolah, and also gave her some Djuite remedies to try. Regardless, though, after I did that, I realized my stock of ready-made things was running low, and retreated to a side room to work on that. It was a quiet hallway, far from the main room, so I was surprised when I heard footsteps in the hall as I was grinding down some herbs.

"Tate?" Oh, that was Klein. Why was he over here in this section?

"General Klein!" I paused at the rather happy greeting. I almost didn't recognize Tate's voice. "Is something wrong?" I heard her ask, her voice dropping back to a 'professional' tone. Had I
imagined...? No, I doubted that.

"No, I'm fine." Now curious, I nudged the door open and shifted so I could easily peer out in the hall. There was Klein, arms crossed as he looked concerned. "I just wanted to tell you something."

"Tell me something?" Tate frowned in reply, and I saw her fidget with her hands behind her back. "What is it?"

"When I hired you and your squad, it was as an Etrurian general."

"Well, yes, that was part of the agreement." She stopped messing with her hands. What had she been expecting to hear? "Why bring that up?"

"This is the Lycian army. It's hard to say that I am an Etrurian general here, even if I still retain my rank for now." Oh, I knew what Klein was saying. He was trying to tell Tate that she didn't have to stay if she didn't wish to.

"Yes, I know." Tate was back to her normal stoic professionalism. I wondered… if she might have a crush on Klein. I definitely couldn't blame her. "I told my squad the same."

"I see." Klein frowned a bit. "Are you certain you're taking advantage of that freedom?"

"Of course I am." Now she was frowning too. "Are you trying to say something?" Yes, he was. I thought it rather clear, but maybe I should intervene?

"…For now, it's nothing. Don't worry about it." Klein shook his head. "Sorry to bother you."

"Sir…" After hesitating a moment, she nodded, and walked off, Klein watching her leave. They did… look rather nice together… It would be a scandal in Etruria, but it wasn't like Uncle Pent or Aunt Louise would care, and it wouldn't be a scandal that weakened Reglay's political power. If she made Klein happy…

"Irene?" Startled, I jolted out of my thoughts to see Klein in the doorway. "You okay?" he asked worriedly. I simply nodded, returning my attention to the herbs. I had ground these almost too fine, but they were still usable thankfully, so I focused on putting them in jars for use later. "Am I bothering?"

"Of course you aren't," I replied, focusing on making sure I didn't lose any powder. "Need something?"

"It wasn't exactly something needed." He stepped in the room, closing the door behind him. "There are a lot of blankets and cloths here."

"Merlinus threw the extra in here for them to use later." He hadn't even protested, which surprised me. I was sure he'd make a fuss. "So, what is it?" He didn't reply, so I glanced up from grinding calendula for a health poultice. "Klein?"

"I…" He sighed, and sat down next to me, looking strangely serious. "I… had a talk with Master Elphin." Was that so? "I know." He knew…? "I know that he's Mildain. He told me."

My temper immediately spiked. "Oh, of course he told you!"

"I think he only did because not telling you blew up in his face." Klein's smile was too gentle for my anger. "I heard his explanation, by the way."
"Don't care."

"Irene."

"Let me be mad." I sighed anyway, though, drooping. "Look, if I think logically, I suppose he had one. It could be something like 'he didn't trust me', which is fine. That is my problem, not his. But that doesn't change that he lied to my face, Klein, when he knows how I view such things." I shook my head when he tried to reply. "So, I'm going to be mad. I'm going to be mad for a while. It's not that he didn't tell me, Klein. It's that he lied."

"I understand…" Still, he sighed. "Though, I must admit. I was hoping for our usual talks."

"I'm sorry." I went back to work, grinding some dreamflower into a powder. I had to be extra careful for this. If you gave too large a dose, they'd die. "You'll have to wait a little longer for that."

"I suppose." There was something odd in how he said the words, and when I glanced up, I saw him watching me closely. "Irene, when was the last time you slept?"

"I slept eight hours last night."

"…You normally sleep for only five or six." He shifted, peering at my face. "You look exhausted, Irene."

"I'm very tired, and very sad." Dad was dead. Mom was captured. My tribe was scattered or dead. Uncle Hector was dead. Roy and Lilina had titles and responsibilities they were much too young for. Sue was forcing herself to grow up because she didn't think she'd have the time. "I might be a good tactician, but I fear not being good enough when everything is falling apart right in front of us."

"I imagine getting a shock of a certain person not actually being dead did not help your emotional fragility at the moment either." He also lied. No, I wasn't going to let that go. "I can also imagine that seeing Deke didn't help much, way back before all of this happened. All the battles, and the deaths."

"No, it didn't, at first." He still owed me an explanation, actually. "Have you talked to him?"

"I did, actually." Klein's smile was warm. "He remembers me, so that's good. Still calls me Little Master, though."

"He calls me 'Little Lady', so deal with it." I couldn't help but laugh a little. "In so many ways, I feel like I'm three years old and learning how to ride again."

"I remember feeling that way when Mildian first appointed me as Archery General." Yes, I knew that. He had been so panicked that day that I had taken him out for a long ride to calm him. "Perceval and Cecilia also were panicking and freaking out when they were promoted." They… that's right; they had been. Perceval had fallen off his horse the same day because he had been so busy fretting that he forgot to actually secure his saddle. Cecilia rode right into a low-hanging branch. "Everything is going crazy, but I think the newness of your title and responsibilities are really what's making you feel lost."

"Is that so?"

"Well, that's just what I think anyway." He patted my shoulder reassuringly. "I think you'll feel more stable when you're used to the title." Mmm… "But, really, you should rest."
"Is that so?" I finished grinding the herbs and set them to the side. "Well, if you insist..." I flopped down, using his leg as a pillow. He stiffened almost instantly. "Now I really feel like I'm three again!" I laughed, already relaxing. "Remember how when we were little we used to take naps together?"

"It was convenient for our parents." He still looked a little awkward. "We're not little anymore."

"No, we're not, but we can pretend for a bit to relax." I reached up and poked his cheek. "Come on. Tell me a story."

"Oh, now we really are five and six again." He sighed. "Well, if we're going to pretend that much..." He looked around the room and tugged over a blanket I had put to the side. "This and..." He grabbed some random clothes not far from the blanket and fluffed them up like they were pillows. "There." He shifted and we were both under the blanket, sharing a 'pillow', just like when we had been little. "Better?"

"Much." I laughed. This really was nice. "So, come on. Tell me a story."

"Give me a moment to think. It needs to be one you haven't heard before."

"I'm fine with an old one."

"No, we're pretending to be little again, which means new stories." Ha! "Ah, I have one. It's a folk tale I learned from a traveling scholar around here."

"That sounds great!" This was fun. "Tell!"

After my nap, it was back to work. Specifically, it was setting up in a different room with Roy and Elphin, working on a tentative plan for securing the mines and all the workers within. It was also doing my best to make sure my anger at Elphin did not interfere with work. It would be the height of childishness to let my not liking Elphin get people killed.

I think it worked mostly well. At the least, we were able to get a lot done, and there were only a few concerned looks from Roy. I think Elphin and I were both professional enough to mostly alleviate his worry.

"So, what we'll need to do first is secure the town," Roy murmured, looking at the map. It was makeshift, mostly drawn from the perspective of someone who lived there instead of an aerial view, but it would do nicely. "If we secure that, then the miners have a place to run."

"And we have a stable base to work from," Elphin added. He tapped the square marking the castle. "This is controlled by Bishop Orlo, of the Saint Elimine Church."

"A bishop is presiding over the Mines of Death?"

"The church is corrupt, and has been for decades." He sighed, shaking his head. "You hear of a handful of 'good' bishops. Bishop Yodel is the most known for his push for reforms, but you hear of others, such as Bishop Lucius, who works as a mercenary, and the mysterious Bishop Renault, who no one knows anything about." That last name came up in the Campaign of Fire, but only as a bishop who helped at the very end. ...The very end of the campaign... Oswin had said to skip to the end of the logbook. I hadn't done that yet... "Bishop Serra is also well known for her healing, and her rather controversial decision to teach particularly talented staff users how to cure illnesses, even if they are not of the church." That was definitely Aunt Serra. "But others... it is an open secret that the church is nothing like how Saint Elimine created it."
"I see." Roy noticeably drooped. "But it's still horrible. You expect a bishop to heal, not…"

"Oh, Roy, he still could be," I sighed. I grimaced when he gave me a confused look. "Roy, you can very well heal a person from the brink of death, providing there is still enough lifeforce. That means you get more work out of them, and you drag out the torture." Well, now he looked like he was going to be sick. "Roy, do you need a break?"

"I need someone to decide the world is nice again," he sighed. I could only smile wryly; Elphin gave him a sympathetic look. "So, town?"

"Yes, the town." We had a lot of fliers, which gave us an advantage. "If we have to secure the area, then we must have squads to defend each of the villages." That was non-negotiable. I dreaded the thought of civilians getting caught in the crossfire.

"Likely, Ekhidna is also in one of the villages," Elphin added. He ran his hands over the squares marking nearby villages. "If she isn't here, she must have gone ahead with whoever was capable of moving."

"That's a bit reckless, isn't it?" I pointed out. He could only groan. "I guess this happens a lot."

"She is a brilliant leader, and even more brilliant fighter, but there are times where she sees the goal and not the trap." I wondered if that played a role in the recent losses. Elphin wasn't the type of person who could adapt easily to such a leader. "I'm worried now is such a time."

"You're also worried that she just can't suffer the atrocities any longer." I thought of a little girl I had watched Elen treat. She had been saying that Ekhidna would save her papa. "She holds a lot of hope on her shoulders. Even if she takes it willingly, that is a large burden."

"It's the burden any leader carries, if they're a good one." That was true. "You two make sure to take care of your own health. If the leader suffers, so does the army." Yes, that was also true.

"That reminds me!" Roy suddenly piped up, grinning. "Irene, did you have a good nap?" He was smiling like the cat that caught the bird. I immediately scowled, and he laughed. "It was cute! Clarine squealed." Yeah, Clarine had been the one to get me for this little meeting. Her squeal had actually been what woke me up. "She has a massive crush on Klein, Elphin." ROY!

"That is not something you just go around and say," I yelped, feeling my face heat up. Roy only laughed, while Elphin tried to muffle his. Of course, that wasn't news to him. Mildain had known about my crush. "Watch it, little brother, as I have weapons against you too."

"H-huh? No, you don't!"

"Lilina, and the 'always be together'?"

"Th-that was…!" Roy's face was as red as his hair. "Um…" He sulked when Elphin gave up the fight and just burst into bright laughter. "Elphin!"

"I'm sorry," he said, voice wobbling as he tried to get the laughter under control. "I couldn't help it." His smile was indulgent. "But, truly, I believe I have seen the seeds of many blossoms of love taking root in the army." That… that… I forgot he could get very flowery with his words, pun intended. "Though, I do not think it is that much of a surprise."

"Really?" Roy asked. He was still blushing badly, but it was slowly cooling. "I wasn't aware that blood and guts were romantic." ROY!
"I'm sure some are in love with their carnage." Elphin shook his head, and leaned back in his chair. "I talk more about how war often brings out a person's truer nature. It brings out the best and worst aspects of everyone it swallows up. In such circumstances, you see a person for who they are, and repeatedly facing down death alongside each other creates bonds like no other." Roy and I exchanged a knowing look. Our parents had met during the Campaign of Fire, basically. We would not have been born, if not for that 'war'. "That is all, really. I look forward to seeing what sort of garden blooms."

"...That sounds mildly creepy." Roy looked a little nervous. "You're... uh... not going to write songs about them, are you?"

"I'm a bard." Mildain always did like writing music. "With the Bardic's Gift."

"...I'm in trouble." HA!

"Hey, you guys at a good stopping point?" The door crashed open, and while Roy was startled, neither Elphin and I were surprised to see Lalum. "Hello~" she greeted cheerfully. "Hey, I had a suggestion!"

"For a strategy?" I asked dryly. She immediately sulked. "Okay, so it's not that."

"Nope!" She bounced on her toes. "But I think it'll help with morale, which is important, right?" Yes, it was. "I was thinking... Elphin, Irene, why don't the three of us put on a show?" Did she just say...? "I'll dance, Elphin will play, and Irene can sing! It'll be great!" Despite her cheer, though, I could see Elphin hesitate, glancing worriedly at me. I knew why. We got along on a professional level, but on a personal one, I was still incredibly mad at him.

However, personally, I considered this part of the job. Therefore... "A performance might raise everyone's spirits." I looked to Roy. "What do you think?"

"I think I'd be willing to fight Bern alone for such a performance," he instantly replied, smiling warmly. "We need to run this plan by the rest of the council anyway before continuing, and they're all busy." That was true. "So, please! Let's have a performance after dinner for everyone."

The performance was an even bigger success than anticipated. What Lalum, Elphin, and I had planned to be only two or three songs at most had turned into ten in a row as the army and resistance members kept urging more and more. Finally, we had to take a break, as Lalum's legs were hurting, Elphin's fingers were on the edge of bleeding, and I swore I was going to cough up blood because my throat was so dry. Even then, the crowd only really let us go when we promised it was a break, not a stop.

"That last song was 'Whisper on the Wind', wasn't it?" I looked up and smiled when I saw Fir approach, a cup in water in hand for me. "That one was one of my mother's favorites," she noted, sitting down next to me. "I think my uncle likes it a lot too."

"It's my sister's favorite too," I murmured. I hunted for her in the crowd, and saw her laughing with Sin and Wolt. Good. "I'm glad Elphin knew it." He better have. I taught it to him.

"I think Rutger liked it too. He looked almost moved to tears." She paused. "Well, for him, at least. Sometimes I think he doesn't smile because he'll crack his face."

"Fir!" I laughed, unable to help it. "Regardless, I think he was near tears for a very different reason. Traditionally speaking, 'Whisper on the Wind' was sung to signal the start of the main event of the Sky Festival, the elaborate dances that told stories of old. Likely, the last time he
heard the song at all, Bulgar was still whole, and his family was still alive.

"If you say so." She fell silent, frowning slightly, and I waited for her to collect her thoughts. "Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"I just… I feel funny around Noah?" She squirmed a bit, and I noticed her face flushing. "My chest gets really tight, and it's hard to speak around him." She shook her head. "It's been… weird. Sue said that 'big sisters know everything', and you're her big sister, so I thought you might have advice?"

"So, you want advice." Hmm… It sounded like a crush, but I think it was a little too 'soon' in terms of how they knew each other. If she had an infatuation, it was with the image she had in her head, not his actual self. But still… "My recommendation, Fir, is to spend time with him."

"You sure?"

"Yes. There is a chance they will fade as you befriend him." I smiled at her. "But if they don't, or if they grow stronger, let's talk again about it, okay?"

"Okay." She smiled shyly. "You're really nice. You remind me of my mother a little." I… I was way too young to be a mom, especially her mom. "You don't make me feel silly for asking questions." Well, I did try? "Thanks so much!" She popped to her feet. "I think Deke is coming over to talk to you though, so I'll excuse myself." She waved as she ran off, over towards Roy and Lilina, who welcomed her with smiles.

"She's got good eyes." A cup of wine appeared in my face before Deke sat down next to me. "Thought you like some alcohol to help you get through the rest of the show," he teased. I shrugged, and sipped the wine. It was a bit sour, but I wouldn't complain. It was clear this was all the resistance had. "How are you feeling? About your father?"

"…It still doesn't feel real," I whispered. I could feel myself droop, but even though I wanted to so badly, I couldn't cry. "Even if I know it is." It was hard to just accept it. Dad was dead? Dad was gone? It just felt wrong. My brave, wonderful, loving, invincible Dad couldn't be dead. But he was. He was, and no matter how much I wished otherwise, I had to accept it. "I read through the letters he left before going to sleep." Sue did the same. When we were done with the letters, we promised to go through the pictures we got together.

"I figured." He laughed softly. "I remember how you were trail after him whenever you'd get a chance. You were definitely a daddy's girl when you were little." I'd been told that many times, actually. Dad was the one I clung to. Mom would playfully pout about it, and Dad would remain confused, even as I got older. "Though, really, you and Sue are both close to your parents."

"We have good ones." We had a good family life. Our parents were loving and kind, but not overly indulgent. It was always warm and quiet, filled with laughter and smiles. I missed it. I wanted it. But I wouldn't have it again, not like how it was in my memories. "I hope there's information about Mom soon." I couldn't stand not knowing. At this rate, she could be dead, and I wouldn't know it for a long while, just like Dad!

"I'm sure she's plotting something even now." That was probably true. Mom always had a plan, and she always won when she planned. "So, how goes the unconventional training?" That was a subject change, but I welcomed it. It was much easier to focus on solid work than hazy assumptions.
"I've convinced Chad to take up healing, learning from Elen." He had been so insistent that he didn't have the talent, despite both Elen and Saul testing and coming up with the same conclusion. "Shanna's also got the talent, so I think she's going to learn as well." She had been excited by the possibility.

"Having a healer who knows how to slide through the shadows, and another who can fly is something that will give you a complete advantage." Yes, that was true. If Shanna managed to successfully figure out a way, I was going to ask if there were other Ilian Knights who wished it. "So, how are things with Little Master Klein?"

"You can ask how he is yourself, you know." Yes, I knew he was trying to tease. I was not rising to the bait this time. "You know… you still haven't given me an explanation."

"Not sure you need to hear it now, when your head is a mess." He ruffled my hair, smiling wryly when I scowled. "Remember, Little Lady, I promised. I keep my promises anyway, but especially to you. I know how strongly Sacaeans hold promises." Yes, we did. "But no matter how well you hold yourself together, anyone that knows you also knows that you're rather fragile at the moment. And you have every right to be, considering everything."

"It isn't really befitting a tactician."

"I'd prefer a tactician who lets herself feel. It makes things less likely to explode at bad moments, and it means you're mentally healthier and more capable of holding steady." That… was very nice to hear. "I think they're calling for encores."

"Yes, it seems so." Still, I waited to for Lalum and Elphin to take the stage before I downed the rest of my wine. "…Thank you for coming to talk with me."

"I figured you needed a big brother." …Those words alone were almost enough to make me cry. He was right, after all. I really did need a 'big brother', or really just anyone that was older than me, and would let me be childish. "Remember to have fun with singing, Irene. It'll make the soldiers feel even better."

"I will."

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I woke with a gasp, shaking and trying not to scream. I had no idea how late it was, but Sue, Clarine, Lilina, and Lalum were fast asleep around me. The five of us were sharing a room, and we had somehow ended up in a blanket-pillow fortress thing. But they didn't even stir as I stood up, now shivering from the cold, and walked out of the room.

As I walked down the hall, I tried to calm myself down, but it was hard. Ever since Sin told me how Dad died, I had been having nightmares of what it might have been like. I had nightmares of Bulgar being splattered crimson, and of Dad burning alive again and again and again.

"My lady?" I paused when I saw one of the resistance members giving me a curious look. "What are you doing awake?" they asked, looking worried. "It's an hour past midnight." Was that so?

"I… found it hard to sleep," I replied slowly. I hesitated before continuing. "Would it be safe if I went outside for a bit? I think the wind would be good for me."

"If you carry your weapon, and do not stay long."

"Thank you." I went back to my room to pick up Rienfleche, my pack, and some arrows before heading out, using the grave exit. It took me a bit to figure out how it opened from this side, but
when I did, I saw how easy it was. That would make sense. This place was supposed to be hard to find, but if you made it hard to leave, it would become nothing but a prison.

Outside, everything felt cold. That made sense. You always felt colder when you left an embrace, and here I was, stepping out from Mother Earth's enveloping arms to greet Father Sky. Father Sky was colder on the surface, but he left more messages in the dark, regarding everything with a distant affection.

I looked up at the stars, but I could not bring myself to read them. That had been a family thing. Mom, Dad, Sue, and I would sit under the stars and try to read the messages Father Sky left in them. But right now, it was only me. From this point on, there would never be an 'us four under the stars'. Dad was in Mother Earth's meadows.

I could only pray that I could see the stars again with Mom. Surely, she was still okay, right? I had not heard anything about her since her capture, despite Uncle Matthew and Uncle Legault's best efforts. But I could hope, right? Even Guinevere had said Zephiel respected Mom. Surely, she would be fine.

A noise caught my attention, mostly because of how strange it was. There was a grumble and growl, accompanied by the gentle and worried murmurs of people. Frowning, I headed for the sound, and I froze when I saw the source: two wyverns, and their riders, one woman in red and a man in blue. Bernese soldiers were here? Either they were sneaking around, or there was some truth to the rumor. There were no other explanations for them being in Etrurian colonies when things were so tense.

But that didn't matter. I could think of no reason for why Bernese would be here other than to fight, so I drew my arrow, and aimed right for them. The woman was my first target, as she was the less armored. The pieces at her feet hinted she had taken them off.

As I aimed, though, the man shifted, wrapping his arms around the woman. He was… he had seen me. He had seen me out of the corner of his eye, and was now using his body as a shield, likely because he expected me to just shoot. I could not say I was not tempted, but I remembered what happened last time I went ahead and shot an unknown Bernese soldier. I only didn't die because Zephiel wanted to play.

So, instead… "If you're trying to be her shield, you should move a bit more," I noted lightly. Both of them tensed. "I still have a good view of her head." His response was to immediately pull the woman closer to him. "My, my, how noble."

"I think it is a reasonable assumption that a Sacaean would take the chance to kill a Bernese soldier," the man replied. He glanced at me over his shoulder, and I thought he was rather like a hawk. "Considering the atrocity at Bulgar."

"I could slaughter everyone who claims Bern as home and it would not be enough." I narrowed my eyes, debating whether or not I should shoot. "You really should move."

"There's an arrow."

"Using yourself as a shield is a selfish and cruel action." I definitely felt my anger bubbling. I thought of Dad, who used himself as a shield for the Kutolah, for the survivors of Bulgar. But he was gone. I would never see him again. All those people he saved would have to live with the knowledge that he paid his life in exchange for theirs. I did not blame him. I am certain, certain, that given how horrible the situation was, that had been the best choice. "If you care about her enough to use yourself as a shield, then you should be thinking of a way you both survive." That
did not mean I could not be angry. That did not mean I could not be furious seeing someone try to pull the same thing without exhausting all other options. "It speaks to the limit of your affection if you are only willing to die for her, leaving her alone with your death."

"I like her." The woman's voice was crisp and no-nonsense, but there was a gentleness in her eyes as she peered at me. "Amber eyes…?" she whispered, looking curious. "I wonder… is your name Irene? Irene of the Kutolah, daughter of Lady Katarina and Lord Rath?" I… um… "Tactician who completely humiliated Narcian?"

"Yes, I suppose that is me."

"Oh, I really like you now." She gave the man a warning look as he opened his mouth. "No. Quiet. I hate Narcian on both a professional and personal level, and there is nothing you can say to change my mind." Well, damn, I could get to like her!

But I had one question. "How did you recognize me?"

"If you put down the bow, we will explain," the man answered. I debated for a bit before my curiosity won, so I brought my bow to my side. I kept an arrow near the string, though. "Thank you." Slowly, he stepped to the side, letting go of the woman. I noticed that they unconsciously leaned towards each other, though, hands just touching. "My name is Galle. This is Miredy." I… knew those names.

"Elen and Guinevere mentioned you," I murmured. They both started, visibly surprised. "Once or twice. I used Guinevere's information about you, Galle, to goad Narcian into the attack."

"Where are they?" Miredy asked. Her eyes were blazing, but not with fury. 'Fervor' was the best word I could think of. She was… I think she might be a knight who served a person, not a country, like Uncle Douglas. "Where is Princess Guinevere?"

"I do not know where she is." That was not a lie. I did not know where she was. I had a few guesses, of course, since she was in Cecilia's protection, but I did not know an exact location. "I only know that she did not come with us." I would also not mention Elen, just in case.

"That does not mean you do not have an idea, though," Galle murmured. He smiled a little when Miredy gave him a confused look. "So long as she does not have an exact location, saying she doesn't know is not a lie. One doesn't have to lie in order to trick people, Miredy."

"You're definitely of the plains." I smiled wryly. "Outsiders never seem to understand that."

"Well, I did spend my early childhood with the Lorca." He shrugged. "I consider myself more Bernese than Sacaean though, at this point."

"That may be true, but you still hear Father Sky on the wind." The only reply I got was a small smile, but I knew I was right. "Regardless, though, that is all you're getting from me about Guinevere."

"As you do not know her plans, or who she wishes to involve." Exactly. "Still, we know she is not in the Isles, that is good."

"What about Elen?" Miredy asked. She hesitated before shaking her head. "No, let me rephrase that. Is she okay?" Hmm? "Is she okay? She can be horribly shy, especially around men."

"She is fine, I believe," I answered. This was just so bizarre. This whole encounter really was. "Certainly, I have not heard anything different." I paused before adding, "I can say the same of
"Good…" She breathed a sigh of relief, shoulders relaxing. Kind. She was kind. I had forgotten Bernese soldiers could be kind. "I've been worried."

"Have you now?" Galle asked dryly. "I would never have guessed by how every other sentence refers to them."

"I don't know why you're complaining, since the other sentences are clearly of how much I love and appreciate you," Miredy instantly deadpanned. Galle instantly blushed at the words, going redder than an apple in the blink of an eye. "Too easy." She turned her smile my way. "To actually answer your question, we know you because we served as Lady Katarina's guards at the Keep before we came out here to continue searching for Princess Guinevere." Keep. Mom was at the Keep. We had known that, of course, but that was… that was the first 'real' confirmation I could remember hearing. "So, we spent our time being teased, hearing stories about her children, and watching her beat King Zephiel in chess." That… that was Mom all right. "She did the latter a lot. Not that we really minded. Around her, he seemed like his old self. Almost." Old self?

"How did you two get to be her guards?" I asked, curious. Belatedly, though, I realized how that might be taken. "If that is not a rude question."

"Not really." But she was hesitating now. Why? What was…? "Um…"

"Do you know about your father?" Galle asked. I felt the world still, and could only reall 'start' it again when I saw the worried look Miredy gave him. "Yes, I know it is not something she should hear from Bernese soldiers, but it would be worse if she never found out."

"…I know Dad is dead," I whispered. It took everything I had to not look at the ground. "A survivor of the Kutolah, who helped get his body out of there, told me."

"Oh, good." His smile was actually incredibly kind. "That is the sort of thing you should hear from a friend, not an enemy." Yes, I much preferred that. "Do you know how?"

"To a degree." Sin's words echoed through my head. "It seems to have been blood loss that killed him, but the burns didn't help."

"Those burns were inflicted by Brunja." Ah, this was marvelous. I now had a personal vendetta against all three wyvern generals, and their king. "She was the one King Zephiel originally assigned as Lady Katarina's guard, but when Lady Katarina learned Brunja was, ultimately, the one who killed her husband, she requested a change. King Zephiel obliged." Well, will wonders never cease? He did have a heart that did more than pumped blood. "Miredy and I were tasked with it as she was waiting for information about Princess Guinevere, and I had been granted leave to assist her."

"I… I see…" Now, though, I had one question. "How… how is my mom?" I looked right at him. He might be Bernese by culture and choice, but he was still half Sacaean. So… so…! "Please, in Father Sky's name…" Do not lie to me.

"By Father Sky, I do swear, she was unharmed when we last saw her." Yes, he knew. I could tell by his eyes that he still believed, to a point, that lies were a sin. He might be 'Bernese', but he still knew Father Sky's voice. "She had lost weight, but was being treated kindly. She was not in a prison cell, but locked in the manse where King Zephiel spent his childhood."

"Thank you." Then she was okay. So long as she was okay, I would see her again. So long as she
was okay, I could hold onto my hope, no matter how much it burned. "Truly…” I had information. I actually had information, for the first time…

"…Would you like to hear Lord Rath's last words?" Everything froze at the offer. I could only stare blankly as he repeated, "would you like to hear them?"

"How do you…?"

"As the wyvern knights fell, Brunja sent a request for reinforcements. General Murdock had been on his way to Iilia, but upon receiving that, he paused and ordered me to go assist." That… must be why Murdock was around to capture Mom. "By the time my unit arrived, though, the battle was over. When she sent the request, she had been under the impression that she was facing an army, not a single skilled archer." Dad… "But, because of that, I… was a witness to his last moments. Would you like to hear them?"

"…Please…” Dad… Dad, what did you…?

"I remember his smile the most." Dad had been smiling. That was important. Dad had been smiling at the end. "It was not the smile of someone who had lost or was in pain. It was the smile of someone who knew he had won." Was that so? "I remember thinking it was strange, but I later agreed. Bulgar might have been officially a win for Bern, but the losses we suffered were far beyond what made it a worthwhile win. I believe there were more dead Bernese than Sacaeans, and most of them died after the gates were sealed." Dad… "When you add in how Brunja cannot take the field for a long while due to her extensive injuries, it's clear that if there was a victor that day, it was him."

"Did all he do was smile?"

"No." Galle closed his eyes, and I knew… I knew it was so that he could give me the most accurate recollection he could. "No, he smiled, and then he started laughing. It was a slow, almost mocking laugh, and it just added to this air that he had won." My hands were shaking. "Then, he spoke."

"What did he say?" I half-thought I was going to collapse. But Miredy came to my side and held her hands out in a silent question. When I nodded, she wrapped her arms around me in a supporting hug. I wondered if she was a big sister too. Her hug seemed like the ones I gave Sue, Roy, Lilina, and Clarine.

"'You are doomed, Bernese.'” That… that was very, very dramatic considering that Dad was the one who apparently said it. "'If I, without my best weapons, aged and scarred and wounded, could do so much damage to you and yours, then you are doomed.'” Unconsciously, I glanced down at Rienfleche. "'You will lose this war, and you will lose all you hold dear. Your king will fall, as will your country.'"

"Did he see that in the stars or something?"

"No." He opened his eyes and looked right at me. "The last part of it was 'I know this because my daughters are far stronger than I could ever be.'” Dad…? "'My eldest is a light born from the dark. My youngest is the wind of a thunderstorm.'” That… was a play on our affinities. I was light; Dad was dark. Sue was wind; Mom was thunder. "'You will fall to them and their friends, because they are those who surpass the legacy of the Campaign of Fire.'” Dad… "After that, he closed his eyes, and he breathed his last. The smile on his face softened, and I wondered if he was perhaps thinking of his daughters as he passed." I… "Those… were his last moments, as near as I can remember them."
"...Thank you..." I was definitely shaking, but Miredy continued to hold me. "I... thank you..." I was rather glad I decided to not shoot them on sight now. But, I also really need a subject change, for my own sanity. "S-so, why are you two in a graveyard anyway? It's not exactly a place suited for a romantic rendezvous." The results of the words were instantaneous. Galle went bright red, again, while Miredy simply laughed. "Well, I suppose some people find corpses a turn on."

"Yes, but neither Galle nor I are such people," Miredy answered easily. I was almost afraid Galle was going to faint from how red he got. "I wonder what your soldiers would say, Galle, if they could see their big, brave, stoic leader turning so red over implications and teasing."

"I live my private life private," Galle hissed. I could see him struggling to return to a stoic expression, but it was clear that Miredy was good at flustering him. "Watch it. I do know how to make you blush as well."

"That you do, but you would not do so with an audience." This was hilarious.

"I could simply tell you." Those words made Miredy blush. "Though, it seems your imagination has done the work for me."

"Galle!"

"So, graveyard?" I interrupted. This was so bizarre. I almost thought I was in some weird ass dream. I was joking with Bernese soldiers. This should be impossible. "Also, where are your wyverns?" Both of them paused. "...Where are your wyverns?"

"Oh, somewhere above our heads, likely," Galle answered absently, glancing up. He tilted his head. "Miredy?" Her response was to move, dragging me with her. "There we go." Um... I had to throw up my hand to shield my eyes as two wyverns suddenly swooped down and landed, one noticeably clumsier than the other. I had been by wyverns before; I had ridden on Hyperion, after all. But there was definitely a difference between an old, battle-scarred wyvern and two young and fierce ones. Holy...

"To answer your question," Miredy murmured. She looked at the clumsier wyvern worriedly. "We were flying towards Bishop Orlo's residence when we noticed there was something wrong with Galle's wyvern." Ah, so they had landed to assess the problem, but then I interrupted. "We need to get on that..."

I hesitated a long moment before whispering, "might I assist?" They both gave me odd looks in reply. "As thanks for telling me about my parents, and I also just feel bad for the wyvern." Animals were animals, no matter where they were from. "I know a bit about their health. An uncle of mine is a former Bernese Knight."

"Sir Heath, who served Caelin prior to going to Ilia." Yes. "He's a bit of a local legend among the wyvern knights now, along with General Vaida." I barely knew that last name, and only because she was a latecomer to the Campaign of Fire. "Well, Galle, our biggest issue was needed an extra set of hands."

"If she doesn't mind putting down the bow?" Galle replied slowly. Belatedly, I realized I did still have it out. "Bows make wyverns nervous." Silently, I nodded, and set Rienfleche down. It would still be within easy reach, just in case, but I had my hands free. "Then here. I'm guessing there is a problem around the wing joint. Miredy will keep him calm while we poke."

Without another word, the three of us went to work. It wasn't silent, though. The wind danced
around us, carrying whispers of approval, as the wyverns growled and grumbled. Various animals skittered about in the shadows as we carefully looked over the wyvern.

The wind nudged me towards a certain point on its leg that looks just fine by my eyes, but I noticed something 'off' as soon as I touched it. "I think I found an abscess," I murmured. At the least, that is what it felt like. "Well, I found a wyvern equivalent?" I carefully prodded, and the wyvern immediately growled. "Whatever it is, I think it's the problem."

"Wyverns don't get abscesses," Galle explained, shifting to look at the area. As Miredy cooed wordlessly to the wyvern, he gently felt around the area, determining the reach. "But it's not uncommon for them to gain infections under the skin. Their wounds heal fast, sometimes too fast for a proper disinfecting." Ah, so that's what this was. "Miredy, do we have things for infection?"

"No, we used the last of what we had in the village treating those kids," Miredy answered. I made some noise in confusion. "There were some wounded children who escaped from some mine." Was that so? "We did our best to help them to a safer location. I have no idea what is going on here, and I'm almost positive I don't want to know." I didn't blame her. "Regardless, we don't."

"I do," I answered, reaching into my pack. "Wyverns can have calendula, right? I'm not misremembering?"

"Yes, I think so. That's a component of vulneraries, right?"

"Yes, but vulneraries are dilutions. Elixirs contain them in much stronger quantities." I pulled out the poultices I had made earlier, eyeing the area. "We'll need an incision."

"Let me," Galle insisted, already tugging a small knife from his belt. I nodded, not being stupid, and found myself smiling with I saw the hilt of the knife. That was a Lorca pattern. He had that knife for a long while. "Miredy, careful he doesn't accidentally bite you. This is going to hurt." To my utter surprise, though, the wyvern only growled as Galle cut into the wound. Of course, all three of us gagged at the horrible smell. Yeah, that was infection, and it had been that way for a while. "Oh, I'm so sorry, my friend…"

"Clearly, he was trying to hide it from you," I muttered. Honestly, wyverns reminded me of Sacaean horses so much. "Easy, easy…" Carefully, I applied the poultice to the injury, making sure it took. "Got a way to cover it?"

"Yes." Galle pulled out some bandages from his saddlebag and easily bandaged the injury up. "There we go." He stepped back, and I followed suit. "That should hold until we reach a city, at the least."

"Yes, it should," Miredy confirmed. She cooed wordlessly at the wyvern before turning to smile at me. "Thank you. It really is easier with three people. Wyverns are tricky."

"It's fine," I dismissed, waving my hand. It felt awkward, being praised, especially by a Bernese soldier. "You require three hands for treating a Sacean horse too, most of the time."

"So I've heard." She laughed a bit. "Well, I think Galle and I will be departing. I imagine it wouldn't be good if the rest of your army found us." Ahaha… ha… ha… Oh, Father Sky, I would get in so much trouble. "We'll be off. I..." She hesitated before nodding. "I hope that if we meet again, it is peaceful, just like this." I heard the hidden words. She hoped we wouldn't have to fight. I wasn't...quite sure if I returned the feeling.

However, I could acknowledge they were both kind and good people, if nothing else. "May Father
Sky guide your path."

"Mother Earth, watch you," Galle replied instantly, and I couldn't help but smile. It was just so nice hearing the traditional replies. "You might want to stand a bit back."

Nodding, I did so, collecting Rienfleche on the way. In a blast of wind, the two took off, and I watched them fly away, noting how Miredy maneuvered her wyvern to be on Galle's weak side. They were obviously very close, and had been for some time. I was almost reminded of my parents…

When they disappeared from sight, I returned to the hideout, being extra careful in opening and closing the grave-door. I barely made it down the stairs, though, when I saw Sue sitting on the floor, clearly waiting for me.

"I woke up and you weren't there," she explained without prompting. She stood up, giving me a worried look. "Someone told me you had gone outside."

"Yes, I needed to feel the wind," I murmured. I thought about what all happened outside, and I realized reluctantly that… even though Sue deserved to know more than anyone, I could not explain it. I would start screaming and sobbing, if I didn't outright collapse. "I will… explain later why I was out for so long."

"Okay." Her smile was sweet, so sweet that I almost felt guilty. "If you are certain that is good for you?"

"I think it is, but I am sorry that you will have to wait."

"Little sisters are supposed to wait for the big sisters to figure out how to explain things." I wasn't sure that was how it worked. "After all, little sisters know that their big sisters know best."

"Now I know you are teasing me." I gathered her up in a hug, stroking her hair. "You are the wind of the thunderstorm, Sue."

"Hmm?"

"Those… Dad said that." She stiffened in my hug. "I will tell you later when and how I heard it." I was the light born from the dark. That's what Dad said. Those words… I would hold onto them. "Whisper them when you feel yourself faltering. That is how he saw you, and we both know…"

"Dad always had the clearest sight." She leaned a little into me. "…I miss him…"

"I know."

"I miss him a lot."

"I know."

"Why did he have to die?"

"I don't know."

"Why…?" She might have said more, but she started to quietly cry, so I simply kept holding her as she sobbed, clinging to me.

I couldn't answer her, so it was all I could do. But a graveyard seemed appropriate for mourning the dead.
Author's Notes: In chapter 10B and 11A, Miredy and Galle make cameo appearances, giving the player a visual clue (or outright confirmation) of Arcardo's alliance with Bern, and providing some insight into not only these characters, but some others. I happen to really like both of these characters, so I made their chapter cameos a little more substantial. …A lot more substantial… (Why yes, I picked Irene and Katri's affinities just for those last words of Rath's)

The idea of a resistance hideout being in, and under, a graveyard comes from the manga Hasha no Tsurugi (I think that's the title), the manga based off of Fe6. We're basically at the point where that manga starts intersecting with the main storyline. Chad is going to be a 'trickster', while Shanna is going to be a Falcoknight like Fe13/Fe14. References to Klein-Tate C support, and mentions of Klein-Deke C support.

Next Chapter – Hero of the West
Chapter 12) Hero of the West

Before we left the hideout, Roy decided it would be a good idea to send additional messages to trusted Etrurian nobles, meaning that he, Klein, Clarine, Sue, Lilina, and I spent a good hour or so writing as many people as we could think of. After sending the letters, we marched forward to the mines to try and free the people there. As we approached, I could hear the wails and dying screams of people on the wind, echoing on and on. Father Sky wanted us to hear the ghosts. They could not rest while the mine was operating.

We had to secure the town. From there, we could get the mine. We had to, because this was not something that would stop alone. Etruria had become a glutton and parasite, far from the nation Elimine began, and far from the country I knew King Mordred and Mildain wanted to rule.

The first thing to be done when we arrived was scouting and spying. Those of us who were good at moving quietly were sent around the town and in the castle itself in order to gather information.

I insisted on being out, in case something erupted in a fight. It really touched me that Roy agreed without hesitations, even as the others in the 'council' pointed out what happened last time I went out on my own for scouting. But he was adamant that he trusted me, and so, I got my permission. Now, I just had to be careful. I didn't want anyone to think Roy was being soft or silly, letting me do this.

I made it inside the castle easily. We might be in the Western Isles, but the castle was clearly built by Etrurians. It had the same weaknesses that made them easy to sneak into: ground floor windows that were more decorations than anything protective. From there, it was just a matter of figuring out a good way to scale the walls and make it to the rafters. It wasn't as hard as it sounded, of course. There was so much stuff on the walls that there were many foot and hand holds.

Carefully, I crept along the rafters, glad that I had picked a good place to climb. I was right over the main room, and there was a bishop below me, talking to a soldier.

"The two Bernese knights have left," the soldier was saying. If there had been Bernese soldiers, then it had to have been... "Are you certain you should not have told them the truth?"

"What, and lose such a valuable hostage?" the bishop laughed. It echoed harshly around the room, and I felt my skin crawl. "What a waste that would be! Princess Guinevere is in Aquelia, and what easy picking she'll be!" Yes, that confirmed who the two knights had been: Miredy and Galle. They must have come here to confirm my words.

Admittedly, some part of me was annoyed by that, because it implied they had thought I was lying. From an outsider's point of view, though, it made sense. Just because we had a relatively peaceful conversation, that did not mean either side was to be trusted. I chose to believe them about Dad's last moments, and about how Mom was currently. I chose that because it helped ground me, and gave me hope. That did not mean they chose the same thing, though. Trust was not automatically reciprocated.
Still, Cecilia, you took her to Aquelia? Yes, it was a place not many would think to look for her, but Father Sky, if someone suspected, as they did now…

"Ah, Grand Chancellor Roartz was so happy to hear about that!" He was still laughing? "As excited as the time it was reported the assassination of Prince Mildain had been a success!" … Assassination?

"Your Worship…!" the soldier hissed. I couldn't see their face from up here, thanks to their helmet, but I was certain their eyes were wide. "You must not say such things aloud."

"Oh, of course, of course." The bishop shook his head. "I just got overwhelmed with elation. Such a good day." Could I shoot him? I very much did. "Now, was there any other news?"

"The Lycian Army seems to be making their way here." So, they had definitely been tracking our progress. That was unsurprising. We were dealing with an enemy army; they had their own spies and scouts. "Lord Arcardo's orders were clear…"

"Capture them, yes, yes." The bishop shrugged, though. "We both know that he's just going to kill them, so go ahead and give the order." So, they were just going to attack. This was definitely a set up. "Oh, and tell the bandits to ransack the villages, will you?"

"Of course…" The soldier seemed hesitant, though. "Are you sure? If this becomes public…"

"You forget that I speak for the gods! I am immune to persecution!" Yeah, I'm pretty sure Father Sky and Mother Earth were sending us to remind you that you're full of it. "So, go on. It would be a shame to let this chance go to waste." I really wanted to shoot him. I really did. "By the way, the other task I asked of you?"

"The stubborn wench hides and no one is willing to talk."

"Take the children. Threaten to kill them. Say that this is God's Command." Wouldn't talk like that just push people away from the religion? …No, it probably wouldn't. It would probably drive them to a zealous fervor, and let them commit atrocities with a free conscience. "But do so quietly. I don't want it interfering." Oh, what ever would it interfere with? At this point, I was ready to believe anything.

"Your box seats at the arena are clean and waiting." So, the bishop liked blood sport. Well, I suppose it couldn't be much of a surprise. Gladiators and arenas could be found almost everywhere in Elibe. "Thy will be done."

"Of course!" His guffawing made me want to shoot him, again, so I decided that was a good time to get going.

After all, I got quite a bit of information and it would be a shame to not tell it to the others because I made a hotheaded decision, yes?

The War Council was called as soon as all scouts returned. Information was exchanged and gathered, and thus, we had a good idea of the layout and current feel not only here, but also for the mines themselves.

"So, they just got one shipment in, meaning that guards are heavier there, but light here," Roy summarized once everyone finished giving their reports. He frowned in thought, eyes narrowed at the map. "We definitely need to secure this area then."
"They'll call in reinforcements from there, too," Elphin murmured. He drummed his fingers on the table, the beat for a song only he heard. "That will make it easier to get into the mines. But if we cannot end this is two battles, maximum, then Lord Arcardo will have ample time to send reinforcements."

"Yes, we must end this today." Roy sighed, shaking his head. "Is there anything else before we turn to other matters?"

"There is one thing," Tate spoke up. She looked calm and stoic; it was hard to believe it took both Klein and me asking for her to consider joining up with the Council as the 'Flier Leader'. "Scouts reported seeing two wyvern riders flying from here." Was that so? Then, it had to be... "Shall we pursue?"

"No, leave them be," I replied before anyone else could get a chance. I held firm even as all eyes turned to me. "Our priority is liberating the miners." This was probably stupid of me, but it was what I chose. I chose to believe that they had told me the truth, and thus, I would also choose to not pursue. "Instead, let us remember the rumors about Arcardo working with Bern, and what the presence of two wyvern riders flying freely means."

"It means we got a lot more evidence for those rumors," Elphin murmured after giving everyone a moment to think. I couldn't help but smile, glad that he was siding with me. I was still mad, of course, but... "Meaning that our priority must be the continued liberation of the Isles."

"Otherwise, they're going to go from Etrurian Colonies to Bernese," Roy whispered. He closed his eyes and nodded. "Yes, I agree with Irene. Leave them be. We must not forget that when we fight soldiers, we fight people, not a nameless, thoughtless mob. It could be that they thought Princess Guinevere was here, and were coming to rescue her from the nefarious Lycian Army."

"Then we should turn to talking about the lord of this area, Bishop Orlo," Klein suggested. I thought there was something a bit 'off' about his demeanor, as if he was hiding a hurt while trying to remain serious. "In my experience, he is a very pious man, amicable and soft-spoken on the surface. But you had dark rumors around him even when he was in the Etrurian court." I shifted slightly, just enough to briefly take his hand and squeeze it reassuringly. Though it did not make him smile as it normally would, I did notice his demeanor 'relax'. He must have been mad about Orlo, then. "That was why he was reassigned to here three years ago."

"Based on what I've overheard him saying, there's something else that must be mentioned," I whispered. I glanced at Klein, and then looked at Elphin. "He stated that Roark had not been so happy about knowing Guinevere was in Aquelia since, and I quote, 'the assassination of Prince Mildain.'" Elphin stilled, and I knew it was true. "That gives credence to the dark rumors, and the implications are... interesting."

"Implications that do have to wait." He gave me a look that told me he knew why I had chosen to say it now. It was a 'safe' way of telling Elphin that I knew. "That's about all I know of him, though."

"We know a bit more," Elen whispered. It took me a bit to realize she was here. She and Saul weren't normally part of the 'War Council', but had been asked to sit in this time since we had no idea what the coming hours would bring. They were huddled in the corner, and both held themselves stiffly. "He is a monster." Elen's blunt, no-nonsense tone actually made the words a little chilling coming from her. "A man of cloth who thinks that acts of atrocities can, and should, go unpunished if done in the name of God..." She actually looked angry. "Unforgivable."

"Yes, yes, we certainly have an evil bishop here," Saul agreed. His polite smile was just as cold. "A
disgrace to God… oh, how he'll pay…”

"So, if the healers of the group are done showcasing how they're actually really scary when angry…" Astore deadpanned. It made both of them jump, and even smile sheepishly. "So, who has a plan?"

"I do," I answered at once, leaning over the table, pointing to a spot on the map. "Orlo apparently has box seats for the Arena. We can set up a trap there, and take him out easily." All eyes turned to me, startled, and I shifted uncomfortably. "It is a perfectly legitimate tactic to just *avoid* the major siege at the castle that will cost us too much supplies and time, especially considering we are dealing with bandits at the same time."

"That is… true…" Marcus replied slowly. I often forgot he was here, as he normally left the leading to the younger folk, and focused mostly on training. "How will you make sure that he will not storm his army into the arena?"

"We'll have them go after different bait: Lycian Army patrols." If you make an 'obvious' attempt at fighting, then the enemy will focus on that. Someone as arrogant as Orlo was even more likely to ignore a subtle approach. "It's simple, really."

"Um… my pardon, but is that not-"

"You do not need to lie in order to trick people." I could recite this in my sleep by this point! "It is not my fault if he thinks that is where *all* of the army is." I straightened, shrugging as I gestured at the table. "The main problem I can think of is getting our people in the arena. We'd want some of ours fighting, of course, so that there are skilled fighters on the ground, but we'll need to set up in multiple places if we're to get a good assassination attempt."

"You can leave *that* to me," Astore offered. His smile was wry. "I can figure out all the best spots with one run through. I was trained enough for it."

"Good, then that's solved," I replied. Now, the big thing… "Who do we send to fight in the arena and play bait *there*?" I had… one person in mind. But I could never ask. I could never, ever ask, and a quick glance to Klein told me he couldn't either. B-besides, there were many in the group that could suffice so…

"Well, if you want bait, then wouldn't the best kind be a former gladiator?" That was why all my thoughts clunked to a stop when Deke spoke up. "I'll head in," he continued, shrugging off all the surprised looks. "Rutger would also be a good choice. The two of us work well together as well, and his style will be just 'foreign' enough to catch interest."

"…I'm not asking."

"I'm volunteering." He sighed, rolling his shoulder. "Though, I can't say how good I'll be. I'm quite rusty." I would believe *that* when I saw it. "But like I said, we'll bring Rutger in too, Little Lady Irene. They'll forgive my rust if it's paired with his strength." He turned thoughtful. "Since we're 'guest' fighters, we'll be able to bring our own healer. Bring Lady Clarine along." He laughed when Klein opened his mouth to protest, and I covered his mouth without even looking. "You two are the same as always. Regardless, she's a skilled healer, she's dainty and pretty so she'll gain 'vulnerability' points that'll hold the audience's attention, and Rutger just fights at his best when she's around. Simple."

"Healers are not in danger in a normal fight, correct?"
"Yeah, she'd just be off to the side to patch us up in between fights. It'll be good experience for her." The look in his eyes told me he meant in more than just healing proficiency, and I had to say, I agreed. "So, no being an overprotective big brother, Little Master Klein."

"I swear; you are both horrible," Klein sighed. It earned a bit of a laugh from the council, which grew when I nudged Klein and he made a face. "Fine, I'll hold my tongue this time." He gave me an exasperated look. "You owe me."

"Tea and sweets, just as always," I teased. I laughed when he rolled his eyes, but it died when I caught a flash of pain on Tate's face. What was…? "Anyway, before Klein and I descend into very unprofessional antics, any suggestions for the other bait?"

"I have a few," Zealot volunteered. He traced out a path. "There are numerous villages here, and I was thinking that if we set up multiple patrols to confuses…"

The council went on for quite some time, but that was what happened when you worked on multiple strategies, just in case.

He took the baits. Orlo fell for all the baits. Chad informed me of how he had his soldiers rushing all over the place, abandoning even their hunt for Ekhidna to chase and kill the Lycian Alliance Army. I didn't need anyone to tell me he bought the arena bait. I could see him, after all. I couldn't believe he bought all of them.

"This feels strange." Sue's whisper made me glance over at her. She and I were set up on a ledge across, and above, Orlo, with our bows ready. Hers remained unstrung for now, since we weren't preparing to shoot, but since Rienfleche was unbreakable, I had gone ahead and strung it. "Should we really be hunting a person like this?" she asked softly. I noticed her hands shook slightly. "No matter how cruel he is, he's not an animal."

"Animals are kinder," I replied softly. She might have moral qualms, but I didn't. "They don't hide that they are." Still, I reached over and took her hand. "If you want to just leave this part to me, it's just fine." Wolt and Dorothy had refused because the thought made them squirm. Klein opted instead to keep charge of his soldiers. Sin had been ambivalent, but I had decided he was best for keeping an eye on Roy for me. "You and Sin can switch."

"No, I want to be up here with you." She shook her head. "I want to see your plan with my own eyes."

"The plan has multiple parts, Sue. If you're uncomfortable-"

"I'm fine."

"Shaking hands lead to misfired arrows." On this, I had to be firm, so I shifted to look her in the eye. "If you think you're going to choke or miss, then I need you to step down. We will not get multiple chances. We have to make sure Orlo is at least incapacitated for Astore." Astore was taking the role of the actual assassin in this case, but that was less because of willingness and more because it was hard to guarantee a kill from this distance.

"Irene, this is a tactic that makes it clear that you are different from Mom." What was she saying? "Mom wouldn't have even thought about doing something like this. We both know that." Her eyes were earnest. "She would have focused on Orlo, but during an actual battle. If she sent an assassin, it would be in the chaos of things. She'd take advantage of that. But you are preempting the chaos. You're throwing them into chaos with this, and commanding the field through it."
"I… suppose…?"

"So, I want to see. This is a battle where no one can compare you to Mom. All of the other times, they could. I know they did." I suppose. But I chased after her. She was my role model. I didn't mind. I just wanted to catch up to- "This… this is a battle where I can see why the adults believe in us, why they think we've already surpassed them. That's why. I want to see." She leaned forward slightly. "I want to see the exact moment where you start your own path, Sister. That way, I can find the courage to start on mine."

I think I got, maybe, a quarter of it. But I smiled wryly anyway. "Well, if you want to do that, you need to not shake."

"Of course." She smiled as she squeezed my hand. "I'll be okay."

"If you're sure." Roars below caught my attention, and I glanced down to see Deke just tearing through his opponents. Those he missed, Rutger got easily. I could see the injuries they were taking, and I knew Clarine was fretting in the wings, wringing her hands as she watched. I would have a talk with her later about all of this. So long as it all worked, though, we'd keep it up. This was the fifth match. It was easy to see that the whole crowd was enraptured by them. They weren't paying attention to anything else…

A fireball arced in the distance. That was Lilina, giving the signal. Elphin had judged the time as right. I nudged Sue, pointing to the fireball, and she nodded back, stringing her bow. Then both of us drew back our arrows and aimed.

We waited for the crowd to cheer wildly, Deke and Rutger the winners again. We waited for Orlo to jump out of his seat, laughing and clapping with the crowd. Then, as the crowd's cheers surged again, likely Deke and Rutger doing something showy to celebrate, we both shot.

My arrow caught Orlo in the neck; Sue's caught him in the shoulder.

Astore's daggers caught him in the spine, and ripped him apart.

I could get used to arrogant fools for enemies. They were just so damn stupid.

Among the screams, I watched Astore race away. That was his part of the plan; he was to lead the guards on a merry little circle, and buy more time and generate more confusion. Deke and Rutger were to clear out the fighting grounds, and guard Clarine as they escaped.

Exchanging a glance, Sue and I swung down from our perch, throwing guards down the stairs as we bolted for Deke and Rutger. Some of the soldiers, I'm certain, we killed with broken necks, just based on how they hit the ground. Others… well, Deke had been very insistent on something when we arrived. He wanted us to free the lions that were being held here. Now, normally, lions didn't go after people, but Etrurians purposely starved lions so that they'd fight the humans they threw at them. The practice was no different here.

So, some of the soldiers were eaten by lions. It was almost hilarious how much the crowd freaked out. They had just watched a bunch of people try to kill each other, some of them children who were sold or stolen into this fate. They had watched some of these lions eat the children, and simply groaned about the fight not being long enough. But Father Sky forbid that a soldier suffer that fate.

"This way!" Deke called, holding out a hand to help Sue and I over the barrier. Rutger was silent as he did the same, and dragged us over to a fretting Clarine. "We have to move before the lions catch
"Scent of us." I was definitely trusting his judgment. "Lady Clarine?"

"I'm fine," Clarine answered instantly. It was easy to see she wasn't, though. Her eyes were puffy from tears, and she held her staff with a white-knuckled grip. "We… we have to move, though…" I ruffled her hair, smiling sadly as she leaned into it. "Yes?"

"Yeah…" Deke still looked worried, but Rutger just quietly took Clarine's arm and led the way. I saw her cling to him, and thought of what Klein said. I think… she was more emotionally mature than he, and I, both thought. "Time to run, you two."

Sue and I just nodded and took off, snickering a little as we left him behind. Deke was slow! However, he was still faster than the lions and soldiers, and that was all I cared about. It wasn't long at all before we slid outside and entered the chaos. There was fighting everywhere, a disorganized mess barely held together by strict orders issued before hand. I bit my lip as I realized it was even worse than I had anticipated. I was glad Zealot had suggested to double up protection, because otherwise, the nearby villages might have been burned by now.

"Everyone, head to your groups," I ordered. They nodded, and split up. I lingered, waiting. I had lent Lalum my horse for a specific task, after all, and I wanted her back. Thankfully, I didn't have to wait long.

"Irene!" Lalum came riding up and jumped down, bouncing on her toes. "Ekhdna, this is Irene," she introduced, beaming. I knew she was pleased with herself. After all, she had been the one to insist that she could easily make contact with Ekhdna, leader of the resistance. "Irene, this is Ekhdna!"

"So, you're her," Ekhdna noted. She sounded unimpressed as she dismounted, but there was something kind in her eyes. "I should thank you and your general. I've been worried about Lalum and Elphin." Yes, there was something kind about her, so her tone might have simply been tiredness. Though, she could just be unimpressed with me. I wouldn't blame her. "Lalum's been talking my ear off about you."

"Well, of course! I've known Irene for a long time!" Lalum clapped her hands in delight. "But it seems like this are going to get messy fast. Shanna told me that while reinforcements are on the way, others…"

"Others are prepping to hide the evidence." Ekhdna crossed her arms, looking right at me. "Lalum brought me to you when we heard that. You have a plan."

"Elphin and I accounted for the possibility," I reassured. That earned me a smile. "I'm to take command of the group heading to the mines. If you would like to add yours to ours, Dame Ekhdna, then we shall go save them and leave the rest here for Elphin and Roy."

"Well, I've no reason to refuse," Ekhdna replied. She held out her hand, and I took it for a handshake. "Let's go liberate the mines of death."

The mines were a good distance away, far enough to give Orlo 'plausible deniability' if any of it came to light. As a result, most of the group heading for it was mounted; specifically, I had brought Lance and Allen's groups. Ekhdna's fighters, of course, weren't. Horses were expensive both to buy and care for. However, they didn't balk from riding with the mounted forces, so that was good.

"We're approaching the gates." Tate swooped down, level to me. I slowed down a little so she could keep pace easier. "There are soldiers in the way," she informed me. "Some are archers."
"Get your girls out of range," I ordered instantly. She nodded. "Our goal is to secure the prisoners first, which means that I don't care about the soldiers in the way so long as they're actually soldiers." Now, if they were miners forced to be a living shield, that would another thing entirely. But if they were soldiers, then I had to force myself to not care. "Everyone else will trample or jump as they prefer."

"Understood." She lingered a bit, studying my face, before flying off. That was… strange…?

"So, what are we doing?" Lalum's voice reminded me that I had her as a passenger. She was the one exception to the 'cavalry' part of my group, but that was because I thought I'd need her dancing. "Are we trampling?" she asked. "Or are we jumping?"

"Well…” I began slowly. I narrowed my eyes as we approached the group. They were standing too firmly to be anything but soldiers. "I think…” My mare knew what I wanted and brought her head down, prepping. "I think you need to hold on, Lalum." Time to jump.

She barely had time to squeak and cling to my waist before we jumped, clear over their heads. A quick glance showed that Lance had also jumped, while Allen had simply plowed straight through, punching a clear hole for anyone else who hesitated at jumping to go through instead.

Once we were past them, though, it was complete chaos. They did, after all, have time to prep, and that meant they had time for traps. Fortunately, that had also been anticipated for. The pegagus knights shouted warnings and let us evade just in time. We lost people, of course. But it was less than the Etrurians wanted, and that was all I cared about.

That said… I had forgotten how reckless of a fighter Allen could be. I swore he was going to get himself killed stupidly!

"Tate!" I called, slowing to a stop so that Lalum could dismount. She automatically dashed off to the side, so that she could dance safely for everyone. "Tate!"

"My apologies!" Tate landed next to me, shaking her head. "An archer almost got one of mine, but I was close enough to catch her," she explained. I smiled to let her know that I wasn't mad, and she relaxed a little. "She's fine, if shaken, as is her pegasus."

"I'm glad to hear." My smile grew. "You mind if I make you a babysitter, though?"

"I grew up with Shanna." HA! "Who do you need me to watch?"

"Reckless charger in red over there." I pointed to Allen for emphasis, and I laughed when she made a face. "You noticed too."

"Yes, I did." She sighed, shaking her head. "No worries. I'll deal with him."

"Thanks, Tate. I owe you."

"It's just part of the job, Lady Irene." She smiled back before taking off again, and I settled into the battle, watching it closely.

The most important question here was 'where were the miners?'. This would not be the victory we wanted if it was bought with their lives. We would win, of course. By this point, that was assured. But simply winning was not all that we should strive for. For a better future, for a happier future, we should focus on saving as many as we could, protecting as many as we could.
Only a fool would say that war can be won without sacrifices. But that did not mean you could not strive for minimal sacrifices.

"Dame Irene!" I fired an arrow to take out the last archer I could find before turning towards Ekhidna as she ran for me. She was blood splattered, and injured, but she had a bright, relieved smile on her face. "Found the miners," she told me. I smiled back, barely checking the urge to cheer. "Need you to keep them off us while we get them, though. The door is barred, and there's oil all over the place." They were planning on burning them all. "Still need to find where they're keeping the newer ones, but we have this much!"

"Go on," I urged. "We've got this!"

"I owe you." She flashed a grin and ran off, rallying her group to her. It was the better decision, of course. The miners would know the resistance members.

"Fill in the gaps!" In turn, our group was better suited for a long battle against soldiers. Knights were trained for such fighting, after all, and with pegasus knights to confuse them, it was even easier to seize control. "Don't let them take control! Seize and hold the opportunity!" I focused my attention on Allen and Tate, and noticed the two actually worked rather well together. I should ask them if they'd mind making that a more permanent partnership on the battlefield, and…

"Irene!" Startled, I twisted, and saw a general with a giant axe swing for me. I grit my teeth as I urged my mare back, noting the trajectory. I doubted it would kill me, but this was going to hurt because I couldn't dodge quite fast enough…

But, instead, the general burst into flames. Literally. I was so confused, as Lilina and Lugh weren't with this group, and they were the only mages we had. Who had…?

"Ah, so this is why everyone suddenly became hopeful." As the general turned to ash, a cloaked man walked up, unafraid of the lingering flames as he stood in front of me. "Hello there, little tactician." His eyes were the first thing I noticed. They were a very old, very pretty blue. I guessed he was somewhere in his thirties, at most, based on his face, though the scars on his neck and collarbone seemed 'older', so maybe fifty or something. I doubted he was much older. There was no grey in his red hair. "I apologize for startling you."

"I should be thanking you instead," I replied slowly. He carried a fire tome, but he also wore a sword. I didn't know of any mages that did that. "My name is Irene, and I thank you for ensuring I don't get yelled at by the healers."

"You are quite welcome." He laughed a little. "My name is Wuotan. I am a traveling scholar who, regrettably, got myself captured." If that was the case, how was he armed? Did he steal weapons from the corpses? "I take it you all are here to liberate the Isles?"

"Well, that is the plan, to a degree. I think we're more focused on kicking the Etrurians out."

"I pray that is the case. History often tells us that when one liberates a country, the so-called saviors move in as the conquerors." Roy wouldn't do that, and neither would Uncle Eliwood and Aunt Lyn. "But I digress."

"Sure…" I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye. "Ah, there-"

But Wuotan had his sword drawn and the would-be-attacker dead before I could finish the sentence. "It always amazes me how many people think a traveling scholar cannot fight." He casually rested his bloody sword against his shoulder, the other hand still holding his tome. "You
pick up many tricks as you read of the past."

"I'm… sure…" This was a little surreal. "So, what? Are you a mage… fighter… or something?"

"Well, that is certain one thing to call me." He smiled. "But, please, allow me to assist you in clearing out the rest of these. I dislike fighting, but I dislike those who justify their cruelty more so."

"Yeah, sure." It wasn't like he was the weirdest recruit we had. "Can you guard the dancer for now? I'm a bit worried."

"Of course."

We did it. We liberated the mines, secured the castle town, and saved the miners. Well, we mostly did. There were some miners whose conditions were so bad that nothing we did, through medicines and healing magic, helped. They died with smiles, though. They died with smiles, and warm blankets, and the knowledge that their friends and family would be safe.

It still made me sad, though. But I couldn't focus on it. If I wanted to save as many people as possible, then I could only look through the past, find the mistakes, and work to rectify them. I must remember, but not carry, their deaths. If I carried them, I would become too slow to save others. By remembering, I would learn what I did wrong.

…At least, that was the conclusion I came up with, after having a very long talk with Zealot about my feelings on the matter.

"The battle is won, but the war is still to be decided." Elphin's calm words dragged me from my thoughts, and I focused on the present. The War Council was meeting again, this time without Elen and Saul, to consolidate casualty information, supplies and budget changes, and to plan our next move. "The way that I see it, there are two paths before us," Elphin continued, speaking slowly to make sure everyone was paying attention. I had not been the only one lost in thought, after all. Tired people were inattentive, and we were all tired. Fighting was exhausting. "One is to head to the capital, and the other to head to Castle Edina."

"Before we talk about that, though, I would like to focus on some more immediate issues," Roy said firmly. Elphin nodded, and Roy turned to face Ekhidna. "So, how are your people integrating into the army?"

"Last I checked, you might need to get more alcohol," she answered easily. She was leaned against the wall behind most of us, a visual indication that while she was working with us, she wasn't quite sure if she counted herself among our number. "Mine started a drinking contest, and Deke's Wade issued a challenge, so I think half your soldiers are getting drunk now."

"So, we're going to need a lot of hangover remedies, but the only fights we have to worry about are drunk fights no one will remember." Roy smiled slightly. "What of Master Wuotan? The… scholar?"

"He's a traveling scholar with a great deal of knowledge," Klein answered. Apparently, he had been the one to tell Klein that folk tale he'd told me at the resistance hideout. "He's very skilled at fighting, though. I think he's teaching Lugh how to fight with both sword and magic, since that's the path Lugh wants to walk, training wise."

"He is," I confirmed. I had been the one to set that up, actually. Lugh had been so excited that he practically tackled us both off our feet with his hug. "He's also assisting Lilina in helping to control
her magic, so if Lilina suddenly becomes more accurate and powerful, it's his fault." I snickered at
the wide-eyed looks. "Basically, he's doing fine. I think the others have dragged promises of stories
out of him, though."

"They can be used during breaks in performances." That… that wasn't going to be a constant thing,
was it? "Regardless, while they are no signs of fights for now, we should keep an eye between
Ekhidna's people and mine. I do not believe we directly fought any, but we did indirectly help with
their losses."

"Yeah, that could be an issue once the joy of the win fades," Ekhidna admitted easily. She studied
Klein a bit before nodding. "With some luck, though, they'll be convinced to bite their tongues for
the sake of peace."

"And mine will be convinced to not look down their noses and sneer," Klein added. He and
Ekhidna exchanged a smile. "Regardless, I think on that front, we're fine for now."

"So with that decided, we need to determine our next course," I murmured, shifting the
conversation back to the original topic. Everyone nodded, agreeing. "Elphin, what were the two
paths again?"

"The first is to head to Castle Edina," Elphin answered. He pointed out the location on the map.
"The other is to head to Jutes." He pointed to where it was on the map too, so that we had an idea
of location. "Castle Edina is a distance away, but that is where they keep all of their 'recruits' for
mining, the ones they don't trick into going directly." Elphin shrugged. "Jutes is closer and where
Arcardo was." But the distance would allow the lords to kill the prisoners to hide the evidence. The
choice was really 'do we aim for the head now and end the war, but risk those in captivity' or 'do
we save those in captivity and prolong the war'.

"...Perhaps I am naïve..." Roy began slowly. His voice was soft, and a little hesitant. "But I think
we should head to Edina, and rescue the captives." But his eyes were certain, and resolved. He was
hesitant, but at the same time, he was certain he was correct. "Perhaps more lives will be saved,
ultimately, if we deal with Arcardo now, but I do not think so. The Etrurians are set up like Lycia
here. Even if you take out the capital, the rest will continue to operate."

"They'll also try to save their own skins," Klein added. His eyes were sad, so I leaned into him a
little for support. His brief smile told me he appreciated it. "They know I'm here, after all, and even
if Roark is in charge of the country, the Great Houses still control the bulk of Etruria's military
might, if nothing else."

"Would they kill everyone?"

"They would raze the whole countryside until there was nothing but ash, and salt the earth to
prevent any growth if that is what it took." Klein ground his teeth. "It's an open secret that many of
Etruria's nobles are corrupt. Mildain, Perceval, Cecilia, and I hoped to change that." I glanced at
Elphin, and I saw him flinch. I don't think he ever knew how bad it was. I don't think
any
of us
understood how bad it was here. "But it is disheartening to see just how far they will go. If things
had gone but a little differently, Etruria might have dragged the continent into war, not Bern."

"I see." Roy sighed, but my focus went to another person. Marcus had a strange expression on his
face, almost as if he wanted to say something, but felt it was not his right. But the look quickly
disappeared, before I could ask. "So, that's that. I think we should head to Castle Edina."

"We'll need a way to get there," Tate pointed out. She frowned in thought. "It's on a different island,
if I'm remembering the map correctly, and there's quite some distance. There are not enough pegasi
to fly everyone, and the supplies."

"Then use the ships," Ekhidna suggested. All eyes turned to her and she shrugged. "They use ships to bring them in from there. Use them to get back."

"That would require at least one good sailor."

"We have a pirate," I pointed out. I gave Roy an exasperated look, and he just grinned. "Well, we have a former merchant turned pirate that Roy somehow convinced to join up with us."

"Hey, Lilina convinced a bandit in the same battle!" Roy protested with a laugh. I could hear everyone going 'what the hell'. "His name is Gonzales. He's very nice, though he expects a lot of beatings..." He shook his head. "Regardless, if we're taking ships, then I'll go bring Geese here." This was going to be very interesting. "We should also make seasickness remedies." This was going to be very interesting.

Notes on Lalum

- Adoptive daughter of Uncle Douglas, making her his heir. There's many who protest a 'girl of the streets' inherited such a powerful noble title, but Uncle Douglas made it clear exactly where those protestors could shove it
- Possesses the Dancer's Gift, allowing her to give extra energy to people with her dances
- We've been friends ever since we met, and she's wonderful for picking up my spirits.
- That said... battlefields are dangerous. I'm going to make her take up some sort of fighting to keep herself safe.
- Her affinity is thunder.

Notes on Elphin

- Really the Crown Prince of Etruria, Mildain, and I am still royally pissed off at him lying to my face about it.
- Possesses the Bardic Gift, inherited from his mother, allowing him to give extra energy to people with his songs
- We've been friends since we've met and though I had a crush on him in the past, he's more like an older brother figure to me. Though, we argued a lot about what Etruria should be doing.
- Battlefields are dangerous, and I'm going to make him learn how to fight in revenge for all of this.
- His affinity is light, like mine.

Notes on Ekhidna

- A woman warrior who specializes in axe fighting, a very unusual thing in Elibe, who leads the western resistance. The people refer to her as their 'hero'. Hero of the Western Isles.
- She is a calm, and kind woman, but it's clear she doesn't hold back for anyone or anything, no matter what it is. I overheard her bluntly tell Lalum that her cooking was bad (which it is, but still...)
- However, as I mentioned, she's kind. She keeps her promises to everyone, even little girls who want their papas back, and I thinks she hopes to build a village for all those who lost their homes.
- Her affinity is ice. Do all the really nice people have ice affinities or something?

While Wuotan has officially joined, he's requested to be mostly an advisor-teacher sort of person,
though he's also volunteered to be the guard for our infirmary. As such, I don't think I'll write notes on him, as he's not really someone I'll 'command'. Well, Elphin is like that too, but hey, he can deal.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: This chapter is 11A. If you played this chapter in the game, this is the chapter where you would recruit Klein and Tate, but we did this two chapters ago. In game, you have to run around saving villages, and then capture the castle where Orlo is the boss. Where he also can hit like a truck if you aren't careful, because he has the Divine light tome. Oh, and you have to deal with suicidal NPCs, and this map is freaking huge, btw. Basically, it's a lovely BS chapter. Elen and Saul's comments about Orlo are based on their battle quotes with him.

Next Chapter – Flight Toward Freedom
Chapter 13) Flight Towards Freedom

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 13) Flight Toward Freedom

So decided, we organized the group onto three ships, the first of which was piloted by Geese. Expertly, he led us through rivers and straits, bringing us to Caledonia with ease, and it was not long before Castle Edina was within sight.

Here, men from the Isles were rounded up and locked in prisons, to be sent to the mines and worked to death. We have to hurry. According to Elphin, we're at the time of month where they ship people off.

If we are to save them, we must act now.

"I feel so sorry for Rutger and Sue!" The journey might have been skilled and short, but even with the gentle, if hasty, travels, Rutger and Sue were still horribly seasick, the only two in the number. "We should ask the locals for seasickness remedies," Lilina continued, leaning back against my legs. I had to nudge her forward so I could continue brushing her hair. "But, Irene, are you sure you want to be here?"

"That is a very odd question, Lilina," I replied, focusing on my task. Lalum had procured some sort of 'hair oil' the locals used that helped keep hair soft and strong even with the excess of humidity we were experiencing. "Are you asking about us coming to Castle Edina?"

"No, I'm talking about you sitting with me on the boat instead of going to Sue." Lilina leaned her head back briefly, to look at me, and I tilted her face back forward so I could continue to work. "Are you sure you don't want to go take care of her?" I hear the hidden words sleeping in her tone. 'Your dad is gone, so why are you not with your family?' I think I needed to have a talk with her, and Roy, about Dad's death. He was their 'uncle', after all.

"Oh, of course I want to." I almost had all the tangles out now. "But I know she'd feel guilty, so I went to do work, and now I'm tending to you." In my tone, I added the words 'besides, you are my family too.'

Her laugh told me she heard the unspoken words, and I smiled. "Because my hair and this humidity do not mix well!" Her hair was frizzing all over the place. "Well, quite a few people's hair and the humidity aren't playing nice." No, they weren't. Sue and I escaped, but others? Even Elen, who wore a cleric's habit, was having issues. "Is the humidity going to be a problem?"

"Yes." We were already experiencing heat fatigue and exhaustion among the soldiers, and that was without running around in armor, bashing people's skulls in with metal sticks. "Ekhidna is doing what she can to help us prep for a fight in the heat, but we're likely going to be fighting in waves."

"So, heat is an issue."

"Cramping, weakness, clammy skin, dizziness, nausea, and potential death." I had read how heat killed more than arrows in summer fights, and I could believe it very easily now. "Plus, we also have some illnesses going through the army..." Many people crammed together, and multiple
exposures due to helping villagers resulted in a lot of sickness. We actually had to delay a couple of days due to some sudden infections. "I feel so bad for them…"

"That's right… we lost a couple due to cholera shortly before leaving, didn't we?" Not only that, but we had to leave the infected behind in the care of some locals before setting off, just to lessen the chances of being caught with cholera on a ship. "How did they get it so quickly without us not noticing?"

"From what I've read, cholera is an illness that only affects a handful of people." Many carriers of the illness were asymptomatic, but they could still pass it on to others who were not so lucky. That's why we had to be careful on where all of our waste went. "I imagine as we all keep fighting, more and more illnesses are just going to spread through." It didn't help that none of our 'main' healers knew more than the basics are curing illnesses. The Church kept a tight leash on who knew, even among their own. "I wish we had a bishop." But even Klein's group didn't have one. They had been healed by those attached to the Isles already, which means we couldn't trust them.

"That's sad." It was sad, not being able to trust. That's why I chose to trust Miredy and Galle, even now. "Still, at least the view is pretty."

"Yes, it is." Finally done brushing, I set to braiding her hair, to keep it out of her face. "The Isles in general are very pretty, almost as pretty as the plains." Yes, they were. Low hanging branches waved at us as leaves rustled in the wind. Flowers bloomed all along the shore as we passed. We were able to relax, almost as if we were in our own little world, thanks to Geese's expert instructions. "But we are being much too sad and serious. Come, tell big sister Irene about your attempts to woo Roy."

"Irene!" Her shriek caused quite a few people on the deck to look at our little corner in worry, but I could only laugh. "You are horrible and mean."

"That does not answer my question~"

"You know exactly how it goes!" Lilina groaned, and tried to lean back. I nudged her forward, so that I could still reach her hair. "He's oblivious!" Yes, he was. I wondered if he got it from Uncle Eliwood. I wondered if he got it from Aunt Ninian. Then, I wondered if it was just a Roy thing. "Besides, it isn't as if I know how to flirt."

"Does anyone?" I certainly didn't.

"Well, certainly you don't." I knew she was pouting. "How goes things with Klein?"

"Nowhere because I'm not trying?" I had the crush, and I was almost certain it was unrequited, so why bother? I didn't want to chance making things awkward with him, especially right now when we were both part of the War Council, and thus were leaders in the army.

"You should. Try, I mean."

"Why? So you can laugh at my fumbling."

"Well, partially." She tried to tilt her head back, again, but I nudged her to get her to stop. I was almost done. "But also because one, I think you're wrong, and two, even if I didn't, it's rather mean of you to just assume you know exactly what's on his mind." …Was I seriously getting lectured by a fifteen year old on romance? "You should try!"

"I like my dignity where it is, thank you."
"What dignity?" She laughed at my squawk before suddenly bursting into a coughing fit that made my blood run cold. "Ugh…"

"…" I leaned forward, so that I could look her in the face. "Have you been coughing a lot recently?"

"No, I don't think so." She looked right at me, smiling reassuringly. "I'm fine."

"…If your cough persists, even into tomorrow, I want you to get checked."

"Okay." Her smile turned wryly, and I smiled back, hopefully reassuringly. It was a scary thought. I hoped it was something simple.

"We're here!" someone called. I tied off her braid, and helped her stand up. "Prepare for battle! They're already on the move!" Here we go then.

I hated the heat. I hated humidity. Father Sky, what I wouldn't give for a good rain, or even a nice crisp wind. I was so grateful that Ekhidna had insisted on us bringing extra water bottles for the fight. Even with them, we had lost people to the heat.

"Allen, damn it, stay in formation!" One of these days, he was going to get someone killed with his reckless charging. "Zealot, Tate! I need all Ilians to fall back!" Tate's group was doing rather well, probably because they had been fighting in these conditions, but I could see them starting to flag. No matter how much they traveled to train, that didn't change that these conditions were not good for a people adapted to cold. "Shanna, that includes you!" Shanna was doing the worst, likely because this was the first time she had fought in such conditions. "Deke, make sure she listens! I can see her about to-!"

For a brief second, I thought my heart stopped as I saw Shanna fall off her pegasus. She just slipped off, too dizzy to stay on. I saw Tate immediately shift formation to try and catch her, but she ended up just out of reach…

Then I saw Allen charge forward, breaking out of his formation to trample an enemy and dive off his horse to catch Shanna before she hit the ground. That was…

"Lance, cover them!" I shouted, riding over too. Lance immediately got his group, and Allen's to surrounded the two, so I didn't bother paying attention as I dismounted, water and my pack of medicine in hand. "How is she?"

"Breathing," Allen replied with a smile. He had a gash on his head, and I could tell by how he moved that he was horribly bruised. But he looked so proud of himself. "I'm sorry for breaking formation, but I knew I could get her."

"In this situation, Allen, that is most forgiven." I immediately checked Shanna's pulse, noticing it was a bit fluttery. She also wasn't conscious. "The earlier time isn't, though."

"Of course. That was me making a mistake. This was deliberate."

"Is she okay?!" Tate ran over, stoic calm gone as she crashed to her knees next to us. "I got her pegasus," she informed us, hands shaking. I was really glad to hear that no one was going to have to catch a falling pegasus. "Is she okay?"

"She'll need to get to Elen and Saul now, but I think she'll be fine," I replied. Tate breathed a sigh of relief, and I smiled to reassure her. "Allen, you head back to, and get checked. Lance can take over
your group for now, but you did just catch her."

"I'll take them both." Carefully, we all stood up, and Tate bowed. "Thank you so much. Both of you."

"W-well, I didn't really do anything…" I was just ordering them to get healed. "Allen's the one who pulled an Uncle Hector." Both of them looked confused and I couldn't help but laugh. "See, during the Campaign of Fire, Aunt Florina fell off her pegasus and Uncle Hector caught her. He also caught her pegasus." I shrugged at the blank, vaguely amused, looks. "They apparently fell one after another. Ask Marcus for more context. I think he's fallen back with Wuotan to help guard the healers."

"I think we will. Thank you." The two walked off, Allen carrying Shanna, and I mounted back up. I noticed Zealot watching us worriedly, but he relaxed when I smiled. That's right; Shanna was his wife's youngest sister. He had to have been scared too.

"Well, I think that was my heart attack for the month." I turned and saw Deke walking up, sighing. "I tried to get her to go back earlier, but she wouldn't listen," he mumbled. I smiled sympathetically. "She good?"

"I think so," I whispered. He smiled back, clearly relieved. "You have a monthly allotment for heart attacks?"

"Considering you and Little Master Klein, I think I have to have one." He gave me a look. "Let's see… the spiders-"

"We were collecting them for research!" At least, that was how we justified it. I wasn't sure how we justified releasing them while Aunt Louise was hosting a tea party, though. "Besides, we didn't know one of them was venomous."

"You found five." Yes, we did. We were forbidden to go into the woods for a while after that. "And a snake." The snake had been an accident. "Regardless, not why I came over. Got a favor."

"Is that so?" I briefly glanced across the field, noting everything. A nearby village had been protected, so things were fine. So long as we ended this relatively soon, before the sun crested over our heads, we should be fine. "What is it?"

"Well, two things. One, Bernese soldiers are here." He grimaced at my incredulous look. "I was surprised too, but Rutger confirmed it. Not only that, but they're soldiers that actively participated in Bulgar's massacre."

"Where is Rutger right now?"

"Not far. I can get him. I want you to tell him to fall back and keep Lady Clarine safe." He looked worried. "Apparently, I got one of the ones that led the attack on his district, but I know he's hunting for others." Of course he was, but this wasn't a battle where you can let things like that… "He'll listen to you. He thinks he owes you, after all."

Was that so? "Why would he think that?"

"He thinks that if Lord Rath didn't give him his sword, he might have survived, and you might still have a father." …So, he thought… the same things I did. He felt the same guilt. "So, I know he'll listen to you. He's also just protective of Clarine anyway."

"Get him here, then." I made myself smile. "You're protective yourself."
"It's a habit." He shrugged. "Kid has issues, so I can't just leave him. But he needs to relax. Otherwise, I don't think he'll understand why Lord Rath gave him his blade." Why...? Oh, I knew. It was the same reason why Dad had given me his bow. 'Let me protect you from afar.' "I'm going to go get him."

"Okay." As he left, I looked around the field, noting where Clarine was. I had assigned her to Lance's group, but she had fallen back to tend to some soldiers suffering from the heat. I bit my lip as I noticed half of our forces were down. We needed to end this soon...

"Deke said you needed me?" Rutger's voice brought my attention back to the present, and I saw just how tired he looked. "What is it?" he asked, but I could only frown. "Irene?"

"Rutger, when was the last time you slept?" I whispered. I should have kept a better eye on him. Dad's death hit me hard, and hit Sue hard, but I should not have ignored what effect it would have had on him. Dad died so he could escape. That was an inescapable truth. "It looks like it's been a while."

"I can still fight." That wasn't my concern...

"Rutger, do you want some dreamflower?"

"...No." He shook his head. "No, I fear I might get addicted." Yes, that was a problem. Another was having too much. "They're supposed to give people good dreams, and I might just get addicted to that."

"I understand." I truly did. I had nightmares too. "But I want you to take it a bit easier these next few battles." I reached down and clasped his shoulder. "Dad saw something in you." He tensed, but looked right at me. "I think I can see it too." Rutger was skilled. He was skilled, and he was kind underneath all that anger. "So, if you feel there's a need to make it up to him, to me, to Sue, you're going to have to suffer through living, okay?"

"...Understood." He actually laughed a little. "Did you want to talk about that?"

"No, but we will have a discussion later." I settled back in my saddle, ducking under an arrow that flew my way without really thinking about it. "Clarine is tending to some soldiers. Guard her."

"Understood." He nodded, and ran over to her, finding her easily. I wondered if he had been keeping an eye on her anyway. I watched him kneel down to help steady a person as she healed him, and I saw her bright smile.

I really did think they'd be good for each other, in time. It was just going to take some work to reach that point, I think.

A bellow startled me, and I could only stare as a warrior, armed with an axe, crashed into the enemy from the northern side. Um... what was... okay, who was the loudmouth screaming and making himself a huge target?

"I am so sorry!" The yelp made me look down, and I was confused to see Fir bowing to me. "Please forgive my father's antics," she hastily explained. So, that man was Fir's father? ...Clearly, she took after her mother in looks. "I tried to tell him that I didn't need help, but he wouldn't listen."

"Fir, it's fine," I reassured. I reached down to ruffle her hair and she tentatively glanced up. "You should... spend time with him while you can..." I would give anything to speak to Dad one more time...
"…Right…" She gave me a sad smile, and I knew she was thinking of how I felt. "I'm sorry. He's just…" Well, I could see how he was. "I am glad to see him. I am just annoyed because he tricked me into saying yes."

"Understandable." I smiled at her. "Try to keep him from charging, please?"

"On it!"

The battle was won before long, thank you Father Sky, but we still had a lot of work to do. Namely, we had to save, and tend, to all the prisoners. The heat had not been kind to the would-be miners either.

"We need more bandages!" "We don't have any!" "Shred and boil the clothes of the dead. They don't need them."

No food and access to only contaminated water had done horrors to their health as well. They were kept in small cells, packed together, often beaten by guards, if not killed for trying to escape. The smell was horrible, and not just because of the corpses.

"You need to let that one go." "He's a child!" "He's dead."

Even with all the horror stories I had heard, I couldn't believe Etruria had done this. I couldn't believe anyone with any bit of morality had allowed this. How did this happen? Why did this happen?

"Don't come near!" "He's throwing up blood!" "He's scared of Etrurians, Clarine. Go to an unconscious one."

This was the accumulation of an almost forty-year-long-campaign. What had started as retaliation for the over five hundred deaths by the pirate king, Fargus, had led to this.

"We have to cut off the arm." "Where are numbing herbs?" "We don't have any. Hold and cut."

I had named Bernese 'monsters' for what they did to Bulgar. So, what word did I have for the Etrurians who let this happen?

"Lady Irene!" I barely glanced up from tending to a crying child. In order to save their life, I had to chop off his legs, and now I was making sure the wounds would close up. "Lady Irene, General Roy-"

"You will wait until I am finished," I ordered, voice cool and calm. I had no idea how I kept my temper right now, or how I kept my hands steady as I stitched and bandaged. I could only guess it was because if I couldn't, this child would die. Others would die. "Is that understood?"

"Y-yes, my lady." Whoever it was stood back as I continued to work, absently drying the child's tears whenever I had to pause. My hands were cramping; I had been at this for three hours.

Finally, I finished my work, and hugged the child, whispering to them as I stroked his hair. "You are a good child. You are a very good child." I could only hope he would survive. His body was in bad shape, and the stress of losing two limbs would not be kind. "Let's see…"

"Irene." The calm voice made me look up, and to my surprise, Wuotan was kneeling next to me, hands out to take the child from me. When did he get down here? "Let me take over for you," he requested, cradling the child to his chest easily. His free hand ruffled my hair, and I was reminded
of Grandfather. "You need to get out of this hell." I glanced around, noting the chaos. There were still so many. "You must tend to your own spirit as well, Irene. Besides, you also need to clean up." He cradled one of my hands, and I noticed all the blood. "You will spread diseases if you continue to work like this."

"Right..." I whispered, drooping. I was so tired... "Why did this happen?"

"This is what happens when you convince a nation that they are better than others, and that other people are 'lesser', perhaps not even human." Wuotan's eyes were sad. "You see it in history often. It is an effective strategy for ensuring that people's morale does not falter in the face of atrocity. After all, it is much easier to kill an animal than a person. And Etrurians have a rallying point. In their eyes, those of the Isles killed a great many of their navy thirty-seven years ago, for no reason. Hate makes people do many things they would not consider otherwise." ...Yes, I could understand that. I remembered the Sacaean I had kicked while they were down, on the way to Thria. "Go on up with the nice soldier, Irene."

"Okay." I tried to stand, but ended up slipping in blood and... something else? It smelled like something else, but I was too tired to think of what. "Ah..."

Wuotan used his free hand to steady me. "Be careful on the stairs." Yes, I might fall. "Might I have your pack?"

"Yeah, sure..." Oh, hold on a moment. "Do you know the herbs I use?"

"You use herbal remedies common to the plains. I know many of them myself." Being a traveling scholar apparently meant he knew everything. "Oh, you have capfredil."

"It's used to cure consumption." Fire Dragon Roses, as they were also called, grew only in Hanover's lands now. Supposedly, it was all year long, but I only knew of a patch that grew in a woodland meadow, during the fall months. "It's also got other properties."

"Such as reducing bleeding and promoting healing for more fragile tissues." Yes, that was actually one reason why it was used for consumption. Another property was that it increased the effectiveness of healing magic, somehow. "What was it they mean in Etruria's language of flowers?"

"'You are my sunshine'." The words were automatic. "Though some use it in the romantic fashion, its primary meaning is based more on 'hope'." The light in the dark... that was what Dad said... but at the moment, I felt like I was drowning in shadows. I also felt like I was drowning in blood, sweat, and other things that smelled horrible that I refused to name.

"That's right." Wuotan's smile was kind, and he nudged me towards the stairs, where the messenger soldier was now waiting. "Go find some sunshine, Irene. People are like plants. They wilt without light."

"...Thank you." I managed a smile and dropped my pack by him before finally following the soldier.

If they said anything, I didn't hear it. Instead, I bullied them into letting me wash up before they led me anywhere. I thought about changing my clothes, but decided against it. I couldn't remember where I had left them, after all.

So, instead, I let the soldier lead me to a study, where Roy and Elphin were waiting. Both looked appropriately horrified when I stumbled in.
"Lady Irene, sit," Elphin ordered, dragging me over to a chair and shoving me into it. It didn't take him much. Everything ached. "I... take it conditions were even worse than predicted."

"I am embarrassed, mortified, and horrified to be half Etrurian right now," I deadpanned. It was less because I wanted to be 'sarcastic' and more that I was too tired to put more force into it. "How can the same country that produced Mom and my family also produce...?" People who did things like this.

"...As painful as it is to say this, Lady Irene, but I cannot say your family is completely innocent." Despite the blunt, painful words, I couldn't even work up the energy to lose my temper. "The true face of what is going on does not spread, but the fact remains that they at least passively allowed the campaign to continue."

"I suppose that's true." Thirty-seven years. That was how long this 'campaign' had lasted. Grandfather had to have known some of it. Mom definitely had guesses. But Grandfather hadn't stopped it, and Mom... Mom had run away from it. For her sanity and happiness, Mom had run away from this. I had no answers for why Grandfather had not stepped in to at least try to stop it. Then again, I had heard that the one who managed to turn the former 'knight initiation' practice of killing 'bandits', really the poor or Sacaeans, into something illegal was him. Maybe he had just picked his battles. Then again, maybe that was just me desperately trying to think of a justification because I loved him dearly.

"I don't think Irene is paying attention, Elphin." Roy's voice dragged me out of my spiraling thoughts. "Welcome back, Irene," Roy teased, smiling wanly. I noticed he didn't really look at my face, but all the stains on my clothes. Maybe I should have taken the time to hunt down and change. It would have kept him from looking so sad, and so much like the world was crashing down around him. This had to be even worse for him. He was never really aware of how bad Etruria could be. "So, instead, let me change the conversation, Elphin?"

"I see no problem with that," Elphin replied easily. He gave me a concerned look before focusing on Roy. "What is it?"

"Well..." Roy's eyes narrowed slightly, tilting his head curiously. Please, correct me if I'm wrong, but you're someone of Etrurian nobility, aren't you?"

"That is..." Elphin did his best to mask his surprise, but I could see he was shaken. "What makes you say that?"

"The way you talk, and hold yourself mostly. You sound as if you're very educated, and you're well versed in the arts, which isn't a hobby those outside of nobility can pursue." He pointed to the lyre for emphasis. "You also hold yourself tall, and often seem to have to remind yourself to slump and make yourself smaller, like you're used to wearing your presence as your armor. I only really see that trait in Etrurians. Even Aunt Katri holds herself that way, and she hasn't lived in Etruria in twenty years."

"...An interesting observation." Elphin did his best to act nonchalant. I think it worked for Roy, but it didn't for me. I knew his nervous habits. "Is there anything else?"

"Aside from that?" Roy shrugged. "Well, Irene's mad at you." ...Ahaha... ha... "I can't really think of why, but if you were of nobility, high nobility, then that would answer that. I can place a few guesses as to what rank from there, based on what I've been told." ...Roy, I would applaud you if I didn't feel so mortified. "But, honestly, most of it is a feeling. A strong feeling, but just one nonetheless."
"...And what would you do if you are correct?"

"Oh, nothing." Roy smiled sweetly, and I snickered at how off-balanced Elphin looked. "I'm sure you've got some reason. You can tell me when, and if, you feel comfortable about it." He pointed to me. "But you'd better apologize to her."

"I'm not accepting apologies for anything at the moment," I replied, making my tone as dignified as possible, much harder than it sounded. Roy looked confused; Elphin just sighed. "I cannot explain, Roy. It involves a secret that is not mine to tell."

"Okay," Roy said easily. He shrugged again. "Regardless, if that's settled, and if Irene is back with us, let's work on the next plan. How many did we lose?"

"Thankfully, not many." At least, it hadn't been many when I last received a report. "We'll have to see if anything catches, or if anyone gets ill from the civilians."

"But, we still have most of our force, then." Yes, we did. "Then, Elphin, Irene, here is what I propose." Roy's eyes suddenly blazed with fierce determination. It was enough to jolt a little energy in me. "We head for the capital. We liberate the Isles, once and for all. I think it has been proven that Etruria cannot govern them well."

"Etruria cannot even govern itself well," Elphin added, voice dry and bitter. I glanced at him worriedly, and he shook his head slightly. He would tell me later. That was always our little 'signal'. "But yes, the capital is where we must head if we are to have a chance of keeping the people here safe."

"Well, it shouldn't be hard to rally the troops," I pointed out. Despite everything protesting, the wheels in my mind were spinning. "Righteous fury goes a long way to generate momentum, even in the face of strong opposition." I closed my eyes, thinking rapidly now. It seemed that no matter what happened, I could maintain my ability to think. "Arcardo is going to run. There is no question about that. He's going to try and run, to pin the blame of those here. He'll try to do something to destroy any evidence to the contrary." I opened my eyes, looking at them both. "We have an advantage, though. Klein's been in there and, more importantly, as the general in charge of the campaign here, he had to have learned at least some secret exits."

"Secrets exits are so convenient for entering." Yes, they were. "General Roy? Shall we rally the War Council for a plan of approach?"

"Yes," Roy declared firmly. He glanced at me worriedly, but I nodded. I could think, and I could think clearly. So long as they didn't expect anything else from me, I could do this. "Send the messengers to gather everyone."

We were ending the Western isle Campaign once and for all.

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**Notes on Bartre**

- Apparently a veteran of the Campaign of Fire, albeit one that never was close to Mom. Still, he greeted me rather enthusiastically.
- According to Marcus, even with the loud and reckless behavior, he is SOMEHOW CALMER THAN HE WAS TWENTY YEARS AGO. I can understand why Mom never talked much with him.
- Has the ability to take a lot of hits, and is very strong, but he's also clearly out of practice.
- I think I'm going to set him to training Wade and Lot, and maybe extend some of the
overprotective fatherliness to others in need of it, like Gonzales. …Not me, though. I don't want a second father. I had the best one I could ever have, and I just can't…

- **His affinity is thunder.**

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**Chapter End Notes**

Author's note: This is chapter 11B, where you recruit one of four possible characters that later return in FE7, Bartre. Marcus and Merlinus were two others, but the fourth and last will not be seen for a **very** long while. And not seen at all if you get the 'bad ending'. Reference to Deke and Rutger's B support. (btw, Rutger, as a level one swordmaster, with an A support with Clarine and a B with Deke, has a base 60+ crit **with an iron sword**. God, I love how broken the supports are, and I love how IS gave swordmasters and berserkers a base 30 crit.)

Cholera, for those unaware, is a very virulent disease, killing within hours. However, only about… Oh… 20% experience the acute, watery diarrhea that characterizes the disease, the remaining 80% experience mild or moderate symptoms. It’s got a short incubation period, which means it can have potentially explosive outbreak patterns. Because of the severe dehydration, it can kill within **hours**. Iirc, it causes the diarrhea by messing with the salt balance in the intestines (very fun). [Expect more illnesses, and more fun facts about illnesses, as the campaign goes on.]

Also, humidity sucks. A lot.

Next Chapter – Interlude, Storyteller
Interlude – Storyteller

The decision made to head to Jutes, we ended up lingering a bit at Castle Edina, mostly to make sure the prisoners would be fine. Some of our wounded remained with them when we left, to protect them, and to not ‘weigh us down’. It was a harsh way to look at them, but it was true speed was of the essence. Arcardo knew we were coming. He had time to destroy any evidence pointing to his involvement in all of this. Though, with luck, those that stayed behind might be able to find things.

The journey to Jutes is long, and the anger in the air is palatable. This army wants to rip Arcardo and his minions apart. All well and good, but I notice some of the anger turned to the Etrurians within our group. Our cause is good, but it is leading to divides in the army.

Armies are such a pain in the ass…

"This is such a mess…" I groaned, sinking into the pillows. Zealot had thrown a bunch around in place of chairs in his tent, and I was appreciative. They were a little too soft to be one of the Kutolah throw pillows, but it was still nice to have them instead of chairs. It felt a little more like 'home' wasn't so far away. "Twenty fights. Twenty." In the wake of the condition of the would-be-miners, tensions in the army were running high. Very. Very. High.

"And that's just since we docked for the night," Deke sighed. He was actually bandaged, because he had the misfortune of accidentally getting in the middle of one of the fights. Even worse, it had been started by Wade: apparently he had a childhood friend among the miners and wasn't taking kindly to Etrurians. "We better think of things fast, or otherwise, we're going to kill each other before we get the lord in charge of this."

"I wish I could say my own are behaving any more professionally," Zealot murmured. He passed us warm drinks of something really popular in Ilia, so popular that they kept the mixes on hand for it. I had no idea what it was called, but it was really good. Spiced. …I wanted to make a fresh version now… "But, alas, that's not the case. I've got Noah nursing a head injury right now from where he held back a fellow mercenary from lunging for… I don't even know. Fir was babbling."

"This is such a mess," I repeated. The worst part was, of course, that Roy blamed himself. He thought it was his poor leadership that was leading to the fights, when that wasn't the case at all. "The worst part is that it's not just Etrurians everyone is trying to scream at." It was nobles too. "We've someone in the infirmary because they ambushed Lilina while she was practicing her magic with Wuotan." I was honestly not certain if they'd survive. Lilina had thought she was being attacked by the enemy and had not held back. "I had to keep Roy from being beaten up, because of course he won't fight back."

"I heard Marcus's screaming lecture from across the camp," Zealot shook his head. "The cause is what we all saw in Castle Edina, isn't it?"

"As near as I can tell, yes, that is the case." Before that point, the only tensions had been the wariness between the Resistance members and those of the Etrurian Army, something easily
expected and accounted for. "Of course, the Etrurian soldiers themselves aren't helping."

"They're screaming at each other," Deke confirmed. He had gotten in the middle of one of those too, but that had been because Klein had looked so tired. Despite leaving, it seemed Deke remained protective. "They're shaken, and trying to look for someone to blame."

"Of course they are shaken," I retorted. I was, and I had grown up knowing that Etruria was far bloodier than many suspected. "They learned the country they pledged service too is ruled by madmen. Father Sky, I know what the knight initiation used to be and I am still startled."

"Very true." Deke shrugged, leaning back against Zealot's desk. He wasn't using a pillow like Zealot and I, but I did see he had already drained his cup. "Still, I don't think we're in danger of a collapse just yet."

"Is that so?" It didn't seem that way to me.

"Yeah." He nodded. "The Etrurians still listen, and trust, Little Master Klein. I think it's because he's very charming and charismatic, and because they saw him desperately helping those he could." Klein had carried those who could not move, uncaring of how grimy or smelly he got. "Lady Clarine is in a similar boat, if you're worried about her. It's hard to hate a healer, even if she's of a country you dislike. You saw it with Elen, and you see it again with Clarine." Yes, that was true. "Despite Lord Roy's worries, and the incident you just mentioned, people still hold faith in his leadership, as a whole.

Based on the whispers, no one is blaming Lilina for her magical attack, except herself and the friends of the one stupid enough to ambush a mage while she was in the middle of lessons."

"I'm glad to hear that." I hesitated before adding, "what of Sue and me? Are we in danger of them not listening to me?"

"Nope, we're more than fine on that. Most of the soldiers forget that you and Sue are half-Etrurian, especially since you both count yourself Sacaean first." Well, that was a relief… "But, basically, I think the nobles here are fine. I'd be more worried about the nobles back home, so to speak."

"Oh?"

"I've a feeling that there's going to be a massive call of abdications for all major Etrurian titles when things calm down slightly. At the least, they're going to insist on King Mordred stepping down." Yes, all of this happened during his reign… "That's assuming there isn't a coup, of course. What happened here is going to echo back, especially now."

"There's going to be a massive political upheaval." It was probably worse in their eyes, as they didn't know Mildain was Elphin. I might… need to talk with him about all of this. "…I feel horrible…"

"Well, this is going to affect your family, so of course you do, Little Lady Irene." He patted my head, like he did when I was little, tearing up over a scrapped knee. "I think those who are not in a position of power will be fine. Lord Christopher just might end up inheriting sooner than expected." I thought I would be well into my forties before my cousin inherited anything, though. "I think the Great Houses will be fine. I'm a bit more worried for the military leaders."

"Klein, Cecilia, and Perceval are new to the jobs." Perceval had it longest at four years. "They'll likely be viewed under suspicion, but will be allowed to keep their positions." Uncle Douglas though… "Uncle Douglas would likely have to retire, actually." As Knight General, and then Great General, the bulk of the military forces would have been under his command. He would become
the scapegoat for all the military atrocities. "The rest might get off on a 'just following orders' defense."

"Seems cowardly, but at the same time, if your family's livelihood depended on you following orders, what would you do?" Most people would choose to follow the atrocious orders to keep their loved ones safe. That was why hostage scenarios worked most of the time. It would take a lot of courage, and heartbreak, to choose otherwise. "We're off topic. Suggestions for dealing with the badness in the group."

"I think some group activities might help ease tensions," Zealot murmured. He had closed his eyes, thinking deeply. I also noticed that at some point during the conversation, he had refilled our mugs. I was very grateful. "It's hard to be mad at a person when you're both covered in mud, after all." That was an amusing mental image. "It might be good anyway. This is a very varied group, and if we don't already have culture clashes, we're going to get it."

"Yes, I've seen a bit already," I sighed. I thought of the argument I had to pull apart just a few hours ago. "A lot of the Ilians have adapted already, and are no longer, or never were, as angry. It's led to accusations of heartlessness."

"Ah, yes, that does always cause issues." His smile was wry. "Because all of us expect to be dead by thirty, we're a very 'quick' country on the whole, emotionally speaking. No mourning, quickly moving on, basically trying to live full lives." That was a very sobering thought. "It's also a defense mechanism. We hire ourselves out for coin. We have to learn how to lock away our hearts to do our jobs."

"Meaning that they likely wouldn't show their horror anyway, and might even be in denial..." I bit my lip, thinking. "I wonder if we can set up some sort of counseling... therapy... thing. We also have a lot of far too young members."

"The army is being led by someone who, in Ilia, would be on their year training." Yes, I remembered that from Aunt Florina's stories. "Do you know why Lycia picked him?" I had a feeling he had been wanting to ask that for a while, and the way Deke's eyes suddenly sharpened told me he had as well.

"It is a combination of things." I sighed, leaning back, deeper into the pillows. "One is, to be blunt, Lycia would not be here if not for him." Regardless of what Roy thought, if the army he led had not made it to Ostia, Narcian would have won. Narcian still almost won, but his quick thinking at calling in Etruria saved Lycia. "That he is capable of swallowing pride to ask for help is another point in his favor. You can see that with how he immediately established the War Council." I closed my eyes. "He's wiser and sharper than one would expect, and with so many of Lycia's leaders dead, injured, or ill, there really were not many choices."

"And the army could not have been led by someone in the army? A general?"

"Most of the ones Lycia would trust died with Uncle Hector." I opened my eyes again, and looked right at them both. "By all logic, Bern should have won when it slaughtered Araphan. Their ambush took out every leader. The ones that remained had as much trust as Roy." I unconsciously glanced down at my hands. I could still feel Uncle Hector's blood between my fingers. I could still feel Oswin's hand loosen in mine. "Another factor is that Uncle Hector wanted Roy to lead. Even if the Lycian lords do not trust in Roy, they trust in Uncle Hector." He had been loved. He had been loved, respected, and trusted.

"Why would he want to put it all on a fifteen year old?"
"A fifteen year old he watched grow up, and one he knew well." I looked back up. "But none of that is the most important thing, in my eyes." Both of them looked a little surprised. "Roy grew up with a very… diverse environment. Lycia is a rather varied country anyway, with customs of what is polite and what isn't differing slightly in each province. A greeting that is simply polite in one is too familiar in another. Roy had to learn how to balance all of that." I reached up to brush the hair out of my face. "Between Aunt Lyn, Dad, Sue, and me, he had to balance Sacaean beliefs, and be certain he did not offend. I think everyone in this army knows of my temper now." They both chuckled, and I smiled wryly. "Through Mom, and later through Cecilia, he had to balance Etrurian beliefs. Through Aunt Florina, Aunt Fiora, and Aunt Farina, he had to balance Ilian. Even through Uncle Heath, he learned some of Bernese culture." Though, it was not a lot. Uncle Heath rarely talked about Bern, after all. "He's used to that. He's used to taking in account many different beliefs and cultures, and being perfectly polite and reassuring to people."

"And that is important, for an army that only lacks the Nabata desert in representation." Zealot smiled slowly, exchanging a look with Deke. "I understand now. Thank you."

"It's no trouble." I shrugged. "We've been trying to figure out why the adults are letting any of us lead. That's just the answer I've gotten for Roy." Even then, it was mostly me reciting what Uncle Eliwood had said. "Regardless, we went off topic. Group activities and counseling?"

"Ah, yes." Both of them looked rather reassured, and I wondered how long they had been worried about this. "So, some things we did in Ilia might not work, but perhaps we can adapt them…"

At Zealot's suggestion, we threw everyone in the river. Yes, some of those were literally. We phrased it as 'you are going to fish with your bare hands if you cannot stop causing trouble for the leaders', and they hadn't believed us. Deke had actually thrown a couple really far. But after the first twenty, the rest of the army realized we were serious and waded in willingly. Even some of the leaders, like Roy and Lilina, joined in.

I smiled as I watched Sue mischievously splash Klein and Clarine, and laughed a little as Sin tried to protect Sue from their retaliation. While part of me wanted to join, I found that I couldn't. My mind was shaking too much. So, after watching to make sure things were going well, I walked away, heading a short distance from camp. From there, I found a tree, and settled into a firing stance.

I didn't actually fire any arrows. I just practiced, and 'shot' all of my frustrated thoughts. I also 'shot' imaginary versions of all the people I wanted dead. Arcardo, Narcian, Brunja, Murdock, and Zephiel. In my mind's eye, I saw them fall, again and again. It was horribly morbid, but it did make me feel less like my frustration and anger was going to take me over.

As a tactician, as a leader, and as a person, I had to make sure I didn't let my anger rule me. This was especially important since my temper could be bad. I had seen the results of that for myself. I still remembered the person I had kicked while down. I still remembered how the only reason Zephiel didn't kill me in Araphan was because I was Mom's daughter, and I had her eyes.

I finished 'firing' and relaxed, slowly rolling my shoulders and focusing on my breathing. I did feel better now, but I still felt like hell. At times like this, Dad would ruffle my hair and, when I was little, pick me up and put me on his shoulders. Of course, Dad was dead, so…

The wind picked up, wrapping around me almost like a hug. I smiled and closed my eyes to listen, straining for Dad's voice on the wind. To my surprise, though, I heard no whispered reassures. Instead, I could hear 'follow me', and the wind pushed to reinforce the words. So, I ran. I ran, following the wind, and tried not to think of what happened last time I did this. The last time I
remembered, I had ended up finding Oswin, and later, had him die just seconds before a healer could be found.

To my relief, though, there was no such sight waiting for me at the end of the wind's path. It was just Rutger, practicing his swordsmanship. I thought he might be doing a 'practice dance', but then decided that could not be the case. His movements were too harsh, too angry. It was as if he was battling invisible demons. I wondered if he was seeing all the Bernese soldiers who slaughtered his home, and now he was trying to kill them too.

I wait for him to take a break before shifting, purposely letting the grass crunch underneath my feet. He jerked his head up in surprise, and it took him several blinks to focus on me. "I admire the resolve to train, Rutger, but if I could sneak up on you so easily, then perhaps we need to discuss different ways to do so," I scolded, walking up. He shrugged, not bothering to reply. "Do you even have a towel? You're soaked with sweat." He shook his head, and I sighed. "Goodness, what are we going to do with you?" I tugged some cloths out of my pack and handed them to him. "Considering how ill you were earlier, I am surprised to see you up and about."

"Clarine told me to rest, but I couldn't sleep," he answered. He sheathed his sword before wiping off his face. "I kept feeling like I was on fire again."

"Again?"

"Yeah..." He lifted up his shirt and I winced at the burn scars on his abdomen. "It's too hot here. It reminds me of the flames."

"Then, of course, your mind jumps back to 'that day', and you can no longer close your eyes without feeling like the dead are clawing at your skin." I shrugged at his incredulous look. "I've noticed you batting at your arms. I thought it was because of the lovely array of bugs, but then realized it might have been something else."

"...You see too much."

"I barely see enough." I shook my head. "Regardless, I've been meaning to talk to you."

"About?"

"My dad." At my words, his expression locked up. "Yeah, I figured that would be your reaction." I crossed my arms and looked at him worriedly. "How do you feel? You doing okay?"

"...He died saving me." The look of pain and anger on his face answered my question. He felt horrible and he was definitely not okay. "Those bastards not only stole away my family and home, but they stole away the only person who helped." His fists clenched at his side as he glared at the ground. "I am to blame for being too weak." I should have had this talk with him much sooner, it seemed. "I will find them." His words took a definite growl. "I will find each one of them, and slaughter them for what they did...!"

I waited for him to relax before I continued. "Anger is understandable, and probably a good thing, but Rutger, what will you do afterwards?" There was no answer, so I shifted to look him in the face. "Dad saved your life." I made sure, in fact, to look him in the eye. "He did that because he wanted to. He would have saved anyone he could. He did do that." I pointed to the sword. "He gave you that, though, because he saw something in you. He saw some sort of light, or potential, or something. That was why he entrusted you with his sword, and the charms he treasured."

"...I have no idea what he saw." He looked a little fragile now. "I have... absolutely no idea." I
could see that it bothered him. I could see it in his eyes; he wondered why he was worth someone's life.

"To be frank, I only have a few myself." I shrugged. "You do have a kind heart, under all that anger. You saved Clarine."

He laughed bitterly. "I just wanted revenge on Bern."

"You could have gotten that by stabbing Narcian in the back. Maybe even stabbing him in the back while he was... busy." I purposely paused, to let the words settle, and I saw him tense and noted how harsh his glare was. "With how arrogant Narcian is, and how overly-focused he can get, you might have even killed him. It would have cost a young girl, and given her a lifetime of trauma and fear, but you could have dealt a blow, right there, to Bern."

"That is...!" He was angry. He was furious at the very thought.

So, I smiled. "But you didn't. You, instead, chose to get her out of that situation entirely, instead of using her for your revenge. If you wanted 'just' revenge, Rutger, you would not have done that." I reached up and ruffled his hair. "So, that's a thought. The rest, you and I will have to learn. But you have to live to do that, and not just for revenge. You were not filled with anger back then. It was not your anger that made Dad give you his sword."

"..." He sighed, slowly relaxing. "Hard to promise that, in a war."

"Well, you're just going to have to do your best." I tapped his nose, laughing as he made a face. "I want you to live to at least forty, one year longer than Dad, and I will not let you just give up." I shrugged. "Besides, knowing Mother Earth, she would let you see Clarine wail and sob over your corpse, and I'm sure neither of us want to see her cry."

"...No, she's much easier to be around when she's screeching." Ha! "What are you plotting?" Hmm? "I know you're plotting something. With her."

"You smile and relax around her. I don't think you're as focused on revenge when she's near." I shrugged. "That is all, for now. If something else starts blooming, I'm right here to listen." I ruffled his hair again, smiling. "But, remember, you do deserve happiness. That... is the right of those left behind, to live and to find happiness again." Somehow. "That is what our dead loved ones would want, and what Father Sky and Mother Earth always wish for us."

"...I'll try." Yes, that was all I could ask. It was hard and weighty, being left behind. "Have you read the stars?"

"I haven't in a while." But I could see in his eyes what he wanted to ask, so I made myself look up. I looked to the constellations, and narrowed my eyes. "They say that we'll have a strange foe in the future." I wondered what they could be. "But, for now, things are peaceful. We are safe tonight."

"I see." He smiled slightly, and I was reminded why Mom and Dad taught me the stars. They were reassuring, and not only to those who read, but also to those who listened. Even if it hurt, I should look to them more often. "I want to finish this practice dance."

"Go ahead. I'll watch."

"Thank you."

Honestly, Rutger didn't finish the practice dance. But that was mostly because the messengers we
sent off had returned, and so the entire camp was in a cheerful uproar over letters from home. I worried about Rutger, since he had no one to write, but apparently, Clarine had written to Uncle Pent and Aunt Louise about him, and they had sent him some things too, likely just so he wouldn't feel left out. It would be just like them.

For my part, I had gotten a lot of letters. Aunt Lyn and Uncle Eliwood, for instance, had sent two each: one formal, and one personal. Uncle Matthew had done the same. Aunt Serra, Uncle Lucius, Uncle Raven, and Aunt Florina only sent one. But I even had letters from Uncle Mark, Aunt Maria, Aunt Anastasia, Uncle Nicholas, Christopher, Uncle Pent, Aunt Louise, Cecilia, Perceval, Uncle Douglas (that one surprised me a lot), Aunt Priscilla, Uncle Erk… there was even a collective one from Uncle Kent, Uncle Sain, Aunt Fiora, Aunt Farina, and Uncle Heath, one that looked like they had fought over who had the pen, based on the squiggles at the end of some paragraphs. It was enough to make me smile.

However, my focus was on two letters in particular. One was from Uncle Legault. The other… the writing on the outside looked like Mom's. I opened Uncle Legault's first, hands trembling slightly.

'I'm going to start off with saying that I was unable to get Miss Wolf out.' Disappointment flooded me, but I shook my head, and went back to reading. 'It took me too long to find her. To my surprise, she wasn't locked up in the castle at all, but rather the manse that Zephiel lived in during his childhood. I think the word I want now is 'ironic', but you won't understand why. I did find some other interesting prisoners, though, 'prisoners of honor', if you will, but keeping quiet on who they are until we're all safe in Lycia. Though I wasn't able to get her out, I was able to observe a bit. She's thinner, and she's been coughing a lot. I think she's ill, brought on by all the stress and her own frail health. But Zephiel has healers, good ones, tending to her. Seems he wants to keep her alive, at least, so I think she'll be fine until I can make a second attempt. Got to watch her demolish Zephiel in chess, by the way. Very fun.

I was also able to get close enough to get her some paper and a pen for letters. Sorry they're short; I didn't have much on me. But that should be attached with this letter that Matthew is going to find some way to get to you. Hopefully, I'll have some good news for you the next time I write. You deserve it. I heard about Rath.

Keep your head up, Miss Pup. I call you that, but that's just an old man not willing to accept that the little girl that braided his hair is all grown up. You'll be fine, so long as you make sure you walk your own path. And, you know, keep an eye on your health. Don't be stupid like Miss Wolf on it, okay?

-Legault'

So, Zephiel was keeping Mom safe and healthy. She was more like a 'forced guest' than a prisoner. That was very relieving to read, especially from someone I trusted so much.

Quickly, I set the letter to the side and opened up the one from Mom. He was right; it was short. But, Father Sky, it was Mom. It was a letter from Mom. I had her words, and a visual confirmation that she was still alive.

'I heard about Ostia. I'm bouncing just remembering how pissed off everyone was. You could hear the screams at Narcian from here. He is in a lot of trouble, and his position as a general is very shaky. All because of the strategy you came up with! I'm so proud~
Do you know about Rath yet? Legault says you do. Said that you actually told them, in a letter, and someone went to confirm he was buried near Araphan. I miss him. When the war is over, let's make a trip to visit him. He'd like that. So, stay safe until then, Irene. I can accept visiting Rath's grave. When we parted at Bulgar, we had a good idea that we would not see each other again, that one of us would die.

Oh, I'd better finish this up before I get the paper tearstained. That won't be fun for you to try and decipher. I love you very much, my sweet girl. I'm very proud of you. Always have been, always will be.

-Love, Mom.'

That was it. It was a bit hard to read, because there were some tear drops that wrinkled the paper, and her writing was tiny, to fit on the little piece of paper Uncle Legault had given her. But it still made me smile. It made me smile, and gave me hope, so I carefully tucked it into Dad's box, just to make sure I didn't lose it.

"You read it?" Dragged out of the letters at last, I focused back on the present. I was in my tent with Sue, Roy, and Lilina. Since we each had a mountain of letters, we decided it was just easier to read them together. But I could tell by the hopeful smiles that they had read the letters from Mom first. "Well?" Sue prompted, reminded me of her question. "Did you?"

"Yes~" I replied, unable to keep from laughing. This was good. This was very good. I had more than one source telling me she was fine. Mom was fine. "I'm assuming you three did as well?"

"Well, yes!" Lilina laughed. She hadn't coughed since that day in the heat, thank you Father Sky, but I was still worried. Perhaps I should get her checked anyway? "As much as I want to hear from Mother, I couldn't help but read Aunt Katri's letter first. We're all so worried…" Her eyes wavered, and I knew she was thinking of Uncle Hector and Dad. Both died while we were away. It was hard not to think the same would happen to Mom. "It's such a nice note, too! Just what I needed to read."

"Aunt Katri has the advantage of thinking a long time at what she's been wanting to say to us," Roy agreed. He was smiling warmly, but I noticed there was something off about it. "That said; I'm really confused why she advised that I ask about Mother." Aunt Ninian? What would that have anything to do with… well… anything? "Any weird advice from you, Lilina?"

"No, not really. Just that she was sorry about Father." …She would be. She and Uncle Hector had been close. "But that's sad and depressing, and I'm tired of both. The camp is in good cheer thanks to the water antics." I wouldn't call it 'good cheer' personally, but in comparison to before, the mood had improved. We also didn't seem to have quite as many fights. Maybe with a few more activities like that… "Though, we didn't catch many fish."

"We did have a fantastic water war!" Roy grinned, and I knew exactly why. His team 'won' under his leadership, and I think that boosted his confidence. Even winning a game was soothing in times like this. "Sue, anything with you?"

"Simply Mom knowing exactly what has been on my mind, as per usual," Sue whispered. She glanced at me with a small smile, and I smiled back, knowing what she was talking about. 'Walking her own path'. "I plan on talking to her about it, when we see her again."

"Before or after you give her a giant hug?" Lilina teased. She giggled, twisting to lie flat on her stomach. I nudged a pillow her way so she could be a little more comfortable. "I plan on doing that. A giant hug and great big 'I love you~!'"
"After, of course." Sue smiled back. "I want a hug. I want one of her hugs, since I can't get any from Dad anymore." Yes, that sounded good. I would love to get a giant hug, and a whisper of reassurance. "We'll have to travel to Dad's grave."

"Yes, she made a mention of that for my letter," I murmured. I closed my eyes, and pictured it perfectly. "We can find some flowers to leave on it, and sing songs."

"Will you three live on the plains as before?" Roy asked. He looked curious. "I mean; if you want, you could stay in Pherae for a bit."

"I imagine we will eventually live on the plains again, as a family." Still, I couldn't help but smile. "I also imagine that we'd spend a lot of time in Lycia. After all, Aunt Lyn and Uncle Eliwood also lost their spouses. I'm sure they'd want to be together to mourn."

"That'll be fun! I found this great waterfall not far from Pherae's castle not long before all this started." He grinned. "I can show everyone then!"

"We can swim!" Lilina added. She laughed, delighted by the mental image. "Like when we were little, and our parents can sit on the shore and watch!"

"This is, of course, assuming we will all live in Lycia for a time," Sue pointed out. She had a distinctly wicked grin as she turned to me. "After all, certain someones might live in Etruria instead. Specifically Reglay?"

"By Father Sky, Sue!" I yelped. The three of them just laughed. "You three are horrible." I narrowed my eyes, though, and smiled slowly. It only grew as the three trailed off, looking worried. "Well, you have opened yourself up for retaliation!"

"You are not teasing me on Sin!"

"I never said a name." I snickered at her blank look. "But no, my retaliation is something else entirely!" I lunged forward, and started tickling her until she shrieked from laughter. When I judged she needed to breathe, I switched to Roy and Lilina. Lilina retaliated with a thrown pillow, and we dissolved into a pillow fight, filling my tent with laughter.

This was exactly what the four of us needed. I was glad we had the chance.

After the pillow fight, and dinner, the camp gathered around for what had become our nightly time of music and dancing, courtesy of Elphin, Lalum, and me. It was probably the one time of the day that the whole camp was quiet. In light of recent events, though, I feared what would happen when we had to take a break.

However, as we started to tire, Wuotan actually held up his hand to keep us from playing again. "I have a suggestion," he murmured, smiling softly. "You three need a break, so why don't I tell a story until you're ready to perform again?"

"A story sounds like a very nice change of pace," Elphin murmured. I passed him a cool cloth to place on his raw fingers. His calluses had faded over the past year. "And, to be blunt, a very needed one. I think Lalum cut her foot."

"Here, I'll help you limp to a healer, Lalum," I offered, standing and holding out my hand. Lalum took it with a grateful smile, and I helped her over Clarine, who was closest, sitting between Rutger and Lance. "Everyone, yell out requests to Wuotan and see if he responds."
There was an immediate cacophony. It seemed like Wuotan had endeared himself to everyone who lived in the Isles more than a month, judging by how rapidly Wade, Lot, Ekhdina, the Resistance members not named Elphin and Lalum, and the Etrurian soldiers listed off stories. It only just started to die down by the time I got Lalum over to Clarine, confirmed that her foot would be fine, and went to sit with Klein and Tate.

"Your singing was as beautiful as always," Klein praised, passing me some mint-flavored water. I smiled gratefully at it; it was my favorite drink whenever I had done a lot of singing. "Tate was mentioning that she wished there were more Ilian songs, though."

"D-don't tell her that!" Tate yelped, face flushing slightly. She could only sigh mournfully as I sat next to Klein and looked at her. "She probably doesn't know any…"

"Actually, I know a few that Aunt Florina taught me," I replied, smiling. Aunt Florina had a habit of singing when she got drunk. "I'm not as certain if Elphin knows the music to them, though. I can ask, though. He might know a few." Actually, if I thought about it, I might have taught him some of the Ilian songs I knew. "Lalum won't know any dances for them, but she tends to improvise anyway, so it won't be that much of a problem."

"Oh." She smiled slightly. "That… would be nice, if possible. I know a lot of us are homesick."

"We're going to have to learn new songs at this rate anyway." Sighing, I drained my cup, and groaned, leaning my head on Klein's shoulder. "I'm exhausted."

"I'm sorry," Klein immediately replied. He reached up to stroke my hair, grinning when I pouted. "What? You hate it when I try to prod."

"You can be a little more sympathetic."

"I'm sorry. Should I have said 'me too'?"

"Sure, since it would make me feel a little less pathetic."

"You could never be pathetic, Irene. I promise."

"I think he's ready to begin," Tate interrupted. She had a strangely blank look on her face, like she was trying to maintain stoicism, but failing. Was she mad Klein and I accidentally ignored her? … Yeah, that could be it. "I wonder what won."

"Before the Scouring, dragons and humans lived side by side," Wuotan began, answering the question neatly. The entire army fell quiet, and the contrast was so unnerving that I automatically took Klein's hand to reassure myself. He squeezed back, and gave me a warm smile. "It was not, as the history books like to say, entirely peaceful, of course. Conflicts rose and fell, much as conflicts rise and fall today, between various lands." Wuotan looked rather 'at home' like this, sitting by a campfire, and giving a history lesson to a large group of people. I wondered if before he was a 'scholar', he had been a 'teacher'. "In the East, Divine dragons ruled."

"Divine dragons?" Roy asked, eyes wide and entranced. He even leaned forward a little. "There are different types?" Ah, yes, Mom mentioned that, once.

"Three kinds made their home in Elibe." Wuotan's smile was gentle, even a little indulgent. He looked, though, as if he could see someone else in Roy, and I wondered who he saw. "Divine Dragons were those who controlled light magic. The most powerful, yet perhaps in many ways, the most fragile of the dragons. They lived in the East, where Bern now stands."

"In the north, Ice Dragons rule. Even now, the mountain they held sacred remains a revered
place in Ilia." I glanced around and saw many Ilians nod. They knew exactly what he was talking about. "In the west, where Etruria now is, the Fire Dragon tribes resided."

"Tribes?" I was surprised Roy was being this rude. But he looked so adorably fascinated.

Wuotan also didn't seem to mind one bit. "Fire Dragons were divided into several tribes, each with their own chieftain. Ice Dragons and Divine Dragons were ruled by 'royals', but they were determined not by blood, but by battle prowess. Before the Scouring, the Ice Dragons were ruled by Aenir, who the Ilians even now refer to as the 'ice dragon of the mountain'. The Divine Dragons were ruled by Helios."

"What happened to them?"

"Helios's fate is unknown. But Aenir died during the Scouring, in the land that is now Bern." I almost thought his eyes flickered with pain. "But we are talking of before the Scouring, when things were not peaceful, but were not warring." Roy flushed red, embarrassed. "In that time, conflicts between dragons are humans were mediated by Dragon Knights, as well as the priests and priestesses of the various temples."

"Dragon Knights?" Allen asked. His eyes were shining. "That sounds so cool!"

"They were very 'cool'," Wuotan teased, eyes dancing. The fire crackled, as if laughing too. "Many of them were half-dragons, who chose to devote themselves towards preventing a war from breaking out. Some, though, were humans."

"No dragons?"

"No, it was deemed 'safer' for it to be humans, or half-dragons. Humans died easily, and half-dragons were of both worlds." Wuotan shrugged. "Regardless, their job was to maintain the wavering peace, a job that grew harder as the years went on. Too many clashes, and too many lies sprouting up about the mystical properties of dragon's blood and dragon scales." His eyes were definitely sad. "The Dragon Knights spent most of their time destroying what were called 'Dragon Hunters', or 'Oathbreakers', as the plainspeople called them." Oathbreakers? "They were those who hunted down dragons to rip apart, selling everything from blood to scales to hearts."

"Why would they do that?!)" Clarine yelped. Her eyes were wide, and I saw she had gripped Rutger's arm tightly out of fear. "That is ridiculous!"

"As I said, lies," Wuotan whispered. He shook his head. "Beliefs that blood would make you stronger, that the scales would allow you to resist killing blows, that the heart would grant one eternal youth." Who would want eternal youth anyway? "But what made the Hunters truly monstrous was who they targeted. For, you see, they did not go after fully grown dragons."

"Children?!" Well, there was my nausea bout of the hour.

"Yes." The whole army was holding its breath now. Nothing like this was in any of the tales we grew up on. "But they were localized incidents, easily put down. Most of the time, they were destroyed before the children died." That was a relief. "However, even with the Dragon Knights keeping the peace, an incident occurred that the dragons could not forgive. The leaders fought long and long about what to do, and how to retaliate. Then, finally, one fire tribe, led by a reckless, passionate, yet stoic dragon by the name of Jahn, decided that there was only one retaliation."

"The razing of Aquelia," Klein supplied. This part, everyone who spent more than a week in Etruria knew. "A surprise attack from the air devastated the entire city, and killed all but a handful,
"Well, it might be divine providence, but the way is different than the stories would like people to believe," Wuotan laughed. There was definitely something pained in his eyes, and I wondered if he was so softhearted that he felt bad for people dead long before his time. "Those that survived simply were not there that day. Now, the reasons for that were a remarkable string of coincidences, so perhaps it was divine providence that they survived. But it was not a miraculous piece of rubble or missed fire. All those in Aquelia burned, with only the Cathedral, now the Tower of the Saint, standing when the attack was over."

"What caused that then, though?" Klein's hand tightened on mine. "You said an incident? The history books say it was for no reason, but your version makes more sense."

"The history books are written by the victors, and for the sake of peace, many lies were told, and many more were made scapegoats." Wuotan's smile was wry and bitter, but there was a bit of laughter in his eyes. It was like he found it all darkly humorous. "However, as for the rest, that is a story for another day. Hey! You couldn't end a story there! "I think everyone is ready for a continuation of the performances." Ugh...

Sighing, I stood up, and returned to my previous seat. I almost thought Klein's hand lingered on mine as I walked away, but when I glanced back, he was already chatting with Tate about something, so I'm certain I must have imagined it. It must have only been wishful thinking.

But looking around at the army gave me an idea, so I crouched by Elphin and Lalum and whispered, "hey, you two remember Sun's Fire?"

"A song of courage," Elphin murmured, smiling. It was a very old song, predating even the Scouring, but it remained popular in some regions of Etruria, most specifically Hanover. It was a staple of many festivals there. There were even some rumors that it was a favorite of the Lady Hildegarde. "Yes, I think that will be a good one for the army now."

"It doesn't have a dance, right?" Lalum asked, giggling. "I'll make something up. I know the lyrics from when you'd sing them in the garden." Yes, I loved the song. "Let's do it. For courage and hope."

"Perfect," I replied. This was going to be great. "Then, afterwards, some Ilian songs. Tate requested."

"Awesome~ let's go!"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Something FE6 does in game is drop a lot of backstory exposition during a single chapter, the penultimate one, in what has to be one of the most tedious chapters I have ever played. (It's a long, straight path with multiple mini-bosses.) Now, this makes sense in game, as until that point, you never really meet someone who was there during the Scouring. However, by adding Wuotan, I get to space things out. Which I am. Because that chapter sucks. 'Sun's Fire' is a made up song, which features a bit in Thief's Legacy.

Next Chapter – The True Enemy
Chapter 14) The True Enemy

To rescue the people of the Western Isles, we make our slow way to Jutes. Along the way, we can see the people look at us with hope. They desperately want us to win. They want it so much that they have taken to calling us the 'Saviors of the East'. We must win, if they are to have a better life.

Arcardo is a noble of high rank, but really, he isn't that important in the court. Hence why he was sent out here in the first place. However, much of Etruria is dependant on this Campaign, and control of the Isles. Etruria will not look kindly on it.

But this is what must be done.

A new location meant scouting and infiltration. Klein told us of the secret passages he was informed of. Astore and I headed inside the castle directly to gather information; Chad and Sue scouted around the perimeter. Rutger and Fir were on standby, just in case.

"I love Sacaeans," Astore whispered as we dropped inside. I could only give him a confused look in reply. "Do you know how hard it is to work with kids normally?" He grinned. "They don't understand how 'quiet' isn't 'quiet'. Sacaeans do, though."

"...I would say it's a livelihood thing," I replied slowly. "If we make too much noise on the hunt, we don't get to eat. Animals tend to have better hearing than humans, so thieves can move a little louder to steal from them?"

"Not quite, but it's a good enough analogy for now. I can give you a lovely tale of what it's like to be a child thief on the streets of Ostia. Later." Something told me I should make sure to have an empty stomach for it, so that I had less to throw up. "Regardless, what a tacky castle." Yes. Yes, it was. "Is this a normal Etrurian thing?"

"I would like to think everything about this man isn't 'normal' anything." I sighed heavily. "I dislike that my family condoned all of this through silence."

"Make some noise when we get back. Though, considering their prince is here, you might not have to." He smiled as I gave him my best 'blank' look. "Sacaeans don't tell lies, but that doesn't mean they can't trick. A blank look to others makes it look like you're surprised about information, but really, you're surprised I figured it out."

"...You do realize I cannot confirm or disagree, yes?"

"Sacaeans keep secrets by talking around, or by not talking at all." He nodded. "I'm gaining an appreciation for honesty. No one ever thinks that a Sacaean tactician would be anything but straightforward."

"We're hunters by blood, and speaking of which, there's a noble I wish to hunt." I smiled. "I assure you; my nerves are fine, and my head is calm. There's no need for chatting to make sure of it."
"Damn, you saw through me." He ruffled my hair. "Lord Legault's missive to me said he told you about your mother."

"Yes." I couldn't help but smile. I was so, so relieved... "I hope we can rescue her soon." Though, that did remind me. "He said he rescued some other 'prisoners of honor'?"

"Yep." Astore looked thoughtful, and I could see him mentally debate something before nodding. "Keep it quiet."

"Of course." So, was that a 'do not tell anyone that there is a possibility' or-

"Lord Jaffar and Lady Nino." He paused, likely because all of my thoughts stopped. "Some bounty hunters turned them into Zephiel, and he's been keeping them prisoner since then. I've no word on their conditions, but I did send word that at least one of their sons was in the army here with us."

"...Uncle Jaffar and Aunt Nino are really alive...?" I couldn't believe it. Ten years. It had been... but they were... "They're alive, and they know...?"

"Near as I can tell, but like I said, I've no idea on their conditions. For all I know, Zephiel has been torturing them to use as assassins." But they were alive. "Ha, you don't even care. They're alive, and that's all you care about."

"Well, yes, it is." If they were alive, they could heal. If they were alive, then I could rebuild a relationship with them. "I am in the best of moods right now. I could sing."

"Save the singing for when the Isles are liberated." Yes, of course. "And, again, keep it quiet. Don't want to give Lugh a bunch of hope. No matter what, he was abandoned for ten years." Yes, that was true. "But I'll tell Lord Legault to give you more detailed missives. You know how to keep quiet."

"I am so pleased to have your approval." Though I kept my words dry, I couldn't keep the smile off my face. They were alive! "But, back to work, I am assuming split up and meet in... thirty minutes?"

"Better make it twenty in a place like this." Understood. "Let's try to meet here, and if you have to leave sooner, just get out wherever you have to."

"See you soon." I waved goodbye as I picked a direction and went for it. It wasn't random, though. If this place was set up like an Etrurian castle, then the main throne room would be somewhere around here. I was willing to bet that Arcardo was there. It was just the sort of place for someone like him to pace and fret.

"General Flaer!" I was right. I just had to crouch by the door and peer into the room to see it. I could also see him shouting to someone in Berinese armor. Well, we really got that confirmed now. "The Lycian Alliance Army!" Arcardo continued to yelp, running his hands through his hair. "They're approaching to take my head!" Well, we might just leave him to the locals. That might be more fitting.

"Ah, yes, they're fighting much better than anticipated," the Bernese soldier murmured. He, unlike Arcardo, was perfectly calm. "We figured things would get difficult if they became friendly with Etruria, and mess up our plans." What plans? "That's why we had you send them to the Isles." So, it was Bern's idea. What were they planning for Etruria?

"Why are you so calm?!" Arcardo actually grabbed the soldier by the shoulders, shaking him. "Do you know how much I lost because of them?! All the riches I've earned..." He stumbled back,
shaking horribly. "But more importantly, my life! My life is in danger! If the Alliance Army reaches here, I'll be done for! General Klein will have be placed before a firing squad!" Oh, that was a thought. I wondered if I could get in on that?

"If you are that worry, then why not leave the defense of the capital to my men, and allow me to escort you to Etruria." The Bernese soldier shrugged. "Warfare is what Bern excels at, and we have a… secret weapon, shall we say?" He gestured, and a cloaked man stepped into the room. There was something… strange about him. The wind trembled and hissed, hating whatever he was. "Aine. Transform and show the good lord."

There was a flash of heat, and the smell of smoke before light enveloped the man. The windows rattled and the floor trembled as it cleared, and I could only stare as a dragon had replaced the man. What was… how did he…?

"Aine, return." There was another flash of light before the dragon 'disappeared', back to the hooded man. "Do not worry. We shall kill them off." Oh, Father Sky…

Arcardo simply started laughing, an almost deranged sound. "Yes, yes!" he crowed. "With this, there truly is nothing to fear! I will go to Etruria, and await the good news!" He ran out of the room, still laughing.

The Bernese soldier, however, scoffed. "Such gutless cowards, these Etrurians are. But if we destroy the Alliance Army, then these Isles shall be ours forever." Ah, no. "Is someone there?" I ducked back quickly, holding my breath as I waited. "It seems to have been just the wind." He chuckled a bit before walking away, each step a thud. "Aine, kill anyone who makes it through the gates." I needed to get out of here now.

Carefully and slowly, I ran away, staying on my tiptoes to reduce the sound even further. However, that didn't really matter as I rounded a corner and nearly crashed into someone.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" the person yelped. I could only stare. The face was harsher, and the robes were dark, but… "Ugh… now I'm going to have to find a new hiding place for-"

"Ray?" I whispered, still surprised. The boy blinked slowly, startled as well. "Ray, it's… I'm Irene. I used to babysit you in Castle Ostia."

"…Oh." He glanced to the side. "Yeah, I guess I remember you." Well, I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't. "Anyway, I'm busy, so-"

"You're coming with me." I grabbed him by the collar, and dragged him after me. "There's a dragon here, and you're not staying."

"Yeah, I am!" He tried to struggle, but I had an height and weight advantage. "I want to study the dragon!"

"Lugh is worried about you."

"And?"

"And he's with me, in the Lycian army." Well, that got him to stop flailing. "The orphanage burned, according to him and Chad. Reassure your twin that you're alive."

"…I guess I can." He finally started walking on his own. "I'm not little anymore. I can fight the monsters by myself."
"Ray, the monsters got bigger." I hesitated before turning, crouching to face him. "Please, just listen to me. Your orphanage is gone, Dad is dead, Uncle Hector is dead, as well as a bunch of other people." His eyes widened slightly, but he quickly tried to hide it with a scowl. "So, come with me." I held out my hand. "I'll keep you as safe as I can, and you will be able to keep me safe too."

"Fine, I guess." He took my hand. "I'm not doing this to be with Lugh or you, or to avenge the orphanage or anything." Well, that just sounded… "W-why are you smiling?"

"It seems you remain as adorable as ever." I gave him a quick hug. "I am glad to see you, by the way." I let him go, and dragged him after me. "Come on. We have to get out of here, now."

I made sure to drop Ray off with Lugh and Chad, Lugh practically tackling Ray off his feet in a giant hug. However, as soon as I did that, I was with the War Council, reporting what I saw. The reactions was predictable: surprised panic.

"So, this is why you had rumors of an 'unhuman'," Ekhidna sighed. She shook her head, running a hand through her hair. I could see in her eyes how much she feared for her resistance members. "This is a mess."

"This is madness," Astore groaned. He had been disbelieving when I had told him why I had to leave before him. I think only the 'Sacaeans do not lie' thing saved us the time of multiple questioning. "I heard about dragons in Araphan, but this is absolute madness." That was an excellent summary of everything. "What are dragons doing in a human war?"

"What are dragons doing listening to humans?" Klein pointed out dryly. He dug his nails into his arms, out of frustration, and I absently reached over to pry his fingers off. There was no need for him to bruise his arms before a fight. "That is the part that confuses me more than anything. Are there somehow hostages?"

"We might need to focus more on the one in front of us, General Klein," Tate sighed. She glanced at Zealot, who looked away. "There is a secret technique usable by pegasus knights called the 'Triangle Attack'. It was originally created to combat dragons…"

"It was also originally created during a time where both pegasi and wyverns had higher resistance," Zealot retorted instantly. I could see he was already rejecting the plan. "During the Scouring, most fliers used magic, not weapons." Oh, was that a fact? I hadn't even thought about that. That would be very interesting if we could pull it off too. We had Shanna training to be a flying healer, after all. "While the technique still works well against human fighters, we have no idea on how well our current incarnation will work on a dragon."

"It is still an option, and I don't mind flying one to see if it can be done."

"It will be considered, but I would prefer thinking of options that might not result in a senseless sacrifice," Elphin murmured. He glanced at me, and I shrugged. "I know a few tales, but most of them revolve around the legendary heroes ripping through dragons like they were paper."

"Not exactly something we can use," Roy sighed, closing his eyes. "We do have Durandel, though. Can anyone in the army use it?" Rutger might be able to, actually.

"That would involve sending a single person against a dragon and hoping the legends are true." That was true. But the reminder of Durandel made me think I was forgetting something. It wasn't related to the sword, but Uncle Hector and Oswin.
I nudged Klein to catch his attention, and he knew immediately that I was going to tune everything out to think, so he nodded and gave me a small smile to say 'I will nudge you if you need to pay attention again'. So, I closed my eyes and thought. What was I forgetting? There was something important that I was forgetting.

Uncle Hector said that Araphan had been attacked by dragons. But, perhaps more importantly, he said... he 'remembered how' to fight them. Yes, that was what I had forgotten in the wake of everything. He had 'remembered' how to fight them. He had, apparently, fought them before. But when would he have done so? I could only think of the Campaign of Fire, but that was...

That was what Oswin had said. He had said to 'read to the end' or 'skip to the end' after learning that I had Mom's logbook. He had used precious breaths to say that to me, before giving me reassuring words I was only now starting to believe. That was it. That was it!

Ignoring everyone, I turned from the War Table and rummaged through my pack. I always brought it with me, to read something before the Council started. So, it did not take me long at all to find Mom's logbook.

I could hear everyone's confusion as I flipped through. Deke's came through the loudest: "...Little Lady Irene, I admire your admiration of your mother, but there is no way there is-"

He said more. I know he did. But the world dropped away as I found the last of the pages and saw at last what Oswin had been trying to tell me back then. "Marcus?" I called. My voice was remarkably clear and even. "Merlinus?" I slowly stood, and turned to them. Merlinus would not look at me; Marcus had his eyes closed. "Why does Mom have tactics for fighting dragons?" The entire tent stilled. Everyone's eyes widened. "Can someone explain this to me?" There was no answer. "Let me rephrase that. Someone explain this to me, now!"

"Yes, I think that is a good idea." Wuotan walked in without even pausing to pretend to knock. "Were you planning on remaining quiet, Sir Marcus?" he... demanded. Yes, this was a 'demand'. There was quite a bit of authority in Wuotan's demeanor now, someone who would be heard, no questions asked. "Again, I should say." He stopped behind me, resting a hand on my shoulder. I was glad for it. I was feeling a little... woozy, I suppose. This was such a big shock. "You remained quiet twenty years ago, about the morphs."

"And how do you know of such things, Wuotan?" Marcus asked. Unlike Merlinus, who flinched and fidgeted, he remained calm and collected. Roy and I exchanged a wide-eyed look. "I do not recall you being there twenty years ago."

"I am friends with Fiona." He was?! "But more than that, I am the one who told Nicholas and Amanda, thirty-seven years ago, about the morphs. You were part of that group. Keep things quiet all you like; those who know how to listen can still reap knowledge." His free hand came up and a caught the flicker of a fire-person batting at his fingertips. Was that a fire spirit? Was that how he learned so many things?

"You look quite well for your age."

"Yes, some of us are cursed to look much younger than we are." His free hand rested on my other shoulder. "But still, were you going to remain quiet? You did not tell your lord anything seventeen years ago."

"It would not have spared them anything." Marcus's eyes were cold. "And there is a promise. I was sworn to secrecy, and so I kept quiet. That incident will remain in the shadows, as it should."
"And what will you do when your lord, to whom you have sworn your life to, looks at you with such questions in his eyes?" A quick glance to Roy confirmed that. "Will you pretend to know nothing, as you did with his father? You knew the name 'Ephidel'. You knew the name 'Limstella'. You knew of the morphs they fought." What the hell were morphs? Should I just save myself some time and look it up? "But when they came up, you stayed silent."

"As I said, all it would have done was given them a name a little sooner. It would not have saved anyone."

"That is something you do not know, and never will know." Okay, I was done with all of this.

"Are you two done fighting?" I finally asked dryly. Now I looked up, twisting so I could glower at both Marcus and Wuotan. "If it's going to lead to trouble, I don't care about the silence." I held up the logbook. "Really, I can wait for an answer on this, even as it confuses me. I mostly want to know so that I know if these are theoretical, or if I can use some variations on these to not have a death rate in the hundreds for the damn army!" I slammed the logbook on the table, letting the sound echo to emphasize my point. "Wuotan, why did you even come in here? Was it to yell at Marcus?"

"Ah, no, actually," Wuotan replied easily. He shifted slightly, and the authority I had seen just melted away, like ice in a fire. "I was coming to tell you that I don't think we're facing a 'true' dragon."

Well, that… um… was that so? "What do you mean, and what makes you say that?"

"There is not enough power or presence." Wuotan shook his head. "Dragons are magic, power. They channel it far better than humans do, which is why they can use magic without tomes, and why the Ending Winter had such a devastating effect on them." The Ending Winter… according to the stories, dragons were forced to take human forms when it occurred, too drained to maintain their true forms. "Spirits bend to them, welcome them. Are you the one who saw it?" I nodded. "Then you had to have sensed it, how the very air seemed to recoil from it?" I nodded again, since I had. "They hate it. They think it an abomination and one could make many arguments for it." He shrugged. "It's a doll. Or, to go off what I was talking about originally, a 'morph'."

"So, morphs are 'dolls'?" Roy asked. He was back to normal, determined and resolved. But his glance at Marcus promised questions later, and I could tell Marcus knew it. Merlinus, I think, escaped only because he had actually ducked away, and tried to make his presence as small as possible. "Magically made dolls?"

"Dolls made from quintessence, yes," Wuotan answered. He crossed his arms, and now he just… seemed like a storyteller again. "Life force, essentially. Dragons were capable of manipulating it, as were those who practice elder magic, providing they're willing to sell pieces of their souls and memories for the strength." That… sounded terrifying. "Most dragons, and elder magic users, can only make morphs that look human. Most often, they were characterized by golden eyes, raven black hair, and ivory skin." That sounded absolutely terrifying.

"How do you even… um…" Roy visibly flailed for a word.

So, Lilina finished the sentence for him, "Harvest it?" All eyes turned to her. "How do you even harvest it?" she repeated, eyes shaking. She gripped Roy's sleeve. "If it is life force, then…"

"You take it from the dying," Wuotan answered easily. Though expected, the words felt like a punch to the stomach. "The more violent, and drawn out, the death, the better, as it ensures that the maximum amount can be extracted."
"…So what amount would war create?" Father Sky… "And how does this connect to this… dragon doll you mentioned?"

"A war would create a lot, by simple numbers. Hundreds die, hundreds' quintessence is gathered." That was just sick. That was sick and wrong, and damn the first person who thought of it! "I believe you are facing a 'war dragon' here, a dragon morph that can only be created by a demon dragon."

"Is that not the leader of the dragons during the Scouring?" Perhaps that was the case, but I thought I heard something else with… of course! Dad's letter!

"A demon controlled by a broken child…" I whispered. All eyes turned to me. "Dad mentioned hearing a prophecy that had those words in one of his last letters to me." If the 'broken child' was, somehow, Zephiel, then… "That would explain why dragons 'suddenly' appeared at Araphan, wouldn't it?" My hands shook. "The massacre at Bulgar… there would have been…" I looked at Wuotan, and saw what I could only describe as 'saddened pride' in his eyes. "Does the amount of quintessence vary by person?"

"Yes," Wuotan replied softly. He reached over to gently pat my back. I appreciated it. "The young have larger ones by nature, as they have long lives ahead of them, in theory. Some also just are born with more."

"…Then that's where the dragons came from, isn't it?" My voice finally shook. "The dragons that killed Uncle Hector, Oswin, and everyone at Araphan were crafted from the fallen lives of Bulgar. There would have been dozens, maybe even hundreds when you accounted for trusted traders, and many, many children."

"The one here was likely born from there as well or from the slaughter at Araphan." Father Sky, I was going to rip Zephiel apart! "Likely, Bern hopes to utilize the mineral wealth here to fund their army, and their king hopes to use the quintessence of those who died in the mines to create more war dragons."

"Then what is the difference between a 'war dragon' and a 'regular' dragon?" I felt strangely calm as I turned away and leaned over the logbook. My hands still shook, but I hid it by curling them into fists. Klein sneakily grabbed one of my hands and squeezed reassuringly. I took a lot of comfort from it. "Are they weaker?"

"Yes." I could hear the smile in Wuotan's voice, even if I refused to turn around to look at him. "Their resistance is particularly bad, actually."

"Oh, good, because I have a powerful magic user." I looked right at Lilina, and she hesitated before nodding. "Elphin, stop staring in the corner." I glared at him, and he jolted out of whatever thoughts he'd been in, nodding once, and eyes filling with determination. "We've got to come up with a plan that gets the most people home."

I would not let Bern make me falter. If they gave me dragons, then I would answer with dragonslayers. That was all there was to it.

We eventually decided to set up on securing the area around the castle first, to lessen the chances of us becoming overwhelmed, with a tentative strategy for dealing with the dragons. After all, I remembered the orders being 'attack those that break the gates', and Wuotan mentioned that War Dragons could only follow orders, and likely only the most literal interpretation.
So, we focused on a strategy that dealt with the 'human' enemies, and prayed the dragon's orders would not change unexpectedly until we could work out something. It would be nice to have some luck, for once.

"It seems preparations are going well." I looked up from checking my medicinal herbs to see Marcus walk up. "We're going ahead and setting up the infirmary now," he explained. "Wuotan and I will be there."

"...Is that going to be okay?" I asked softly. I thought of their argument earlier. "I mean..."

"I know what caused it." Was that so? "He's scared. He's scared that there is information he knows, that I know, that anyone knows that will mean the difference between life and death." Ah... "That fear turned to anger, partially at me, and partially at himself. There are things he hides too, and I know that he, like I, debate everyday if a 'promise' is worth keeping if there is even a chance it might endanger you."

"And that frustration bubbled over, because it felt like, to him, this was something we should have known before."

"I think he did think you knew before. And, I must admit, to a point, he is right." His eyes were sad. "As soon as you learned in Araphan that dragons were here, I should have said something. Even if there was much going on, there was not so much that you should not have known that." He shook his head. "I still maintain that my keeping information about the morphs quiet twenty years ago did anything to influence the decision, even if he thinks otherwise." Was that so? "But... I do have some information you might want to hear now."

"Go ahead." I checked my pack one more time before facing him. "What is it?"

"The first is... the incident that led to the Western Isles Campaign."

"You're talking about when the Pirate King, Fargus, destroyed the Etrurian navy for no reason, the first and most deadly battle of the Western Isle Campaign."

"There was a reason." Was that so? "It is like what Wuotan mentioned before, about how the original cause of the Scouring is lost to time. And, before you ask, no, I don't actually know what it was."

"But the reason is simple. Thirty-seven years ago, there was an attempt on King Mordred's life."

"Oh, the poisoning thing that led to the dissolution of House..." Oh, what was the name? It started with a 'k'. "That was related?"

"Yes. The leader of the navy, at the time, was allied with Albert. Our group, tracking down something else, prevented it and left Etruria on a ship. I... had a bad feeling suddenly. "A pirate ship, captained by Fargus." Then... then the deaths had really been... "Fargus killed them in defense of his men and us. They were only out because of a corrupted leader."

"...This whole Campaign was a falsehood from the start. It was no wonder things became so bad, if the start had been so dirty. That made... "That makes so much more sense."

"It's also why I didn't protest Lord Eliwood seeking Fargus's aid twenty years ago." Wait, they did? Was I going to run into him? ...Wait, no, he was dead, wasn't he? "I thought you might want to tell Lord Klein, and perhaps we get a bit of the truth spread. It might help with ending the Campaign in Etruria." That would be nice.

"So, will I get an answer to my question?" I looked him in the eye, ignoring the bustle of the
soldiers around us. "Uncle Hector 'remembered', and Mom has tactics."

"...The Campaign of Fire started as a simple quest to find Lord Elbert." Marcus's eyes shut, and I knew he was lost in the past. "It ended as an attempt to prevent a madman from forcing open the Dragon's Gate, on Valor Isle, and dragging dragons forcibly through to raze the world in flames." Was that so? "So, the final bout involved a group fighting four dragons. I was not with them; I was preventing the morphs from killing them from behind with the main part of the army."

"That explains it, then." It also explained how Mom fought 'true' dragons, when we fought the supposedly weaker 'war dragons'. Though, I was not really sure what a 'dragon's gate' was. "Thank you. If there is anything else you can think of, please, tell me."

"I will do my utmost to remember." He bowed to me. "Relax, Lady Irene. You have learned from Lady Katri's mistakes. Things will be well."

"I am pleased you have so much belief in me."

"How can I not? I have watched you grow up, just as I watched Lord Roy." His smile was warm as he straightened. "Ah, I remember how you toddled after me, pouting when you did not receive a hug."

"I was two!"

"Your mother did the same, actually." Was that... so? "She was a very bossy, very clever three year old, who demanded hugs." When did Marcus meet a three-year-old Mom? "Ah, I'm getting nostalgic. I'll go and smooth things over with Wuotan. The benefit of being old is that you are more capable of admitting you're wrong."

"I'll remember that when you insist that carrots are good for you."

"Your hatred of carrots remains hilarious." He laughed at my scowl. I just... hated them. They were icky and bland and... icky! "I'm off; I'm off." He waved goodbye as he walked off, and I sighed, closing my eyes. Well, that was... combined with earlier, I was flooding with information. Maybe I could have a bit of time to my-

"Irene!" Then again, maybe not. "Hiya!" Fir greeted, looking strangely red in the face. "I... um..." She bowed suddenly. "P-please keep me away from Noah!" ...What happened now? "It's um... those feelings I mentioned before? They got worse!" Was that so? "It keeps distracting me!"

"We'll arrange things for now," I replied slowly. I was... strangely amused by this. It was so nice to see a 'normal' problem. "Any requests?"

"W-well, maybe Rutger?" Rutger? "I asked him to spar earlier, but he turned me down, called it 'play'." Oh, Rutger... "But I was hopin... His blade is sharp and his eyes show no hesitation." Ah. "I hoped to learn from him..."

"He's like that because he is still re-learning to care about whether he lives or dies." I ruffled her hair. "Ask again, much later, but until then, I'll arrange it so that you and him have the same time allotment at the practice grounds. Learn from watching."

"Okay!" She beamed at me, before pointing to something behind me. "Oh, there's Roy." I turned to see she was correct. "Who's the girl with him?" That...

"She is a thief we've run into a few times before." I waved as they walked up. "So, what's going on?"
"Cath is going to join us!" Roy declared happily. He looked so proud of himself, and I gave her a confused look. She simply sighed in return. "That's okay, right?"

"Of course it is," I reassured. I reached over to ruffle her hair. "Though, I am curious how you convinced her?"

"I promised to rebuild all the fallen and destroyed villages." Oh, Roy… "She's staying to make sure I keep it." He still looked proud, and I thought I understood why. This was him, and him alone, understanding and working on a way to fix a problem he had not realized existed. It was a step he was taking, all on his own. "Irene will assign you to a group and everything, Cath, so let her know your skills and preferences!"

"That includes future training." I smiled at her, and slowly, she seemed to lose her sour look for confusion. "Welcome to the army, Cath. But be prepared, because things are about to get rough."

Almost as if I timed it, I heard the cry go out: "All soldiers are prepared for battle! Ready to march!"

Let the battle begin.

The gates were conveniently barred. They were barred and shut, and we had to fight hard to secure the area. The enemy took advantage of the tight areas to set up ambushes. Thankfully, though, Elphin and I had accounted for that as soon as we had seen a map. Therefore, after what felt like an eternity of fighting, we only really had one area left to secure: the gates themselves.

"Mages, archers, I want you to focus on the enemy archers!" I snapped. My throat was hurting. This was a battle where I had to yell a lot, simply because so many things rapidly changed. "Pegasus knights, focus on the mages! Prioritize those who wield fire!"

A resounding 'thud' reminded me of why this was important. Roy was yelling orders too, coordinating the soldiers on a battering ram. Elphin had ordered one to be set up, and Ekhidna had shown us particularly good trees. She, Wade, Lot, and even Deke had worked hard with axes to get one ready. Now, I just had to make sure the hard work would not go to waste while Elphin continued to secure everything.

"Tate! Got one with Elfire!" At my words, Tate immediately dropped, skewering the mage and throwing the body at a nearby window for good measure. Her slight surprise told me she hadn't exactly been expecting that, but it worked to startle the rest of the enemy. "Take them out, everyone!" I aimed and fired for good measure, noticing Sue and Sin had stopped chasing down wyvern knights to do the same. I suppose the ones the Bernese general left were now all dead.

A thunderous crack told me we were almost there. Roy's shouting got a little more enthusiastic. As the last of the enemy fell from the walls, the gates splintered into thousands of pieces, raining down as the ram with through.

Everything stilled, though, as it sailed over the head of the cloaked figure I had seen earlier. 'Kill anyone who makes it through the gates'. We just made it through.

I almost thought I heard a bit of laughter before the heat, smoke, and light barraged my senses. "Burn." I wasn't sure if I had really heard anything, or if it was just the impression I got from the dragon.

But it was true. The first thing it did was set the nearby soldiers on fire, with a simple breath attack. Some escaped, but I could only watch as a soldier threw Roy out of reach as the dragon
skewered them with its claws. I could only watch as fleeing soldiers were snapped up by wickedly sharp teeth, blood and body parts dripping down as it opened its mouth to breath another wave of fire that stole even more soldiers. That was just its initial strike, as it lumbered out from the ruined gates. Just one initial bout, and we already had so many dead.

This was weaker? This was weaker?! What could we…? How could we…?

…No. No, I couldn't think like that. If I did, it was over. If those of the past could destroy them, then so could we. If… if Mom and her group could kill them, then so could we! I had to believe that. I must believe that!

I could not falter. The resolve I had in planning must stay in the fighting. I was the tactician. I would not let them win.

"Archers!" I snapped. I could feel the scared, disbelieving eyes focus on me. "I don't care that it's an overgrown lizard! It's still has fleshy joints and flesher eyes!" For emphasis, I drew Rienfleche and aimed. I thought I felt the bow 'buzz' before I fired, and caught the dragon straight in the eye. It roared and stumbled back in pain. "See? Shoot it and it bleeds, just like anything else!"

"We'll take advantage of its blind side!" Roy dramatically jumped onto a piece of rubble, sacrificing a bit of safety to ensure he could be seen and heard. "It's just a dragon!" he cried, holding up his rapier so that it caught the light. "Our ancestors fought and won against an army of them! We will not falter before only one!" He glanced at me, and I nodded. "Archers, follow Irene's example and take the joints and eyes!"

"All magic users, save Lilina, take advantage of the weakened resistance! Lilina, come to me!" I hesitated before adding, "Rutger!" I stood up in the saddle and caught his eye in the crowd. "Get Durandel!" He nodded and raced off. "All other soldiers, eliminate the enemy on Elphin's orders and secure the area!"

"Remember! They only set the dragon on us because they are afraid!" Roy's words cracked through the air, and I saw everyone stand a little straighter. "They're afraid, because we are stronger! We are better! With this victory, the Western Isles will be free from both Etruria and Bern! They can live their lives in peace, and bury their dead without wondering what next sick death their loved ones will suffer!" There were smiles in the army now. "So fight! Fight to save those who still live! Fight to avenge those who died! Fight, and show Bern and Etruria why they are right to fear us!"

The resulting cheer made the stones on the ground tremble, and the army moved. In an instance, they went from shaking in their boots to fighting with vigor. The injured fell back to be healed without being told; the healthy charged forward, with shield that buckled but held, and blades that bounced off, but distracted. Arrows flew and magic rained.

Roy and I exchanged a look, and a disbelieving grin. Neither of us… had really expected that to work.

"So, what do you want me to do?" While Roy and I were still a little dazed, Lilina walked up, eyes determined, even as she clasped her hands to keep them from shaking. "Do you want me to strike, like you suggested in the War Council?" she asked. "I think I can charge one up."

"Yes, that is exactly what I want you to do," I whispered. I reached down to clasp her shoulder. "You don't have to worry about killing it. If I'm right, then we can have Rutger deal with that."

"Oh, good, as I think I can't manage something like that without risking the lives of the soldiers
close by." She nodded, eyes fierce. "I can do it."

"Good." I glanced up and saw Rutger running for me, Durandel unsheathed. "Do the spirits within it…?"

"They allow me to wield it," he answered easily. He glanced down at it with narrowed eyes, though. "This is not a blade to wield long, though. I think it is burning the palm of my hand."

"I'm putting Clarine and Deke near you, as precaution," I informed him. He only nodded in reply. "When we call everyone back, Lilina, you make the dragon burn." She nodded. "Rutger, as soon as the flames clear, it's on you."

"Understood." He moved, heading close. Lilina ran away, to a clearer area so that she could safely channel her magic.

Roy and I exchanged another look, this time more determined, and went to work. I snapped orders; he rallied the forces. I got Clarine and Deke to stay near Rutger. Roy got his knights to charge and open up the underside for further strikes. I heard from Cath and Astore that Elphin had everything secured. As soon as the dragon was dead, the castle was ours.

A flash of light and a pulse of power caught my attention, and I glanced back to see Lilina was prepared, a giant fireball, as bright and warm as the sun, hovering between her outstretched hands, tome fluttering at her feet.

"Fall back!" I screamed. The magic users already were, of course. They sensed the power Lilina was about to unleash. Those who could not followed soon, especially with Roy helping. The wounded took a bit longer, but all that were breathing were dragged away. At least, I hoped, because… "Now!"

Lilina threw the fireball, the heat cracking the stone walls of the castle, charring and making the ground bubble. Even in the face of that heat, I could see Rutger moving closer, ready to strike. I could see Clarine hovering near, staff in hand, and Deke a distance away, his attention completely on Rutger, just in case.

I felt my heart stop as I realized something. Though the flames were strong, though they were powerful, the dragon didn't stop. It burned, and it screamed in pain, but it still lunged, claw heading right for Clarine…!

Rutger, however, intercepted the blow, the claw ripping into his side. Clarine's shriek echoed as the blood flew, but Rutger shifted into a stance, and Durandel answered, flames spiraling around the blade as he leapt forward, moving fast enough that I swore he 'split' into five, and struck the dragon where I thought the heart might be.

The dragon screeched, and I could almost hear the 'what is this?!' in it. But it felt, falling to the side, and dying with a gurgle, eyes glazing over.

I didn't care. Rutger collapsed right next to it, and there was a lot of blood!

"Rutger!" I heard Clarine yell as I rode over. "H-hang on!" she yelped, rolling him into her lap, mend staff glowing as she went to work. I didn't even bother to stop my mare before leaping out of the saddle and racing over with my own medicinal pack, praying I could help. "You can't die!" She was already sobbing. I glanced around for Deke, and saw him racing for the infirmary, likely to snag Saul or Elen. So, I knelt next to them, and went to work on trying to make sure Rutger's guts stayed where they should, so that Clarine didn't accidentally heal them outside of his body. "I order
you to not die!" Clarine, I love you.

"Stop… crying…" Rutger rasped. He coughed wetly, and reached up to wipe at her tears. He just succeeded at smearing blood on her cheek. "It's… okay…" He was definitely struggling to breath, though. "It's okay…"

"No, it's not!" Even while she was shrieking, she kept working. I grit my teeth as I watched it tried to take. Caphredil. I needed it. I knew I had some, but I couldn't find it. It wasn't in the pocket I normally had it. "You're not allowed to leave me! Understand?"

"Fine, fine…" He actually managed a smile. "It's fine… can't die… until I'm forty… anyway…"

"You need to live longer than that, mister!" Clarine's voice cracked as she kept crying. "Okay?"

"Okay…"

"Rutger, I need you to chew on these," I ordered, having finally found my caphredil flowers. No wonder they had been hard to find; I was running low. I should restock, as soon as we made it to the mainland. "Just chew the petals. It's okay if you swallow them, but try not to until they're mush." I shoved them into his mouth, and them worked on crushing some others into a powder, and mixing it with some water from my water bottle to make a messy paste. "Clarine, keep working. This will boost the power of the staff."

"I-I can help!" Both Clarine and I jerked our heads up as Lilina raced over. "I can lend my magic!" she panted, coughing as she stumbled to a stop and rested her hands on Clarine's shoulder. "I'm going to do it now, Clarine."

"Give me all you safely can," Clarine replied. She still cried, but her eyes were fierce as she shifted, so that Rutger's head rested on her shoulder. I gathered it was to make it easier for him to chew the petals. "Um… Irene?" She looked to me. "I… if I heal him, I won't…" I saw what she was asking.

"Let me finish getting this on the injury," I whispered. It hurt my heart to not help more, but she was right. Both of us could not focus on Rutger alone, especially since Deke was likely getting another healer here. "Then I will lead the triage and field medicine." I was going to drag Chad along. Maybe a demonstration would help reinforce why I needed him to take advantage of his healing aptitude.

As many people were coming home as possible. I would make sure of it with my own two hands.

"That… was so close." In the wake of everything, including identifying and burning the dead, dealing with the injured, trying not to lose more… it seemed to take forever before Roy, Elphin, and I could simply sit and talk for what was rapidly becoming our routine 'meet after the battle to discuss the next step' meetings. "That was the power of a dragon," Roy whispered. He shook his head almost violently. "No, that was the power of a 'war dragon', a weaker one…"

"Do not panic," Elphin urged. I just sat on the floor, doing my best to not kick myself too hard, and to relax so I could resist the urge to keep scrubbing at my hands and arms. I knew I had the blood off, but I could still feel it. "If you panic, so will the army. You saw outside how well it works for the army if you are confident."

"I was just fast-talking, saying the first thing I could think of." Yes, and I had done the same. That was why neither of us could believe it worked. "If we fight more than one… if we fight a real one…"
"It might work better if I don't order the use of fire magic on a fire dragon," I grumbled, unable to help it. I couldn't take it. That had to be the height of stupidity. "Of course a fire dragon would resist fire magic. It is fire magic. You can't burn fire! And what do I do?"

"Give the order that saved us," Elphin pointed out. Clearly, he wasn't going to let Roy or I have pity parties today. "It was a good strategy, especially since our original plan fell apart." Yes, on the account of me just plain forgetting it. Though, to be fair, it had been a very tentative 'do this if there are no options' plan. "...Irene, you're going back into 'I hate myself' thoughts."

"I don't hate myself. I just think I'm stupid."

"Just as bad." Ugh... "It is done. A tactician's job is to lead the army forward, not deal with past 'what ifs'." Still, I saw him hesitate before asking, "how is Rutger?"

"Alive." I heard them both breath a sigh of relief. "Between the capredil and Lilina's magic, Clarine managed to heal him enough that Saul could take over." Clarine and Lilina had both passed out, though, and Clarine had actually taken a fever from channeling too much magic. "I'm having Elen check them both over when she's done in the infirmary."

"And Durandel?"

"Sword is pristine. Rutger's hand, though, is blistered." Durandel would not suffer wielders. "So, we'll put it up again until the next time we fight a dragon, and it is never being used otherwise." I pushed myself up warily. "Why? You thought a weapon that survived a thousands years would break so easily?"

"It was a thought. The legends often exaggerate." Mmm... "But it seems this time, it downplayed the strength." Elphin closed his eyes and shook his head. "Regardless, there are rumors of another Divine Weapon, hiding in a cave not far from here."

"...You must talk of Armads," Roy murmured. His gaze was a little steadier. "The axe of the Berserker, Durban."

"Yes," Elphin confirmed. "If we can find it, perhaps fighting future dragons will not seem so overwhelming."

"Do you know where, exactly, it is?" Roy's eyes grew sad. "We have injured and we're all tired, so I'd rather not go for a prolonged search..."

"No, but Wuotan seems to know a lot of things, and there are rumors." Elphin shrugged. "I figured we could ask him if it was true, and for him to lead us if it is."

"We'll have to be just as cautious with it." That was very, very true. "Especially since it seems Durandel will burn its wielder." Roy's eyes lit up. "But if we can gather all eight, then perhaps we can stop Bern, even with the demon dragon helping them?"

"We'll have to be careful," I whispered. Both of them looked at me. "I was not kidding about Rutger's hand. I dread to think of what some of the others can do."

"...True," Roy reluctantly agreed. He closed his eyes, shaking his head. "I suppose it's also good to remember... these were sealed. They're hidden, lost to rumors with few exceptions." Yes, when you thought about it, there had to be a reason. "Irene? Is there anything in Aunt Katri's logbook?"

"I'm going to read through in the next couple of days, and I'll share what I know from there."
"All right." He nodded. "Then, for now, let's track down Wuotan." He grinned. "After giving Marcus a rough time about not sharing information earlier, he'll have to tell us, yes?" Well, no, but that would be good blackmail material. "Let's go!"

Wuotan did know, and he was more than happy to show us the way. He even offered to tell us more about the legendary weapons during the trip, which would honestly be great. We only had legends to go off them, and anything about them would be good to know.

Afterwards, it was a rush of making sure everyone was okay, checking on the injured, dealing with those who died despite our best efforts… really, it was evening before I finally had a chance to check in on Clarine and Lilina.

"How are they doing?" I asked Elen. She had put herself in charge of them when told to rest at the infirmary, and greeted me with a smile and a curtsey when I walked inside the room they were all in. "Any changes?"

"No, not really," she murmured. I had to resist the urge to sigh. No news was good news, but I had hoped for 'better' news. "But they are sleeping peacefully, more or less."

"More or less?" I leaned over Clarine, adjusting the wet cloth on her forehead. Noticing it was a little dry, I went to re-wet it in a nearby bowl. "Did something happen?"

"Lady Lilina had a coughing fit, but it was not strong enough to wake her." That… did not make me feel better. "But, otherwise, there's been nothing of note. Which is good. I feared Lady Clarine had destroyed her ability to use magic."

"Has she?"

"No, but I would advise that she refrain from healing for a few days in order to ensure a full recovery." Elen moved to fix Clarine's blankets as I set the wet-cloth on her forehead again. "I thought those of Reglay had a strong magical aptitude?"

"Clarine was frail as a child, so she was never taught for fear of her life." I almost wished Uncle Pent had chosen differently. I wondered if there was a 'safe' way to fix that. "That's all, really."

"I can see that." She smiled sweetly. "I am glad, though. I would hate to see Lord Rutger's face if he learned Clarine crippled herself to save him."

"I think the incident will ultimately be good for them both." I sighed, shaking my head. "I hope so, anyway. Good things need to come from this."

"Most of us live. Even with tales of the Scouring, you heard of how the battles were blanketed by blood." I suppose. "That was why the legendary heroes are still believed to be messengers of God."

"Yeah, they won the war singlehandedly if the stories are true." I suddenly laughed, realizing something. "Ah, that's right. I'd been meaning to talk to you anyway. I just remembered."

"Oh?"

"Yes." Ah, why did I suddenly remember it? "I saw Miredy and Galle."

"You did?" She looked startled. "I see…" She smiled slightly. "Ah, I did her such an injustice. She is more loyal to Princess Guinevere than anyone, yet I did not inform her what the princess's plan was."
"Wouldn't she have stopped it?"

"No." She shook her head. "No, I think she would have come with us, to keep us safe." So, Miredy would have abandoned her country for her princess. That... was rather nice to hear, truthfully. It made me feel 'better' at choosing to trust her. "I wish Galle was the same, though. But even if his loyalties waver, he feels he owes Bern. It was the country that took him in when the Lorca perished, and the country that gave him a purpose when he was lost in grief." She shrugged. "It's also the country where he met Miredy, and Zeiss. He loves the country too much to betray it."

"I see." Strangely, that made me feel better too. It made me feel better at believing their words. Mom was safe. "Do you mind if I change the subject?"

"Oh, please, go ahead." She laughed a little. "I fear I will get trapped in nostalgia."

"Thanks." Still, I hesitated. "It relates to something you said earlier." I glanced at Lilina, sleeping peacefully. "Do you know how to check for consumption?"

"Yes, Lady Serra was very insistent on that." That didn't surprise me. "I do not yet have the staff skill to cure it, though I do know the method." Was that so? "Do you need me to check?"

"Yes, it runs in my family, and in Lilina's." I smiled wryly. "I was in contact with Uncle Hector before he passed, and he had it."

"One moment." Her staff glowed, gentle as a breeze. "You seem to be perfectly fine. If you have it latently, it is slumbering far too much to register." That was good. "Now then..." She turned, letting the healing magic wash over Lilina. I knew what she was going to say as soon as her eyes widened. "Oh..."

"So, she does have it."

"...Yes." She looked sad. "It's in its earliest stages, though. If we begin some herbal treatments, it might pass over before it gets worse, though it would be best if we have her treated outright."

"I'll check with Saul." I glanced at her. "We'll be heading to a cave tomorrow, a small group. Most will remain here. If you and Saul can screen for any illnesses you can?"

"Of course." She smiled softly. "Do not leave until Saul and I have screened your group."

"Yes, that sounds good." I smiled back. "Thank you." I leaned down to stroke Lilina's hair. "You'll be okay. We'll make sure of it."

"Remember to get some rest, Lady Irene." Elen's voice was gently scolding as I looked up. "It's very late."

"I hear the orders, miss healer." I grinned and she laughed. "Thanks for watching out for them."

"Of course." She nudged me out of the room. "Even if you cannot rest, at least talk of something silly with someone."

"Yeah, I might have to do that." But I was first going to go check on Rutger again.

"Very well, but be certain to actually go do that, and not check on Rutger." Ahaha... ha... "You are very predictable, Lady Irene."

"Yes, she is." Startled, both of us turned, and I smiled when I realized Klein was walking down the
"I figured she would be here or there," he teased, returning the smile. He offered his hand. "I am under orders from Sir Marcus, Sir Zealot, and Master Wuotan to ensure that you relax."

"You may add a healer's orders to that," Elen joked. Even as she did so, I noticed her shy away. Ah, that was right. She had mentioned, a long time ago, being shy around men. "She works too hard, and these days have been much too trying."

"Well, that's four people's orders, then." Klein grinned. "Shall you go ahead and admit the loss?"

"I suppose I must," I sighed, taking his hand. He squeezed it reassuringly. "Are we certain this isn't you wanting information on how Clarine is doing?"

"I figured you would be screaming if she was anything but on the road to recovery." His smile told me he would want to talk about it, but later, when his thoughts were more organized. So, I simply smiled back. "Thank you for watching over her, Sister Elen." Elen simply laughed and waved off the thanks. "We'll leave you to go tell silly stories and relax."

"I can't believe those three all asked you to look after me." I waved Elen goodbye as Klein and I walked through the halls, hand in hand. We had done such since we were children, but it felt just a little more special to me now that we were older. I doubted he thought much of it, though. "How did you even see all of them?"

"It was easy. They were drinking together." They were? "Sir Marcus and Master Wuotan were teasing Sir Zealot about him being a recent father, with all of the nerves, when I poked my head in to give Sir Zealot the most recent report from the infirmary. I had been volunteering there."

"How are things?"

"Better than expected." That did not mean much when we expected a lot of bad things. "You were really amazing out there." I felt my face heat up in a blush as he smiled at me. "Though, you did feel strangely far away."

"I did?" I shifted to stand in front of him, mostly to look him in the eye. "How?"

"I had simply been thinking how, even a year ago, you would have never stood in front of so many people except to sing." His smile became sad. "But there you and General Roy were, encouraging the people."

"I have no idea how it worked."

"It worked because you're both likable." He laughed a little, but it also sounded sad. "So, you seemed very far away, right then."

"...Well, I'm not." I held up our clasp hands for emphasis, even as I frowned at him. "See? I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere." I sighed. "Who else is going to make sure I relax, since according to three of the oldest people in the army, I can't do that by myself?"

"To be fair, you fret." He snickered at my scowl. "But yes, you're right here." His smile softened and warmed as he squeezed my hand. "I suppose I should keep my silliness to myself."

"No." I frowned again when he looked startled. "Then you'll be far away from me. I won't like that." I wanted to stay close to him, for as long as I could. "Got it? We've been close since childhood, and not everything has to change because we're grown up."

"True." He laughed. "Sorry. I'm supposed to be relaxing you, but I'm only adding more stress."
"No, I think it's less. Imagine how much fretting I'd do if you suddenly stopped talking to me!"

"That is true." His laughter faded for a smile, and I smiled back. "I'm right here."

"Good." Footsteps caught my ear, though, and I turned to see Tate walk up. She stopped suddenly, and shifted almost awkwardly. "Tate, hi!" I called, waving to her. Klein also waved, smiling warmly. "Did you need something?"

"No, it wasn't… um…" Tate began. She glanced at something and I thought there was something pained in her eyes before she shook her head. "I simply thought you two might be awake. Some of us, mostly my knights and Allen's, were meeting for scary stories by the fire. I wondered if you might want to join."

"That sounds like fun." I glanced at Klein, and he nodded, beaming at the thought. "Let's go! I'll think of some from the plains to keep you entertained, and Klein knows a lot of good ones told in Reglay."

"Oh, good." She laughed a little, smiling warmly. Perhaps I imagined the earlier pain? "I want them good and scared. Especially Allen. He's been scoffing at the idea of anything scaring him, which just bothers me."

"He's strangely noble for an annoying person." I made a face. "He still has my book, though."

"He borrowed a book?"

"No, I threw it at him. It's a story."

"Tell me on the way?" She pointed down the hall, and the three of us walked. "I'm sure he deserved it."

"Well, I suppose. He was trying to murder me." I launched into the tale, doing my best to make it as humorous as possible, to get her and Klein laughing.

It wasn't until we arrived at the room and sat down that I realized Klein and I held hands during the whole walk. The thought made me smile, even as I shrieked in fear over the ghosts that hid among the snows.

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**Notes on Ray**

- *Lugh's twin brother, one of Aunt Nino and Uncle Jaffar's sons. He used to be a shy, scared child, but now is a still shy, but grumpy child.*
- *His eyes are harsher than Lugh's, despite them being identical, as if he took more more after Uncle Jaffar. His hidden kindness reminds me of Aunt Nino, though.*
- *A powerful magic user, but unlike Aunt Nino and Lugh, he specializes in dark magic. His speed is good, but the long casting times of dark magic will make him slower than his natural speed suggests.*
- *His affinity is Ice. If my theory about ice spirits being attracted to kind people is true, then I am further convinced that he remains the kind boy that I remember at heart.*

**Notes on Cath**

- *A cynical thief who steals from nobles, hating them with a passion after her village was burned.*
- *In comparison to Chad and Astore, she is much weaker, but has a great deal of potential.*
Unlike them, I think I will have her stick mostly with thieving and spying, to free them up for other duties.

- Due to her hatred of nobles, it's probably best that I assign her to groups that don't have many.
- Her affinity is anima.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So, this chapter has another set of 'revolving' bosses where you switch between three, ending with Aine, the dragon. This is the first time, in game, that you fight a dragon. Since the dragons here don't have 1-2 range, though, and have minimal resistance, magic users (i.e. Lilina) become your dragon killers. Plus, it's not uncommon for Rutger to be promoted by now, with an S in swords (oh, glorious is seeing him crit with Durandel). The idea of a battering ram comes from the FE6 manga.

Ray is an interesting recruit in that he's only 'pretending' to be an enemy, so he will literally not attack you (I also don't think he gets hard mode bonuses, but am not certain on that). You normally recruit him with Lugh or Chad. This map is also the earliest map you can recruit Cath (you must talk to her three times, and she will join on the third). Fir's conversation with Irene references her C support with Rutger and her B support with Noah.

By virtue of FE7 being a prequel to FE6, and therefore written after FE6, there are many occurrences where Merlinus and Marcus come off as not knowing anything about things that, as FE7 showed us, they really should. So, here comes a direct explanation: they're purposely keeping quiet and some aren't happy about that, for various reasons. (There are references to Thief's Testimony in this chapter too.)

Next Chapter – The Thunder Axe
At dawn, our small group moved, heading for a cave not far from the capital. Of course, considering how tired we are, it feels much longer than it is.

Wuotan urges us to bring handkerchiefs, for some reason. We just smile and nod. All of us are far too tired for any of this, really. Only the fear of dragons compels us forward.

The majority of the small group was composed of riders. Sue, Sin, Tate, Lance, Allen, and me rode our own mounts. Wuotan also rode, on a borrowed horse, sharing stories with Elphin as we made our way to the cave. Roy rode with Lance. Klein had originally intended on coming with us, but Clarine's fever spiked during the night, and he opted to stay with her instead. I almost stayed back too, but there was nothing I could do for anyone there except study, so I went.

I sighed, feeling everything ache and feeling the urge to just go to sleep. The horror stories had been fun, but when everyone went to bed, I ended up staying up longer, making medicines. I just couldn't sleep. While I no longer had nightmares of Dad burning, I had other nightmares. I had nightmares of Lilina melting into a skeleton. I had nightmares of Rutger bleeding out. I had nightmares of the dragon, killing the soldiers again and again. I had nightmares of the civilians who had been treated worse than animals, wasting away under my fingertips.

I had nightmares of all the soldiers that died under my orders screaming at me, clawing at my skin, my face, with desperate, falling apart hands. They begged me to save them, wondering why they had to die, and why I could not give better orders so that more of them could have returned home.

Sleep was something that did not come easily anymore. I worked in an attempt to make myself too tired to dream. Maybe I should take some dreamflower…

I shook my head, trying to get rid of the thought. Dreamflower was dangerous. I shouldn't… what I really needed was a nice, good sleep. Everyone was very careful to tell me that. 'Make sure to eat; make sure to sleep. Make sure you keep healthy.' The words were a mantra, constantly running through my head. I had to take care of myself, because the last thing this army needed was a tactician who was falling apart.

So, instead, I focused on the group, purposely eavesdropping on some talking pairs to distract me. Distractions were nice. They kept me from thinking about all the bad things, like how Mom was captive and Dad was dead. It kept me from thinking of all the soldiers who would never return home, because we couldn't send their bodies back.

Distractions were nice. I could avoid things with them. So, I first focused on Sue and Sin, out of sisterly concern, and a want for teasing material. Of course, they seemed to be quietly arguing about something, so I was also worried just on those grounds.

"You're still fighting up at the front," Sin chided. He looked worried, especially for him. "You really should stay back. You are the hope of the Clan."

"You forget about my sister," Sue retorted. She shook her head. "I understand your concern, but I will not sit around doing nothing. I cannot hide while others fight."
"I understand, but you push yourself too much. We have a dream, yes? To return to the plains?"

"Yes, we will return to the plains and rebuild the Kutolah." Her eyes narrowed. "That is all the more reason I should fight."

"People do not necessarily follow someone because they fight on the front lines. There is a time and place for such things."

"If that is the case, then you must remember your own words." Sue's eyes narrowed. "Do not push yourself too far in an attempt to protect me. I am not the only one hoping for the Kutolah to be rebuilt."

"...Of course." The two fell silent, and I shifted my attention away from them, content that they were okay. However, I caught Sue looking at me worriedly and gave her a smile. She smiled back, reassured, and so I focused up ahead, on Lance and Roy. After all, they seemed to also be in the middle of an argument.

"Lord Roy, might you stay back from the front lines for a while?" Lance began. I could tell by his eyes that he had been thinking about this for a while. "Then you can command the armies from a safe place."

"I really don't think people will listen to me if I keep myself safe and start telling people what to do," Roy instantly replied. He twisted to smile at Lance. "I'm not very smart, like Elphin, and I'm not charismatic, like Irene. So, I have to gain everyone's trust by experiencing the same things they do."

"If the leader is lost, though, then so is the battle." Lance's eyes narrowed, as if he wanted to say more. All I could think was... how I had this conversation with Sin, and given these exact reasons for why I had to be on the field. I couldn't help but snicker a little. Sin as a knight... that was a great mental image. "So..."

"Perhaps I'm not meant to be a leader. But I won't fall back." Roy's voice was certain. "I will not betray all those who died for my sake." Yes, that was exactly it. We had to keep going, because otherwise...

I shook my head again, wishing I had better control of my thoughts. I decided to hang back a little, to try and mental shoot down the thoughts, as I had been doing. However, hanging back just brought me level with Tate and Allen, and they were in the middle of... well, based on Tate's expression, she was trying to debate something. Allen, however, wasn't really having it.

"I've been meaning to say this, but your pegasus is amazing!" Allen gushed. He reached out to carefully stroke the pegasus muzzle, careful to not startle him. "Such a cute face..."

"Um... thank you..." Tate mumbled, looking pleased. She immediately, however, snapped back to being stoic. "I mean, let me finish!"

"Oh, right, you were saying something." Allen laughed. "Sorry, what is it?"

"Do you always fight like that? Charging forward with all your strength?" Her eyes were narrowed. "Isn't that a little rash?"

"I know that my fighting style can be dangerous, but you see..." Allen tilted his head, and turned. "Oh, Lord Roy needs me. Later!" He rode off, falling easily beside Lance to talk to Roy. Based on how grateful Roy looked, it seemed like he had, indeed, needed to talk to him. That was still...
"There's something wrong with him." Tate swooped down to fly next to me. "I am certain on it," she continued, eyes narrowed. "A head injury, perhaps?"

"Do you need me to reassign?" I asked gently. She shook her head. "You sure?"

"I might knock him out eventually, but that's the only real danger for the moment." She peered at my face, eyes sympathetic. "Nightmares?"

"Is it that easy to see?" I reached up to tap the side of my eye, noticing how puffy the skin there felt. It was more obvious due to the scar. "No wonder Sue keeps looking worried."

"At this point, I'd be more surprised if you didn't." She smiled. "I know some tricks that are good for going to sleep and don't require things like dreamflower. We're taught them as Battle Fatigue is very common among mercenaries."

"I don't think I've heard that term before." But it reminded me of something Uncle Douglas told me of called 'Soldier's Heart', a mental sickness that was similar to what Grandpa called 'Bleeding Soul'. Was that why it was so hard sleeping now? Maybe I should talk to some of the veterans. "But, being able to sleep sounds like a good thing."

"I think so." She became serious, and I knew she was debating something. "Something we're taught in training is to try and face that which we try to avoid, but I think you're too tired for that."

Mmm… "So, might I ask something that could be related?"

"Sure?" This was a little strange. But, it did make me happy, knowing she was trying to help. "What is it?"

"From what I understand, you've had your mother's logbook for quite some time." …Ah. That. "I would have thought you have memorized it by now, based on how everyone mentions you look up to her. But, you seemed as surprised as everyone else when you looked through the last pages."

"That's because I was." It was hard, thinking on how to answer. My stomach turned, and I remembered I hadn't been able to eat breakfast this morning. "Well, on the way to Pherae, I was studying other things." I closed my eyes. It seemed so long ago… "I was going to assist Roy. I wanted to make sure I was good enough. Reading the logbook could wait. It was a 'reward'," I knew I was smiling wryly. "Though, I did read some of the entries. I was just too curious. But I read them slowly, and repeatedly, so that I didn't miss a single potential bit of study material. That stalled my progress."

"What about after?"

"Well, soon after joining up, I ran into Deke and I…" I laughed bitterly, opening my eyes. "I got scolded. Even if you really want to do something, the second you're scolded, you automatically recoil, right?" I slumped slightly. "Besides, the Campaign of Fire… no one talked about it. I'm sure you realized that in the War Council. The most we got, growing up, was that it was the explanation for how a wide variety of people knew each other." I glanced up at her. "You hear one or two stories, but for the most part, no one said one word on it. As a child, that frustrated me, but as I got older…"

"You realize that there are reasons for such a thing." She nodded, understanding. "Captain Farina was in charge of training my class. Well, one of them. All recruits have a veteran and a new Captain to teach them. Captain Farina and Sigune were mine." Sigune? I didn't know that name. "Sigune is my elder sister's best friend and rival. She acts cold, but she also fought to be the one to teach my class, and always made sure she was the one teaching me." Tate smiled, very proud
suddenly. "I was pretty bad at first, but thanks to her, I graduated with honors. She was beaming when I was named a Captain, even more than Juno."

"She sounds kind." I almost wanted to meet her. "But you were saying something."

"Ah, yes." She smiled a little sheepishly before growing serious. "Captain Farina was always quick with horror stories. She wanted all of us to know what we were getting into." I could imagine a few. Aunt Florina had been quieter about it, but I knew one of the things Uncle Pent had been working on in the courts and legislation was better protection for the pegasus knights Etruria hired. Perceval had also raised hell when, as a squire, he had to kill some of his fellows because they were assaulting some pegasus knights. He never was quite the same after that. He became more stoic and harsh. "Are you there?"

"I'm sorry. I got…" I shook my head. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine." Her smile was reassuring, but it fell as she continued. "So, she never hid anything. But whenever someone asked about how she met her husband, Sir Kent, she wouldn't say a word. No matter how much we pleaded, she refused to talk about the Campaign. The most we got was 'I came in late, and it was still painful.'"

"Exactly." Unconsciously, I glanced down at my pack, where the logbook hid. "Mom was there from the start. It starts with her logbook. She was the tactician, from beginning to end. It was the dark secret. I wanted to know, but I recognize it would be painful. I was not…"

"Not in a mental state to read of tragedy, when the world around was filling with it, thanks to war." She nodded. "Most Ilian tales are divided into two things: horror stories, like what you heard last night, and almost sickeningly happy tales. Our lives are harsh, so we don't really like having such harshness in our tales."

"When your life is sad, you want happy tales to keep yourself going." I did not think the logbook would give me a happy tale, even if it did cover a rather interesting time in the lives of my heroes. "Then Araphan happened. Thria. Ostia. We went on vacation in Hanover, but I was working. I was taking care of Sue, Roy, Lilina, and Clarine. I was fussing over Rutger, Chad, and Lugh. I was learning strategies from Zealot, and determining new strategies for our group. The times I wasn't working… I didn't want to read something sad. I had enough from worrying."

"Throwing yourself into work to avoid the trauma." Well, when she said it like that… "I understand." She hesitated before continuing. "But your mother is a captive, yes? Wouldn't it… I don't know… wouldn't it be nice to read her words?"

"The one who wrote the logbook wasn't my mom, though." I looked right at her. "The writer is the person Mom was before then. The writer will not read, sound, like my mom, until perhaps the end, if then." I shook my head. "I know nothing of the Campaign of Fire, essentially. The person who wrote it, the people featured inside, they're strangers. They're strangers who grew to become the people I love and cherish. There's no comfort in reading the dark secret." There were only potential answers and, as I discovered, answers to questions we had now. "Comfort was talking to people and being reassured that Mom is fine. Comfort is chatting about memories, memories that are mine, and planning for the future."

"I see." Tate smiled slightly. "I don't quite understand, but that could be because I don't really have many memories of mine."

"Is that so?"
"Yes, though, the tale isn't that uncommon in Ilia." Tate closed her eyes. "When Shanna was about a year old, our parents got hired out. Father was part of the cavalry, and Mother was a pegasus knight. They told us they loved us, hugged us dearly, and left. I found out later that they had been hired for opposite sides, and they had known it."

I felt like ice water had been thrown on me. I knew what their code dictated. "That must have been…"

"I never heard how they died. But they both did, on the same battlefield, and they had apparently been close enough to hold hands as they passed. They might have killed each other." Tate shook her head, and opened her eyes again. "I'm three years older than Shanna, so I didn't have many more memories. All I have are Juno's stories and the letters from the past. Most of them are, of course, from before she gave birth to even Juno." She shook her head. "Though, you still have a chance that your mother can come back. I guess reading through the logbook for comfort is like admitting she's dead."

I hated how right she was. "I see." Instinctively, I reached over to stroke her hair, though I pulled back when she squeaked. "Oh, I'm sorry! It's… a habit."

"Is that a big sister habit?" Tate looked embarrassed, but had a small smile. "Juno would do that to Shanna and me too."

"Well, it could be?" I smiled back, laughing a little. "Sue used to get so teary if she did something she thought was 'good', and I didn't stroke her hair."

"Shanna is the same." Slowly, but surely, our conversation turned to chatting of our little sisters and, from there, just lighthearted stories in general, like the exhilaration of riding alone for the first time, or days where we would take our younger sisters out riding with us. We actually had a lot in common, surprisingly so.

I rather liked that.

Finally, we ended up at a cave, one all but hidden until you were right on it. It was eerily quiet, and even the wind stilled as we lingered by the entrance, checking that the horses were tied, but still could escape if need be. Of course, we lingered and triple checked mostly because of the bodies that littered the entrance. None of us were in a hurry to step over them.

"It seems Bern tried to send people to block off the cave," Wuotan murmured, nudging the bodies. One he hit a little too hard, and it rolled to show the cause of death: flayed alive. They must have died within a few hours. "And it seems that despite the seals being removed, the guardians still hold firm." He shook his head, and seemed completely nonchalant by all of this. "Keep your handkerchiefs over your mouth, and say something if you feel woozy. There are records that the air inside can be poisonous."

"There were not guardians on Durandel," Roy noted as we followed Wuotan inside slowly. The cave was dark, and smelled off. I hoped that some of the anti-toxins in my pack would work against the possible poison here. "In fact, we had to fight bandits to reach it."

"I imagine none of them tried to snag the blade." Wuotan shrugged. "Thus, the guardians chose to simply sleep, and judge in silence. That you didn't see them shows you were judged worthy."

"Why go through so much?" Elphin mumbled. I moved to stand near him as I noticed his steps faltering slightly. "I have heard Aureola is easily obtainable."
"There are traps in the Tower of the Saint," Wuotan answered easily. His voice wobbled a bit, as if he was holding back a laugh. "Old ones that predate the Scouring, and thus use a power and mechanism unknown to modern times. And different ones for each floor."

"So, it is only a mask. That's rather fitting."

"Yes, quite so." For a time, the only sound was our footsteps and ragged breathing. The air felt 'thin' in here. "The traps and guardians were set up because the weapons are powerful."

"The legends are pretty clear about that," I whispered. For instance, in the Sacae, you often heard of how Hanon fired an arrow from her Gale Bow into the sky, and summoned a thunderstorm. "According to Aunt Lyn, though, the Mani Katti didn't have such protections, despite being powerful."

"The Katti Blades have a different sort of protection," Wuotan explained. His voice carried well in the dank cave. "They choose their wielder." Ah, yes, that was right. "But the legendary weapons are different. Contrary to what legends would have you believe, they could be used by anyone. The Legendary Heroes were simply people the Blacksmith, Martin, trusted to wield such weapons of power. Even then, it was not uncommon for the wielders to trade weapons for battles."

"Oh, so the protections are to keep the weapons from falling into the wrong hands."

"Exactly." There was something sad in his voice now. "Never before had so many weapons of such power been forged. At their full strength, they twisted reality itself. When the weapon was swung in battle, someone would fall, even if the weapons had to drag the wielder and force them to its will."

"…The weapons can control their wielders?"

"I do not think they can, any longer. While it reacted for Rutger, he still retained his own movements. His wounds would have been much worse." He glanced back over his shoulder. "But, I do believe that is a recent development. Within the last twenty years, perhaps?" He shook his head. "What I most worry about is that the weapons might demand a price still."

"What prices would they be?"

"Durandel is a blade that hungers. It requires blood, a sacrifice, and often, it will not let the wielder choose. It might now be more cooperative, now that Rutger almost died." That… was not a thing I wanted to hear. "Armads is an axe that makes the body crackle, a force that is never satisfied unless in battle. It dooms the wielder to die in battle, even if they manage to resist the storm within." That was…

I thought of what Marcus said. I thought of the last entry in Mom's logbook. I had… a sinking suspicion suddenly, and I was very, very scared to learn if I was correct or not. I wasn't sure I wanted to know. I wanted to run away. But I couldn't. I could only keep walking forward.

Silence reigned again, and we all focused on walking. I had a feeling that Wuotan was waiting on something before continuing to explain things. It was hard to mind; it felt like he had already answered most of our questions. I could take guesses for others.

My focus, instead, centered on Elphin as I noticed something incredibly strange. He was stumbling a lot more, and his hand flailed about, hunting for something.

Finally, he sighed, and tilted his head towards me. "Irene, are you still beside me?" he asked softly. I nodded in reply. "Irene?"
"Yes, I am," I answered verbally, a little confused. I wasn't that far from him. He should've seen my nod. "What is it?"

"Irene, might I hold onto your arm?"

"Yeah?" I lifted my arm slightly so he could more easily grab it. It still took him a few tries. "Why? If you're stumbling, I can just carry you. You're not that heavy."

"I would like to try and walk on my own feet for now, but my vision just went." …Was that so? "I can feel the judging silence."

"You have two seconds to tell me why I shouldn't be yelling."

"...I was poisoned." Was that so? "It is a lingering effect, and nothing to be done." His hand tightened on my arm. "Is that enough for now? I'm not sure I can tell the full story here."

"Yes, it is." I shifted a little closer, so that he could lean on me more. "The ground is becoming a bit uneven. There's a loose rock by your right foot."

"Thank you." He gave me a small smile, and I noticed something clearly. He was a lot frailer than he had been before. I had been mostly teasing about him not being that heavy, but it was a statement that was far more right than I intended.

Quietly, we followed Wuotan through the strangely linear cave, with me giving small warnings to help him walk. The rest of the group murmured and whispered, likely just to fill the silence.

But then, somewhere between steps, I realized something. There were silvery shapes lining the path. It took me a couple of blinks to realize they were humanoid. When I realized they were ghosts, I shrieked, clinging to Elphin as I stared, horrified. What were they…? How were they…? Ghosts were…!

"They are not barred." Wuotan's gentle voice slowly broke through my panic. His smile was also just as gentle. "All of the ghosts you see were not barred from Mother Earth's meadows," he murmured. Gradually, I relaxed, but I felt tears fill my eyes as I realized something horrible. Many of the ghosts were younger than me. Father Sky, some looked to be the same age as Lugh and Ray. "They are simply soldiers, called by magic, to fulfill a purpose." As if to emphasize the words, I thought I saw a few of the ghosts smile reassuringly. I could only focus on the silver lines across their bodies, marking the wounds that killed them. Some of them looked quick, clean. Others, though, looked brutal and painful. "Has everyone else recovered from their shock?"

"A little warning might have been nice!" Allen snapped. He had protectively tucked Lance and Tate behind him. Sin had moved to protect Sue and Roy, though I think the latter was only because Roy and Sue had grabbed each other from fright. "You're normally forthcoming!"

"I had expected them to remain invisible, as they had been." Then they just suddenly decided to show themselves? Why would they do that? "I was thinking of how to describe the 'guardians' to you when they appeared, so perhaps they were simply trying to help." He pointed ahead, to an altar I had almost overlooked. "We're here, though." We were. I could see Armads from here, but I couldn't believe it was a viable weapon. It was almost comically massive! Who could wield something like this? I knew the legends said Durban was huge, the strongest of the heroes, but how could even he…?

"You said Armads has a price," Roy whispered. We slowly clustered around the weapon, and I could see all of us hesitate at the reminder. None of us could use axes, yet, but still, we hesitated.
"Doomed to die in battle..." It was not a fate you wanted hovering over you when you went into a fight. But, at the same time, we might need this blade. Bern had dragons, and these dragons were destruction. So, one of us had to grab it.

"Yes, I did, though the price might be no longer needed," Wuotan replied. He had a kind smile. "But it is good that you worry. Prices are not to be taken lightly. The second that you do is the second you find yourself paying a price far greater than what you wished." Without hesitation, though, he took the axe and easily hefted it up, resting it on his shoulders. All of us could only stare in shock. "Let the oldest of the group take the risk for now. I will carry it to Merlinus, and we will keep it wrapped. You may decide who, if anyone, will take it when you next fight a dragon."

"...Do the other weapons have prices?" Roy's eyes were dark as he looked at Armads. I wondered if he was thinking, too, that this might have been used twenty years ago. "You mentioned Durandel took one from Rutger?"

"Durandel was the first weapon, though not the first crafted overall." The legends made that clear it was the Saint's Staff that was forged first, but many also did not count it among the legendary items. "Armads and the tome, Apocalypse, were the last. The latter's price is well known." The fate of Bramimond was clear in the legends. He lost everything to wield the dark tome. "I do think that if Durandel still required one, Rutger paid it."

"But what of the others?"

"Well, the legends aren't as talkative on that." Wuotan's smile was kind, though. "That, alone, should tell you something. They were not 'spectacular' enough to make history." In theory, they should be safer, then. "Shall we head outside? The ghosts are waiting for us to leave."

"What will happen to them?"

"They will wait, as they have for a thousand years. They chose to guard the weapon, until the power fades for all time, and it is nothing but a simple axe, made well, just like Basilikos." That was... "That is the loyalty they had to Durban. That is the loyalty of the soldiers who served the Eight Heroes."

"...That is quite a legacy to bear."

"That is the fate of the future, to bear the hopes of the past." Wutoan smiled warmly. "Come now. Outside. I think you all need some sunshine on your face to remember that not all is dark."

"Ah, yes." But Roy turned and bowed to the ghosts first. "Thank you..."

As we walked away, I thought the ghosts were smiling warmly at us. In those smiles, I heard 'I am proud and grateful'. I could only hope we lived up to it.

The trip back was quiet. I wasn't sure if any of us even breathed until we saw Wuotan safely store Armads in the very back of Merlinus's convoy, in a place where it would be hard to grab accidentally. After that, we all dispersed to take care of duties. There were a lot of chores to be done in the morning, and even more with so many wounded and dead.

I, of course, had one thing I had to clear first: giving Lilina medicine.

"Here, drink this," I whispered, passing her a bit of tea. She made a face at it, but dutifully sipped it. "I'm sorry. I can't sweeten that one." Well, I might be able to, but I didn't know how to do that and still keep it effective. "I'll make the next one extra sweet to make up for it."
"Okay…" she mumbled, unable to keep from sighing. In public, she kept up her cheer, but when it was just her and me, she let the mask fall and let me see how being diagnosed was really getting to her. "I do wish you had waited for me to be awake for the check."

"I'm sorry." In retrospect, it was a bit overbearing. "I just got worried when Elen mentioned the coughing fit."

"I understand. I just wish you had woken me up." She sighed again. "Then again, I might not have even if you tried, and this is really something that's an 'earlier the better'." She went back to sipping her tea, and I could see her do her best to not spit it out. "How is the camp?"

"There are some colds, a few bits of pneumonia, but nothing like cholera, and if there are more with the consumption, it's so latent it cannot be sensed." I finished making the second tea, and went to work on a paste for her to eat. "Since you're still in early stages, you'll only have to take medicine once a week."

"However, I have daily check-ups with Elen." She looked down at the mug, absently swinging her legs. She seemed extra small today, since her feet barely scraped the ground even when sitting on my cot. "And when we are on the mainland, we're to find a bishop as soon as possible."

"Yes, we are." It would be better for everyone if this came and went. "But, we are missing an important part of the cure now."

"Oh, that's right. We used up all your caphredil flowers to save Rutger." I had even triple-checked with Merlinus. There was none in our supplies. There had been too many injuries among our own, and the civilians, that had required it. "That is bad, I suppose." That meant we had to get to Hanover. It was either that, or get absurdly lucky and find another patch. "I think there's some in Ostia. Ever since Aunt Serra learned they were part of the cure, she insists on it." I wasn't surprised. "Bitter…" What was…? Ah, yes, she had switched back to complaining about her medicine.

"The sweet one is almost done steeping."

"Can I have it instead?"

"No, you need to take all of your medicine."

"Okaaay." She sounded so… childish that I couldn't help but smile. It felt like forever since I had seen her just being a child.

Checking the urge to just laugh, I glanced outside at the slowly bustling camp. Everyone was slow to wake up, and I could see people crying as they realized friends had not made it through the night. I wished I could have done more… I wished I were stronger, better…

Shaking my head, I glanced around for familiar faces, and noticed Tate and Allen actually weren't far away. In fact, they were close enough to eavesdrop on.

"You were about to explain why you fight the way you do, earlier," she was saying. So, this was a continuation of their earlier conversation. "I don't see how it's beneficial. Your lanceplay leaves you open. You won't be able to retaliate properly that way."

"Wow…" Allen replied, looking impressed. "You've been watching me, huh?"

"Not you in particular!" Tate glowered. "It's just that I can't ignore you when you fight like that, and Lady Irene tasked me with fighting with you."
"Why are you freaking out suddenly?" He looked confused for a brief moment before shaking his head. "Ah, no, no matter. I understand your concern, but I can't hold back."

"But if you keep fighting that like, you'll-

"In battle, without fail, the first to match blades with the enemy are us, the knights." Allen looked… surprisingly serious right now. "Lady Irene and Lord Elphin's strategies rely on the power of the horses to break open enemy lines and send the enemy into chaos. They rule the field by taking advantage of the cavalry." Um… he had been paying that much attention? I expected Lance to figure that out, but not him?

"Well, yes, that is true. It's common in Etrurian strategies, and the Sacaeans are dependant on their horses, so…"

"So, the knights are the enemy's first impression of the army. They will judge us based on how we fight." He looked more serious than I had ever seen. This was something he had thought long and hard about. "They will judge Lord Roy, our general, Lady Irene, our tactician, and Lord Elphin, our strategist. That's why… that's why I have to show them my full strength." He had such passion in her voice, and a sparkle in his eyes. "If I cringe, even a little, the enemy will know we can be defeated. If I hesitate, then our army's morale will suffer."

"That's…" Tate visibly tried to come up with words, but she couldn't.

It didn't matter. Allen was more than willing to keep talking. "I refuse to bring such insult to my comrades. I refuse to bring shame on Lord Roy, Lady Irene, and Lord Elphin. They guide us well, and I want the enemy to know that. So, I have to keep pushing forward, for the army and our victory."

"And here I thought you were just a careless idiot." To be fair, Tate, so did I.

"Eh, I am an idiot." Allen smiled sheepishly. "Just… I put a lot of thought into this. The army is hurting, and our leaders, more so. Thanks to the war, everyone has lost a lot. So, if I can help, even a little, I'd like to." He laughed awkwardly, scratching the back of his head. "Of course, since I'm an idiot, fighting with all my strength is all I can do."

"I rather doubt that." Tate looked very serious as he looked startled. "In my experience, even seeing that someone is willing to do what they can is enough to soothe a battered spirit."

"Oh." He grinned, face distinctly red. "Ah, so, um…" He snapped his fingers. "Right!" He pointed to her. "I still really respect your advice, though. I know you said it because you're worried, and it does give Lady Irene quite a bit to shout about." Yes. Yes, it did. "Tell me more, when you get a chance?"

"Very well, I suppose." She glanced down before looking back up at him. "Why not see if you can invest in heavier armor?" Allen looked surprised, so she continued. "If your armor is better, stronger, then you'll be in less danger. Lady Irene listens to soldiers when they tell her how they wish to train." I tried, at least. "Many of mine have taken up healing, simply because she encouraged Shanna to do so. Maybe she can figure out something there, too."

"I'll talk to her later, when she's a little more rested. I think yesterday was rough on her." Well, I'll be damned.

"Irene?" Lilina's voice brought my attention back to her, and I noticed she was holding out her empty cup. "Irene, are you okay?" she asked worriedly. "Do you need to go sleep?"
"No, I'm fine." I shook my head, smiling slightly. "I just... got a better opinion of Allen, that's all." I took the empty mug from her and handed her the honey filled tea. "I hadn't been expecting that."

"Are you sure?" She pouted. "You can't take care of everyone without taking care of yourself too, you know."

"Oh, I could, but I dread the lectures." I laughed, shaking my head. "No, there are some questions I have for the older, more experienced members of the army, but I will do that later."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise." I ruffled her hair and passed the paste to her. "Eat this with it. It's bitter, but the tea should help with the taste."

"Okay." She sighed again, giving me an almost evil look. "I'm going to tell Klein you haven't been sleeping."

"Father Sky, Lilina, if you insist on teasing, I will have to tease you back." I grinned at her rather scared look. "So-"

"Report! Report!" At the shriek, I burst out of my tent, not even bothering to say anything to Lilina, and ran for the source of the noise, a pegasus knight we had sent out as a messenger a few days ago. "A revolution has broken out in Etruria!" she screamed, making sure she could be heard through the whole camp. "A coup d'état!" Well, wasn't this just lovely timing? "The ones leading the revolution are High Chancellor Roartz and Lord Arcardo!" This was really lovely timing!

"That explains why they plotted Mildain's assassination," I murmured, narrowing my eyes as I finally found Roy and made my way to him. "Revolutions are easier when the opposing side only has a broken old man of a king as their rallying point."

"This must be why they joined forces with Bern," Elphin added, coming to join us. The soldiers around us were starting to panic, and I couldn't blame them. "Zephiel is brutally clever. Take advantage of their ambitions, and remove the last remaining threat to his army without losing a single soldier."

"Why couldn't he have been stupid like his father?" You still heard people talk poorly of King Desmond. "It would have saved a lot of pain."

"Yes, indeed."

"Complain later," Roy scolded. His eyes were wide, and I knew he was doing his best to remain calm. I patted his shoulder reassuringly. "Miss?" He gestured to the pegasus knight, who dismounted at last to come over. "Do you have any news on Miss Cecilia or Princess Guinevere?"

"Very little, sir," she replied. I noticed she was shaky, barely able to stand up straight. I wondered if she had flown nonstop to make sure the information got to us. "The generals are divided, and the last anyone heard of Mage General Cecilia, she was heading to the Missur Peninsula."

"I see." Roy made sure to smile, and I saw the pegasus knight relax at it. "Thank you. Please, go get the healers to look after you and your pegasus before resting." The pegasus knight saluted and ran off. Roy simply sighed as she disappeared. "Why would the generals be divided?"

"I'm assuming she means in terms of actual distance, as there's no way Roartz and Arcardo would've had the balls to do this when they were easily within reach," I answered. I closed my eyes, to think a little easier. "But they're likely divided mentally as well. Cecilia won't bow to them.
The king being hostage is not enough to make her bend her knee, and she is guarding Guinevere. She would die before betraying the trust we put in her." Cecilia, please, be safe… "Uncle Douglas, however, is famous for his loyalty to King Mordred. Him being a hostage is more than enough to make him bend. So, Uncle Douglas will be with the rebels so long as the king remains hostage." I opened my eyes, and gave Elphin a pointed look. "It might be enough for Perceval to kneel, as well. He's been shaken since the person he swore loyalty to is dead."

"Then he will fight for King Mordred's sake if only because he is Prince Mildain's father, and he doesn't know what path to walk now." Roy sighed. "We should focus on the one we can reach." Roy looked to the panicking soldiers running about. "Someone, please, get us a map!" It looked like a couple listened, but I wasn't sure. "Where is the Missur Peninsula again?"

"If I recall the maps correctly, then it is very far from Aquelia," Elphin murmured. I saw his hands shake as he crossed his arms, and knew he was terrified for his friends, family, and country. "The strip of land on the other side of the Nabata desert."

"We're going to have to sail," I sighed. I already felt sorry for Rutger and Sue. "We're going to have to sail right through waters that are famous for two things: currents and pirates."

"But if we are going to have a chance of helping, then we have to," Roy whispered. His eyes were pained, and I knew what he was thinking. 'What if we are too late again?' "Is there a way to keep us safest?"

"We will ask Geese, but I believe just splitting the army into waves will be enough. A single ship can pass through unnoticed." A group could not. "We need to get him."

"We also need to calm the soldiers." Roy closed his eyes and he took a steadying breath. "You two plan the route. I'll calm them, and get everyone moving."

Hold on, Cecilia, Guinevere. Just… hold on…

Notes on the legendary weapons since, for once, we didn't have someone join up

- Forged by the Blacksmith Martin, these weapons are sometimes referred to as the 'Divine Weapons', and were wielded by the Eight Heroes to end the war with the Scouring. They represent the pinnacle of the might of humans during the Scouring, to the point that no one knows how to reproduce even poor imitations.
- The weapons are: Durandel, the Blazing Sword; Armads, the Thunder Axe; Forblaze, the Infernal Element; Aureola, the Heavenly Light; Murgleis, the Gale Bow; Maltet, the Frozen Spear; Apocalypse, the Silencing Darkness; and Eckesachs, the Royal Blade.
- According to Wuotan, though, the weapons demand a price for their power, and demanded them even from the heroes who first wielded them. Durandel hungers for blood, Armads curses the wielder to die in battle, and Apocalypse required everything about the wielder.
- …I'm afraid that I'll find something about these weapons in Mom's logbook. I'm afraid to read it now, more than ever.

Author's Note: This is chapter 12x, the second gaiden chapter. The requirements are that you have to complete chapter 12 in 20 turns and, if you recruited him, Elphin must be alive. In game, this is a battle against bandits, again, with lots of treasure looting (primarily antitoxins and elixirs, though there are a couple of gems). Instead, though, I opted to remove the fight, and instead, utilize the ghosts also seen in Tactician's Testimony, and to allow a little bit more history lessons.
Sin and Sue's conversation is based on their B support, and Lance and Roy have their B. Tate and Allen’s conversations are based on their C and B supports. Supports in FE6 work a little differently than in FE7. Each chapter has a set amount of 'support points' that can be used (120), and those you’re trying to support gradually 'eat up' these points. When used up, no more supports can be gained for the chapter. *However*, this also means that pairs can get multiple support levels in the same battle. (This is really easy to see with Roy and Lilina, as they gain +4 support points for every turn they stand next to each other.)

Elphin having vision difficulties due to poison is related in his supports with Douglas. Soldier's Heart and Battle Fatigue are two historical names for PTSD. Others include 'shell shock' and 'nostalgia'.

Next Chapter – Interlude, Pirates
Interlude – Pirates

We moved as fast as possible. Geese had his old ship not far away, and offered to take the first wave of fighters himself. Some of the wounded, ill, and those who would become seasick were going to be on subsequent ships. Sue wasn't happy about that, but listened when I explained.

Now, we're off, on the seas again, hoping that we can make it to Cecilia and Guinevere before they're overrun. Father Sky, please, give us a good wind...

As we sailed, Tate had her pegasus knights fly to and from the shore, gathering information. Though, considering everything, it was only rumors and, honestly, it wasn't all that helpful as... well, no one knew anything. The attack had been too quick, too brutal. There were too many dead, and many more injured.

The facts were bare. The Revolution, the coup, had occurred in the middle of a ball, when Bernese forces ambushed the castle in the middle of a waltz. There was an estimate three hundred dead from that one attack. There were no estimations for the number of dead resulting from the following attacks, but most of the rumors agreed that the market of Aquelia was bloated with corpses, glutted from blood. Estates had been ransacked, with blood splattered adding to the décor.

From there, things became more contradictory. 'The Generals were dead'. 'The Generals turned traitor.' 'The king was hostage.' 'The king was dead.' 'Zephiel is claiming the throne.'

That last one held some weight, though, far more than I would like. Zephiel was in line for the throne. When Mildain 'died', Zephiel actually became King Mordred's heir, since he was King Mordred's nephew, only son of his elder sister. In fact, as far as anyone knew, Zephiel was King Mordred's only living relative.

It was enough to make me wonder if Bern had been planning this for a long while, if Bern had something to do with the 'assassination' of Mildain. After all, if King Mordred died before Elphin dropped the mask, then Zephiel would be the king of the two most powerful nations, fully within legal right to bring the full might of them on the fracturing continent. And old sick men did not last long during revolutions.

"Lady Irene." The voice drew me out of my thoughts, and I turned to see Elphin walking up. "You have been staring at the waves for a full hour," he lightly teased. I shook my head and looked back over the water. It was pretty, in the dawn. "Did you even sleep?"

"I slept some," I answered. I'd been woken up twice due to reports. "I'm just thinking of everything."

"It certainly is chaotic." Yet the water was so peaceful. It didn't care at all.

"Will you tell me what happened now?" It seemed like an appropriate time and, unlike Deke's story, it also seemed like it couldn't wait until I was in a 'better state of mind'.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
"Yes, I suppose it is needed." He came to stand beside me, the wind tugging at his braid and clothes. Father Sky was giving him His reassurances. "Well, you already know it was an assassination attempt."

"Of course." I closed my eyes. "Though, admittedly, I'd been suspecting that. There were too many questions. I knew your horse, too calm for anything, and I knew you, too skilled of a rider to simply fall." I opened them again, glancing at him. "I'm pretty sure most people who knew you knew that the story was off."

"Yes, Douglas might have better served with a different story, but perhaps that was his point." Elphin shook his head. "Two poisoned arrows. One hit my horse; the second hit me." He pulled his collar down slightly, so that I could see the small, star-shaped scar right above his collarbone. "I had ridden a bit ahead of Douglas, not so far that he couldn't see me, but far enough that he couldn't protect me. But he managed to get me before I fell and broke my neck."

"Was there a body in the coffin?" All Etrurian funerals involved a closed casket, unlike Lycian funerals, so it was impossible to know. Sacaeans didn't bother with coffins. We thought it slowed the trip to Mother Earth's meadows.

"No, from what I understand, it was just a bunch of carefully measured rocks, with clothes stuck in between to make sure they didn't roll." Any 'extra' weight could then be attributed to the coffin itself. "He set it up so that it looked like it had been a success. To be fair, it nearly was. Douglas hadn't realized at the time the arrow had been poisoned."

"What poison?"

"Wyvern's Fang." That was one I had never heard of. "Grows mostly in the southern regions of Bern, some parts of Etruria, and the Western Isles." So, it could have been Bern, but an Etrurian could easily obtain it without help… "He entrusted me to Lalum, and then had me escape to the Western Isles."

"Why there?"

"Maybe he wanted me to see what was going on with my own eyes. Aunt Katri had been trying to get me to go for years." That was true. She was adamant about it. "The poison hit me hard on the way, though. I had a high fever, and spent almost five months hovering between life and death." He laughed bitterly. "Lalum even gave up hope a few times. Lalum." That painted a good picture right there.

"How did you live?"

"Ekhidna." Was that so? "During an attack, she hid in the little house we were using, thinking it empty. There, she saw me barely alive, and Lalum weeping, desperately trying to help me." His smile softened. "And the first thing she did was pick me up and carry me to someone among the rebels who knew herbs. They knew what I was inflicted with at once, and gave me medicine." He shook his head. "Isn't that ironic? They were fighting the Etrurian Court, and unknowingly, they were saving the prince in whose name all the atrocities were committed."

"They were committed in King Mordred's name, not yours."

"Perhaps." He sighed, dropping his head. "I recovered slowly. I lost my vision for quite some time, and though it recovered, I still relapse. I likely will my whole life." That was why, then… "While I recovered, I saw all the horrors committed. I held a toddler's hand as they died, because an Etrurian soldier had run them through for simply being 'in the way'. I comforted a young woman whose
face was scarred, because a noble had not taken kindly to her refusing his harassments. I watched countless of children ask what happened to their parents, unable to comprehend how their parents were fine one minute and then dead the next.” He balled his hand into a fist. ”I am ashamed and horrified I never knew, that I had dismissed such atrocities as things of the past, not something that occurred every day.”

"Elphin…"

"When I recovered enough to play, I did, using my Bardic Gift to give them more energy. When I gained their trust, I gave them strategies, using my knowledge of how Etruria normally worked to make up for my poor ability in tactics. But, the whole time, I waited and hunted for a way to return to the mainland."

"Why?"

"I felt like that was how I could best help." He shook his head, still far too tense. "Return home, return to my position, and use my power, my privilege to draw attention to what was going on. To amplify their voices, bring them to the capital so that they could explain what was going on, and support them so that no one could simply shut them down." He smiled wryly. "And then, well, you all arrived. I've only been on my feet for about a month and a half."

"…Who knew?"

"Douglas and Lalum." That was it? "As far as I know, he did not tell anyone else. Now, that might have changed due to recent events…” His fist shook on the railing. "I never would have thought them so bold. A revolution… so many dead…”

"…Are you afraid for your father?" I received no answer. "Elphin."

"I am coming to terms with the fact that my father might die thinking he will reunite me in the afterlife, alongside my mother." His voice was far too calm. "I am also coming to terms with the fact that I might have to sacrifice him for Etruria."

"You would let your own father die?"

"I would not let him.” He faced me, eyes blazing. "But it is a fact that I might have to choose and I know what I will have to choose." His eyes narrowed with pain. "I don't want it. I hope that we can move fast enough. But this is not an ideal situation."

"…I suppose." I turned away, looking out over the sea. "If this was ideal, you would be rallying Perceval and Cecilia with you right now."

"Instead, Perceval is trapped, and we can only pray Cecilia is alive when we find her." This just sucked. "You didn't mention Douglas."

"I think we can only pray Lalum isn't going to inherit soon, because Uncle Douglas will not leave King Mordred's side for anyone." Father Sky… how many of us were going to lose our parents…? "Why is it up to our generation?"

"Because Zephiel was of the previous, remember?" That made sense. He was… three years younger than Mom? No, he was four years younger. He was the same age as Aunt Lyn. "So, he focuses on that generation. He doesn't really know 'our' generation. If you think about it, he's heard of our generation, but the only one he would really know the combat potential of, among our allies, is Princess Guinevere, his sister." That was true. "So, I suppose that's why. When you have an enemy, it's always the initially unknown, written off person that deals the final blow."
"If we were in a tale, then there would be a guarantee of a happy ending."

"Yes, I suppose." His smile was wry again. "I think the best we can hope for, by this point, is… bittersweet."

Yes, and by this point, all I could taste was bitterness.

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After breakfast, I headed to the room I shared with Tate to read Mom's logbook. I just focused on the end, to read about 'dragons'. But that was when I came across some really strange things.

I was right about Uncle Hector. He had, in fact, wielded Armads. He had, in fact, known he was going to die in battle for twenty years, and he accepted that fate in exchange for being able to help Uncle Eliwood and the army.

It turned out that Uncle Eliwood had wielded Durandel. He and Aunt Lyn had fought the guardians, and proven themselves 'worthy' of the blade. Apparently, both Uncle Eliwood and Uncle Hector had even 'conversed' with the ghosts of Roland and Durban, who gave the warnings.

But what was this about Uncle Eliwood killing Aunt Ninian?

This didn't make sense. I met Aunt Ninian. I hugged her, and played with her hair, gave her kisses. She taught me songs she learned when she was a child, and laughed and cheered at my every accomplishment. She was alive. You couldn't have done any of that with a ghost. Perhaps more importantly, since ghosts were incorporeal, they couldn't exactly have sex and give birth to children. Roy was definitely alive.

But it also didn't make sense because there was… nothing to explain why he accidentally did that?

I flipped through numerous times, frowning as I tried to figure it out. On one page, everyone was happy and hopeful. On the next, Aunt Ninian was dying in Uncle Eliwood's arms, because he accidentally killed her. There was no in-between. I flipped a few pages back, and realized that Aunt Ninian hadn't even been there when they got the weapons. She had used herself as a sacrifice, a willing captive in exchange for everyone's safety. The same choice Mom made to protect what remained of the Kutolah, actually.

Sighing, I held the book up, sniffing to see if I could catch the scent of lemon juice for invisible ink, but found nothing. I held the book up so that I peered at the edges of the pages, wondering if there was a secret there. That was when I found my answer. It was careful, so careful that you could only see it if you looked at the logbook end-on, but there were pages missing. Pages had been ripped out, right in between the two pages that baffled me.

Mom had removed these pages. It hadn't been in an act of passion either. She had chosen to remove them, and had done so in a way to make sure no one would even notice, unless they were really paying attention.

What was she hiding? Why give me the logbook and still hide whatever this was? Had she simply forgotten she had removed it? I suppose that was possible. But what was there? What had led to Uncle Eliwood almost… no, killing Aunt Ninian. The pages after confirmed she was dead. How did she come back? The dead did not resurrect. That was a law of the world. Mother Earth did not return those who made it to Her meadows.

What sort of mess did we inherit, anyway?

"Lady Irene!" Fast footsteps jolted me from my thoughts, and I barely had enough time to tuck the
logbook into my pack before the door crashed open. "Lady Irene, on the deck!" Tate yelled. I was startled to see her afraid. What had happened? "It's the navy!"

"...They have the navy rallied?!" I yelped, pushing past her. I ran as fast as I could, cursing myself for my stupidity. We hadn't planned on the navy. With everything being in chaos, it never occurred to me that Roartz and Arcardo might send the navy to deal with the troublesome Lycian Army.

"That's what General Klein said." Tate kept pace with me easily, though the running did make it hard for her to talk. "I flew up to confirm the flags." This was getting worse and worse. "Who do we need?"

"Lilina, Lugh, and Wuotan." If we were going to be fighting, then... "We will also need as many of your girls as possible." What were Eturia's naval tactics again? I knew magical barrages were a thing...

"On it." She split off from me and I hit the stairs, taking them three at a time as I burst outside, noticing the panic among the soldiers.

"Irene!" Roy yelled. He waved so that I could find him easier, and I bolted for his side. "Irene, this is bad." Yes, I figured that part alr- "We have pirates too." ...Was that so? "And the weather..." A quick glance up showed clouds rolling in. A storm was coming. "This is bad."

"It's three strokes of bad luck all at once," I murmured. Were we getting our bad luck out of the way, or was this an omen to come. It was too early in the day to read the starts; I was afraid to read them anyway. "How many?"

"There is only one pirate ship, though we're not really sure what flag it is." There was only one, though... "But there's at least six Etrurian Naval Ships." Thus, we had seven enemy ships to deal with. "The others..." We had seven enemy ships we had to deal with; Otherwise, those on the other ships were going to sail straight into an ambush. "Do we have a plan?"

"All I have, Roy, is that we have Lilina, Lugh, and Wuotan send magic at them while Tate and her pegasus knights use hit and run tactics." This was a merchant vessel originally. It did not have easily used cannons. Even if it did, considering everything, I doubted there would be ammunition. "If they board us, we have some more options, but that runs the risk of them ramming us, and I don't think Etruria gets close for fights." Something flickered out of the corner of my eye. "Down!"

Everyone hit the deck, literally, as three bolts of lighting flew overhead, just barely missing everything. They had already brought out the bolting tomes.

"Everyone, hold on!" I heard Geese yell. The ship suddenly lurched, twisting hard, and everyone went rolling. I wrapped my arms around Roy protectively as we crashed into a wall of the deck. Blood trickled down my neck. "Haha! Got it!" I glanced up and realized what he had done. He'd maneuvered us so that Etruria would hit their own ships instead. However... "Oh, hell, the pirates are the Davros." The pirate ship had taken advantage to come up alongside. Were they going to board us? Who had weapons up here?

"Dart, is that you?" Everything sort of stilled as Marcus suddenly appeared on the deck, wearing a smile. "Well met," he greeted, sounding far too polite for all of this. "It's been a long time."

"Well, I'll be damned, the old knight is now a geezer knight." An older man, with a face that reminded me a lot of Aunt Rebecca's, laughed. "Here I was wondering what a merchant ship was doing in these waters," the man continued. I glanced over the pirates, and realized something. They weren't prepped for a fight. If anything, they looked concerned. "Then Geitz was all 'that looks like
my kid brother's ship', so we came over to investigate." A bit of movement drew my attention to a man with graying pink hair, the same shade as Geese's. "So, why is the navy chasing you down?"
This was beyond bizarre. Was all the bad luck countering having this strange bit of good luck?

"We… need to head to the Missur Peninsula," Roy explained. He looked as baffled as I did, and the pirate actually did a double-take when he focused on him. "Is something wrong?"

"Did Eliwood get small again somehow?" The pirate laughed. "What the hell?"

"This is Lord Roy, Lord Eliwood and Lady Ninian's son," Marcus introduced. He beckoned for Roy and I to come over. "This is Irene, Lady Katri and Lord Rath's eldest. You last saw them when they were small." I had met a pirate?

"Well, Roy there is still small," the pirate joked. I snickered as Roy tried not to pout. "And the girl running over here with a tome?"

"Lord Hector and Lady Lyn's daughter, Lilina." Marcus smiled as Lilina joined us. She looked confused, but I had no answers for her. "Regardless, there's been a coup in Etruria. We are going to help the survivors."

"Meaning the Etrurians who have control of the army aren't liking you lot." The pirate nodded. "Well, then…" He glanced back at the grey-pink haired man. "Geitz, what do you say? Up for some navy killing?"

"Whatever," the man instantly replied. He shrugged. "I don't take kindly to them drowning my little brother, but it might be a pain getting too involved. You're not the leader of Fargus's suicide squad anymore, Dart."

"Maybe, but I am Captain of the Davros, and it would be a shame just to run from her legacy," the pirate laughed. My eyes widened as I realized what they were doing. "Roy, yeah? Roy, Irene, and Lilina." He focused on us, smiling wide. "Nice to see you again. Find an island to camp for the night. This storm is gonna be bad."

"Geese can sail them. Stop being a mother-hen."

"Bite me." He shouldered a massive axe that made me stare. It reminded me of Armads, but it was less 'magical'. It was still incredibly impressive, though. "Go on."

"Hold on a moment!" I yelped. I leaned against the railing, looking right at them. "One ship against so many is…" I shook my head. "B-besides, we have more of our own sailing through as well."

"Oh, so you're with an actually army-army," the pirate noted. He seemed unperturbed. "Well, we'll finish up quick so they can pass safely."

"All logic dictates that you're going to die doing this."

"Well, might not, if we can get them to one of the whirlpools." He shrugged. "But yeah. It's possible. But that's nothing knew. Pirates court death everyday."

"You're just going to die for us, then? Just like that? No talking, no conversation. Just 'hi, go on, we are going to be the sacrifices'?"

"Nah, we're going to die reminding Etruria who rules the waters here." He grinned. "We were going to fight them anyway. You all are just benefiting. An Etrurian ship is a juicier target than a ship with Lycian soldiers." A fireball flew right past my ear, and struck his axe. "Well, they're
coming. Which means you're going."

"Good seeing you, Geese!" the pink-haired man called. He had a sardonic smile on his face. "Try to not confuse port and starboard like you used to!"

There was some movement, and just like that, they pulled away, and we were moving, catching a current that would send us out of the battlefield. I felt like someone had just poured ice water on me. None of this made sense to me. They just appeared and then they were going to go? They were going to go die, and I could even pretend to help?

The wind gusted, pushing us further along. In the silence that fell over the ship, I glanced back, wondering what was happening. But all I saw was fire, a fire that grew smaller as we pulled farther away.

Were they going to die for us? Would they survive? From here, it was impossible to tell. Given everything, I wasn't sure if we would learn until we reunited with the others. I wasn't sure if we would ever learn at all, the final fate of the Davros.

"Irene." Startled, I gasped, trying to figure out everything as my body seized up and I struggled to breathe. "Irene." A gentle hand stroked my hair, and slowly, I calmed down to look up. Klein was hovering over me. "Sorry to wake you," he murmured. He leaned back so I could sit up and look around. "It looked like you were having a nightmare."

"I was," I whispered, shivering as I remembered. I dreamed I was in water, desperately trying not to go under as bodies clawed and clung. One of the bodies had been the pirate called Dart; another had been Geese's brother, Geitz. Was it just a dream, or was this Mother Earth showing me what happened to them? "Ugh, I feel stiff…" Now that I was awake, though, my brain was working. "Was there something wrong?"

"No, I just got off my watch." We were on an uninhabited island, unclaimed and unnamed. The storm that hung over us during our whole flight from the battle dropped on us abruptly. We barely had time to anchor the ship and find shelter before the deluge drowned the paths. "Everyone seems to be fine." There were many of us, so we had to split into separate caves. Some of the ones in the lower caves had to move up to higher ones to avoid drowning.

"How is the ship?"

"Holding steady." Klein took my arm and tugged me towards the entrance. "Can you see?"

"Well, there is a blurry patch of brown." The rain was falling so hard that I might as well have been looking for something underwater. "What do you think?"

"About?"

"The ships there." When there was no answer, I glanced at him. "Klein?"

"I think the Davros won the battle." He kept his gaze outside, his hand sliding down my arm to take my hand. "They know the waters better, and Etruria's navy is a one-trick pony. It's a devastating trick, but if you know the way around it, it's easy to turn it against them."

"But…?"

"...I'm not sure if they lived or not." The words were soft. "There would have been reinforcements, so even if they survived the battle against the six..." They might not have survived the numbers
that followed. "I think our army will join us safely in Missur, though. Such a battle leaves signs, and there are ways to avoid it."

"Yeah…” I squeezed his hand, and leaned into him. "This is all so crazy."

"There's not been one word about my parents." That itself was strange. Uncle Pent and Aunt Louise were known for taking travels, but surely, they would have done something by now. "There's been no word on any of the Great Houses, not really." You only had word of Perceval, but that was more in context of him being the Knight General.

"They can't just be standing back and watching hell unfold." They wouldn't do that, right? "Could there be hostages?"

"That's all I can think of. It makes me worried for Erk and Priscilla." Take them hostage, and Uncle Pent would be pliant. He loved his children more than anything, and Erk was his eldest, even if it wasn't a 'by blood' relationship. "Even if they're skilled, if the rebels took some of the students hostage…” It was the middle of the term for Reglay's magical academies. That meant a lot of children, some as young as five. "Etruria is shattering."

"Everything is shattering." What was the point of this war? Guinevere had said something about 'liberating the world', but what did that mean? Did it mean breaking and destroying everything and seeing what rose from the ashes? Did it mean 'liberating' it from the older generation, who let such corruption go, who let such atrocities exist? I suppose in that light, there was some sense to it, but at the same time… "I feel like Marcus used Geese, Roy, Lilina, and me to trick the Davros to suicide for us." It wouldn't leave my head. They sailed in, and with just a quick set of talks, they sailed away again.

"It's not your fault." Of course, Klein saw right to the heart of the matter. I felt almost overwhelmed by guilt. "None of this is your fault, Irene."

"I know the logic of it…” I sighed, leaning more on him. "I'm so tired."

"Come on. Let's head back to sleep. My watch replacement should be set up by now."

"Will you sleep beside me?" There was no answer, so I glanced up at him. "Please?"

"…All right." He smiled reassuringly. "It'll be like when we were children, sharing a bed to hide from the monsters in the closet."

"Yes, exactly." But this time, the monsters were both real and not. "Thank you, Klein."

"Let's get you to bed, Irene. You need it." We all did. After all, there was one thing I tried to forget all damn day.

There was absolutely no word, at all, on Cecilia or Guinevere, and I was terrified we were going to be too late.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Have a Geitz and a Dart, and an ambiguous 'are they dead or not?'. As mentioned before, Geese is actually Geitz's younger brother, but I think that's only
made clear in a support conversation of Geitz. Yes, Dart still wield Basilikos. The full story of what happened to Elphin/Mildain is revealed if he is the one who recruits Perceval, though you can take some guesses based on some of his support conversations.

Next Chapter – Rescue Mission
Chapter 15) Rescue Mission

The ambiguity surrounding the whole situation of the Davros hung over our heads as we continued on. I couldn't bring myself to ask anyone else's opinion; I couldn't bring myself to ask Marcus if he manipulated them as I suspected.

We are almost to Missur, where our limited information says Cecilia is. But our information also tells us that Revolutionaries and Bern's own army are converging at an old castle where we suspect Cecilia to be.

I could only hope that things wouldn't fall apart in front of us, again.

It was bad. We could tell that as soon as we landed. Etrurian and Bernese flag flapped proudly in the breeze as the castle in the distance was frequently obscured by wyvern wings and fire spells. In the chaos, we managed a mostly silent landing, but that wasn't going to last much longer.

"General Roy, Lady Irene," Tate swooped down to land in front of us. Roy raised a hand to protect his eyes from kicked up dirt, but I held steady. I was already mounted. "As near as I can tell, Mage General Cecilia is still fighting," she reported. Roy and I exchanged a relieved look. She was still alive. "However, it's clear that they're done playing." There were a very large number of troops. "We face cavalry, wyverns, and ballista, among other things." It wasn't her job to give a map and numbers; that went to others in her unit, and they reported to Elphin who was already setting up an overarching strategy to the fight.

I bit my lip as I thought. We had only an eighth of our force. One eighth of our force, which was already 'small' compared to Etrura and Bern anyway, had to break through Etruria to the north and Bern to the east, in order to make it to the castle. This was insane. Logically, we couldn't do it.

But if we held back, then we would have to watch Etrurian and Bernese forces eradicate Cecilia and all of her fellows. We would be forced to watch them kidnap or kill Guinevere.

"We have to go forward," Roy whispered, summarizing it all. His eyes wavered in pain. "Surely, though, Miss Cecilia will be able to last a while?"

"Assuming she has been fighting even half as many days as we had to travel, then she will, by no means, be at her best," I replied. I hated that I could think so clearly right now. My friend, my elder sister, was in danger, and yet, here I was, listing off all the reasons why she was likely going to die before we could reach her. "Not even going into how its doubtful she and her followers have had a decent amount of food, sleep, or water in days, she is likely at half strength at most. Her magic will be weakened due to haziness in mind and weakness in body. The weakness in body will make her less skilled, less accurate, and slow her speed. Her defenses have never been high, since she can't wear heavy armor, and I doubt she will have the mental aptitude to resist magic. We could go on luck, but she's likely used up a lifetime's allotment just lasting this long."

"Irene…"
"But it still stands, and we're here." I looked down on him. "Whatever you decide, Roy, I am with you. If you choose to stay back, I will calm the soldiers with you. If you choose to charge, I will apologize to the survivors alongside you."

"…" Roy closed his eyes, and debated. When he opened them again, his eyes were certain. "We will charge."

"Then we will give them a fight to remember." I looked back up to Tate. "You okay with this?"

"Lady Irene, I am a mercenary in your employ and, more importantly, I chose to be here," Tate replied. Her face was calm, cold even, but her eyes were warm. "What do you need?"

"Get me…" No, I was going to change my plan mid-thought. There was something Zealot had said that would be useful now. More to the point, I refused to play by the rules of war Etruria and Bern set. If I did, we would lose. We would die. Their might was overwhelming. But you didn't need might when you could pull a well-placed trick. "Get me Wuotan, and have him test every one of your fliers who is willing to wield a tome."

"…You're going to recreate the old magical fliers."

"If there are any in the group who are capable and willing, then yes." I smiled slowly. "Wyverns have poor resistance."

"I'll be right back." She took off in a flurry of feathers.

"So, here's to reviving the army of old," Roy whispered. The wind gusted, and he glanced up at me. "Anything on the wind."

I closed my eyes to listen better. "I hear reassurances," I murmured. I could hear Dad and Uncle Hector. I could hear Oswin. I thought I could hear even Aunt Ninian. "They are not warning us away." But, still, there was one 'voice' I couldn't shake. I could barely hear it, and I might have been imagining. "Let's gather and prepare."

But I thought I heard Mom. It must have just been me wanting a little more reassurance, though. There's no reason to hear her on the wind.

We focused on breaking through the west. Aside from some token forces to harass and distract them, we left the north alone. Both Elphin and I agreed as soon as we heard that Perceval was leading the northern Etrurian troops. There was no way we were getting close. We knew he was skilled… and we didn't want to run the risk of an accidental arrow killing him before we had a chance to convince him to come with us.

Elphin and I thought about having him go to Perceval directly, but decided it was too dangerous. So long as he lived, so long as we lived, we could recruit Perceval later.

At some point while we were fighting on the big bridge, I noticed something that made my hands shake. I could see the castle easily. There were no magical attacks flashing. There didn't seem to be any fighting at all. I could only think of one reason for that. The castle had fallen; Cecilia had fallen. Were we too late? Was I going to have to watch another member of my 'family' bleed out under my fingertips?

I closed my eyes, despite how dangerous it was to do so on the battlefield, and listened to the wind. But the wind didn't bring me any reassurances. Instead, it gusted from…
"I want a group of soldiers to return to the rear!" I shouted, bringing my eyes open again. I didn't like how the wind nudged me back. "Enemy reinforcements might appear there, and there is only a handful of guards there!" There was some shuffling about, and a decent sized group retreated. "Everyone else, continue forward!" We had to break through before Bern reorganized its forces and blocked us at the end. For now, there were only those we could trample, and wyvern knights that harassed our flanks and heads. Thankfully, Klein and those of his archers who came with us managed to seize the ballista, allowing Tate's fliers to fly unimpeded.

I had been surprised how many of hers had leapt at the chance to use magic while flying. Tate herself had been among them. When I glanced up, I could see her casting fireballs with surprising ease, burning the wyvern knights clear out of their saddles.

"There's a wyvern that's broken off from the rest!" The shout made me hunt for the wyvern in question and I realized that was… a bit incorrect. Based on where they were, I doubted they had even been with the rest. At best, they had used the grouping as a shield to get farther out.

My heart stopped when I saw the rider. Miredy. I thought she might have a passenger, but from this angle, I was uncertain. But that didn't matter. The point was that I knew her, and I now had to make a decision. Did I shoot her down? Did I order her taken out?

I rode a little away from my group, shifting Rienfleche so that it caught the light. Miredy's head instantly turned towards to it, and I saw her eyes narrow. She could see me. I could tell she was making a decision too, but what, I couldn't say. Whatever it was, she nodded, and changed her flight path to come straight for me.

I thought a little longer, and then decided to wait. I remembered how, when we last met, she had hoped we would meet 'peacefully'. I remembered how she had been kind enough to hold me as I trembled. I could be kind enough to wait.

I was glad I did. Miredy did, in fact, have a passenger and, more importantly, it was one of the two people I had been desperately worried about. "Guinevere!" I yelped, reaching out automatically. Guinevere took my hands, and then lunged to hug me, nearly dragging me out of the saddle. "Whoa, hold on, let's not fall!"

"Sorry!" Guinevere laughed. But it was a broken sort of laugh, the laugh of someone who found sanctuary when they thought all hope was gone. "Ah, here, Miredy, let me get off…"

I dismounted too, and gave her a better hug. "It's good to see you." I pulled away and looked to Miredy, smiling at her. "It's good to see you too."

"As well, Lady Irene," Miredy replied. There was pain in her eyes, but also resolution. I understood right then what had happened: she chose Guinevere over Bern. "Is the red haired boy running up General Roy?"

"Yes," I confirmed, without even having to turn around. I glanced down as he slowed to a stop, and bowed to Guinevere and Miredy both. "So formal."

"It's not proper to for a general to spontaneously hug people on the battlefield," Roy answered, dignifiedly. Still, his smile was warm and boyish. "I am relieved to see you are safe, Princess Guinevere."

"It was a near thing," Guinevere replied. She shuddered, hugging herself as if to keep warm. "We were in Aquelia when it fell. All of the bodies… I never want to see a person's intestines outside of their body again." Oh, that painted such a lovely picture. "Then, of course, we've been stuck here.
Cecilia did what she could, but she's been flagging…” I hated being right. "Of course, my brother had to come himself." …What?!

"King Zephiel is here?"

"Yes." She shook her head, and I finally understood why she thought all hope was lost.
"Thankfully, he… does not have the Fire Emblem." She hesitated before touching the necklace she kept hidden, through her collar. "I still wear it. I don't think it ever occurred to him that Miredy might be more loyal to me than him, than to Bern."

"Oh, I'm sure it occurred to him," Miredy drawled. She looked rather exasperated. "I didn't hide it."
Guinevere smiled sheepishly, and I wondered if they had a brief argument about it before their flight. "I don't think it occurred to him that I might love you more than I fear him, though." In her eyes, I could see another sentence: 'I don't think he thought I would pick you over Galle'.
"Regardless, Zephiel fought her, but didn't kill her." Cecilia was alive then?! "It was a bad injury, though, and if we don't hurry, though, I'm sure she'll wish he had. Narcian is here, and he's mad about some humiliation."

"Oh, wondrous day, I get to turn Narcian into my new quiver," I deadpanned. It sparked a laugh out of everyone. "Miredy, for right now, can you take Guinevere to Elphin. You can't miss him. He's an androgynous looking man with long blonde hair in a braid, and he's probably bent over a map of the area. He's taken over as strategist for the army, and I think is stationed next to where we had Elen set up an infirmary." Elen, however, was our only healer in this situation. Most of the healers in the group had been on the second ship, because of the injured.

"I'll be glad to see her." Miredy held out her hand, and Guinevere mounted up behind her easily.
"What should I do afterwards?"

"Since we don't have the time to explain to everyone that you're not an enemy, just stay close to the infirmary and help with the injured this battle." I glanced at Roy, who nodded. He had been thinking the same thing. "Wuotan is the only other guard there. You can't miss him either. He's a mage… fighter… person."

"You all are breaking the rules." Her grin, however, told me how much she cared about that.
"We'll be off. Stay safe."

"We'll try." I shifted back to give Miredy's wyvern room, and watched her launch off, flying towards the back of the line. "Send a messenger so that the others in the back don't freak out too much."

"Yeah, sounds good," Roy murmured. He breathed a sigh of relief, and smiled up at me. "Well, that's one part of our goal." Yes, it was. "We need to-"

"We've cleared the bridge!" Roy and I both whirled at that particular shout. It was true, though. Bernese soldiers were desperately trying to push our forces back, but we were clear.

Roy automatically started running back to the front. I mounted up and ordered a messenger to run back and inform Elphin before riding forward with some other cavalry. I had to jump over an enemy soldier to get off the bridge, but it worked. We were clear. We had a straight shot to the castle.

However, as I rode towards it, shouting orders, my horse did the strangest thing. She suddenly reared, giving me no time to prepare. With a yell, I tumbled out of the saddle, startled. Never, ever, had she reared on me before. Never had she reared, and then ran.
But a spark of lightning blackened and charred the grass where she had been and I realized what had happened. She had reared, because it was the only way she and I could survive whatever attacked. She had only been trying to protect me, as she was trained to do.

As I stood, I learned what the 'whatever' had been. Zephiel. He was here, ready to fight.

"I thought I saw you," he murmured. I pulled an arrow out of my quiver and aimed it at his neck. "Goodness, when did you all arrive?"

"Ask your dead," I deadpanned, shifting back to get a bit of distance between us. Everyone else was busy with their own fights. "Why come after me? I'm not the general."

"I saw you first." Roy had bright red hair that I could see out of the corner of my eye. "I was curious to see if you grew any since Araphan."

"Who knows?" This was eerie. "But I hope you weren't expecting fear." I glared. "I wasn't afraid of you at Araphan, and I am not afraid of you now." I certainly was angrier though. "Get out of my way and go back to your game. I want to reach Cecilia before your Wyvern General gets his hands on her."

"He's already inside the castle, so you might want to run." The very casual way he dismissed my concern made my blood boil. "If she still clings to life. She wasn't worth a killing blow."

"Or you couldn't manage it." I nodded to his shoulder, remembering how it had bled. "Thanks to the injury Uncle Hector inflicted."

"I managed to kill Katri just fine, so I doubt she was any harder." …What was…? "Oh, did you cling to some hope that you'd find your mother? An impossible dream. I cut off her head with this very sword." He shifted his stance, clearly prepped to attack. "Shall I do the same for you?"

"…Lying…” I shook my head violently and snarled as I shifted my aim from his neck to his head. Rienfleche buzzed against my palm. "You're lying. I know this trick. Outsiders lie all the time to shake their opponent's resolve."

"Come now; I wouldn't lie to a Sacaean." He almost sounded hurt that I would even suggest it, but he mostly sounded like he was mocking me. "I hold a great respect for Sacaeans."

"Liar." I had to make myself keep from shooting. If I shot too soon, then I was dead. I doubted he would spare me this time. "Someone with respect wouldn't have massacred Bulgar."

"Preposterous. I did that because I respect Sacaeans. My troops would have never have won against them if I hadn't initiated such an attack." This… this bastard! "Even doing so, and taking advantage of the weaker will and fear of another tribe's leader, it's hard to call that a victory. I understand that Rath was mostly responsible for that."

"Keep my father's name out of your filthy mouth." I couldn't believe him! "While you're at it, stop trying to bullshit a virtue out of your sadism. I'm not a sycophant clinging to your cape."

"No, you are an enemy, and one I should apparently fear." His eyes narrowed. "It is your choice if you want to live in denial, but do not fret. You won't have to live long with that choice." Lightning crackled along his blade. "I have been told it was a mistake, letting you live in Araphan." I thought of the words Guinevere said that day, so long ago. Had she spat that out him? Had someone else? "I shall rectify that mistake. You may ask Katri whether or not I am telling the truth when you see her in heaven."
"I won't, because Mom is alive." The air was sparking. It was hard to breath. "Someone like you would not have had the balls to kill her, not when you spent so much time keeping her healthy."

"Well, perhaps I found the ruthlessness instead." He shifted and I tensed. He was going to swing. I would only have one-

Fast. He was fast. He was far faster than I expected. I jumped back as soon as I could, but I still caught a glancing bow, and the lightning scorching my arm, obliterated my arrow.

I fell back on my ass, my legs not working quite right, and Zephiel loomed over me. I glared at him as he prepared to swing again. This time, he would not miss. This time, he would kill me. But I would not give him the satisfaction of seeing me afraid. If it was my time to go to Mother Earth's meadows, I would not be afraid.

"IRENE!" Everything stilled as blood flew, and it took me several blinks to realize what happened. I wasn't dying. I hadn't been hit a second time. Zephiel hadn't suddenly been hit with some fatal blow, like it would be in the stories. Though, he looked just as surprised as I did as he also figured out what had happened.

Roy had stepped in front of me. Roy had brought up his rapier in a vain attempt to block Zephiel's blood. Roy's rapier shattered like a twig. Roy had been hit straight on, the sword biting deep. Roy's blood shot through the air as he fell back.

Roy's head hit my leg as he gasped for air, hand weakly twisting in the grass as if that could tether him to life. Roy's torso was blasted open, redder than his hair, from left shoulder to right hip. Roy was… Roy was…!

"Roy!" I screamed. I couldn't do anything else. "Roy!" No. No, no, no, no, no. You couldn't take Roy from me, Mother Earth! You took my dad and my tribe; you couldn't take him! "Roy!" But there was so much blood. There was so much blood already, and my medicinal pack was with my horse, too far away. "Roy!"

"Well, that was… unexpected." Zephiel's calm voice was like ice water on my head. "I was planning on killing him today, but after you, Irene," he continued as I slowly looked up at him. He was splattered with Roy's blood, but he didn't seem to care at all. "I suppose the young man has never heard of 'ladies first'."

"You…!" I lunged forward, wrapping my hands around his throat. He barely even shifted back; I must be light as a feather compared to him, especially in that armor. "You will not!" But you didn't need weight to kill. The windpipe was fragile, frail. It took less pressure to bend a bow to crush it. "I will not let you…!"

"Things like this are why this war exists." His breath was ragged, but he wasn't stopped me. He had his blade angled towards my back, but he was just letting me strangle him. "Jealous, vanity, greed, pride… people fight over such rubbish in all nations. The world must be liberated from-"

"Don't give me that bullshit!" I could see bruises purpling under my hand. Why wasn't he stopping me? "As if anyone would believe such a stupid reason!"

"Ah, yes, you're too smart to believe my every word. So then, would you like another?" He suddenly smiled, and it looked vicious. "Would you more believe that I wish to end the age of man? Return the land to dragons?" He leaned forward slightly, voice soft as if he was telling a big secret. "Humans are so filthy, aren't they? They flock to those in power, do not think twice about
betraying trusted allies, and you give one an overinflated ego, and look how he treats his supposed lesser? Look to the horrors Etruria, land of the Saint, holy land, committed in the Isles. Look to what my own soldiers did to Sacae, to Bulgar."

"That was on your orders!"

"One word, and they were in a fervor, ready to wipe out everything your people were, are, and could be, just because Bern hates outsiders as much as the plains, but for reasons relating to pureness and arrogance instead of wariness and hurt." He laughed; it sounded breathy. "Such madness. When will it ever end?"

"You didn't exactly help matters!"

"I proved my point." His eyes flicked to something behind me. "Ah, Idenn, are you ready now?" Who was he-?

…Pain. Pain, pain, and more pain. I dropped like a rock, crashing to my side and I curled up in a ball to try and escape. I thought I heard someone whimper. I thought it might be me.

"Idenn, it normally does not take you so long."

My blood was boiling. It was not an exaggeration. My blood was boiling. I could see the steam coming out of my injuries. It hurt. Father Sky, it hurt! Make it stop!

"Her quintessence is strange." Quiet voice. Quiet, emotionless voice. Feminine. Who? "It burns, but in the fire is a light that fractures the future." Who was this? What was this? "I must be slow, or I will lose it all when it scorchest my hand."

"Is it as powerful as the records in the Archives suggest?"

"More. A war dragon made with this quintessence will be far stronger." However, even as the feminine voice said the words, the pain abruptly stopped. "Oh." Slowly, very slowly, I opened my eyes and I tried to focus on just who the woman was. All I could see was that strange, cloaked person again, the same one from Araphan, with an arrow sprouting from her chest. "Master, what should I do?"

"Tug the arrow out." That would only exacerbate the injury though… "It seems some other pests managed to make their way here," Zephiel murmured, shifting to go on the attack. "Etruria's Archery General and a gaggle of pegasus knights, among others."

"Understood." Just like that, she ripped the arrow out, the blood pouring down her chest. She didn't even seem to care. "What do I do with the arrow?"

"Just drop it. A broken arrow is worthless."

"Understood." She dropped it, just like Zephiel ordered. It wasn't that far from me… "Shall I call the dragons?"

"No, I want them to continue to Arcadia." Where was that? "Just stand back, Idenn. I need the exercise."

It wasn't until I heard the shrieks of pain that everything finally processed. Zephiel was killing my friends. Zephiel was killing the army I had, all on his own. That Idenn girl… she was… something that didn't matter, actually. She didn't even move as magic crashed into her, as she bled, just because that was what she was ordered. She was a doll, as much of a doll as the dragon we killed
back in the Isles.

But Zephiel had… Zephiel was…!

"General Klein! Captain Tate!"

Zephiel was killing them… and I wasn't armed… I was helpless…

"Lady Lilina! Lord Lugh!"

But that broken arrow was within reach. I just had to… I just had to…

"Master Elphin!"

I just had to grab the arrow and pick myself up…

"I won't let you kill them, Zephiel! I will not let you, brother!"

"I told you I would only forgive you once, dear sister."

I just had to…!

With all the strength I had, I snagged the arrow and pushed myself up. That girl, Idenn, looked to me, but she registered nothing as I stood, swaying and wobbling.

"What happened to the brother who gave me the fox? What happened to the brother who comforted me when I cried? What did I do to make him go away!?!"

"You didn't do anything, Guinevere. Know that much, at least, before you join Mother and Mom."

No. That was not allowed. You would not take more from me, Zephiel!

I lurched forward. It was clumsy, stumbling. My attack was more of a flail. But that broken arrow, that arrow he had dismissed, cut deep into the back of his neck, and the blood, for some reason, started turning black as it streamed down.

As he shouted, more from surprise than anything, I somehow managed to snatch up Rienfleche, next to Roy's body and slick with Roy's blood, and I aimed that broken arrow at his head with shaking hands, and shakier vision. He looked more stunned than anything as he turned to face me. Behind him, I could see a crying and staring Guinevere, and a bleeding Elphin. I could not see anyone else. Were they…?

"…I can see why she told me I made a mistake," he whispered. The surprise turned to something that almost looked like 'impressed'. "I can see why she smiled like she had won." Who was the 'she'? "But that's the last of your strength, isn't it? Born from a feeble, worthless desire to protect." He gestured, and my eyes flicked to the side; I only saw bodies and blood. Who was…? Was anyone…? "Eckesachs was the second divine weapon forged. Weakest in might at the Scouring, but it had no costs to its power and, unlike them, its power has barely weakened these past thousand years." That made it the strongest now. "Only the Sword of Seals exceeds its might now." What was that? "So…" He shifted, ready to attack. Ready to kill. "Shall we?" He shifted again, clearly prepping for a killing swing.

"I won't let you!" A fireball dropped then and I turned to see Lilina, battered and bleeding, unable to open an eye because of the blood on her face, and coughing up a lung. But her eye blazed with fury as she made herself stand. "You will not win!" she shouted, as she threw another fireball.
Zephiel cut it in half. "We will not let you!"

Arrows fired. Magic rained. Lances and axes were thrown. They were small things, but it was clear what the message was. 'We are not beaten yet!'

"You're nothing but a human, and we killed a dragon! Don't think you can beat us with borrowed power!"

"What a pretty little speech," Zephiel murmured. He turned to face her, and I noticed the veins in his neck were turning black. He didn't seem to notice or care. "I can see why you are the darling of Lycia." Lilina's response was only to glare. "Fine. You can follow your friend first, then."

Before anyone could move, he swung, and lighting jumped from the blade. It shattered the air as it screamed towards Lilina, who only closed her eye and waited for the end.

But just before it hit, there was the sound of water suddenly freezing, and then… there was a barrier. A barrier of ice erupted in front of Lilina, protecting her from harm. I thought it was some new magic trick, but she looked just as started as the rest of us. So, what was…?

"Don't… touch her…" Startled, I whirled, and could only gape as I realized that Roy was standing. He staggered and teetered, something glinting at his chest. It took me a second to realize that was his blood, his frozen blood. "Don't touch… any of them…" Roy continued, biting out the words through what had to be massive pain. But when he looked up, all I saw… all I saw was anger. I saw anger, and a dragon's eyes. "LEAVE THEM ALONE!" A blizzard erupted, devouring the battlefield. But it didn't freeze me. It didn't freeze any of our soldiers.

It froze the Bernese soldiers, though. They fell to the ground and shattered into thousands of pieces, as if they had been sculptures the whole time.

"What is this?!!" I glanced back and saw Narcian stumble out of the castle, cloak up to feebly protect him from the ice. "Your Majesty, is this some new weapon of ours?" he asked. Absently, I aimed and shot, catching him in the shoulder. "Not you again!" Ha, he hadn't even looked to confirm it was me.

"No, this isn't something of ours," Zephiel murmured. Eckesachs's lightning protected him from the ice, but it was clear the fight was finally getting to him. The poison probably helped. I could think of no other reason why his blood was turning black, at least. "What is this?"

"Draconic Awakening." That was Idenn, and I almost thought there was something in her face. It wasn't quite an emotion, but it was closer than anything I had seen before. "Three-quarter dragons, half-dragons, and quarter-dragons who cannot transform can tap into their draconic heritage if they are at death's door," she continued. My thoughts, however, clunked to a stop. That would mean… "His dragon relative is strong. This power is vast, and the power is enough to save his life. That was not the case for many during the Scouring." Her eyes narrowed. "...Another comes. Someone Jahn is afraid of. Master…"

"...Perhaps it is a mistake, but the scholar in me cannot help but see what this will do." Zephiel relaxed. "Idenn, warp us away, and drop Narcian off in the desert. He can fly home. I need to deal with this poison before it kills me."

There was a squawk of protest and a flash of magic, and then… they were all gone. All three were gone, and the blizzard faded away.

What just…? Oh, forget that! I didn't care! They needed to get to healers and I needed to get to
Cecilia!

I made to step towards the castle, but I only stumbled and started to fall. Someone, however, caught me. "You need to get to the healers," they whispered. I thought the voice was Wuotan's. "You are looking for your friend, yes? I will head inside and get her. I seem to be one of the few unwounded." Oh… "Focus on staying conscious. The second ship arrived not long ago, along with most of the healers." Finally… "You all just got very, very lucky."

I think I figured that part out for myself, thanks.

Zephiel did a number on us. No one could be fully healed; there were too many injuries and not enough staves. We made ends meet with bandages and medicinal herbs, but it was clear that we were paying dearly for deciding to charge when we did.

The survivors from Cecilia's group, however, were grateful and shared all they had. Guinevere was safe. Cecilia was alive. So, the price was higher that anticipated, but we still got our objectives completed. That was, itself, a victory.

"I seemed to have made a fool of myself in front of you all," Cecilia murmured. She was set up in a bed in 'my' tent. Klein was with us. Roy and Lilina were absent, despite their wishes. Roy's injuries were extensive, including some very bad frostbite. Lilina also had frostbite; that ice shield had also snagged her leg. Both were on bedrest. "All of you are so injured as well…"

"You didn't exactly escape injury yourself, Cecilia," Klein pointed out. He had some bad injuries, but since they would not kill or cripple him, he was dealing with bandages, like me. I could tell he hurt, though, just by how stiffly he stood by the bed. There had been only one chair and he insisted I take it. "Have you gotten a verdict on it?"

"Yes…" She sighed. "I should be grateful to keep my life, but I am horribly frustrated. I have to be healed in stages, like most of you, but due to the placement of the injury…" It was a mirror to the injury that almost killed Roy, but more expansive because the lightning had conducted through her armor, and exacerbated the damage. It was difficult to say if her armor helped or hindered her; without her armor, the blow might have just killed her. "And due to the poor condition my body is in…" She had skipped meals to feed her soldiers. It wasn't the smartest of moves, but her alternative had been watching them starve. "I am at half strength, at best, and will be for quite some time. If I use my full power, I'll just make things worse."

"Yeah, most of us are praying we don't run into battles for a small while." There was, surprisingly, some nearby villages willing to put us up while we waited for the rest of our ships, and replenish our supplies. Most of our 'market budget' was going to staves, but even then, it wouldn't be until tomorrow the healers would have the strength to use them. "I can't shoot a bow until the injury on my arm is healed for the same reason."

"Did I thank you for coming to my rescue?" I asked, turning to face him. Klein had been the one to shoot the arrow that disrupted Idenn's concentration. "I did, right?"

"You did," Klein confirmed. His eyes looked very dark. "Besides, even if you didn't, Sue thanked me enough." Sue had been terrified and livid about all the injuries that happened in her absence. Sin declared that I was never going ahead of him again. Clarine, Rutger, and Deke made similar declarations. "I'm peeved Perceval just left, though."

"What else could he do, though?" Cecilia whispered. Her eyes were warm and forgiving, and I thought she should be at least a little mad at him, even if he was understandable. "If he charged, he
might have come to save me, placing the lives of all his soldiers in danger. Not to mention King Mordred."

"You really should be mad."

"It's hard to be mad at someone who killed Etrurians and Bernese alike to make sure I could get to Princess Guinevere." That… did sound like him. "He made a point to hug me too, and had me promise to stay alive." That… also sounded like him. "Besides, well, you two know why I find it hard to be mad."

"You're in love with him, have been for years, understand him far too well, and won't say a word about your feelings." Klein rolled his eyes. "I still think you can be mad." So did I. "You should get on fixing that last one also."

"I might if someone else does." Cecilia's smile was perfectly sweet, even as Klein scowled. "Regardless…" She turned her attention to me. "Irene, how are you doing?"

"I'm forbidden to doing practically everything the next couple of days," I sighed. According to the healers, by all rights, I should be dead, but it was still enough to be frustrating. "I guess there's something to that saying of scions of Hanover."

"You lot are impossible to kill without a lot of hard work," Cecilia laughed, cheering up. However, the thought just made me think of something else. "Irene, what is it?"

"…Have you heard anything about Mom?" Zephiel was lying. He had to be lying. It was all that made sense. He had been taking care of her, so why would he suddenly kill her? He had to have been lying.

"Aunt Katri?" She bit her lip. "Not really. I mean; I saw her in Aquelia."

"You did?!” She was there?! "Yes." She nodded. "I managed to get Guinevere out because she distracted some soldiers, faking something with her leg. They all panicked and prioritized her health over chasing down some running people in cloaks." There. That was more proof. The soldiers wouldn't have done that if Zephiel hadn't ordered it. "She smiled and waved when I glanced back. She looked fine."

"I see."

"Don't worry." Cecilia's hands covered mine, even though I knew it had to hurt her to move even that much. "We'll go rescue her. Liberate Eturia and rescue Aunt Katri. Doesn't that sound like a plan?"

"Yes…" A sound outside, however, startled me. "Who's there?!" I whirled to my feet, glaring at the tent flap. "You have to the count of three before I start throwing things."

"I advise listening," Klein added when there was no reply. "We're all a little tense at the moment."

"I'm sorry…" A voice I didn't know mumbled the words. A girl I didn't know stepped through the tent. "Who's there?!" I whirled to my feet, glaring at the tent flap. "You have to the count of three before I start throwing things."

"I advise listening," Klein added when there was no reply. "We're all a little tense at the moment."

"Sofia, have you joined up with the army?" Cecilia asked sweetly. It kept up when Klein and I looked at her. "Her name is Sofia. She was in the same cell as me, a prisoner Zephiel dragged with him when he arrived." Was that so? "She tended to my injuries as best as she could, and kept
"I just… manipulated… the shadows…" She brought up a tome. "I am… bad at human magic… still… but I am good… with dragon magic…" She was…? "My name… is Sofia…" She spoke so slowly. "I wanted… to check on Cecilia."

"Thank you. I'm doing well."

"Good…" Her eyes flicked over to me. "A light… in the dark…" I froze at the words. "You shine bright… like a white wolf in the sun… unafraid of the storm, unafraid of the future," U-um… "I'm sorry." She ducked her head. "I… see some things…" I… oh!

"You have Foresight?" I asked softly. Sofia glanced up timidly and smiled slightly. "Ah, it's probably not just that… Foresight and Insight?"

"Yes, I have both." She brought her head up fully again. "It is… rare to have both… but I do… It gives me visions randomly… I got caught… because I had one while running…" Was that so? "The leader of the army… the boy with fire in his spirit, ice in his blood… the quarter dragon who Awakened…"

"You mean Roy." I heard a noise of surprise, but didn't focus on it. There were still so many questions. "He's resting in his tent, but I can take you to him."

"Thank you…" She waited patiently as I waved goodbye to Klein and Cecilia, and followed me silently as we left.

We set up camp just outside one of the villages, worried about straining their resources too much. But they were certainly a cheerful group. It seemed like Cecilia had gone out of her way to befriend them, so now, they were more than willing to help us. It was clever, and really helpful right now. There were so many wounded that even basic camp chores couldn't be done.

But it was still set up like normal, so it didn't take long at all to reach Roy's tent. He was alone, resting in his bed, but he sat up and smiled when he saw me. "Irene!" he greeted cheerfully. "How are you?"

"I'm much better than you at the moment," I retorted. I crouched down to hug him. "…Don't do that again."

"Do what again?"

"Don't be a human shield again." That moment… that moment was going to haunt me forever. I really understood why Aunt Serra still had nightmares of the time Mom shielded her from an arrow. I understood why Aunt Nino once told me that one of the worst memories she had was when Mom shielded her from a brutal punch. "Promise me."

"But-"

"Promise me."

"…Okay." His voice wavered. "I'm sorry. I just got scared. I didn't want to lose anyone else."

"I know. But remember, I am the same." I let go of him, and sat by him on the bed. "Anyway, this is Sofia." I gestured to her, urging her to sit in the lone chair in the room. "She helped Cecilia, and wanted to speak with you."
"Oh, hello!" Roy beamed at her. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted… to check on you…" she whispered. She was a kind girl, wasn't she? "Draconic Awakening… is hard on the body…"

"I seem to be doing well," Roy murmured. He held up his hand, though, and a bit of blue light flickered in his palm. "I can do things like this now, though. Somehow."

"You are… related to an ice dragon…" She hovered her hand over the light, nodding. "Yes, ice… so with Awakening… you gained their ice powers… without needing a tome… you can conjure and manipulate ice… until the day you die… Was that so? "They must have been strong… you have more power than me… despite being quarter to my half."

"Half?" Roy looked startled. "You're half dragon?"

"Yes." She nodded, bringing her hands to her lap. "My home… Arcadia… is in the east… in the Nabata desert…" She bowed her head. "We try to stay hidden… but Bern found us… they learned, through their Archives, that dragons live in Arcadia…"

"Dragons?" Roy glanced at me, but I shrugged. I was just as shocked. "There are still dragons?"

"Yes… some who fled to the desert… to escape the war… some who fled… when it ended… dragons and humans… who wished to live together, as they had been… that is Arcadia." She smiled sweetly. "It is… our hope… for the future…" She bowed suddenly. "Please… I know you are hurting… I know your army is injured… but please… can you help my village?"

"Dragons need our help?" I asked softly. I made sure to pitch my voice so that she knew I wasn't refusing.

"Many cannot transform… their bodies are too injured by the loss of magic in the world…" Was that so? "Lady Fiona can… but she is reaching the end of her life…" Fiona? That couldn't be the same Miss Fiona we knew, could it? "Fae is only a child… she does not even understand death…" She shook her head, still bowed. "Igrene is our Guardian, but she is… only one person. And Bern… is sending its dragons…"

"I see." I glanced at Roy. "Once again, your call. I will point out that unless we all want to sail again, and risk running into the navy, we'll have to brave the desert or brave the mountains to reach the 'main' part of the continent."

"Yes, and if that is the case, then I see no reason why we cannot help her along the way," Roy answered easily. He smiled when Sofia looked up again. "But, do you mind answering something for me?"

"If I can…" she whispered. Her smile was so sweet and so relieved. "What is it…?"

"Do you know the name 'Ninian'?" Roy's face was serious. "If I truly have dragon blood, logically, it would have to come from my mother." That was true. Uncle Eliwood's lineage was traceable all the way back to Elijah, first lord of Pharae, and his lady, Alice. But Aunt Ninian's background was unknown. It had caused some friction in the early years of her marriage, from what I understood.

"I do not…" Sofia bit her lip. "But twenty years ago… the Dragon's Gate was open…" Twenty years ago… "She might have… come from there… I do not know…"

I remembered something then. I remembered the missing pages in Mom's logbook. Was that what
happened? Was that the secret?

"I'm going to leave to check something out," I told them. They both looked to me, and I smiled. "Well, I suppose I have many things to research. We will have to cross the entire desert, after all." I stood and waved them goodbye. "You two chat a bit more, okay?" I left before they could answer me.

I had a lot to think about.

I focused on duties first. Preparing for a trek through the desert was going to be rough, even with a healthy army, and we were a very weakened one. I expected more protests when I brought it up, but most just accepted it. I wasn't sure if they were just too tired, believed in Roy, or just didn't want to spend who knows how long on boats again.

When all that was done, though, I retrieved Mom's logbook from my things and hunted down the one person I thought would know what the hell was going on, and be willing to tell me: Marcus. It took a while to find him. I almost thought he might have been hiding.

"Marcus?" I called when I finally did find him. Of course, I was a little startled at what I found him doing. "Are you… skipping rocks?"

"It's a good way to keep my wrist from hurting," Marcus explained. He was good at it too; the one he threw skipped six times. "So, what is it, Lady Irene?" He turned to face me, eyes concerned. "You really should be resting."

"I had a question." I brought up Mom's logbook, and his eyes flickered with pain. "I don't know how widespread it is in the army, but most of us leaders, the ones here at least, know that Roy experienced something called 'Draconic Awakening'. That means he has dragon's blood."

"...Yes."

"You knew."

"Yes."

"You knew, because Uncle Eliwood accidentally killed Aunt Ninian twenty years ago with Durandel."

"Yes." He bowed his head. "Is it in the logbook?"

"The dragon part isn't." I opened it up to show him. "It skips. It struck me as odd on the ship, but now, it makes some sense. Mom was hiding that Aunt Ninian was a dragon."

"Lady Ninian was half dragon, yes." Oh, yes, that made sense. Sofia had said he was 'quarter'. "She was one capable of transforming, though. Something happened after she let herself be taken captive. I never learned what. But it forced her into her dragon form, and in that form, she had only one desire: to see Lord Eliwood."

"Uncle Eliwood, not knowing that the dragon was a friend, or really anything but an enemy, cut down the dragon." I thought of what Wuotan said. "Though, I suppose Durandel could have 'demanded' it."

"Yes." He hesitated before continuing. "She didn't want him to know. Lord Roy. She didn't want him to know."
"Why?"

"This is a world for humans. She worried what others might say, do, if they learned he was part dragon, if she was part dragon." Marcus shrugged. "He couldn't transform. There were only a few traits that might suggest the heritage." I thought of how he didn't like heat, and how he could tolerate the cold with ease. I thought of how high his endurance was, even as a little boy. "She thought it would be best for him. She never mentioned a Draconic Awakening, though…." "That could be because she didn't know." Marcus and I both jumped as Wuotan walked up, smiling sheepishly. "My apologies," he murmured. "But I was napping in the tree there." He pointed for good measure, and I noticed the branches were very good for hiding. "I eavesdropped on accident."

"I think it's a testament to my age that I didn't know you were here," Marcus grumbled. His eyes were very fierce. "Wuotan, I know you are a scholar, but not one word of this to anyone."

"Of course, though I do not think you will really be able to hide Lord Roy's awakened ice powers. He made quite the show." The blizzard… "Still, from what I hear, it gives the army even more hope."

"Does it?"

"Fight power with power. Unlike the war dragons, Lord Roy does not need to 'transform' in order to use his magic. He simply has to learn how to use it." That reminded me of something. "I thought Roy was poor with magic, though," I whispered. I remembered Cecilia telling me about it, as she prepared lessons plans for Roy and Lilina. "He didn't really have an aptitude."

"According to the records, dragon magic and human magic have similarities, but are fundamentally different," Wuotan explained. I thought of Sofia, and realized her words made a lot more sense now. "He has no talent for human magic, but now that he's Awakened, he will have quite the aptitude for ice magic, and it will be something the land has not seen in 1000 years." That was…

"If people start worshiping Roy, I'm going to tell baby stories." I didn't want him to have that pressure. He had enough going on. "I really am."

"You should do so anyway. Don't make the same mistake the Legendary Heroes made. They let the army distance themselves out of fear and awe, after all." Mmm… "But, regardless, there are records, actually, of a 'Ninian' living during the Scouring." Was that so? "Tell me, Marcus, did she have a younger brother named 'Nils'?"

"Yes, she does," Marcus answered slowly. He looked startled. "There are seriously records?"

"There are records of everything if you know where to look. I also know that the reason why Zephiel's blood was turning black was because a demon dragon's blood is poisonous to humans." Was that so? …That confirmed my suspicion then. That emotionless girl was the terrifying demon dragon of legend. Something seemed 'off' though, different from the legends. "Regardless, she did?"

"Ah, yes." He nodded. "At the end of the Campaign, though, Lord Nils went through the Gate, and shut it from the other side, to ensure that no one could tempt young dragon children through again and cause havoc here."

"Then, I believe she is the same one in that record," Wuotan murmured. He looked thoughtful, and strangely sad. "It would explain why Lord Roy has such a high aptitude as well. That Ninian was the eldest child of Aenir." That was the Queen of the Ice Dragons he mentioned in his story. "He
inherited Aenir's power through his mother."

"And she did not warn?"

"As I mentioned, she might not have known. She was a half-dragon who could transform and, more importantly, the last record of her 'here' states she was around ten. You don't tell ten year olds things like this." He shrugged. "Perhaps it was never mentioned in the land across the Gate either. It's impossible to really know." That was true. "Still, it is a good thing."

"Is it?" I asked. I could still see the blood flying. I could still feel his head on my leg, hear him gasping for air. "He nearly died."

"Not that part," Wuotan immediately dismissed. I still scowled. "It is a power that he inherited, but is also his own. Whatever he does with it, it will be his own, not his father's, who he is most compared to." Oh, that's what he meant. Roy was rarely compared to Aunt Ninian. This was a strength that was hers, yes, but also his. "I think, in time, it will help with his confidence." That would be nice. "I think it will also inspire the rest of you to become stronger."

"I think getting our asses handed to us would do that anyway." Even working together, Zephiel had… "Damn that weapon of his."

"A child broken by the world, a genius shunned by the one he most wanted praise from, and unable to see the strengths he inherited from the people he loved." He was also a liar. He was a very big liar. "Wielding a borrowed blade, and using borrowed power in order to see out his dream."

"Why did Hartmut get the special weapon that didn't lose strength?"

"If you are talking of the Sword of Seals, he got it because dragons attacked and he didn't want to lose more family, so he gambled his life for the chance to save them." What was the Sword of Seals?! "If you talk of the blade Zephiel wields, though, then the answer is simple."

"It was given to him by the smith, yes, yes."

"No, no." He smiled as I stared. "The Smith Martin gave that blade to another. She gave it to Hartmut after a revelation made him worry he would not be able to wield the Sword of Seals to its full strength."

"She?"

"The Lady Hildegarde." …THAT WAS NEVER MENTIONED IN THE LEGENDS! "She was the original owner of the gem that would become the Fire Emblem, as well." That… was never mentioned either?

"Why are two important things of Bern tied to the Lady Hildegarde?"

"That is truly a question. There is another as well." Wuotan's smile had so many secrets in it. "Ask Princess Guinevere about the necklace you wear. Not the carved wolf, but the other one that you keep hidden under your shirt." Why should I ask Guinevere about something I got from Mom? "Though, in my opinion, you must get to bed, Lady Irene. You had your quintessence ripped from your wounds, and suffered bad injuries on top of that." But…

"I must agree, Lady Irene," Marcus instantly replied. There was very real fear in his eyes. "Lord Elbert died because of that." He did? Was that in the logbook? "Please, if only for this old man's sake, head to bed."
I sighed, and nodded, giving up. But my mind continued to spin with questions. I had a feeling Wuotan was trying to tell me something, and I also had a feeling that it might explain why Zephiel made a point to come after me, and not just because he felt like 'rectifying a mistake'.

But Wuotan wanted me to make my own conclusion first, so that I did not reject and ignore it. That, at least, was the only conclusion I could draw.

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**Notes on Miredy**

- A skilled and renowned knight of Bern, Captain of Guinevere's guards. Devoted to Guinevere to the point that, when forced to choose, she chose her over Bern, despite having a great love for her country (and despite having family and a lover who are tied to Bern as well).
- Strong and, while slower than a pegasus, she's faster than you would expect. Much faster than you'd expect.
- She's also CLEVER. She smuggled Guinevere out, on her wyvern, while the castle was under siege, and Zephiel was right there, without taking a single injury.
- Her affinity is Dark, like Dad's. No wonder I like her.

I had meant to talk to her and Guinevere after the battle, but my injuries prevent that. I'll make an effort to talk to her in the next few days.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Author's note: In game, this is Chapter 13. So, we have our first wyvern rider, and Cecilia, and Guinevere has returned, and yes, I changed a lot in this chapter. In game, Zephiel is the 'boss' for a turn or two before it switches to Narcian. From there, it switches to Flaer. Here, I kept it to just Zephiel, and just had the group fight him for a few 'turns'. Think of it like fighting the boss of a survive chapter, and just barely making it through the final turn.

In the FE6 manga, around this chapter, Al, the main character, accidentally grabs the Fire Emblem, which triggers a 'promotion' for him because he's half-dragon, and this leads to a subplot that I'm not going into. Here, though, Roy is quarter-dragon, and Draconic Awakening is something I established in Thief's Legacy. Roy also has… well… one of the latest promotions ever. In a game that is about 22/31 chapters (the second number is including paralogues), Roy promotes at the end of chapter 21 or 21x. Meaning that if you get the 'bad ending', you have one chapter with a promoted Roy and if you get the good/true endings, you have four. Now, while this is technically the same as your 'main lord' in FE7 (I think it's five chapters in Eliwood's story and six in Hector's), it's balanced by being able to promote your other two lords at earlier points: 24E/26H and 26xE/28xH (I think). It's still ridiculous. It's also tied with receiving the Sword of Seals, which isn't fun character-development wise. So, Roy gets 'two' promotions, and this is the first: gaining Ninian's ice powers.

I also decided to feature Idenn more, as she and Jahn are basically non-entities for most of the story, and bringing up a plot point mentioned in Thief's Legacy. Also bring in Zephiel's motivations. And give an explanation for Cecilia's less than steller in-game stats: she's recovering from her very bad injury and poor physical condition.
Next Chapter – Interlude, Sands and Moons (Yes, more interludes; the game does a lot of jumps between chapters and also, I’m not looking forward the in-game Chapter 14)
Interlude – Sands and Moons

Missur was a victory, but only through luck. Everyone who was of the first wave was injured badly and, though losses were much less than estimated, that is only because Roy ‘awakened’ to his secret legacy: the ice powers of Aenir, the Queen of the Ice Dragons, inherited from his mother, Aunt Ninian. This confuses me for many reasons, especially his affinity, but Wuotan suspects that spirits of fire chose him in part because of Uncle Eliwood’s affinity (anima) and in part to protect him. This is a world of humans, and the fears from the Scouring are deep.

But there is a place in this world where dragons and humans live side-by-side: Arcadia, a hidden oasis in the desert. Bern sends forces there, possibly wanting the dragons there. At Sofia’s request, we go to reinforce her home. Though we move as quickly as possible, it is hard. The heat is vicious during the day, but the cold is freezing at night. The sand is hard to move through. While less than an eighth of the army is injured, the injuries are severe and effect many who are heavily involved in the army’s well-being: Roy, Lilina, Klein, Tate, Elphin, Lugh, and myself.

I just pray we don’t get caught in a sandstorm. That sounds like all sorts of bad.

"Irene, you need to hold still," Klein scolded. He sounded so annoyed right now. "And lift up your hair. It keeps getting caught in the bandages."

"Okay," I sighed, reaching back to do just that. The bandages on my arms made me feel stiff. "Sorry to make you do this."

"I volunteered when I saw your stomach was bleeding, remember?" One slight overextension, and the injuries on my abdomen had reopened. "I’m almost done."

"I know." I was supposed to be working, but… well… health took priority here. "Thanks." I had so many injuries that I couldn't change my bandages myself without risking reopening the ones on my arms. Most of the time, they got changed when I got checked at the healers, but sometimes, I just moved wrong and… well, thankfully, Klein spent a lot of time in my tent. It saved me a trip. "The camp seems lively this morning.

"Princess Guinevere somehow managed to bake some tarts. I thought I saw her give a few extra to Lugh."

"She did, but it was so that he could share with Ray." I had overheard both conversations earlier. "How is Clarine?"

"She’s finally recovered." That was good to hear. "Brother Saul ordered her to continue resting, so I think he assigned her to watching over Rutger as he builds back up his strength." Rutger finally recovered from the dragon, but he was severely weakened. "The healers are working overtime."

"Yes, they are." But, thankfully, everyone was on the road to recovery. "Cecilia might be the only one with lasting effects." Even as her wound scarred, the damage to her body was still great. As she had predicted, she was at half-strength. "Elphin?"
"I think he was given the all-clear earlier, but Lalum promised to keep an eye on him." Good… "I still can't believe Perceval just left."

"He doesn't know Mildain is alive." Which meant he was stuck between conflicting loyalties. "His duty to his men meant keeping them out of danger."

"Cecilia could have died." Considering Narcian was there, Cecilia was also in serious danger of being raped. "I understand guarding one's men, but…"

"You and I both know that Cecilia would never forgive him for risking his soldiers just for her." I couldn't deny being aggravated, of course. I just understood, and I just… believed. I believed he had wanted, but had felt trapped by obligations and duties. "Based on the reports, aside from us harrying him with fliers, he didn't attack us either." He defended. After all, we attacked him. But he never initiated anything.

"That is true. And there were many times I know he could have killed one of us." Klein sighed and briefly leaned into me, pausing in bandaging. "I'm just mad. I'd feel more reassured if he was with us." He laughed a little. "Besides, it would be hilarious to tease him and Cecilia. I felt like I haven't done that in ages."

"Tease Roy and Lilina. It works." Lilina had appointed herself Roy's personal nurse, and was actually learning how to use a healing staff as she tended to his still recovering injuries. It seemed 'awakening' didn't do anything but gave Roy ice powers. "Do you hear something?" It sounded like someone was running towards…

"Irene!" My tent flap burst open to reveal Fir. "Oh!" For some reason, her face was bright red. "I can… um…" she stammered, looking at the floor. "I can… come back later… if you're busy?"

"Klein is changing my bandages," I told her. What else did it look like? Yes, I was shirtless, but I still had my bra on and, more importantly, a lot of bandages, which weren't tied yet. "Something wrong?"

"Um…" She looked hesitant, but as Klein ignored her to return to bandaging, she walked over to crouch in front of me. "I… um… might have insulted Rutger?" She bowed her head. "I'm sorry."

"What happened?"

"I… was overly aggressive in getting him to spar with me?" She sighed. "I wanted to learn from him, and I could see he was frustrated that he wasn't back at full strength, so I just wanted to help…" She shook her head. "But I think I was rude about it."

"I'm sure it'll be fine." I smiled when she glanced up at me. "He only sounds snappy. He's hurting, mentally, so it results in him having difficulties conveying his tone properly." Of course, considering how a lot of Sacaeans were stoic by outsider standards, there were many who thought Sacaeans were angry when they weren't at all. "Relax. I'll talk to him in a few days."

"Okay…" She glanced over at Klein. "Um…"

"Yes?"

"Why is Klein bandaging you? Shouldn't one of the healers do it?"

"They're overworked, and Klein was here." I tilted my head. "Is something wrong?"

"No?" She shook her head, looking up at me. "Just… I thought only husbands and wives changed
each others' bandages?" …WHAT?! "That's what happened with my parents, at least." I… um… face going red. My face was going red.

"I just happened to be in here when Irene needed assistance," Klein murmured. His voice sounded calm, but when I glanced back, I thought I caught a blush on his face. "So, I'm tending to it now."

"Oh, so that's it," Fir replied. She still looked curious. "That happens a lot though now, doesn't it?" Well, now that she mentioned it… "Half the time, you're asleep in her tent here, and the other half, she's asleep in yours?" I wasn't sure why he never carried me back to my tent when that happened, but I knew why I didn't carry him to his when he fell asleep in mine. My injuries wouldn't allow it, and honestly, with everything going on, I swore I was one surprise away from completely freaking out.

I mean… look at everything that's happened in a few short months, some of them in a few short days. I was horribly injured, injuries that were healing slower as my body was also, apparently, restoring whatever 'quintessence' Idenn had stolen. My 'little brother', Roy, almost died protecting me, and would have died if he didn't happen to be quarter dragon. I was constantly assaulted with nightmares when I tried to sleep. I was recovering from the deaths of family, such as Uncle Hector and Dad. I had to deal with the 'what if' about Mom being possibly dead, because even if Zephiel was a hateful liar, and even if it wouldn't make any sense, he still put the thought in my head. That wasn't even going into the horrors of war, where every single day, someone died, and you had to constantly deal with being covered in blood and other things that made your stomach roll…

Klein was comforting, though. In this crazy situation, he was the most comforting person to be around. With most of the others, I felt like I had to be strong, because they were looking to me for comfort and stability. I was the tactician, and if I faltered, then so would they. Roy had the same pressure, but I wanted to be someone he could relax around, and he couldn't if it seemed like I wasn't able to take the burden. Elphin did as well, but for one, he was used to the burden and had tricks to help him and, for two, I was still mad at him. Mad wasn't comforting.

Somewhere in the middle of my rambling thoughts, I realized Fir almost seemed to expect a reply, and so, I smiled. "Yes, it is, because he brings me a little bit of stability in the chaos," I told her. I thought I felt Klein pause in tying bandages, but Fir just smiled, nodding in understanding. "However, if you do not mind playing messenger for me, Fir?"

"Just tell me where!" she chirped, bouncing to her feet. "I'm proud of my speed!"

"Just don't run into anyone." This would be incredibly helpful, and get me a few extra minutes to rest. "So, over there on my desk are some papers. Bring them here, and I'll sort out what I need you to deliver."

"Okay!"

Sending Fir off to deliver messages actually bought me more than a few extra minutes. I ended up with an extra hour, which I decided to spend with Guinevere and Miredy. Specifically, I thought to ask Guinevere about the necklace I got from Mom.

"Now this is strange," Guinevere murmured, holding it up to the light. The sun blazed overhead, but it was too hot to travel, so we were all in tents or shaded areas in hopes of avoiding serious burns. "This is a symbol of peace, luck, and other good things like that, but it's only used in Bern." She passed the necklace back to me and I slipped it on again. "It's from before the Scouring, actually. But it's very much a Bernese symbol nowadays."
"I see…" I murmured. If I remembered correctly, though, this necklace had been an heirloom for generations, typically worn by the 'head' of the house. Mom ended up with it, though. I hadn't heard exactly how. Uncle Mark wore the bracelet that typically went with it, though he might have given it to Christopher already. "That's rather interesting." You could argue that it was just a token of friendship. Same with why Bern had two objects related to the Lady Hildegarde. But there would be no reason to keep something like that a secret, right?

"It's fun, being in this army." She smiled, but I saw it shake slightly. She was looking at the 'bright' side of things. Her encounter with her brother had really hurt her. "You learn so much about the different countries." That was true. "I had no idea Etruria had a festival devoted solely to the arts."

"You're probably talking about the Festival of Flames." It was the festival of Etruria, though there were two other major festivals throughout the year: the Festival of Thunder and the Festival of Wind. "It lasts for several days, with each day having its own theme." It was probably the only Etrurian party I liked. We made a point to visit every year, just as we always made sure to visit the Sky Festival in Bulgar. "It takes place in the month of the dragon, and I've heard it was a 'replacement' for a festival Aquelia used to host before the Scouring."

"That's in a few months, isn't it?" It was, actually. "I would love to see it. Clarine's description was so pretty…" Of course, we were now in serious danger of never having it ever again.

"It is something to look forward to, my lady," Miredy murmured. She smiled indulgently as she handed us water. "You mentioned that there was something you wanted to tell Lady Irene, though."

"Oh, right!" Guinevere gasped. She looked very serious as she faced me. "I overheard some of Zephiel's plans. I'm not sure if he'll still use them, since he knows I escaped, but they might be helpful."

"I doubt he realized you were eavesdropping."

"Maybe…" Guinevere sighed. "But regardless, it's Narcian's troops we'll be fighting in the desert. Narcian was ordered to oversee it, but I doubt he'll be here." She made a face. "It would ruin his complexion and require him working up a sweat. HA!"

"No matter how many years pass, that man refuses to grow up," Miredy sighed. "In many ways, he's still the same fifteen year old I met a decade ago."

"Fifteen?" I asked, curious. "You've known him for a while?"

"Yes, and I wish I didn't." She shook her head. "Bern trains everyone in the basics from about ages ten to fifteen, give or take a year or two, and then you split off into specializations from there. He, Galle, and me were all in the same 'year', so we met when the three of us chose to become wyvern knights." She sighed. "He hated Galle even back then, though. Galle was always ranked higher than him. Often, he took the top scores." She smiled softly. "Drove me up the wall. He was just so driven, popular yet alone. Wanted to pay Bern back for taking him in when the Lorca were massacred."

"Why did you join, if you do not mind me being nosy?"

"Expectation, really." She shrugged. "I come from a family of knights. My younger brother is a recent knight himself." I had been right, then. She was an older sister. "It was always just a thing. I would become a wyvern knight." I wondered if that 'expectation' was why her loyalty to Guinevere was greater than her loyalty to Bern. She was expected to be loyal to Bern. She chose to be loyal to Guinevere. "Narcian just wanted the glory. Always was boasting." She shook her head. "Nearly
punched him out the day he declared I would be his girlfriend."

"...Did I seriously hear that correctly?" I gave her an incredulous look and she grimaced. "He just…what?"

"According to him, I was the prettiest and strongest woman in Bern. That made me the 'best', and he 'deserved' the 'best', and so, he was claiming me." She rolled her eyes. "I told him that I didn't deserve him. Meant it as an insult. He, of course, took it as a compliment."

"Why didn't you punch him out?"

"I decided it was much easier to explain 'accidentally' knocking him off his wyvern into a dung heap." AHAHAHAHAHAHAH! "Kept at it too. Narcian, I mean. He just kept at it, hounding and hounding, trying to drag me off to places on 'dates'. I told him that if he beat Galle in the next examinations, I'd consider it."

"He lost, right?"

"Horribly." Her face softened in a bright smile. "Gave Galle the meanest glare and stormed off. I walked up to explain why Narcian was worse than usual."

"What was his reaction?"

"Galle knew." Was that so? "He happened to overhear the conversation, and since I had looked so annoyed and exhausted, he had made sure to do his absolute best."

"What was your response?"

"I called him a well-minded idiot, and then dragged him off to make him a thank-you dinner. We became friends after that." I noticed she was fidgeting with something on her finger, and felt so sad when I realized it was a ring. It was a beautiful diamond ring. "Ah, I need to check on…"

"Thanks for chatting with me." I gave her a warm smile, and she smiled back before leaving. But my smile fell as she departed, and I glanced at Guinevere, who looked ready to cry. "That ring…"

"They're engaged," she whispered. She balled her hands into fists, digging them into her knees. "Galle proposed shortly before my brother started all this madness. It's the last happy memory I have. We had a party to celebrate, and they were so happy."

"Even Zephiel came by, to congratulate them, and ordered Murdock to give him time off so that he and Miredy could go tell her family. They had just gotten back when…"

"That's…" What was there to say? I couldn't think of anything.

"I put off running for so long, scared of damaging her reputation, scared of forcing a choice on her." She shook her head violently, her hair whipping about with the motion. "I didn't want her to have to choose. But I also couldn't stand what was going on. I had to do something, and maybe if I was quick enough, she wouldn't have to choose. That's what I thought. Hoped. But it didn't…"

"...Guinevere." I rested a hand on hers, waiting until she looked up before continuing. "I swear, to our Father, the Sky, and our Mother, the Earth, if I can find a way to keep Galle from dying in this war, I will do so." It was the most formal of promises, the most sacred to Sacaeans. I could feel the air swirl around us, bearing witness to the oath. "I wish I could guarantee I can do so, but this is war. It only takes a single arrow to kill a flier." I tightened my hand on hers. "But I promise. I will do whatever I can."
"…Thank you…” Her voice cracked and she really did start crying. "But why?"

"It's not right that you and her have to sacrifice so much just for doing the right thing." I also owed them both. They told me Dad's last words. They told me of his last moments. Even with my head a mess from everything, that was a comfort. I couldn't let either of them die in good conscience. "That's all, really."

"This is war."

"Yes, well, if we give up on ideals, things will never change, right?" Mom always said that just because something was an 'ideal' did not mean you couldn't work for it anyway. Maybe, when the world was so crazy, you had to focus on ideals to make it sane again. "So, again, I promise."

"Thank you…” She leaned forward, crying into my shoulder. I stroked her hair reassuringly. "Thank you…”

That evening, after an afternoon of walking through too hot temperatures, Elphin decided his hands were recovered enough to play. I was recovered enough to sing, and Lalum hadn't been in that first wave, I think, so she was completely uninjured anyway. So, for the first time since we left the Western Isles, the three of us performed for the group. The moon glittered overhead, by the twinkling stars, and I almost thought it was Father Sky telling us He was happy we were performing again. At least, the spirits were glad. I thought I heard Dad singing along with me.

I refused to hunt out any other voices on the wind. Zephiel was lying. I had to believe that. I had to.

"Break time!" I called after a while of singing. The army groaned, but nodded. It was a shorter show than normal, but no matter how much Elphin insisted he was recovered, I could see him wincing and massaging his hand. He wasn't recovered. "Someone else perform while we rest!" There was another set of groans before someone started singing a Lycian drinking song, horribly off-key. There was a race to drown out the singer, but others only joined in, making it a raucous, almost painful, but hilarious rendition. I laughed, skirting the edges of the crowd to find a quiet place to rest and to watch.

It seemed that I wasn't the only one hunting for quiet. I saw Klein and Tate chatting on the edge of the campfire. Though I knew I really should have left them to it, I found myself creeping closer anyway. I wasn't quite sure why. It wasn't jealousy. I think. Though I did suspect Tate liked Klein too, she was also a really good friend, and jealousy was always described as 'green' and sickening and the like. I didn't feel that way. I felt curious, and I felt nervous. But I didn't feel jealous. It was weird. I had been jealous of people in the past. But I couldn't bring myself to be jealous of Tate.

"I wanted to ask you about something you said a while ago," Tate was saying. I crept just close enough to listen, and stopped before coming closer. "Do you mind?"

"No, go ahead," Klein answered. He looked confused. "What was it?"

"You said that I don't seem to be taking advantage of my freedom."

"Ah, yes, that." Klein shrugged, and I thought he winced slightly. "Just you're free to do what you want. You have no obligation to stay here."

Tate looked hesitant suddenly, and very sad. "Does that mean you don't want me around anymore?"

"Not at all." He shook his head. "I prize your friendship, Tate." I thought I saw her wince at that.
"But I'm concerned by your pay."

"...My pay?" Tate looked startled. "You're worried about my pay?"

"Ilian mercenaries contract themselves to obtain money for food, yes?" Klein crossed his arms. "But this army pays everyone on a Lycian standard. Compared to Etruria, that's low, because Lycia operates on a 'group budget' for things like weapons and supplies. And, unlike Etruria and Bern, Lycia also pays for good housing for her soldiers. So, their pay is much less, because everything else is taken care of and it's more of a 'spoil yourself' sort of thing."

"I see." She looked like she was trying to decide between being amused and exasperated. "I know the army doesn't pay well." That was something Roy and I needed to fix then. Yes, we might be following Lycia on the 'group budget' thing, but everyone really needed a good wage for this. "But I'm here on my own choice, I assure you. Please, don't worry about it."

"Very well then." He smiled. "Sorry to be a bother."

"Don't be. You're not."

She might have said more, but my curiosity was satisfied, and my nervousness was reaching a peak, so I just moved away then. Instead, I wandered the edge of the group, walking slowly. The general mood of the army was hopeful. That, in of itself, was a blessing.

"Sister!" I turned and smiled as Sue waved me over to her. "How are you feeling?" she asked as I sat down next to her. She peered at me worriedly. "Are you okay?"

"I'm recovering, Sue," I reassured. I gave her a hug for good measure. "I'm sorry. That was a situation that went very out of control, very fast."

"I hate it." She pulled away, but snatched my hands, squeezing tightly. "I was on a boat, far away, and you almost died. It's almost like with Dad."

"I know." I squeezed back. "But, we shouldn't have to separate like that again, Sue."

"You sure?"

"It's hard to be sure, but as far as I can currently see, there should be no reason." After all, the only reason she hadn't been in the first wave had been because of her seasickness. But perhaps it was a blessing in disguise. Considering how badly things went…

"Okay." She looked down sadly, but then tried to smile. It didn't quite work, but I didn't tell her. "You know, it's strange. For all the trouble we're having, none of the captain or squad leaders have fallen." I suppose it was a little strange. Soldiers died every day, but everyone that I knew by name was still alive. Ha... maybe I should have all the soldiers give me their names. Maybe that would keep them safe. "I hope that continues…"

"Elphin and I do all we can."

"I know." She looked out over the group, and looked sad. "It's begun."

"What has?"

"The army treating Roy differently." She pointed to him in the crowd, sitting between Lilina and Wolt. I saw him struggling to maintain his smile, and I could see why. The soldiers looked at him with awe, with fear. He was part dragon. He was someone who controlled power unlike any other.
He was different, other. They put him on a pedestal, and wanted to glorify him.

I couldn't stand that. I couldn't stand it at all. So, when there was a lull in the singing, I waved my hand to catch everyone's attention. "Hey, everyone!" I called, smiling. "Lalum and Elphin still need to rest, but I just remembered a great story to tell you all!" Roy was going to kill me for this. "It's the story of how Roy was convinced his shadow was a monster that was going to eat him!"

Roy immediately squawked, turning as red as his hair, but the army laughed and drowned out whatever protests he might have had. I knew that telling such a story would open me up to retaliation. Father Sky knew how many stories Marcus had.

But seeing the soldiers laugh and relax, seeing them nudge and tease Roy and no longer look at him as if he were something from legends… that was worth it. No matter what, that was worth it.

The moonlight was very pretty across the sand. It turned it a strange pearly white, that just went on and on, like a comforting blanket. Of course, it was only an illusion, but it was still a pretty picture.

The sand shifted under my feet as I walked through the camp, carrying a lamp with me. I was checking with the watch and checking that people were actually able to sleep. Those that couldn't, I sat with and listened until they nodded off. I tucked them in, and continued on to the next. I checked on the healers on patient watch duty, and was gladdened to hear that none of the injured in the infirmary had died thus far in the night. It would be difficult to bury them in the desert, and I fretted that any who were buried here would not find an easy path to Mother Earth's meadows…

I passed by Roy's tent and peeked inside, smiling softly when I saw Roy fast asleep. Lilina had nodded off in a nearby chair, likely sitting up to make sure he fell asleep. I draped a blanket over her and removed her headband, so that she could rest a little easier.

Content that they were fine, I went to check on Clarine and Sue, sharing a tent. The two of them were curled up next to each other, bedding close enough together that I thought they had fallen asleep while in the middle of telling stories. Though, the paper near them made me think they had been plotting something. I shifted their blankets a little higher on their shoulders before leaving.

Cecilia, Guinevere, and Miredy were the next on my 'list'. Miredy was still awake when I peered inside, and she smiled silently as she pointed to how Cecilia and Guinevere were fast asleep. Papers with spell patterns, and partially written incantations were sprawled on the table between their cots, hinting what they had been working on prior to falling asleep. I smiled back, and tilted my head in silent question. She shook her head, saying 'all is fine', so I moved on.

Elphin was fast asleep on his desk, strategies and half-written letters strewn about. I glanced at them, realizing he was looking up hazards to fighting in the desert. He was also penning messages to Uncle Douglas, and many crossed out and crumpled, then smoothed, ones to Perceval. Shaking my head, I dropped a blanket on him and moved some of the papers, jotting down some questions for the strategies for him to consider when he woke up.

From there, I moved on, and I sighed as I noticed something. Klein had candles burning in his tent. "Klein, what are you doing up?" I chided, walking it. He glanced up at me from the bed, but didn't reply as the answer was a little obvious. He was trying to bandage his shoulder and arm, and he had a mouthful of bandages. "Oh, seriously?" I sighed, and set my lantern down on his nightstand before sitting beside him. "I thought I saw you wince earlier." I took the bandage from him. "Here. It's tricky doing this alone."

"Yeah, I noticed," he replied dryly. He sighed, and held still as I went to work. "I thought it was
fine, but then I took off my shirt to try and sleep without dying from heat, and noticed they were bloody."

"Well, then I won't scold you for not being asleep." Carefully, I unwound the bandages to start again. I frowned at the angry red lines on his arm, running a finger over them. "Will these…?"

"They won't cripple me, but I'll be spending time attempting to regain the strength in it." He smiled slightly. "I'm fine. I'll be fine."

"I hope so." It didn't take me long at all to bandage his arm. "There we go." I got up and headed to where he normally kept his tea things. "Here, let me…" He snagged my arm as I passed him. "Klein?" I glanced down, but his head was bowed. "Hey, what's-?"

He tugged me sharply, and I all but tumbled into his lap. Before I could protest, he clung to me tightly, but still carefully. "Sorry, can you just… stay here for a moment?" he mumbled, hiding his face in my shoulder. "I just need…" His voice cracked. "I need to remember you're alive."

"Klein?" I almost asked why, or what he meant. It was a rather sudden request, after all.

But his hands shook on my back, and I put the pieces together. In that battle at Missur, I nearly died. Twice. If not for him shooting Idenn… if not for Roy being my shield… I would be dead. I knew how terrifying that feeling was. But that was not even going into everything else going on. After all, with all this craziness, we had no word of Reglay. We had no idea what happened to Uncle Pent or Aunt Louise. There was no word on Uncle Erk or Aunt Priscilla. In the chaos of Missur, he nearly lost three other friends. Cecilia only survived because of Sofia. Elphin was only alive because Guinevere shielded him, and that gave Zephiel enough pause for Roy to save the day. Tate might have been able to survive, but considering everything, Roy's blizzard was likely the only reason she was alive too. His soldiers, who he was responsible for, would have died. Some had died.

Then you had the fact that Perceval, who was also a dear friend no matter how aggravated Klein was with him, was trapped, due to his own hesitations and conflicted loyalties, on the enemy side. There was a very real threat that we would have to fight, and kill, him in order to save Etruria. Etruria, his home, the country he became a soldier and general for, the country he hoped to change, was falling apart. It would have been stranger, in my opinion, if Klein continued to act perfectly fine.

Perhaps this request wasn't really 'sudden'. It was just that he finally hit a breaking point.

So, I wrapped my arms around him, running my hand through his hair soothingly. "I'm right here," I whispered. I felt him slowly relax. "I'm right here. I won't go anywhere. I'm here, for as long as you need and want me."

I wasn't sure what else to say. But maybe that was enough for him. For us, resting in his tent, clinging to what little comfort there was… maybe it was enough.

But as he rested, I found myself thinking of what Fir said this morning. What many others had said about my feelings for Klein. I thought of Lilina, and how she had scolded me for thinking I knew what Klein was thinking or feeling. I thought… that maybe I was wrong. Maybe my insistence he didn't return my feelings was just born from my own insecurities, and not a fact at all.

But now wasn't the time for such things. Both of us were far too shaken for anything like that. Not with Etruria, and our spirits, in the conditions they were. It was something to think about, though.
It was something to think about indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Interactions! Supports! (Specifically references to Ray and Lugh's C, Rutger and Fir's B, and Klein and Tate's B) Backstory building for Miredy, and to a lesser extent, Guinevere. Most of it made up, and with partial references to Beauty and the Beast. Miredy and Galle were not mentioned to being engaged in game (in fact, the game is rather subtle about their relationship, the most blatant being their talk conversation during Chapter 21, where you fight him). Galle's part of the Camus Archetype, btw. Miredy is part of the Minerva one (and even physically resembles her quite a bit). Irene and Sue's conversation is basically them talking about how the player characters (i.e. those you control in the game) are all still alive.

Next Chapter – Arcadia (aka, one of the peaks of IS's bullshit)
Chapter 16) Arcadia

Slowly, we continue to make our way to Arcadia, Sofia leading us easily. Our injuries slowly heal, though some, like Cecilia, continue to have health issues.

The wind is howling. Someone, long ago, called the wind to protect something, and now it does so with everything it has, kicking up the sand to destroy anything in its path. Unfortunately, though, we are stuck heading right into it.

Sandstorms, injuries, and Bernese soldiers. Oh, my.

Well, I could add another thing to my 'list that I have to deal with that Mom never had to'. Based on what I flipped through in the logbook, and based on Merlinus's grumblings, they had never really had to fight through a sandstorm? At least, they never had to fight like this before.

"Ugh… of all the places we could go…" Cecilia groaned. Still, even as she complained, she reached over to make sure my hood was up. It was, after all, practically the only protection I had from the sun. "In my condition, I only have two advantages: my proficiency and my ability to move, and the latter is worthless in sands like this."

"It'll be okay, Cecilia," I reassured, twisting to smile at her. It was very unnerving, though, being on terrain that a Sacaean horse did not take with grace. My poor mare struggled with every step, and she was light. "You've also coordinated with Wuotan to teach people magic, remember?"

"Well, yes." A full third of the pegasus knights ultimately showed magic potential, and a willingness to learn offensive spells. I suppose the idea of being 'like the heroes of old' would certainly do that to a person. "But I'm not a teacher like Lord Pent or Master Erk. I'm a general. I would hope that I could function as one."

"You can't function as one if you're dead." I chose to not point out that Uncle Pent had been both a general and a teacher, only because Uncle Pent had never wanted to be a general. Mom had told me, long ago, that he had been conscripted into the army, and then promoted far too fast. A lot of Uncle Pent's continued rebelliousness and whimsical antics were because it had been the only way he could keep himself sane. "It's okay to do what you can, Cecilia." Cecilia, on the other hand, had chosen to join the army, and had further chosen to accept the position, becoming the first female Mage General since the post was created. I knew her frustrations were also from how she constantly felt the need to prove herself. Etruria was not kind to prodigies, or 'firsts'.

"I know the logic. I simply cannot find a way to reconcile my emotions with it." She sighed, drooping. "I also feel guilty."

"What would make you feel that?"

"Aside from being taken completely off-guard, and having to run away from a capital teeming with dead and letting them take Aquelia?" Well, that certainly would do it. "Aunt Katri was right there. I judged that I could not save her, that I could not keep both her and Guinevere safe, yet I cannot
"Hey, she smiled right?"

"She did." Cecilia finally relaxed some. "It was her 'everything will be okay' smile too. Still, I worry. The last time I had seen her look so thin, she had just come back from the Campaign of Fire."

"What was that like?"

"I was only a little girl. No one tells little girls anything." She shook her head. "I do remember things were tense then. I think King Mordred had been considering a war with Bern, to protect Queen Hellene and Prince Zephiel." She shook her head. "I don't know why." That was… intriguing. I had never known that. But if it was just to protect those two, then I had a guess… "But things were tense, hectic. Then suddenly, Douglas came down hard on everyone. Something Aunt Katri had told him made everything stop. Then, the next thing anyone knows, Aunt Katri is back with Lord Pent and Lady Louise, Master Erk and Lady Priscilla." She suddenly laughed. "Then after that, the next big thing was 'Mommy, what does elope mean?' and 'What do they mean when they say Aunt Katri eloped?'." She made a face. "I was so put out that my favorite babysitter wasn't around."

"Sorry!" I couldn't help but laugh too. "Was it really hectic?"

"Oh, yes. The court was throwing a tantrum, over losing one of their greatest tacticians, and over losing one of their most eligible noble ladies." Ha! "The court demanded King Mordred do something, but even if he wanted to, he couldn't. Lord Nicholas was in such good spirits." She smiled indulgently. "Ah, I still remember the first day I met you. You were a year old, all tiny and adorable."

"I'm not so tiny now."

"No, but you are still my adorable little sister." She snickered. "Perceval and I would fight over who got to carry you. He'd never admit it, but he was so attached too."

"I guess I was charming as a baby?"

"You would look at people with these big, beautiful eyes, and give the sweetest smile." She sighed. "I remember when you suddenly started crying, though. You would cry over everything." H-hey! "But I suppose my clearest memory of your first visit is Merlin."

"Oh, right, the fledgling peregrine falcon we found." I had been so upset that Perceval and Cecilia had done everything they could to tend to him. "He was your very first patient."

"Yes, and the three of us nursed him until he was ready to fly away." By that point, though, he had become attached to Perceval, and Perceval named him 'Merlin'. "All of us cried when he finally passed away." That had been a couple of years ago. By all accounts, fifteen was a very respectable age for a peregrine falcon. "I wonder how Arturia is doing…" Merlin had fathered a clutch shortly before passing, and Perceval had immediately taken to one of the hatchlings. He'd named her 'Arturia', and she was inordinately fond of him.

"I'm sure she's just fine, as is Perceval." Her smile fell. "I hope he's okay. He must feel so lost…"

"Are you seriously not angry at him?" No matter what explanations I could give, I was aggravated, and… well… "You can't tell me you're not at least a little hurt."
"Oh, well…" She sighed, drooping. "Yes, I am. But I know why, and I would have been livid if he had abandoned his soldiers to save me." I called that one. "And, honestly, since Zephiel was there, all Perceval might have accomplished was getting a severe injury like mine." I suppose that was true. "By falling back, he also did accomplish keeping Etruria casualties to a minimum. If we can get him to join us, then…" She suddenly became thoughtful. "Hey, Irene…"

"Hmm?"

"That bard, Elphin…" Oh, dear Father Sky. "Don't you think he looks like…?" ELPHIN, FREAKING TELL PEOPLE THINGS SO THAT I WASN'T IN AWKWARD SITUATIONS, DAMN IT! "Oh, Miredy." …Thank you, Father Sky, for your most wonderful timing.

"My pardon for interrupting," Miredy called as she landed by us. Guinevere immediately jumped off, and climbed up behind Cecilia. "Dame Tate just returned from her scouting."

"Then you're up," I murmured. Fliers rotated scouting patrols, and Miredy had the longest ones, since her wyvern could actually handle the heat. "Anything unusual?"

"There might have been a dragon sighting." If that was the case, then we were definitely getting close.

"Be careful."

"Do not fret, Lady Irene." Miredy smiled. "I have spent my whole life taming and riding wyverns. An overgrown one isn't going to scare me." Her eyes told me she knew what I really meant by my words, though, and her own words were her way of saying 'I will be fine.' So, I nodded and watched her take off again, careful to not launch sand into people's faces. Not like it would have mattered, of course. After all, the wind was doing more than enough of that.

"In many ways, I think she is the ideal knight," Cecilia murmured. She looked in awe. "I think all of us could learn a thing or two from her." I didn't much like the fact that the 'ideal knight' had to give up too much for all this. The choice between 'love' and 'duty' was cliché. I really hoped I could keep my promise. "Ah, but Guinevere, this reminds me. You had mentioned…"

"Cecilia, you could give me a little more time," Guinevere immediately grumbled. She looked a little put-out, but her eyes danced slightly, hinting she wasn't really mad. "But, very well." She sighed, and looked to me. "Well, Irene-eeek!" A particularly strong gust of wind, threw a bunch of sand in our faces. I swear; I was losing several layers of skin thanks to the stupid sand. "…Maybe that's a sign I shouldn't."

"No, it is a sign to get on it. Right, Irene?"

"Don't drag her into this!"

"You're the one telling her."

"Clearly, this is something the two of you have been discussing extensively," I noted dryly. I tugged my hood forward, to try and shield myself from the sand. "So?"

"Well…" Guinevere began. She squeaked again as Cecilia's horse lost its footing slightly. "That's… oh, fine, I'm just going to blurt it." What was going on? "Irene, I wish to fight with the army." …Pardon? "Please?"

"Um…" My brain just sort of stopped. "Well, I won't say no?" I was just really confused.
"...I am tired of being passive." Her eyes were firm, and Cecilia nodded encouragingly. "I feel like if I had the courage to pick up a tome in Aquelia, we could have saved more people. We could have gotten Katri out of there." Oh... "If I had the courage to pick up a tome, then maybe Cecilia would not be so injured. Maybe you all would not have gotten so close to death." I got it now. The 'what ifs' were started to kill her. It was the same mentality that led to her serving as a healer in the infirmary. "I know both anima and light magic. I know how to heal. I can help Clarine be a field healer, and I have the advantage of knowing how to fight back." That she had access to two types of attacking magic was incredibly rare. "So, please?"

"I see no issue." I smiled warmly and she smiled back, clearly relieved. "You two head to Elphin and let him know." This might be a little mean, but if he still hadn't told Cecilia, I was going to 'subtly' remind him that he needed to inform his friend and mage general. Honestly, Elphin, sometimes... "I need to check in with Roy and Sofia."

"Okay!" Despite her cheer, I could see the pain in her face. It hurt her to actively fight her country. But she couldn't stand by any longer. That hurt her more.

So, I kept the smile on my face as she and Cecilia carefully headed to the back, where Elphin was resting with Klein. Only when the sands made them leave my sight did I urge my mare towards where Roy and Sofia were riding. While normally he would be riding with Lilina, she had opted to ride with Wuotan instead for some extra magic lessons. So, he was riding with Sofia, getting tips on how to control his ice magic.

"Roy!" I called when I got close, mostly so that I didn't startle the two. "Hey there!" I managed to come along side them, and saw them smiling. "Guinevere is going to join us on the field."

"Is she?" Roy asked, startled. His eyes turned sad. "I guess she's giving up on things ending peacefully." I was pretty certain the whole continent gave up on that. "Well, if it is her decisions, then we need to simply support her." Yes, we did. "Sofia, are we close?"

"Yes..." Sofia confirmed. She looked distinctly uncomfortable. "Do we... have to go... so fast...?" Fast? "We are... quite high up..."

"This is a rather slow pace. But, I guess your home doesn't have horses."

"No..." She shook her head. "I do not... like heights... I once fell... from a dragon's back... in flight..." That did not sound good. "So... um..."

"We'll hopefully be breaking soon." Hopefully, we'd be there soon. "But should we not wait for the sandstorm to pass?"

"It will not..." Was that so? "These sandstorms... have always protected our village from intruders..." Her smile was soft and sad. "The Archsage... conjured them..." So, Athos himself was responsible for our current headache.

"You think he could have conjured a way from harming allies?" I asked dryly. I felt like I had lost some skin thanks to the sand. "This is annoying."

"Well, it makes sense," Roy 'helpfully' pointed out. He shrugged when I glowered. "I can imagine that most who wanted into this mess would give up quickly."

"I think they died, actually, and I'm wanting to avoid that fate."

"True." He smiled warmly. "We must live to reunite with Father, Aunt Lyn, and Aunt Katri." Yes, we had to.
"Um…" It took me a full second to realize Sofia was trying to talk to me. "Is there… a reason… you do not…?" she began. I could tell she was struggling to think of the words, and struggling because she did not want to sound accusing. "You do not… send a messenger…?" Now, where did this come from? That was… well, I suppose it wasn't completely off-topic, considering what Roy said.

"Assuming I would be willing to damn two pegasus knights to fly through the desert, alone, where there are Bernese soldiers and sandstorms all over the place, just to satisfy my own curiosity?" I replied with a little laugh. The thought had occurred to me. "The only spy network who would possibly have information is Lycia's and, even then, I do not think they have any operatives in Etruria yet. That's Mom's last location according to Cecilia." Uncle Legault's last message had him returning to Lycia from Bern, with two presumably injured people at that. "I dare not send a pegasus knight there either, not when all of this is going on." I shrugged. "I'm curious, yes, but I will not risk someone just for that." No matter how much I wanted to prove that Zephiel was a liar, I would not. I was a tactician, and a leader, and I would act like it. If I waited this long to reunite with Mom, I could wait a little longer.

"Oh…" She nodded, but there was something sad about her. Then again, she was always rather melancholic. "Ah, the enemy…" Her eyes darted to the side. "They… approach…"

"Then let the battle begin."

We lost soldiers because of the sand. Footing would change, or someone just wasn't able to move out of range in time. Sometimes, the entire freaking dune would just collapse suddenly, swallowing up everything unlucky enough to be standing on it.

That wasn't even going into those who dropped because of the high heat, and those who had to fall back due to severe dehydration and sunburns.

"Father Sky, how many times to I have to yell?!!" I screamed. Sand caught in my mouth, making me hack and cough. I had tied a cloth around my mouth before, but had long since given it up. I couldn't give tactical orders with it on. "Listen to me!" Sand tasted horribly, and there had been so much that I was almost certain my mouth was bleeding. That was not even going into my constantly tearing eyes, thanks to the sandstorm. We lost quite a few just from being blinded, because the only way we could think of to protect our eyes was tie pieces of cloth over them. You couldn't do that in a fight. "Keep your guard up, and be prepared for attacks from above!"

Nothing was more terrifying in a desert that a flier. Nothing.

"Left flank, you need to fall back!" Position mattered in a desert battle, even more so than a normal battle. No one could move fast. Few could move well. Bern took advantage of that. "Shanna, need you to tell Elphin we need the third wave now!" This was all just a nightmare.

"Lady Irene…" Sofia tugged my pant leg to catch my attention. "Over there…" she whispered, pointing in the distance. "Bern's dragons…"

"So, there's one," I murmured, eyes narrowing as I tried to make out more than a shadow. "Miredy reported seeing four…" Sofia helped me figure out where they were, but I couldn't relay that well. "Something…" I thought of the dragon in the Isles. In human form, it had worn a cloak of red. "Sofia?"

"Yes…?"
"Do any dragons of your home wear red cloaks?"

"No…" She shook her head. "It is… unlucky… to wear a cloak the color of blood…"

"So, anyone with a red cloak is likely a Bernese dragon." Then… "Everyone, target the red cloaks!" The War Dragons were fierce, powerful, but they had a clear weakness. They took time to transform, and did not seem to be able to hold the form that long. In a 'human' form, they were weaker. That was when we would strike. "If they transform, get out of range!" Dragons were heavy. The sand slowed them down incredibly. "Do not, I repeat, do not engage them while they are in their draconic form!" There were too many dead already. I could see their bodies disappear under the blown about sand. I only had to look to the side to see the sands claim them, one by one, until only their fingertips could be seen. In a few seconds, it wouldn't even be that.

Honestly, though, I hated the sand the most because of the way the blood just… ran through it. It lingered far longer than it did in the ground and mud because of that.

"Lady Irene…" Sofia tugged my pant leg sharply again. "We must hurry," she whispered. But, though her voice was soft, her words held no hesitancy. "We must."

"No." Her voice was sharp, but I could tell it was from fear. "No, there is a storm coming. A thunderstorm." I glanced up at the sky and through squinted, tearing eyes, I thought I did see clouds gathering. "It is dangerous."

"It would firm up the sand?" It might clear away the blood.

"Eventually, yes." Sofia shook her head. "But it is common for there to be heavy rains, and the sand cannot absorb the water quickly." Was that so? …That would mean…

"Flooding." The rains would bring a flash flood. "How violent would it be?"

"Since we are near dry channels, and this battle has created large ditches…" The answer was 'very'. "It looks to be a large storm." She closed her eyes, and I wondered if she was actively trying to read the future. "If it is like the storm back then… we could get a wall of water as high as the walls of Arcadia." That… was going to be high. "Trees will be uprooted. Boulders will move."

"Basically, if we don't get within Arcadia soon, there's a good chance we're going to drown in the desert." I looked back at the field, gritting my teeth. "We just need to get within the walls." If that was the case… "Change of plans, everyone!" I ducked under a bolt of lightning, flinching as it clipped my ear. "Charge forward to the walls! NOW! Someone inform the others! Ignore any and all enemies that you can safely avoid!"

It was a mess. People didn't hear the order and so the charge forward was a strange, stumbling thing, like a child taking its first steps. I ended up dismounting and forcing Sofia on my horse when a mage nearly burned her alive. Then it was shooting down fliers who tried to ambush my group, praying that I wasn't accidentally aiming at Miredy. I wouldn't know until it was far too late in these conditions.

"Lady Irene!" A hand fell on my shoulders, and I jerked my head up to see Wuotan behind me. Unlike… everyone else, he seemed almost at home in the desert, and unbothered by the heat. "Come, into the walls," he said, tugging me along. "Quickly. There's a-"

A roar cut him off, and I sighed. "There's a dragon," I groaned. Sure enough, one quickly appeared from the fog of the sandstorm, prepped for an attack. "Well, that's kind of bad." Neither of us could move, and the dragon was about to attack with fiery breath. "Maybe if I shoot out its eye…”
"...Stay behind me." He shifted so that he was firmly in front of me. Was he...?!

"No!" I grabbed him by the arm, trying to drag him out of the way. He would not budge. "I will not let someone be my shield again!"

"Stay behind me!" That... that was authoritative. So much so that I could only freeze as the fire roared towards us.

But then, it halted. Wuotan held up his hand, and it halted... no, it didn't. He parted it. Like the water rushing around a rock in the stream, he diverted the flames to either side of us. How did he...?

"Tragic puppet..." he whispered. The dragon flinched back, writhing in pain. "Disappear."

It broke apart. It shattered like glass, and a strange, whitish light gathered in his palm. What was... hold on, what just...?

"Yes, this should be enough..." He turned to me with a smile, and poured the white light over me, like it was water. I could sense the weight of something falling on me, and could hear the whispers of many people linger briefly in the air. "How do you feel?"

"Confused," I told him bluntly. I reached up, but felt nothing on my head. "Was that... quintessence?"

"Yes. I used it to replenish the bit you lost, to hasten your recovery."

"You manipulated it."

"Yes."

"I thought dragons..."

"You require either a dragon's blood or a dragon's knowledge in order to manipulate quintessence."

His pained smile begged me not to ask more.

So, I simply asked one thing. "You are on our side, yes?"

"Lady Irene, I assure you, I am always on your side." He ruffled my hair. "I promise." That... would be enough for me, then. "Quickly. To the walls before the storm comes." RIGHT!

By sheer luck, we managed to make it to the walls without encountering anyone else. Wuotan and I quickly split up once we were there, as I had to find Roy, and possibly Elphin, to discuss the next step, and he had his own duties.

However, as I pushed my way through the crowd, tripping on corpses wearing Bernese armor, I noticed something strange. Sue and Sin were a short distance away, and Sue looked furious.

"You were ambushed," she said, eyes dark but voice even. "I heard you were ambushed."

"Yes," Sin confirmed. He was as passive as always. "But I am unharmed." Sin held up his hands, almost like we were children again, showing a parent that our hands were washed. "See?"

"...I want you to retreat to the back lines." Sue's voice was crisp and no-nonsense. "I will take over for you."

"What are you saying, Lady Sue?" A bit of anger bled into Sin's voice. "It should be you in the
"No, this is an order!" I didn't suppose these two could *talk to the tactician about this* before arguing *in the middle of a crazy, chaotic fight.* "Step. Back." You know… it wasn't really like Sue to let her anger show.

"…You're not acting like yourself." Sin almost looked confused. "It isn't like you to let your anger show." See? "Lady Irene is the one who wears her temper like a blade." Ahaha… ha… "Is something wrong?"

"I…" Sue's expression immediately crumpled. "Everyone… everyone is gone…" Her voice suddenly cracked, and I knew she was crying, even as she ducked her head. "Dad's dead. Mom's… captured. She's captured. She's not dead; she's just captured." That's right. Zephiel was only lying. "The Kutolah are scattered. Some are safe in Pherae, but the rest are bleeding or dead in the plains. And I almost *lost my sister!* While I was weak, battling a stupid motion sickness, she almost *died!*

She shook her head almost violently. "I'm tired of losing people! I'm tired of *almost* losing people!" She clung to his shirt. "I don't want to lose anyone else… I don't want to lose you… so please…"

Her voice cracked again. "Please, just go to the back… I can't convince Irene to do so, so please…"

"Lady Sue…" Sin hesitated before hugging her tightly, letting her cry on his shoulder. "You know I cannot stay back. I have my duty to guard you, and I wish to be of help to Lady Irene."

"But…"

"…I will not die before you." Sin's words were soft; I could barely hear him over the howling wind. "Is that all right?"

"Swear it."

"I swear to our Father, the Sky, and our Mother, the Earth." I should… probably leave them for now. I'd check on her later.

So, despite desperately wanting to go comfort her, I instead continued my search for Roy. I found him not too far away, in what seemed to be a village square with Sofia, both of them surveying everything. They both barely acknowledged me as I joined them.

"Where are the villagers?" Roy finally whispered. He was staring at the blood splattering the walls. I noted that a lot of the nearby corpses were dead by arrows. Someone around here was a skilled archer. "Are they…?"

"It is… okay…" Sofia reassured. She was looking, however, at a nearby building made of pure stone. "They probably… hid…" Well, there didn't seem to be enough blood or unarmored bodies around for a massacre, so that did seem likely. "But the entrance to the temple…"

"Temple? Oh, this building." Roy's eyes narrowed. "It looks like its been forced open." It more than 'looked'. The hinges were ripped off. "What lies in the temple?"

"Our king…" Was that so? "And Forblaze…"

"The Divine weapon?!"

"Yes." Sofia nodded. "Fiona brought it with her… to tell us of his death on Valor, twenty years ago. We put it in the temple, with our sleeping king, and sealed it to keep them both safe…"

"Then we need to go and *keep* it safe." Time for another Divine Weapon, it seemed.
What price would this one hold?

Notes on Cecilia

- *Mage General of Etruria. Normally a powerful mage and talented healer, but recent injuries have made it difficult for her to use her full strength.*
- She retains her proficiency, though, and serves as a tutor to the others, though she is very frustrated that this is all she can do.
- *My 'big sister' who I love to tease about her feelings for Perceval, and who is always there for me.*
- *Her affinity is Anima.*

Notes on Sofia

- *Half-dragon girl from Arcadia. Quiet and shy, and possesses both Foresight and Insight*
- *She is capable of 'draconic magic' as well as 'human magic', hinting she is actually an 'Awakened' half-dragon. I find it strange that she specializes in dark magic, though.*
- *She's rather weak and frail, but if she can master her strength, she could end up quite powerful.*
- *Her affinity is Dark, like Dad's.*

Notes on Guinevere

- *Princess of Bern, second child of King Desmond, sister to King Zephiel. A kind woman who desperately wanted to stop the war before it began, and keenly feels her failures.*
- *Not a lot of faith in her ability to take damage, but her willingness to wear armor, unlike most mages, helps with that.*
- *Powerful and, more importantly, versatile. I know of no other person who knows both anima and light magic, and she can heal on top of that.*
- *Her affinity is Light, like mine.*

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: This chapter is the height of BS. It's a desert map, meaning you have movement restrictions seen nowhere else and hidden goodies (including the Boots and the Silver Card). It's Fog of War. You have to deal with two forced units, one of which is mounted and thus has no movement (and IS, typical, did not give the *female* general stats befitting her title). The *other* is a level one dark mage with only 3 con, with low as hell stats all around, can easily be oneshotted by everything on the map, and you must *escort* in order to get a special item only *she* can get (a Guiding Ring, in a game that can be stingy on promotion items). There are dragons hiding in the fog. There are bishops with Recover and Status staves (notably sleep). Oh, and there's a time limit if you want the Gaiden. Which, you do, because you are locked out of the 'good/true ending' otherwise.

In game, Guinevere is only playable during Trial Maps. But prototype notes indicated she was intended to be another 'lord' at some point, so… why not? Added the threat of a thunderstorm for the time limit (in game, you know if you went past the time limit by the sandstorm dissipating). Sin and Sue's conversation is based on their A support.
Chapter 16x) The Infernal Truth

In the hidden village of Arcadia, there is a temple normally locked and sealed. But Bernese soldiers have broken into it, perhaps revealing their true motive to attacking Arcadia: hunting for Forblaze, the Scorching Reason, the Infernal Truth, weapon of Athos, the Archsage.

To try and protect the divine weapon, and to drive out the last of Bern's soldiers from Arcadia, we follow them into the temple, deep underground.

It was strangely cool. Underground, it was strangely cool. It made sense. We were out of the sun. But, it was still startling, how cool it was. The sound of water lapping over stones was comforting. Though, the sheer amount of water was beyond startling.

"There is so much water…?" Roy breathed. Only a small group of us were in the temple. Elphin stayed with the bulk of the forces, to organize a defense. Roy and I headed below, and were just… staring at everything. "Why is there so much water?"

"This is close to a source of groundwater…" Sofia explained as she walked up. She knelt down, running her hand through the water. "This is the reason plants and animals can live in our village."

"You really got lucky, finding such an idyllic spot…"

"It was not luck." She shook her head. "Athos saved us. He traveled the continent after the Scouring, and eventually came upon our village… we were struggling to survive… especially the humans…" She smiled softly. "But he led us to an old… abandoned village… and told us to live and make it our own… I was a child at the time, but I remember the sadness in his face… I think it was his home, once, long ago." She was a child then? She… how old was she? "This was once a temple to the spirits. Now, though, it simply holds our sleeping king and Forblaze."

"Is it safe?"

"Yes, the altar cannot open… except to someone of dragon blood." She straightened, and turned to face us, eyes serious. "You want to use Forblaze, yes?"

Roy nodded. "If it is all right."

"As long as you use it… to save Elibe and protect us… then of course…" She shook her head. "But I… do not know the price. I do not know if it still has one…"

"So, what can you tell us about the temple?" I asked, as Roy visibly drooped. A quick glance around showed it crawling with Bernese troops, but I noticed an additional odd thing. "Why are they wet?"

"They must… have fallen in," Sofia murmured. She looked out over everything, eyes sad. "The temple is… enchanted with old, draconic magic. Some of the pathways will… suddenly sink into or rise from the water."
What. "Why do that?"

"To befuddle invaders...." She shrugged. "There is... a temple in the east with similar properties... though I do not know what it once guarded..."

"I see." I glanced around, eyes narrowed. "Okay. I'm not playing the game."

"Pardon?"

"We have people who can swim, and we have thunder magic." We also had Roy, who had ice magic. "So..." The wind, what little there was, suddenly screamed. "Duck!" Two seconds after I dragged Roy and Sofia down with me, a giant lightning bolt blackened the tiles right in front of us. "Why do they have bolting, and, by Father Sky, where are they shooting it from?"

"Is everyone okay?" I glanced up as Elen ran over. "That certainly came from nowhere," she continued, voice a little shaky. I didn't answer her, but looked back to check on everyone. Roy, Sofia, Elen, Tate, Allen, Wade, Lot, Miredy, and Cecilia. That was our group, and they all looked okay. "Lady Irene? Lord Roy?"

"We're fine," Roy reassured, standing up. He sighed, shaking his head. "Well, they have bolting." The worst part was that, like other spells, they had been refined to be easier on the body, allowing for a faster casting. If they targeted a slow enough person, there was a good chance they'd fire off two bolts before the target could move. Though, bolting did have fewer pages compared to other tomes. "I'm sorry, Irene, but this is going to be a strange one."

"Nothing will ever be stranger than a little brother summoning a blizzard," I deadpanned. He smiled sheepishly. "What we really need is to get someone over to the bolters as fast as possible."

"Would you like to use the warp staff?" Elen asked. I knew my expression blanked. "It might be difficult to get a sighting in, but..."

"We have a warp staff?" Since when did we have a warp staff? I could not have overlooked that.

"Yes, we found it in the sands to the south." She shrugged off my incredulous look. "The wind uncovered it as we dashed inside the walls."

"Are you serious?" Why was this the first I heard about this?! "What else was there?"

"Well, there might have been a silver blade, but mostly, I remember the silence staff."

"Is that so?" I smiled slowly. We had both silence and warp? Father Sky, I thank you for your tricks. "Well, I have a plan, and it is 'I am definitely not playing this game'."

Let's end this quickly.

Roy iced the water. Those who could swim used the ice as a launching platform to jump into water. When our people were out, we knocked the enemies into the water and electrocuted them. When someone tried to do the same to ours, we used silence to stop them. That was after fliers sighted the center of the temple and helped our staff users warp people there.

All in all, it really wasn't that difficult, especially compared to the battle it took to get here.

"Sofia, fall back to get healed!" I called, eyes narrowing. She really was very fragile. She was powerful, yes, but very fragile. "I don't care if you're half-dragon. That's a bad injury, so go and get
healed." Her smile was warm as she listened to me, and I wondered if she had truly thought I would prioritize others over her, because she was part dragon. "Tate, what's the report on dealing with the leaders?"

"It took Wade and Lot a bit thanks to how fast the leader was," Tate replied, swooping down next to me. "General Cecilia had to focus a lot on keeping them healed." I could only hope that helped her feel useful... "But he's dead. We're just cleaning up the last now."

"Father Sky, thank you for your-" Screams cut me off. "Oh, what happened this time?"

"Um..." Tate pointed to something up ahead, near where Roy was freezing some water. "That happened."

"What the...?" I could only stare in shock. At first glance, we had a dragon glaring at us. However, on a second glance, it was kind of transparent. "Why is it transparent?" I sighed heavily. "Tate, keep an eye on everyone. I, apparently, need to see what's going on."

"Have fun." She was off instantly, and I walked over to where Roy was, both of us staring at the very transparent dragon.

"So, this is... an illusion or something?" Roy asked, poking at the 'dragon'. His hand passed right through it. "I've read of desert mirages, but I don't think this is one."

"Neither do I," I agreed. So, what caused this? Was this a bending of light? "Hey, we're not enemies, and we've seen through this, so if you can just... show your real self?" The 'dragon' disappeared. "Is that a 'yes'?"

There was no answer. But a woman stepped out from the shadows, a woman wearing a long skirt with slits high up the sides, and a sleeveless shirt that showed her belly, not unlike what Lalum wore. Her long pink hair was tied up in a bun-ponytail style, and her bright green eyes glittered with suspicion.

But that suspicion cleared when she saw us, jaw dropping. I had no idea who was more shocked: Roy, me, or Fiona.

"Roy, what are you doing here?" she breathed, waving her hand to dispel the dragon. That had been her? "And your aura..."

"Yeah, I 'awakened'," Roy replied slowly. He looked very, very hesitant. "I know. I know Mother was..."

"I see." She sighed. "Oh, how Ninian would weep."

"Well, it kept me from dying, and kept my friends safe. Many of us would be dead, if not for the strength I inherited from her." He shook his head. "But to answer your question, we came with Sofia. She asked for help, and is around here... somewhere?"

"She ducked back to get an injury treated," I answered, walking up. Fiona looked almost relieved to see me, for some reason. "It's... been a while."

"It has," Fiona agreed. She walked over and started laughing suddenly. "You grew." Yes, I had. I was taller than her now. That was startling, really. She always seemed to tower over me as a child. "Goodness, I think you're the same height as Hartmut. He was always the tallest of us."

"Did you just say 'us'?" That would mean...
"Yes…" She smiled wryly, even as she bowed. "I am Fionataralis, princess of the divine dragons, a half-dragon capable of transforming, once. I've been helping run the place since I returned after Ninian's death."

"You were 'once' capable?"

"Yes, though thanks to the Ending Winter, and my proximity to the divine weapons, it's rather dangerous for me to transform nowadays." She straightened, crossing her arms. "It doesn't help that I'm at the end of my life, also thanks to those two things. Truthfully, I expected to be dead a while ago, like… other friends. I suppose the fact that I could transform extended my life beyond theirs." She shook her head. "If Bern was looking for dragons to break into transforming, they chose a poor place. The only one who can is Fae, a child." That name was familiar… was it in Mom's logbook?

"Why her?"

"She was a baby during the Ending Winter, unlike everyone else. Thus, she was able to quickly adapt."

"What of dragons born after?"

"No dragons have been born after the Ending Winter. Only half-dragons who either cannot transform, like Sofia, or those who can, but hold risks because of the strain."

"In 1000 years, not a single dragon child has been born?"

"Dragons were never able to carry children to term easily." She laughed a little. "But I am distracted. Igrene, it's safe." Who?

"I'm glad to hear that." A woman stepped out from the shadows, with a small child clinging to her leg, who looked a lot like Fiona. "Are they friends of yours, Lady Fiona?" the woman asked. The bow in her hand, and the easy way she held it, made me remember the corpses in the city. "You do not seem to be on edge."

"Roy here, is part dragon," Fiona explained, gesturing to him. He immediately bowed politely. "I babysat him and Irene." She gestured to me, and I nodded a greeting. I smiled and waved at the little girl when I saw she was staring at me curiously. "They came with Sofia."

"I am relieved to hear that." The woman nodded back at me. "I am Igrene, Guardian of the Nabata. Normally, I'd be the one fighting off you lot, but it seems Bern had other plans." That they did.

"What brought you here?"

"Well, Sofia asked for help?" Roy answered slowly. I knew he was picking his words with care. "We also wished to ensure Forblaze did not make it into Bern's hands. If you will allow it, we also wish to use it against the dragons they field, but we will understand if you would rather we didn't."

"Bern has dragons?" Igrene asked, noticeably startled. Had she not seen the ones outside? … Considering the sandstorm and how she likely would have been focused on evacuation, that actually was very likely. "I wonder if this has anything to do with the dark force Sofia sensed."

"It could be," Fiona answered. She sounded, and looked, resigned. "If Bern has dragons, then they must have awakened the demon dragon." Mmm… "Igrene…"

"Yes, it might be best for me to go and investigate with them." Igrene focused on us again. "If you will allow it, of course."
"I see no reason to refuse," Roy replied, smiling warmly. "But we are an army. Will you be all right with following orders?" She nodded. "Then there are definitely no problems."

"Fae's going too!" the little girl suddenly chirped. She tugged at Igrene's cloak, eyes sparkling. "Fae wants to go too!" Um…

"No, Fae," Igrene replied, stroking her head. It didn't stop her from drooping. "Things will get dangerous if Bern learns you are here." Yes, that was likely-

"General Roy! Lady Irene!" Both of us whirled at the voice, seeing a soldier slide over to us. "Trouble above!" they reported, even before they got their footing. "Massive influx of enemies!" Was that so? "However, there is thunder…" The predicted storm was approaching.

Then, it was time to make sure our people were safe within the walls.

By the time the rain fell, we had everyone safe, including the villagers. But those outside the walls were not so lucky. Bern's soldiers were flailing about in the waters, desperately trying to drown as they rose and moved like the waves of the ocean. Even their wyvern knights fell to the lightning and rain, as it was too much for them to stay aloft.

I stood on the walls, wearing a cloak to shield me from the rain, and watched it all alongside some of the others. I watched them fight and flail for their lives, and drown when the waters rose too high and stole their strength. They… deserved it. After everything they did, Bern deserved anything that happened to it. For the massacre of Bulgar, the slaughter of the Kutolah, the ambush at Araphan, the rebellion in Ostia… for their invasion of Lycia, for the coup in Etruria… for killing Dad, Uncle Hector, and Oswin… for capturing Mom… they deserved all of it.

So, why did I feel like I was dying, watching them struggle and drown? If they deserved it, why did I feel guilty?

"Help!" I heard one of them scream. It was a young boy, who did not look much older than Roy, with eyes wide with fear. "Please, someone, anyone, help!" He didn't have much longer. Soon, he would turn quiet, his body focused on desperately trying to survive. They he would slip under, the waters claiming him. "Please!" He was a Bern soldier. He deserved it. For everything Bern did, he… "Help!"

I threw off my cloak and jumped in. They deserved it, but I couldn't stop myself.

It was brutal, swimming through. I swore the water was alive, a hungry beast desperate to devour everything. But I had enough strength, and height, to swim through anyway. But it was just barely. My feet scraped the bottom.

"I have you," I whispered, grabbing the struggling soldier. He coughed and sputtered, staring at me with wide eyes. "I have-" A wave washed over both of us, and I almost lost him. "Just hold onto me!" This water tasted horribly gritty.

But the soldier clung to me, sobbing as he babbled prayers. It took most of my strength to drag him to the walls. Of course, I needed to figure out how to-

"Little Lady Irene!" A rope fell down, right by my face. "Get that around him!" Deke yelled, leaning over the walls. "I'll pull him up!" Another rope fell next to me. "Tie that one around you so that we can keep you grounded!"

"Thank you!" I shouted. I got the rope around the soldier, and helped him grab onto the rope. "Just
hold on. They'll help you." I looked back up. "Is anyone else being crazy like me?"

"Some want to."

"The water is high. I can barely touch the ground."

"I'll stop the short ones."

Managing a smile, I used the wall to push off, swimming towards some others. I saw some of the fliers swooping down, trying to help free some of the people. It was difficult for them, as the rain pounded the wings, and feathers held onto water. But they still managed some. As I pulled a couple more over to the wall, I saw Miredy help some wyverns escape the water, and then use them as points to pull out more.

"M-my little sister! She's out here! Please, please, you have to..." "I'll do my best. Just stop flailing."

On the wall, those who could not swim, or were too short to safely swim in these waters, helped pull out soldiers. At some point, Roy managed to ice some of the water, providing small bridges. They didn't last long, thanks to the heat and water, but often, they lasted just long enough to get help. That was all we needed.

"Mother... mother... please... I..." "I've got you. Just fight to stay awake."

My heart stopped every time I saw a bolt of lightning, but it always was just far enough away to prevent us from getting electrocuted. I thought it might be Father Sky's way of approving of what we were doing. But the guilt still overwhelmed me.

"Let me be! My little brother... he can't swim! He's under the water! Just leave me and-!" "I have you, so just stop. I'll get him next."

What was I doing, saving Bernese soldiers? They, and soldiers like them, killed and hurt everyone. Each life I saved felt like a betrayal to the dead. But each person I did not save felt like a betrayal to me. Damned if I do, damned if I don't.

"Thank you... thank you..." "Save your breath. You're not in the clear yet."

But the lightning stayed clear as we continued saving each Bernese soldier we could before the water rose too high for us. Despite Sofia's warnings, we did not see the first boulder or uprooted tree until we were back safely on the walls. Whatever my feelings, Father Sky and Mother Earth made theirs clear: they approved.

If only that were enough to make me feel better...

The storm continued on and on, but Arcdia itself had clever ways to divert water out of the streets to prevent flooding within the walls. But I could see why Sofia was so worried when we fought before. The water was horrendously high. It wasn't exactly something I expected to ever see in a desert. Some part of me honestly wondered if it was another defense mechanism Athos might have set up. But, then again, I barely knew anything about deserts. It could be normal.

Regardless, as the rain fell, I found myself in the temple, staring at Forblaze. We had been permission to use it by the village elder, but Roy had opted to leave it in the temple until we were ready to depart. On the surface, it looked like a fancy fire tome. But it was a 'divine weapon', 1000 years old. It was... strange.
Sighing, I turned away from it, and walked down the stairs. Now that there was no 'danger', the tiles stayed still. Curious, I walked down a path that we did not fight on, into another part of the temple. It soon led me to another altar, one that did not hold a dusty old tome. Instead, it held a person in a glass coffin. Who was this? Sofia had mentioned…

"I had wondered if you wandered here." I glanced back and saw Fiona walking up, steps light and soft. "You always were a curious explorer," she teased, before nodding to the coffin. "This is Helios, king of the Divine Dragons." He looked fast asleep, under the glass. His long hair was a shockingly bright pink, like Fiona and Fae's. "My father, and Fae's." She came to stand next to me, running her fingers over the glass. "I will never forgive Nergal for what he did."

"How did he end up like this?" How long had he been asleep?

"…When Athos was traveling through the desert, he came across Nergal. He hadn't known who he was, but I did. He was an old friend. So, when Athos brought him to Arcadia, I vouched for him." Her eyes were sad. "We spent long days here in Arcadia, laughing and joking. He and Athos would pour over texts at the tavern, and I'd point out mistakes, teasing them. It was fun."

"But then something happened."

"Nergal began experimenting with quintessence, making morphs." Was that so? "Then he decided to try for a dragon's. But getting it from an adult dragon would be tricky, so he went after a child.

"…He went after Fae."

"Father saw what was happening and intercepted the blow. It would have obliterated Fae." Her nails scratched the glass as she curled her fingers into a fist. "There was a battle after that. I was in so much shock that I couldn't do much but hold Fae and beg Father to stay awake, to stay alive. Athos delivered the parting shot, and we thought it was the end of it."

"But it wasn't."

"No." She shook her head. "I left Arcadia, purposely leaving a trail to draw Nergal away from here. Athos set up the sandstorms and waited, planning on using Nergal's greed to do away with him." She laughed bitterly. "Ended up having to fight him. Nergal, I mean. He tried to go after Bramimond, and I happened to be visiting. He was so lost to the dark that he didn't even recognize me." She shrugged, but I saw the pain in her eyes. "That made him have to hide on Valor for a while, only able to perform experiments with his morphs. Though, another group of people managed to set those back by almost twenty years." She tugged my arm, leading me away from Helios. "You look startled."

"I take it that when you live for countless centuries, you play the very long game."

"Oh, yes. Hilda was almost killed because Hydra played one such game." …Who was Hydra? "But it's a skill you learn once you get older than a century."

"I see." I dug my heels in as we passed by the altar with Forblaze. "Hey, Fiona." I walked up the stairs again, looking at the tome again. "What is…?"

"What is its price?" She sighed when I nodded. "If you know the truth of who you are fighting, will you still keep going?" She hovered her hand over Forblaze. "That is Forblaze's question, and its price. The bearer learns the 'truth' of those they kill. Their last thoughts, their dreams, wishes, loved ones... bits and pieces filter in, turning a faceless enemy into a person. Every victim devoured by the flames."
"Question?"

"The Divine Weapons, in truth, ask questions." She closed her eyes. "Armads asks, 'if you knew a violent death awaited you, would you still take up the axe?'. Durandel asks, 'if the person you love most dies by your action, will you continue forward anyway?. Their answers are their prices."

"Why?"

"Martin made them that way." She smiled wryly. "He purposely… made them that way… to make sure his most powerful weapons, weapons that warped reality, would not fall into the hands of madmen." She laughed bitterly. "He knew what they could do, as he was forging them. He knew a weapon that would poison the smith would wreck havoc on the world. So, he set up a countermeasure. Probably the only deliberate invention he ever did. He was always taking chances, making mistakes, but also making miracles."

But that would mean… "So, wait, he sacrificed…?"

"Yes, though we did not learn it until after he died, and he admitted in his letter that he did not quite realize the extent. He made the questions, but it was the power that made them deadly." She sighed. "But yes, he forged the weapons, picked the ones he wanted to wield, knowing they would have consequences." She shook her head. "But that is why Eksesachs has no price. He made it for Hilda, the Lady Hildegarde, and he could not bear to force a price on her. He loved his 'sister' too dearly."

"But he could on Saint Elimine?"

"Well, that one was unintentional." She snickered. "He made light magic. But that meant every light magic was an experiment. He had not wanted it to have a price, though. I remember him crying when he realized it had one." She became serious again. "But the rest? The rest, he did."

"What did the others…?" How did they feel about it?

"They understood, after a moment of shock." She crossed her arms, eyes nostalgic. "Keep in mind, Martin died while we were in the lands now called 'Bern'. It was only in the letters he left behind that he explained, but that was because he did not have the strength. Everything was focused on the 'final battles' and, regardless of the price, they gave us the strength to end the war then, which is what we all wanted." The Smith Martin died forging the divine weapons. That was a lesson all Etrurian children learned; I helped Klein study for that particular history test. "Martin was never a soldier. He helped people because he thought it was the right thing to do. He forged the weapons so that his children could live in peace, so that his surviving family could find some sort of happiness. But weapons… they last. Especially these ones."

"So, he put the prices, knowing that someone would take them up again."

"Yes." She sighed. "Of course, he hadn't known just how powerful they were, and that they would be sealed away. He had thought they would be out and about for use." Thus, he had made sure only people of a certain determination could use them. "But, and this is important… the prices are still there. All of them." They all were…? "The prices are part of the power. They are part of the weapons. You cannot separate them."

"Then, do I need to worry about…?" I groped for words, but found none. How was I supposed to plan for this?

"As near as I can tell, Durandel has quieted." Her smile turned wry. "There's a reason for that.
Durandel got its answer to its question." …That meant Rutger would have… oh, hell, the massacre of Bulgar… if he had fought back, then maybe… "It should be fine. But Armads will curse the wielder. Forblaze will exact its price. All of them will, even if they are weakened."

"…Then, I have a request." I looked right at her. "Wuotan knows a great many things, but you lived them. You know the prices, better than anyone."

"Oh, Wuotan knows a lot more than he says." She shook her head, laughing at a joke only she knew. "But, I get it. You want me to come along, to help with the divine weapons."

"Will you?"

"Yes." She laughed. "If this old lady can still help, then I suppose I shall keep on dancing until the air of this world truly kills me."

"The air?" I thought of Aunt Ninian. I thought of her slow death by 'sickness'. I thought of Aunt Lyn, whose poisoning was disguised as illness. "Is that what killed…?"

"Yes, it's what killed Ninian. She chose a short life filled with happiness, knowing she would die too soon." Her smile was sad. "She was… just like Aenir. Aenir also knew… that joining the army back then would lead to her death. No matter how much she talked about reuniting with her husband and children, she knew, when she made the choice to keep her promise, she would die for it. And she did it anyway." Well, now I was worried about Roy. I could only hope that he took more after Uncle Eliwood's side of the… wait, no, Elbert died badly too… Ugh, now I was just worried about everything. "Oh, Al, when did you arrive?"

"Just now. Apologies for interrupting," a man said as he walked up. I could only stop and stare at him. He had amber eyes. That was the first thing I noticed. He had warm amber eyes, the same shade as Mom's, as mine, and with his brown hair, even if it was many shades darker than Mom's… the resemblance was uncanny. "But the elder is calling everyone for a feast in the main hall." He smiled at me, the twinkle in his eyes hinting he knew I was staring. "Is something wrong, Miss Irene?"

"A-ah, no…" I mumbled. I ducked my head, mortified. "I'm sorry. I was startled. You look a lot like my mom."

"And, once again, I'm mistaken for a woman."

"That is not what I said." I glanced up to scowl. He was still smiling. "You look like her. That's all. It's mostly the eyes."

"I was teasing, though I have been told I make a very convincing girl when wearing a dress." He snickered, and bowed to me. "My name is Alberich." That name seemed familiar, but I couldn't figure out why. "I'm a very strange hybrid. Both of my parents were half-dragons, so I'm quarter fire, quarter divine, and half human. Arcadia is a very kind place to rest since my wife, children, and childhood friends have all passed." …That was a sobering thought. Would Roy be stuck with that? He was only 'quarter', but… "To make up for the teasing, will you allow me the honor of escorting you to the feast?"

"I really don't see how that's an honor." I sighed at his grin. "Fine, fine. Let's just go."

"Excellent." He offered his arm, almost like he was a noble, and I took it with a roll of my eyes. "You're a tactician, yes? I've a few books that might interest you. Some were written during the Scouring."
"You have what?" Well, now I was interested! "How do you have them?"

"Well, I was born a year after the Scouring ended, give or take." He looked fantastic for someone almost a thousand years old. Really, he didn't look a day over twenty-five. "It's really not hard when you're that old."

"Tell me!"

"Yes, yes." He sounded like a parent, or like an indulgent grandfather. I wondered if he was amused that we were leaving Fiona behind. "Now, some of them are tactics, some of them are history..."

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**Notes on dragons**

- *The 'children of Father Sky', born from the immortal wind. In days gone by, they could switch between a draconic and human form. Now, though, they can only keep a human form, and most cannot switch into their draconic form.*
- *Cannot bear children easily. According to some records, this was a reason why humans were able to win. Overwhelming numbers.*
- *There were once three main types: divine, ice, and fire. Now, though, it seems only divine dragons are around, aside from the war dragons.*

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Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: So, if you're curious about the predecessor to the water temple in FE7, here it is. Not a hard chapter, all things considered. It is also your first introduction to Bolting. Which, thanks to the 10 weight, has a very real threat of doubling you. That's probably the worst of it, but it's nowhere near as bad as the previous chapter.

Silver Blade, Silence, and Warp are all treasures you can get in the previous chapter (along with a speedwing, boots, talisman, and a silver card). Chapter 14x requires you to beat Chapter 14 in 25 chapters and Sofia must be alive. Oh, and minor explanation for why tome 'weights' are significantly less in FE6 compared to FE7.

Next Chapter – The Dragon Child
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 17) The Dragon Child

Once the storm cleared, we left Arcadia, Igrene leading us towards the border with Etruria. Once we cross the mountains, we'll actually be in Hanover, but I am uncertain if we will actually be safe there, considering the complete lack of information. But, from there, we will have a straight shot to Aquelia, meaning it is the perfect place to plot our assault.

For everyone's sake, we needed to end the coup decisively.

Cool air was so lovely. I also very much adored not having to deal with sand. Really, it was a blessing, so much of one that we immediately made camp once we crossed the mountains to savor it, and to rest.

I smiled as I heard laughter through the camp. Some of the younger members were playing tag, like they were actually children and not soldiers, veterans of too many battles for their ages. Some of the braver, more forgiving, of the army had also taken to the skies with the Bernese. The soldiers we saved in Arcadia ended up joining with us, likely because they really had nowhere to go. Guinevere and Miredy were in charge of them, but surprisingly, there had not been many fights, not nearly as many as in the Western Isles, in the aftermath of… everything.

Maybe it was because we actively saved them. Maybe it was because, as they were drowning, they remembered that we fight people.

That thought made me look back to the tome in my pack. After telling Roy the price, Forblaze had ended up in my things, to lessen the chances of a mage accidentally grabbing it in the middle of a fight. Fiona had joined us, but decided against telling us all the prices at once. After all, there was a chance we never had to deal with the rest, after all. Instead, she was helping Roy control his ice powers, and… well, considering the sudden spike of people eating their vegetables, I think she also became the 'nanny' for the whole army? It was probably because she was so much older than the rest of us, being over 1000 years old and the mentality to match. Father Sky, I think the only person in the whole army she didn't nanny was Wuotan.

"Hey! Hey, you!" The shout drew me from my thoughts, and I focused as I noticed Ray chasing after Sofia. "Are you ignoring me or are you just deaf?" he snapped. "Seriously?"

Sofia paused and turned. "Um… me?" she whispered, pointing at herself. "You are… talking to me?"

"Yes, who else is even around?" He scoffed, not even noticing Sofia glance right at me. I wasn't even being sneaky. "Are you stupid?" Ray, we were going to be having words. "Whatever. You study elder magic, right? Let me see your tomes." He reached over without waiting for a reply. So, it really served him right for Sofia to smack him. "Did you just hit me?!"

"Don't…" Sofia's voice was soft. "Don't… touch me… please…"

"Well, you have some spirit to you after all." He actually sounded impressed. "Well, whatever. I
give for the day. But you're definitely showing me that tome the next time we meet!" He ran off, then, to go do something.

Sighing, I stood up and walked over to Sofia, who looked confused. "Are you okay?" I asked her. She nodded slowly. "Do I need to have a talk with him?"

"No…" She shook her head. "I was just… startled… and worried my power might go… out of control."

"If it looks like he's coming after you again, make sure you can be by someone, okay?" Regardless of what she said, I think I was going to give Ray a lecture. This was not the first time he had been pushy, and that was just something that could not be tolerated right now, especially when he ignored people's right to refuse. "I thought you were in the kitchens."

"I was… but I sensed something wrong with Igrene…" She clasped her hands and peered up at me. "Um…"

"I'll go check."

"Thank you…" She smiled slowly, sweetly. "She is that way, I think…" She pointed down the path, towards the edges of the camp. "I'm sorry…"

"It's no trouble." I waved her apology away. "Besides, depending on what it is, I'll likely need to know about it anyway." Smiling, I walked off, heading in the direction she indicated.

It didn't take me long at all to find Igrene, and I was startled when I did see her. She looked like someone just punched her as she stared at someone I couldn't quite see yet. "Could it be…?" she breathed. She shifted slightly, and I saw she was talking to Astore. "Could… could it really be you?"

"Sorry, what?" he asked, shaking his head. "I don't know what you're talking about." He bowed with a little flourish. "I'm Astore, scout in employ of Ostia."

"Oh…" She drooped. "I'm sorry… You look so much like him…"

"Him?"

"My husband." Did I just imagine that Astore flinched at the words? "He disappeared years ago. We lived in Arcadia, but… well, I thought him dead." She closed her eyes. "Lost to the desert sands."

"Well, they say everyone has an exact double somewhere out there." Was that really a thing? I never heard of it before. "So, if you don't mind, I'll just be going."

"Wait!" She reached out, and somehow managed to snag his leg brace. "W-wait, might I see your leg?"

"Whoa, hey!" Astore twisted, freeing himself. "Hands off the brace, please. I like it not killing me." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Why do you want to see my leg anyway?"

"I'm sorry." She looked almost flustered. "I first found him collapsed in the desert. Between the heat and his injuries, he fainted, and lost his memory. He was covered in blade wounds, but the one on his leg was particularly bad. It never quite healed, leaving a scar and a limp."

"Well, sorry, but I'm definitely not your man. I was just born with this." That… assuming he had
told me the truth, then that was a complete lie. More importantly, what he did tell me would match up rather nicely with her story. What was going on there? "Oh, Lady Irene!" He looked almost relieved. "What brings you out here?"

"Sofia was worried," I explained, keeping my distance. I think Igrene appreciated it, even as she smiled sadly. "Though, aren't you late for a report?"

"Yes, well, I think you see why," Astore joked. "Anyway, there's definitely soldiers at the fortress and they're certainly busy for a posting that shouldn't be expecting threats." Something happened then. "I've also seen a peregrine falcon swooping about. It's not unusual in of itself, but I don't think this area is known for them, right?"

"No, they avoid Hanover unless brought here by an owner." It really made me wonder if… "Anything else?"

"Well, there wasn't originally, but it looks like we have an unknown person running for us now." A glance back confirmed that. It was someone with pointed ears, even.

"I know her," Igrene cut in. She was frowning slightly, but there was nothing that showed her earlier worry. "She is one of the few half-dragons who can transform, but avoids it for the massive amount of pain." Then what was she doing here?

"Guardian!" Whatever the reason, it had to be important as she just blew right past me to grab Igrene's arm. "It's Fae!" she breathed, eyes wide. She was shaky, and I wondered how much she pushed herself. "Fae disappeared!"

"How?" I thought it telling Igrene wasn't overly shocked, just mildly surprised. "When?"

"Shortly after you left, she transformed and flew off after you!" How did we not see a giant dragon following us? "Well, sort of. I think she lost the trail after a moment." She shook her head. "But I think she crossed the mountains ahead of you, and… and…"

"I see." She glanced at Astore. "You mentioned unusual activity?"

"I did," Astore confirmed. He sighed heavily. "Though, if they, say, found a little dragon child, that could account for it."

Well, damn.

The scouts were sent. I didn't accompany them this time, but hung back to wait. This was definitely a job for those who lived in the shadows. Astore, Cath, and Chad could handle it well enough.

Still, I didn't much like how their investigation confirmed that Fae was within the walls, locked in a room without windows, even if that same investigation informed us that there weren't that many soldiers about.

"I am terribly sorry for the trouble," Igrene murmured, bowing her head to the rest of the War Council. "I know there's not really time for something like this."

"It's fine," Roy reassured. He smiled warmly. "I would hate to think of what would happen to her if Bern learns she's here, after all." Two flinches caught my attention, and I looked up to see they were from both Wuotan and Fiona. They, apparently, had some sort of idea. "Irene? Do you know much about this fortress?"
"Not really," I sighed. "It was an abandoned fortress, more kept up because of how old it was and the significance to Etruria's history."

"Old?"

"Yes, it's very old, predating the Scouring. According to the tales, it played host to many orphans, as well as the Lady Maron once she discovered her pregnancy." I looked at Roy. "You might know it too. It's the fortress where Lady Alice and Lord Elijah first met."

"It is, indeed," Fiona confirmed. Her eyes were sad. "I first met her here, actually. Alice, I mean. Such a small, sad thing. Took her ten years to move on and marry Elijah. Of course, I still am not sure if those two married for love, or because they were friends and he needed an heir." She shook her head. "Sorry, you don't need me rambling on and on."

"How else will we learn?" Klein joked. Still, his cheer faded quickly as he nodded to Tate. "Tate, might be a good idea to give your scouting report now?"

"Yes, sir," Tate replied easily. Still, she sighed. "My group might have figured out why the defenses at the fortress proper are so light. Was that so? "There is a border guard that was out of training exercises, and they are returning." There were a bunch of groans and Tate grimaced. "That is not the worst part." Was that so? "They're led by Knight General Perceval." …Damn it. I had a feeling when Astore mentioned the peregrine falcon, but I hated being right. "Orders?"

"Actually, at this point, it might be better to get more information," Roy murmured. He glanced at others on the council, who nodded. "Let's dismiss for now, and return when we have a few more scouting reports. Lilina, you had mentioned a new spell?"

The group dispersed, moving quickly and shouting orders. When I went to do the same, though, Elphin snagged me by the arm and tugged me out of the tent, towards a quiet part of the camp.

"I'm sorry to just drag you," he murmured once we stopped. I noticed we weren't far from where I had my mare tied up. "But, I need a favor." Was that so? "I know you're still mad at me, but I do need one."

"I am your only source?" I asked dryly. He was right; I was still mad. With everything going on, I couldn't focus on it, but that anger was there. "I'm assuming this involves you needed a mount. Why not ask Cecilia?"

"Oh, yes, let me casually ask Cecilia, who is also mad at me, to take me to Perceval when she's got her own conflicting feelings there." He sighed. "So, please?"

"You want me to take you to Perceval." I eyed him warily. "Why is she mad?"

"Because she figured it out instead of me telling her."

"Tell people things, damn it."

"Well, it would have been easier if she wasn't running around like a maniac and overworking." That… was a good point. Cecilia had been very busy; it was likely he could not think of a way for 'Elphin' to politely ask the Mage General of Etruria for a few moments of her time. "We're off topic. I'm asking because you and I both know I have the best chance of talking him down. That… was likely true. "Please…"

I could only sigh. It wasn't like I wanted to fight Perceval. "I'm still mad."
"That's fine." He smiled warmly. "Thank you."

"I'm also fully blaming you if someone yells." This was going to be a pain. "Why aren't you just going off on your own again?"

"Well, the last time I rode a horse alone, I got shot with poisoned arrows." That... was a very good point, actually. "Shall we?"

"Yes, yes."

It didn't take long at all to get my mare saddled and for us to slip out. From there, we rode in the direction opposite of the fortress. I worried we had picked the wrong direction, but it wasn't long before we saw signs that we were right. Etrurian knights yelped as we passed, clearly not expecting anyone to be riding for them right now.

I took advantage of that shock to head straight for the center, and that's where I got a huge shock. Perceval wasn't the only one here. Uncle Douglas was too. Though, to be fair, both of them also looked shocked as I slowed to a stop right in front of them.

"Irene..." Perceval whispered. He tried to appear stoic, but I could see the pain in his eyes. "You are here."

"I am," I confirmed. I dismounted, waiting as Elphin did the same, and gave Uncle Douglas a withering look. "You have no idea how pissed off I am at you, by the way."

"Why are you mad at him?"

"Let the dramatic explain."

"I am not that dramatic," Elphin sighed. He stepped out from behind me, and the effect was instantaneous. Uncle Douglas's jaw dropped, but he looked also relieved. Perceval, however, looked like someone just sucker-punched him. "Not on purpose, at least." He laughed lightly, smiling softly. "Hello again, Perceval."

"How are you...?" Perceval breathed. His eyes were wide, and his hands shook slightly. "No, I must be hallucinating or something. Brought on by how lost..."

"I understand your confusion; a dead man stands before you." Elphin's smile warmed. "But, it is me, Perceval. Surely you can tell by how mad Irene is."

"What... happened...?"

"The full story will have to come another time. But know that Douglas only deceived people so that I might have a chance to survive." His smile fell, eyes growing serious. "I know it is harsh to ask, Perceval, but if I still have the loyalty you pledged to me...?"

"Until the day I die, my prince." Perceval smiled, looking happier than I had seen in a long, long time "I have only one master, and it is you."

"Oh, what a relief. I do not think I could bear it if I didn't."

"If you two don't stop, Cecilia's going to get jealous," I deadpanned. Both of them jumped, and Uncle Douglas started laughing. "Do not think I won't tell her. I'm a bit vexed at you too, Perceval." The sound of hooves startled me, and I turned to see who it was, sighing when I did. "Elphin, I'm blaming this entirely on you." After all, Cecilia and Klein didn't look too happy. I
suppose they must have noticed us missing, and figured it out from there.

"Clarine would have come along as well, but she opted instead to check on the infirmary preparations," Cecilia noted, voice crisp as she waited for Klein to dismount from her horse. "Yes, I caught that last sentence." Her eyes were narrowed as she looked at Uncle Douglas and Perceval. Perceval, amusingly, looked a little panicked. "I am quite mad at the moment."

"Perceval, what are you even doing out here?" Klein asked. He seemed far calmer about all of this. "This is the border of Hanover."

"Lord Mark was ordered to withdraw all of his troops, so that the revolutionaries could replace them," Perceval sighed. I was more startled Uncle Mark listened. Why would he…? "I am here, specifically, because Roartz wanted me out of the capital. He's quite worried I'll stab him in the back." There was something hilarious about Roartz being afraid of a traitor.

"Now, why would he think that?"

"Perceval hasn't been in the best of moods for a while, and decided after returning from Missur to make it quite clear that he was angry," Uncle Douglas explained. Perceval rolled his eyes. "And sent him south because we all know what would happen if he went north." Caliburn was the northernmost territory of Eturia, bordering Ilia. Perceval would have had the support of his people, and of Caliburn's personal soldiers, if he had gone north. "Are more approaching?"

"Sue and Lalum weren't far behind us," Cecilia explained. I sighed when I did see them approach, and Lalum didn't even wait for Sue to come to a complete stop before vaulting off, and running for Uncle Douglas. "You, Mildain, are quite mean."

"I had no idea Douglas was going to be here too," Elphin grumbled. Sue, for her part, gave him a curious look. "Wait, did Sue not know?"

"There's been too much going on, and I'm still very mad," I retorted. Sue turned her curious look to me. "Yes, this is part of why I've been grouchy."

"I had been wondering," Sue replied. Thankfully, she simply laughed softly. "It's fine, sister. I know you would have told me eventually, but the fewer people who know, the safer he is. I'm more mad at him hiding."

"I have the best sister~" I noticed the weird looks we were getting then. "What is it?"

"Sue, are you sure you're not mad?" Cecilia asked slowly. She looked startled by it. "I mean…"

"Sacaceans do not lie, but you can keep a secret simply by keeping silent," Sue replied. She shrugged. "It is not the first time Irene has kept something from me, because she could not speak of it, and there are things I do not say because I cannot speak of them."

"Oh." She laughed lightly. "I see." It didn't escape me at all that she gave Elphin a withering look, and he held up his hands in surrender. "Well, we're all here now, though some people tried to arrange that otherwise."

"Oh, yes, let's just have a whole bunch of us ride through at once," Elphin deadpanned. Now he looked exasperated. "That will surely make it so that we could get through without a fight."

"Well, if someone actually talked, maybe we wouldn't panic."

"I had Irene with me! You think she'd let me do something stupid?" Laughter cut off any retort
anyone might have had, and Elphin shot Uncle Douglas a dirty look. "I am pleased to be amusing, general."

"I am sorry," Uncle Douglas replied, through the laughter. He smiled warmly. "It just does this old man good to see you all alive and well." He stroked Lalum's hair, and nudged her back towards us. "I was worried, but it seems you all are going to be just fine."

"Well, we try," Klein replied. He glanced at his arm. "We certainly had a close encounter with Zephiel not long ago."

"But you survived, and are stronger for it." Well, we survived. I wasn't quite certain if we were stronger or anything. "Now, listen you all. Do not speak, but let the words sink in." That was… ominous. "Etruria will fall along with the king before this war ends." H-hold on a second there! "But, no matter what happens, I will stay by Mordred's side, as I swore years ago." Lalum immediately made to protest, but he simply shook his head. "You all, though, are a different breed than me. A different generation, one to lead the Etruria of tomorrow." He took a noticeable step back, just to make the distinction clearer. "Despite the impending collapse, I firmly believe Etruria will prosper once more, just as it did after the civil war decades ago, when King Arthur took the throne."

"...So, you're going to be a stubborn old man, no matter what we say," I sighed. This was just… I had never wanted to shake a person so much. "Fine, I get it." I hated it, but I understood. This was just how he was. "I do have a favor to ask."

"Of course, Irene," Uncle Douglas replied. His smile was soft. "What is it?"

"Do you mind taking a message to my mom?" The very air stilled at the question, and that was because of two things. Perceval flinched, and Uncle Douglas's smile fell from his face. "Oh, is she not in Aquelia anymore? I heard she was there, but…"

"Is that… all you heard?" He spoke the words slowly, and dread dripped down my spine. "Just that… she was in Aquelia?"

"Well, yes?" Why was he…? S-surely, everything was… "I mean, Zephiel said something stupid, but it was just a lie, a way to try and make me, make us, falter as we were-!"

"If he told you Katri was dead, then it was not a lie." The world just… faded away at the words. "Katri… Lady Katarina, younger sister of Count Mark of Hanover, wife of Lord Rath of the Kutolah, Master Tactician, Tactician of the Campaign of Fire… was executed in the town square a few days ago." That… that…

"You're joking!" Cecilia blurted. She sounded so far away, but when I turned to look, I saw she was right next to me, tears streaming down her face. Elphin's eyes were wide, hands shaking. Klein was shaking his head, as if biting back a scream. Sue… had collapsed, and Lalum fussed over her, even as she also cried. "You must be… Perceval!" She whirled on Perceval, who simply looked away. "Tell me he's just playing a cruel joke!" Perceval didn't reply. "Or… or that he's doing the same thing that he did with Mildain!" Y-yes, maybe… maybe that was it…!

"I'm sorry," Perceval whispered. The soft words shattered what little hope I had left. "But I was on the podium at the time, so I know it was her. You can't duplicate amber eyes."

"But it doesn't make sense!" No, it didn't. "Zephiel respected her! The soldiers prioritized her health over chasing down people who fled!"
"Well, he still respected her enough to chop off her head himself." He looked up then, and his eyes just looked dead. "Shortly after your group was chased out, others began rising up. Bern has hostages, but many thought it a bluff. Zephiel decided to show that it was no bluff, and to destroy what hope people had." Mom… would have been a good choice… since people looked up to her… even now… "All three wyvern generals were in attendance, and Zephiel marched her up the stairs, onto the block…" His breath caught. "She was smiling. Smiling like she had won. I don't know what she said, but whatever it was, it started and shook Zephiel. And then, she smiled, like she had won, and closed her eyes…"

"Then down came the blade, and Katri's head rolled," Uncle Douglas finished softly. I wondered what he thought. He had… babysat Mom. "No one tried to call a bluff after that. That's why all the Great Houses are quiet." That was why Uncle Mark listened, then. "So, I am sorry, Irene. I… cannot give her a message easily. Not in the way you mean."

"Her body," I whispered. My mind was clunking, but moving. "Her… will? Did she have a will?"

"I do not know of the latter, but her body is in my estates, carefully preserved with ice magic. I did not want to assume where she wanted to be buried."

"Thank you." If there was no will, then… then we would simply… bury her with Dad, so that they could… find each other… more easily… "Mom is dead."

"Yes."

"Mom died a while back."

"Yes."

"She likely died before we even learned of the coup in the Western Isles."

"Yes, that is a possibility."

"I see." I was thinking again. I hated that. I hated that I could think, right now, of all times. I hated that my voice was even. I hated that my eyes were dry. "…Perceval." I turned to him with those dry, clear eyes, spoke with that even, calm voice. His eyes widened at both. "We have a kidnapped girl at the fortress here. We need your help getting her out."

"I… yes?" Perceval replied. He looked startled. "Yes, I can do that. They will not have learned yet that I joined up with you."


After all, what sort of daughter couldn't cry at learning her mom died and she didn't even know of the danger until it was far, far too late?

The battle was a blur. I only knew that the plan worked, from Perceval getting our forces within the walls, to the fliers devastating the enemy left outside. Maybe we were all hardened by our battle in the desert, but it all just seemed so, so easy. But, other than that, the battle was a complete and total blur. It was a shock when Zealot found me, and reminded me that there was going to be a war council meeting. He had also mentioned that Perceval and Cecilia could not be found; I volunteered to look for them.

But, even then, everything just sort of swam. I felt like I was stuck in a dream, a nightmare, and if I
just did something stupidly dangerous, I would wake up, and all would be right in the world.

My feet paused, and it took me a second to figure out why. I had found Cecilia and Perceval. They were both chatting not too far away from the War Tent, looking like they were in their own little world.

"Have your wounds healed, Cecilia?" he asked, looking at her worriedly. "I heard they were bad."

"I have mostly recovered," she reassured easily. She pressed a hand to her chest. "They still cause a great strain, so I cannot bring out my full strength, but that will heal in time." She smiled.

"Hopefully before the war is over. I couldn't bear it if people started wondering how I got my title."

"If those rumors pop up, I'll deal with them, as I did when they first did." He shook his head and, hesitantly, took her free hand. "I'm sorry. I was there, but I didn't could to your aid."

"You 'couldn't' come, Perceval." Cecilia moved her other hand to his, clasping his hand between hers. "You and I both know that."

"But still…" He sighed. "I will atone for following Bern, even under duress."

"As always, you are too serious." She laughed a little, smiling softly. "I am glad you are here now, though."

"…Yeah, I am too." He glanced to the side, and his eyes widened slightly. "Irene." Ha, both of them were turning red. "What is it?"

"War Council," I told them. With their embarrassment fading, Cecilia looked so sad, and Perceval frowned. "Come on. We're late." I turned away, expecting them to follow. After a moment, they did, but I could hear the hesitancy in their steps as I led them to the War Tent.

Of course, when we got there, I still felt like I was in a haze. Not even the revelation that, at some point during the battle, Lilina had recruited another bandit did anything to pierce the fog. If anything, it just made things feel a little less real. I couldn't focus on anything, really. Everyone's reports didn't even register, just a mush of sounds.

"General Perceval," I finally heard someone call. I thought it was Roy, but it really could have been anyone. "You were in Aquelia the longest. Might you tell us the situation there?"

"I will gladly tell you all I know, but there is a piece of knowledge I think you all will need to know now," Perceval replied. His face was serious, too serious really. "At least, so that you know why Irene is so quiet." …He wasn't… "I believe it will severely affect some of you as well, and I apologize for that." I opened my mouth to tell him to stop, that it could wait, but the look he gave me told me exactly why he was doing this. He hated that he had not gone to save Cecilia. So, this time, he wasn't going to be the 'general'. This time, he was just going to be Perceval, my 'big brother', who was desperately worried for me. "A few days ago, Aunt Katri was executed." The entire room stilled. Every single person froze. "She is dead."

That short sentence made everything move again, and it was chaos. Shouting, screams. People wondering why Zephiel killed her, and what it meant that he killed the one person he still respected. Guinevere and Miredy, I knew, were apologizing. Lilina collapsed. Marcus and Merlinus were crying. Roy struggled to keep a calm face, but couldn't manage it.

I used that chaos to slip away. No one would be able to get anything done while that was going on, and I just… needed to be alone.
I focused on putting one foot in front of the other, trying to ground myself. I could deny it all I wanted, but that wasn't going to change the facts. The sky was blue, grass was green, and Mom and Dad were both dead. They were both dead. I would never see either of them again. I would never hear Mom say 'I love you' again, or call me 'sweetling'. I would never have another tactics lesson, or get a little scolding for rushing through chores.

That letter I got… all the plans I had made… they just disappeared. They had to. Zephiel had destroyed them.

The worse part was that he had told me. Zephiel had told me that he killed her, that she was dead. But I was so… so naïve. I thought that after taking care of her, he wouldn't hurt her. I thought that because he respected her, she would be safe. I had thought he was lying, because I was so stupid, so naïve, that it never occurred to me that he might have just been setting her up for that public execution in Aquelia. It never occurred to me that he might have taken care of her so that he could kill her publically, to destroy what hope Etrurians had.

It made me think of the other things he said. Perceval might not know what Mom said, as her last words, but I did. I did, because Zephiel said it. She had been the one to tell him that leaving me alive was his greatest mistake, and he would pay for it. She had been smiling like she won, because she knew I was out here, that Roy was here, that Lilina and Sue were here… She knew we were here, fighting, and believed in us.

But I wished she hadn't. I wished she were still alive. I mean… I couldn't even get mad at her over accidentally sending Zephiel after us. There was no point. She wasn't here to apologize. She wasn't here to reassure me that she loved me. She wasn't… here… at all…

"La, la, lala, la~" A child's singing startled me, and it took me a couple of blinks to realize I knew the pink-haired little girl happily skipping in front of me. "Oh!" Fae gasped, racing for me, and hugging my legs. "Hello!"

"Hello, Fae," I whispered. I crouched down so that I could look her in the eye. "Didn't you pinky swear to Roy to not go off on your own?" I… vaguely remembered that, from when we rescued her.

"Is Fae too far?" Her eyes were wide and innocent. "Fae's sorry… Fae thought this was fine."

"Well, we'll let it slide, this time." I stroked her hair and she giggled. She was like a little bundle of sunshine. "What were you doing?"

"Fae was chasing a butterfly!" Was that so? "Oh, but your eyes are pretty!" She laughed, reaching up to pat my cheek with a chubby little hand. This little girl was seriously a dragon? "They remind Fae of Katri!" …What did she just…?

"Katri?"

"Yeah!" She laughed, pulling something from her pocket, and my breath caught when I realized what it was. It was an agate earring, the twin to the one Mom always wore, the one that was still in my pack. "She gave Fae this! Fae remembers the fun times thanks to it!" She met Mom? "Fae got to ride on a horsie with her and Rath!" She met my parents? "It was fun! Like a mommy and a daddy!" That… "Do you know them?"

"Yes, they're my parents, actually." This little girl… had met my parents… "I'm their eldest, actually."
"Wow, really?" Her eyes sparkled. "Yay~!" She nearly knocked me over with her hug. "Fae hopes they're super happy!" That... "Can Fae see them?" I... "Fae wants to see them! Fae is in the outside world now, so can Fae go see them?"

"I'm sorry, Fae." My voice finally cracked, but my eyes stayed dried. "They're dead."

"Dead?" She tilted her head curiously. "What does that mean?"

"It means..." How did you explain something like this? "It means they went away. They went far, far away."

"Can't they come back?" She looked at me pleadingly. "If Fae is a good girl, will they come back?"

"N-no, they can't..." My voice shook. "Those who are dead can never come back, no matter... how good of a girl you are."

"Why would they leave?" Her eyes welled up with the tears I wished I could cry. "Did they leave because Fae was bad?"

"No, never." I gathered her up in my arms, holding on to her tightly. "No, they didn't want to leave. Bad people made them. Bad people made them, while they were just doing what they thought was right." No, that wasn't quite... "It's not your fault." I just had to reassure her. I just had to reassure this too young, too old, little girl that she wasn't responsible for my parents' deaths.

"Papa went away because of Fae." Fae... "Are you sure it's not Fae's fault?"

"Nothing is your fault." Helios was injured protecting her. Dad died protecting Bulgar. Mom died... Mom died to protect the Kutolah, ultimately. "It's not your fault." It wasn't mine either. What was my fault was that I was too stupid, too naïve, to think that Zephiel, of all people, wouldn't hurt Mom. What was my fault was that I let myself be deluded, let others be deluded, because I refused to believe anything that went against what I claimed was logic. "It's not your fault."

"Fae's sorry..." She wailed, clutching my shirt. I wished I could cry too. "Fae's so, so sorry..."

I just kept on repeating my reassurances as she sobbed, wishing I could find the words to make things better again, for both her and me. But when pain ran this deep, there was no magic spell to heal it.

"I've been thinking, and I believe the best method for ensuring we end this in only one or two battles is getting the church on our side." Apparently, I could think through anything. Dazed and self-hating, comforting a little girl, carrying said little girl back to the fortress when she cried herself to sleep? It wasn't a problem at all. I still could think, and think clearly.

I wasn't sure if that was a talent to be proud of, especially since Roy was looking at me like I was insane. "Irene, are you sure you should be...?" he began. He visibly groped for words before settling back in his chair. "I mean; Aunt Katri is..."

"My mom is dead." The words felt like mush in my mouth. "I will never see her again, just as I will never see Dad again." I sighed. "But, somehow, I'm still thinking, so let's make use of it."

"As always, you surprise and impress me, Lady Irene," Elphin murmured. He was seated across from Roy at the little table we were sitting at, leaving me as the 'odd' one out to form the weird
"Though, I must admit, I had been considering the same as we made our way here. The difficulty comes from figuring out how."

"That's not too difficult if we can find Yodel," I pointed out. I leaned back in my chair. "He's not the highest ranked, but he's easily the most influential bishop, and people trust him because of all the reforms he'd made."

"That certainly is true." Elphin closed his eyes, thinking. "With Yodel, we can spin it so that the revolutionaries are going against the teachings of Saint Elimine. Not a difficult thing, considering their actions." He smiled slowly, and when his eyes opened, there was a distinct glint in them. "We can also use them as scapegoats."

"It will be difficult to put the full blame of the Western Isles on them." The Campaign had lasted too long. "But, yes, I think we can bring that in." I smiled slowly. "After all, Arcardo was the one in charge of it. We can easily, easily, place the more recent stuff in his lap, and that will be what resonates with people." We had some of the Western Isle resistance members. If we had them speak... "That will definitely turn people away, though it runs the risk of them turning on Mordred as well."

"There's that risk anyway, thanks to the coup." This was also very true. "The chance of getting them on our side, in righteous fury, is greatly worth the risk."

"That is true." It was very risky, but the prize... the prize would be well worth it. "Roy, you are quite quiet at the moment."

"I am simply thanking everything that you two are on my side," Roy deadpanned. He sighed, and made a face when I reached over to ruffle his hair. "So, we get the church on our side, build the fury, and then..." He bit his lip. "Then we funnel the revolutionaries into Aquelia, into the castle, and then we strike there?"

"That would be the best idea," I replied. We would have to plan carefully. There were many, many things that could go wrong. "It is best to remember that, for the most part, the revolutionaries only did as much damage as they did through ambush and through having Bern." I smiled slightly. "We now have three of the Generals on our side, each of the specialized ones. The Great General only has a handful of troops he commands alone, compared to the rest."

"Meaning that we can bring most of the 'loyal' Etrurians into the fold, leaving only those who support the revolutionaries." His eyes turned serious. "What about hostages?"

"We'll have to make plans to free them." We had no choice. "This is going to be slow. It has to be." If we did not move slowly, we ran too high of a risk. "Moving slowly will also have Bern start to pull back as well, thinking they won."

"True." He suddenly sighed. "But how do we convince the people that we are not new invaders?" His eyes wavered. "All of this is good, but will it mean anything if they think us the enemy? Even if they do not, how do we restore their lost hope?"

I glanced at Elphin, but he shook his head slightly. He was not quite ready to reveal himself. So, instead, I closed my eyes, and gambled. "Use me."

"Irene?"

"I am Mom's eldest daughter, her successor. I am the one she taught." I opened my eyes and looked right at him. "Use me to rekindle their hope. Use me to spark it, and then use your own actions to
"And how do we reassure them we can win?"

"Well, we have some legendary weapons." The Divine Weapons were being used for the first time in a thousand years, and let us wield them. That, alone, would give people hope. "Let Rutger walk around with Durandel. Have Cecilia play a bit with Forblaze." I hesitated at Armads, because that was… not a price you could play with. "You… could also showcase your ice magic."

"Won't that make people be afraid of me, though?" He drooped. "I don't want them to be…"

"Make it fun," Elphin suggested. His eyes were thoughtful. "Make snow or pretty little ice sculptures. Smile and be reassuring, even as you show it off." He laughed a little. "Then suffer through embarrassing stories that make you more human. They'll follow you anywhere then."

"I can help with that~" I teased. I couldn't help but laugh. "I have plenty."

"Then we'll be fine. We just have to tread carefully." Yes. "But, with all that said…" He looked at me. "Are you certain?"

"On what? Continuing?"

"Partially that… and partially, I am worried if you can keep your temper." That… was a legitimate concern. "Many have suffered at the hands of Bern, but you have suffered the most recent wound."

"…I have my job." I looked him in the face. "I will not stray from it. If it seems like I am, drag me off the field."

"Then I have no other concerns that are not personal." His eyes told me he worried over all of us. "But, speaking of personal, I do think it is time for you two to rest." He did not include himself, but I knew he was hurting too. After all, Mom had been his 'Aunt Katri' since before he could even talk. "I know you two were hoping."

"Yeah, I think we all need to get to bed." I stood up, and looked at Roy. "Do you need me to stay with you?"

"No, Lilina and I made plans to work on fun, distracting things, so I should be fine until the morning," he replied. His smile shook. "It doesn't quite seem real yet, anyway." I definitely knew that feeling. "But, yes, I agree. Let's save the rest of discussions to the War Council tomorrow."

Quietly, the three of us left, going our separate ways. I decided to just head straight back to my room, to read or something. Some part of me wanted to read Mom's logbook, since it was one of the few physical things I had, but… but it hurt. It hurt, because the person who wrote it was not 'my mom', but the person she was before she was 'my mom'. I could read her letter, but it was filled with such hope, plans for the future. It just seemed bitter now. I could look at the earrings, but all I could think was if she had her 'protection', would she still be okay? Would she still be alive?

Murmurs caught my ear, and I slowed to a stop as I realized who they belonged to: Cecilia and Perceval. They were standing near a window, looking out over the horizon.
"The village out there is in ruins…" Perceval sighed, looking conflicted. "Most of Elibe probably looks like that now, thanks to the war."

"Yes, I imagine so," Cecilia murmured. She closed her eyes, as if holding back tears. "Many victims will go unnoticed."

"We must put an end to the conflict, defend those who cannot defend themselves."

"Ever the knight."

"I'm sorry."

"No, don't be. I very much like you as you are." She laughed, and I didn't think she noticed how Perceval's ears went pink. "Besides, I agree. Is that not why you and I joined the army in the first place?"

"Sometimes, I do wonder if I could be more help outside of it."

"I think we can be of more help within the system." Her eyes were firm. "It's harder to change it from without unless we want catastrophic violence."

"You're so much of an idealist."

"Well, someone had to counter your cynicism."

I smiled, watching them. I always thought they looked the most relaxed with each other; that was why I teased them and hoped they'd get together. But, much as I wanted to tease them now, I was too tired, so instead, I just continued on my way.

The room I had was surprisingly warm, and I noticed someone had also made sure to light candles in it. That confused me, until I noticed the note on the desk, and picked it up to read it.

'I came by, but was told you were at a meeting. The news has spread throughout the camp, so I am just going to bed early. Check on me in the morning? –Sue'

I smiled sadly at it, knowing what this was. It was Sue subtly telling me to worry about her 'tomorrow', and to worry about myself 'today'.

"Oh, you're back." Startled, I jerked my head up and whirled. Klein was in the doorway, smiling bitterly. "You really must be out of it, if you didn't hear me," he noted. I could only shrug in reply. "You done for the day?"

"Yeah," I murmured. I waved him inside, sighing. "How is Clarine?" She was probably the only one I hadn't seen, who didn't also make it clear that they just wanted to deal with everything in the morning.

"She screamed and wailed herself into a faint. Rutger is looking after her." He sighed. "I think you're getting to me. I didn't even pretend to protest."

"See? I told you they'd be a good match." I made myself smile. "Oh, since Perceval and Cecilia are around, we should definitely give them some shoves."

"That does sound good." He shook his head. "I just wanted to check in on you. I'll let you go to bed."

"Yeah…" But even as he turned away, I felt myself panicking. I didn't… "Klein?"
"Yes?" He paused, turning back to smile at me. "What is it?"

"Can you just stay here the night?" I managed a wry smile as he looked at me incredulously. "I just… you're comforting, and I need that right now." I sighed. "I know it's out of the blue, but…"

"I'll… get my stuff." He hesitated and reached over to cup my cheek. "We'll tell each other silly stories, like we did when we were children."

"Yes, that sounds good." I grasped his hand to keep in on my face. It was just… so soothing. "Thank you. I know Etruria has propriety issues."

"Yes, well, I think propriety kind of dies when war happens." Ha… "I'll be right back. I promise."

"Okay." I smiled as he left, but it faded as soon as he was gone. That probably wasn't something to ask, but I couldn't…

"Well, well, that was interesting to overhear." Yelping, I lunged for Rienfleche in the corner. "Relax, Little Lady Irene. I just wanted to check in on you." Oh, it was Deke. He smiled wryly as he walked in. "Didn't think I could startle you," he half-teased. "But then again, considering what you just learned, I should be glad you're able to react at all."

"I'm probably going to be out of it for a few days," I sighed. It just… hurt. I didn't even want to go outside and listen to the wind, because then, it would become real. I didn't want it to be real, not yet. "Sorry."

"It's fine. As I said, I'd be more startled if you were well." He shrugged. "But, in thinking of all of this, I realized something else."

"Yes?"

"I realized that I haven't yet kept my promise." Ah… "I keep thinking on waiting, but at this rate, you'll be waiting until the war is over." He sighed. "So, here's a promise. When Aquelia is freed, when Etruria is, I will tell you. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Good." He suddenly smirked. "So, why is Little Master Klein moving in with you exactly?"

"I thought you eavesdropped."

"Just on that last bit." He laughed at my scowl. "So?"

"I just need someone reassuring right now." I hesitated before whispering, "Deke?"

"Yes?"

"…I can't really imagine him just… indulging me for something like this, unless…" My face was heating up. "So… um…"

Deke smiled, and laugh a little. "Well, you're right. I can't see it either." So, perhaps… "And I think he knows that you wouldn't ask just anyone to be around you right now." Ahaha… ha… "And that's all I'm saying."

"Fine." It still gave me more to think on, though. "Tell me the dog story while I wait for Klein?"

"The dog…? Oh, right, that one." He sighed, and sat down in my desk chair. "Well, let's see if I can
Notes on Igrene

- The Guardian of the Nabata, a human who is entrusted with defending Arcadia. She's a talented archer, and we've already had numerous people confuse her and me, despite looking very different, thanks to the similarities of our names.
- There is a sadness to her, but it is an old one, held deep within. I wonder if it's related to the husband she mentioned to Astore.
- Strong and skilled, but it is clear that she is more suited for ambushing. Still, she's a valuable ally.
- Her affinity is ice.

Notes on Garret

- A former bandit Lilina apparently talked into joining. Don't know how, and given everything, I doubt I'm going to find out. There's already too many people for me to keep track of.
- Typical of a former bandit, he had high strength, but low skill or speed. Truth be told, I think Gonzales and Geese are more skilled.
- I think I'm going to throw him with those two, and have him support them.
- His affinity is wind.

Notes on Perceval

- The quiet and, to most people, stoic Knight General of Etruria. Since I grew up with him, though, I find him as easy to read as anyone else. It helps that he tends to relax around me too.
- High strength, incredibly skilled, and thanks to riding one of the faster Hanover horses, a gift from Mom, he's fast.
- He used to be a lot more cheerful, but something happened while he was a squire, and he's been quiet and serious ever since. It makes me a bit sad. But so long as he still smiles for his friends and family, I don't bring it up.
- Equally skilled in swords and lances, and isn't bad on axes, easily making him the most versatile
- His affinity is dark, like Dad. Probably why I've always been comfortable around him.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: This is chapter 15 in game, and is a breather chapter compared to chapter 14 and 14x. I typically use it for support grinding, since I'm usually done in about… in under ten turns. Fliers are lovely. This is the second map that you can recruit Perceval on, and the only one where he receives Hard Mode bonuses. He's… probably the best pre-promote in the entire game, especially on hard mode. I've never had an Allen, Lance, Noah, or Treck that surpassed him significantly even on normal mode. Speaking of supports, Sofia-Ray C support, Astore-Igrene C support, and Cecilia-Perceval C and B supports were all featured here.

Also, yes, Katri is dead. Timeline wise, she died shortly after Aquelia fell, meaning that she died before Roy's group even learned of the coup in the Western Isles. Since
this is not only a breather map, but also a map that features both Perceval and Douglas, I chose to use this chapter for revealing it, and skipping over the… rather boring battle, truth be told.

Next Chapter – Interlude, Poison (there will be two interludes between this chapter and the next in-game chapter, since the game skips right to fighting in Aquelia and mentioning that they had the support of the church)
Interlude - Poison

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Interlude – Poison

Fae has joined us, providing a much needed bit of sunshine in the army as we prepare for what might be our greatest challenge yet. We must manipulate Etruria to corner the Revolutionaries, and then we must defeat them while they are cornered. The plans for this are slow and sure, as there is little room for mistakes. What can be planned for must be planned for.

I refuse to let Zephiel hold onto Etruria. I refuse to let him have any chance of winning.

We moved on from the fortress the day after rescuing Fae, and I found, to my extreme discomfort, that I found myself mostly stable within the same timeframe. I suppose everything we had gone through had made me adaptable, but it did make me wonder if there was something wrong with me. I also worried that I was just accidentally setting myself up for a huge breakdown. Neither option seemed appealing to me.

"Lady Irene?" Of course, wandering around in thought when I was supposed to be talking to Zealot was also not appealing.

"That has to be the tenth time in this conversation you had to prompt me," I sighed. "This is after I asked you for help too." While I could think and move on, I was not as confident in my ability to keep details straight, especially when I would get lost in thought whenever I was all alone.

"It's fine, Lady Irene," Zealot reassured. I was really glad he had enough good humor and patience. We were dealing with supplies while the army set up for lunch, which was a tedious task without having to deal with a scatterbrained tactician. "But, since this has happened so many times, why don't we focus more on what is making your mind wander?"

"That smile makes it clear I'm not getting out of this." I sighed, shaking my head. "Well, part of it is simply feeling out of place. We're not far away from the estate, so I've spent some part of my childhood in these parts." Of course, my mind would always go to how Dad would take me on rides, galloping across the grass and hills, or how Mom would cook all morning for family picnics. "Part of it is simply worrying over my little sister." Sue was devastated by Mom's death, and while strangers might think her stoic, I knew she wasn't sleeping and I had to share meals with her for her to eat at all. She had definitely withdrawn from everyone, only seeing Sin, Lilina, Clarine, and me.

"The other part or parts?"

"Well..." I hesitated, but decided to go with it. Zealot would be honest with me. "Well, part of it is trying to piece together what, exactly, happened the day I learned Mom died?" I smiled wryly. "So, tell me. Was everyone as shocked as I thought they were at Mom's death, or was that more of a 'everything does not feel real, so everything blurred together' sort of thing?"

"Well, it's likely the latter, if you do not mind my being blunt." He smiled awkwardly. "Well, many were startled, but it was more genuine surprise, not shock mixed with sorrow." Essentially, I was feeling bad and hazy, so it seemed like everyone was too. "For instance, I felt like Miredy was apologizing more for accidentally letting you falsely hope, than actually apologizing for the
"Death." Yes, I thought that made sense. "Some, like Igrene, had no reaction at all, but of course, silence is trumped by noise, so I doubted you would have noticed those who did not react."

Exactly. "Sorry."

"Why apologize?" I made sure to smile. "I was asking for clarification. As I mentioned, very few things felt 'real'." It did make me wonder a bit on Fae's reaction. It would be difficult to parse out why exactly she had cried, but if I had to guess, it likely stemmed from what happened to her father, and how isolated she was. Though, there might be more to that story. "What was your reaction?"

"Truthfully, I am not surprised he killed her. I'm surprised by his timing." He closed his eyes, deep in thought. "It would have been much better if he had set a date for the execution, and used her as bait for a trap. I highly doubt General Roy would have left her, especially since he so recently lost Lord Hector, and learned of Lord Rath's death." By using Mom as 'bait', Zephiel would have almost guaranteed that we would come, nowhere near prepared for the attack, just on the chance that we might be able to avoid yet another injury. "It would have been more effective if..." He trailed off suddenly, looking awkward. "Well..."

"It would have been more effective if he had waited to kill her until we were there." I bit my lip, stomach churning even as my brain spun. That was very true. It would have been more effective. Uncle Hector's death still haunted my nightmares, because I had been there to see his death. Dad's death hurt because I had hoped, and because I blamed myself. But with Mom, I had only 'hoped'. I didn't blame myself for it; she had died before I even knew what was going on and I had not been there when she had been captured. "In this way, the ones who feel the most guilt, the most likely to waver, are Sue, Cecilia, and Guinevere." Sue, because Mom had given herself up to protect her. Cecilia and Guinevere, because they had seen her that day, and chose to leave her behind. "Roy is sad, but he stands resolute." There were others in this army who knew her, loved her, but most of them had moved forward, or had focused on other worries. After all, it was a 'distant' death. Once the shock passed, it was easy to find our footing. We had too much practice. "I am devastated, but I also refuse to let Zephiel win." So, why? Why would he kill her when he did? "I... probably shouldn't be able to think like this over my own mom's death."

"Well, your lack of an appetite makes it clear to everyone that you're not 'fine'. Everyone grieves differently. In Ilia, you would be commended, but mostly for how clearly you think, not that you are able to."

He smiled slightly. "But, yes. That is the crux of everything. He killed her at a really 'poor' time. Perhaps it was good for shaking Etruria to its knees, but he had to know of you all."

I thought of what Zephiel said. I thought of what I knew Mom's last words had been. "Actually, I don't think so." He made a mistake. That's what it was. Mom had even told him. He made a mistake. He focused too much on Mom, on his generation, that he did not even consider ours a threat. "I think Mom made sure of it." Mom was a tactician, the greatest in recent memory. An effective strategy was always using 'bait'. Bait the enemy into focusing on something insignificant, and then they would be blindsided. "No, I know she did." Mom used herself as cover, to buy us time. She sacrificed herself to ensure that Zephiel did not realize what was the greatest threat to him until it was too late.

Sacrifice the 'queen' to protect the 'pawn'. Many would scream at how stupid of an idea that was. A 'pawn' was weak, worthless, while a 'queen' was the most powerful piece on the board. But a 'queen' was replaceable. More importantly, a lost 'queen' could always be replaced by a pawn, so long as it made it to the opposite side of the board.

Sacrifice the 'queen' to protect the replacement. Sacrifice the predecessor to protect the successor. That was what she did. It almost backfired; Zephiel had more power than anyone had a right to
even imagine. But it didn't. We survived. We survived, and we were determined.

Those of the Isles were determined, because this was their chance to purge Etruria of the infection that led to so many of their own being lost. Those of Etruria were determined, because this was their home, and it was time for a change. Those of Lycia were determined, to repay the debt they owed. Those of Nabata, all three of them, were determined because Bern dragged dragons into a human war. Those of Ilia were determined, because this was where they proved their worth. Those of Bern were determined, because they wanted their country to change. Those of the Sacae were determined, because we refused to tolerate traitors of all kinds.

That was not even going into those with personal reasons. Zephiel's greatest mistake was focusing on the predecessors. He paid no mind to the 'successors', those who inherited the legacy and strength of those before.

Well, that was the theory at least. I still did not feel adequate or skilled. But now was not the time for doubt. Now was the time for action. If they believed in me so much, then by Father Sky's blood, then it was time for me to just gamble on them being right.

"Well, I suppose it is possible," Zealot murmured. I frowned at his conceding tone. "I personally think that she more got lucky." That made me frown more. "Irene, I just find it hard to believe one person could plan all of that." If anyone could, Mom-! "After all, Lady Katri is still human, no matter how skilled she is. Believing that she could orchestrate all of that, perfectly..." He shrugged. "That just puts her into 'eerie' territory. Like the soldiers trying to put General Roy on a pedestal." The thought made me pause. "It's not how I want to think of someone." That... never occurred to me. It never occurred to me that I might be... had I, in my hero worship, turned them into something they really weren't? ...Yes, I had. I had. In my head, they were heroes, legends, people I could never reach. That was the very fate I actively did my best to avert for Roy. "Lady Irene?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," I replied. I smiled wryly. "I got lost in thought." I could almost hate myself, but that would... not really be a thing to hate myself for. It was a child's mentality, and it was just sad to hate the child in you. But it was another indication of how naïve I had been. "Perhaps we might compromise and say it was both?"

"She got lucky, because she had the courage to make the best of her situation?" Zealot laughed. "Yeah, I think that will work." It also sounded the most 'plausible'. Mom was not superhuman. She was skilled, and I was certain that, at least in the end, she had decided to use herself as the cover, use herself as the sacrifice. But it would be foolish to think that she had even planned for that opportunity in the first place. It would be foolish to think that she had come up with the plan without watching and realizing Zephiel's mistakes.

"Yes, I agree." Footsteps caught my ear, and I turned to see Lilina walking up. She looked a little thinner, but that was the only outward sign that she was anything less than healthy and happy. Her appetite had definitely disappeared, likely a symptom of her illness. "What is it, Lilina?"

"Well, it could be nothing," Lilina answered, stopping to give a little polite curtsy to Zealot. She then focused on me. "But we're camped not far from a town." Yes, I knew that? That was why we stopped here for lunch. "I, and some others of the army, decided to drink from the local well, and I thought it tasted odd." It... tasted off? "I didn't think much of it, but then I heard the villagers mention that the water's taste had changed recently..."

...You have got to be kidding me.
Father Sky, give me patience. Whoever was currently in charge of Hanover poisoned the water supply. They actually poisoned the water supply. Who was the idiot running things, and how many times could I shoot them before they died?

"So, why is it that no one is dropping dead yet?" Roy asked with a sigh. The almost exasperated look on his face all but screamed 'oh, great, another thing going weird'. "And why did they poison the water supply?"

"Everyone has been poisoned with 'ebrove' from my understanding," Guinevere explained. She had been elected as the infirmary representative for the War Council, likely because Elen and Saul didn't want to deal with it and she'd be here anyway. "Ebrove is not a poison that can kill directly. Only indirectly."

"And what does it do?"

"In the doses that seventy-five percent of the army consumed? All but block healing magic."

"How does it do that?"

"Ebrove is an herb with properties that disrupt magic in general, Roy," I answered absently. I wasn't quite 'all here' at the War Council, mostly because I was trying to figure out a 'logical' reason for this stupidity. "In lower doses, it's used to make things like 'pure water' to boost ones resistance to magic. The herb was cultivated specifically for that reason." As a result, it grew practically everywhere. "In higher doses, though, it's dangerous."

"Healing poultices, like vulneraries and elixirs, still work," Cecilia sighed. She had been heavily involved in diagnosing people, and it showed in how tired she was. Though, I didn't think she had been sleeping well, which couldn't have helped. "But considering how reliant most people are on healing magic nowadays, including our army, we have a very limited supply."

"So, could this be a way to shut us down?" Lilina asked softly. She looked paler than normal, and I knew some part of it was that the medicines we had been using to keep her consumption at manageable levels no longer worked quite as well. Though, I suppose some part of me found it darkly, darkly humorous that she continued the 'Caelin tradition' of being poisoned. "It seems inefficient, but it was effective."

"I suppose that is possible, but considering the amount, this would have had to be placed quite some time ago, possibly while we were in the desert. So, likely, getting us was a 'bonus'. There needed to be a different, primary reason. "What I'm worried about is that there is a good chance it's reached the rivers."

"Dilution?"

"There is a lot. While it would eventually be diluted, that won't stop hundreds from being poisoned before that happens."

"Why would you poison an entire province with ebrove, though?" Yes, why would you…?

"Perhaps that is not what should be focused on right now," Wuotan calmly cut in. He was in the back of the War Tent, watching over us quietly. "You need to think of how to counter it." He glanced at me, though, and I got the feeling he was giving me a hint. Again. "So, the antidote to ebrove requires many components, and we cannot use healing magic to make up for missing ingredients. So, do we have them?"

"We likely have most of them," I answered. If this was a hint, then I needed to think. "Most of them
are very common components to other medicines we keep on hand." Though, we were likely missing... oh. "Wait, hold on, that's it." Wuotan's small smile told me I had it. "They poisoned everyone to make them dependant on whoever is running Hanover at the moment."

"What do you mean, exactly?" Zealot asked. He looked more curious than anything. "How can they do that?"

"The antidote for ebrove poisoning has one key ingredient: caphredil. As far as anyone knows, that flower only grows here in Hanover now. But there are only a handful of known patches, all of which are basically on 'estate' grounds." Another thought occurred to me. "Perceval, what's the economy like?"

"Bad," Perceval deadpanned. His eyes were narrowed as he crossed his arms. "No business in the market, everyone too terrified to leave their homes... there's no gold flowing."

"Then we also have a potential gold mine here," I explained. Grandfather and Uncle Mark had always purposely kept the market price of caphredil low so that it was readily available. In the hands of someone with less morals, though... "Caphredil is used in many healing poultices anyway. But if you poison the populace so that they cannot fall back on healing magic and they are solely dependant on medicinal herbs..."

"The revolutionaries have a steady flow of income," Elphin finished. He had his eyes closed, and he was clearly thinking. "We need to deal with that. We would have to anyway, just to have a stable base to work from." Finding Yodel, for instance, was proving to difficult without a base. "But now, I think it has become a priority."

"Any ideas?"

"Well, we could take advantage of 'sacred hospitality'." He opened his eyes, nodding. "It is very important to Etrurians. However, I doubt whoever is in charge here will actually follow it if we give a juicy target."

"Basically, we send people in, get others to gather information from within the estate, and then retaliate when the enemy violates it." Oh, then we could... "Then we add that to the horrors of the Western Isles, among other things, to help turn the populace against the revolutionaries." I smiled slowly. "I know the Hanover estates better than anyone here, and certainly much better than whoever is there."

"I feel as if I need to point out something," Deke sighed. I could tell he didn't exactly like pointing this out, but he thought it needed. "Everyone keeps talking as if Lord Mark isn't the one responsible, even though we have no evidence for it." Mmm... "So, how does this plan work if it is him?"

"...The plan will work even if it is him, as he would know it is not something I would suspect," I answered. I closed my eyes to fight back tears at the mere thought of it. "I am Sacaean. I hold liars and traitors in poor regard. It gives me some blind spots in that I find it very hard to believe that those I trust would lie to me." I opened my eyes, and gave a pointed look to Elphin before turning to address the group as a whole. "I know that is how the Djute managed to kill the Kutolah. Knowing Grandfather, they likely got in by begging for help with their wounded. He was never one to turn his back on someone who needed help. But if we work with that knowledge, then we can use it to our advantage." I clenched my fists. "We'll send in our scouts, of course, to get a handle on the situation. Hanover is a very, very secure area."

"Is it?"
"Hanover was once the home to a tribe of dragons," Wuotan chimed in. He was definitely smiling now. "It is built on top of a large connection of catacombs, which are partly used as crypts for the family, and the estate itself might have been remodeled many times over the years, but the foundations are the same. Those foundations withstood a fire dragon assault that razed the rest of the area to the ground, a feat shared by the Tower of the Saint, and Castle Ostia."

"At the same time, though, it is easy to exploit if you know the way through the crypts," I murmured. Mom had shown me; she used to win hide and seek with her siblings thanks to them. "You could call it a 'good' fortress because it is secure, but not a trap. By exploiting the latter, we can get all of our soldiers within the estate easily." Another thought occurred to me. "We can also utilize the horses. If it's not Uncle Mark in charge, then I know the idiots have failed to calm them."

"Yes, Hanover horses on the market are docile and strong, but Hanover keeps the more spirited for themselves," Perceval agreed. He knew that for a fact; his own horse was a gift from Hanover's 'personal' stock, and suffered no one but him. "If we're worried about communications, we can use Arturia and Sieg as well."

"Sieg?" I… didn't know that name. "Who is Sieg?"

"I might have been adopted by a second one while you all were away." AHAHAHAHAHAHA! "Regardless, he's sharp, and is strangely attached to people."

"Why is that strange?" Roy asked. He looked adorably confused. "Is he not a messenger?"

"Arturia is Perceval's pet peregrine falcon," Klein explained. He bit back a smile, and I knew he was holding in a laugh too. "I'm assuming Sieg is the same, which would make the attachment quite strange."

"Oh." Roy grinned, and his eyes sparkled slightly. "Can I see them? Later, of course." Times like this reminded me that he was fifteen.

"Of course. Perceval loves showing them off." The group laughed when Perceval's only response was to roll his eyes. "But, to continue with Irene's thought, I believe Hanover actually has a verbal commands for getting them to follow and, more importantly, to stampede." Klein laughed when I gave him a look. "Sorry, 'to charge'. But we can cause a stampede with it."

"We can?" Roy looked to me, and I nodded. I knew the verbal commands. It was impossible to spend more than two days at Hanover while the horses were being trained to not have most of them memorized. "Okay, then let's get a plan together, everyone. I would rather get everyone treated as soon as possible."

"Impetitis!" It took me a couple of tries to get the correct pronunciation, but eventually, I hit the right inflection and the Hanover horses in the stables charged, breaking through some of the stable doors in the process. I wasn't too worried, seeing them run off. They would return eventually; after all, the stables were where their food was. For now, though, they were a wonderful distraction to prevent the enemy from seeing groups of us enter the crypts, and stampeding horses were not a 'violation of sacred hospitality' that Roy's group was using to talk to whoever was in charge.

"Miss Irene?" Cath suddenly called. I glanced over at her, waiting as she shifted awkwardly. While she had agreed to help out, it was still clear that she had issues with helping out nobility. I couldn't really blame her for it; in fact, I actually admired how she continued to help despite that. "We just found a couple of servants. I don't think they have long, though. They're wounded, and it smells
bad." That would be infection and, likely, they got dosed with ebrove too. "But they were really happy when I said you were here."

"Do you mind taking me to them?" I asked. She shook her head, and pointed down the way. "Thank you." I waved to the others in my group, indicating that they needed to keep going. Rutger, of course, stayed back, but I had expected that. Clarine had made him promise to keep both himself and me safe and well.

So, Cath led the two of us to a tiny room filled with oh-so-lovely smells that made me want to gag and Rutger tense up. 'I'm back.' She opened the door a little more, to let the light in. There were two living servants inside, a maid and one of the stable workers, both people who had worked here since they were children. He looked half-dead already, but the maid might hold on. Though, it was a big 'might'.

"I'm sorry it took so long," I whispered, kneeling so that they didn't strain their necks looking up. "Can you tell me what all happened?"

"Oh, Lady Irene…" the maid breathed. I felt horrible that I did not know her name, had never learned her name while I was here. She smiled so brightly and sweetly at me, after all, but I barely had a single memory of her. Maybe I had been more snobbish growing up than I originally suspected. "Well, we can reassure you that Lord Mark and Lord Christopher aren't the ones doing this." That was a much needed balm for my spirit. "They were in Aquelia when everything happened. The one in charge is Baron Ailmi." That… was not a name I thought I would hear. "He said that Lord Mark hasn't come because he's being doped with dreamflower." Well, now I was terrified for all the rulers of the Great Houses, save Perceval. "We fought back, of course. But knives can only do so much damage when you're facing people with armor." I was rather impressed…

"Thank you for your loyalty…" I just… felt horrible. I didn't know their names. I barely knew their faces. I knew them more by how long they had served the house. Yet they had fought to protect this place, important to my family. "I truly thank you for that, and for reassuring me that my uncle and cousin aren't involved in this atrocity." I couldn't even think of a way to ask for their names now. It seemed rude.

"It's nothing much," the stable worker mumbled. He blinked open bleary, unfocused eyes, and tried to focus on me. "Just repaying a debt. Lady Katri… gave us coin during a bad time, and then Lord Nicholas hired us on, knowing the risks. It's home, first one we had." He closed his eyes again. "Nothing much about protecting your home."

"…I'll try to make it back to you in time," I murmured. Then, when that happened, I would learn their names. I would learn the names of all the servants who fought, and died, and not just ignore them as I had done as a child. "I know it is cruel when you hurt, but please, try to hold on."

They both smiled gently, and did not reply as I stood and walked away. Cath and Rutger followed me silently. I think they knew I was shaken; it took all my energy to simply… make sure I wasn't getting us lost.

"So, who is this stupid baron?" Cath asked when we were a distance away. We were almost to one of the doors to the estate, actually. "You know him?"

"I don't know much about him, truthfully," I answered. I found the staircase leading up. "I mostly associated the name with a list of very creative curses." Ailmi was a barony that swore oaths of loyalty to Hanover, but the house had bad relations with House Hanover for a long while. "They had close ties to a noble house in Caliburn called Kerinei. The house was dissolved when the last
lord, Albert, was posthumously found guilty of attempting to assassinate Mordred, but there are many who proclaim he was framed." The key of the argument lied mostly in that it had apparently been very well known that Grandfather and this Albert person had loathed each other, so Grandfather was accused of a set up. I thought it ludicrous, but there were apparently a lot of unanswered questions surrounding the incident. "This baron's family was one of them, so they hate us, even almost forty years later. Seeing as I am half-Sacaean on top of that, their lands were always a 'do not trespass' sort of place."

"And here I thought Hanover was universally loved."

"No, from my understanding, it was just that the house is so powerful that few want to take the risk." Hanover survived the 1000 years by making other noble houses indebted to them. When I thought about it, it was incredibly manipulative. "But now with everything shaken, they're willing to take the risk now." We reached the door, and I turned to face them. "When I open this, you two will have to find the others; I will need to find Roy."

"Yeah, we remember." Cath looked put out that I told her, but my attention was focused on Rutger, as I was worried I might accidentally make him break a promise. He nodded, though, with a small smile, so I assumed that things would be fine. "Do I need to pick it?"

"Let's see." I turned the knob and it opened easily, without even a squeak of the hinges. "That would be a 'no.'" I could hear the signs of fighting. "Well, it seems the trap sprung while we were here." I glanced back at them. "Father Sky watch over you."

We ran through the hallways, splitting up at the nearest intersection. It took me a couple of seconds to recognize where in the estate I was, but from there, it was child's play to make it to the dining hall, where I suspected Roy and his group would be. However, when I got there, I could only stare. I… this… Could someone explain to me how they managed to fire from the ceiling? I thought the spots on the ceiling were decoration, not freaking murder holes! I did not expect this at all, and I was really glad that Roy had ice magic, because his shield was probably the only reason his group wasn't dead.

That'll teach me to think I knew everything about this estate. But now, I had to think of a way to shut things down. I could see Baron Ailmi from here; he was the only person in the room that I did not recognize. The part of the room where he was wasn't being attacked, for obvious reasons, and I happened to enter the room in that part, so I wasn't threatened, yet. In fact, I wasn't far from the table. What could I…?

I hesitated, but noticing the cracks in Roy's ice-shield, I decided to go for the half-thought in my head. I reached into my pack for a certain vial and upended it into one of the glasses of wine, before picking two up. Then, I walked over to Baron Ailmi, kicking a chair lightly to catch his attention. "Well, it seems we lost," I sighed. He turned and grinned when he saw me. So long as he kept up thinking he won… "Though, it was quite rude of you to break sacred hospitality."

"Those laws do not hold with traitors," he scoffed. I barely resisted the urge to roll my eyes, but he made some sort of gesture to make the magic stop. Roy kept the shield up anyway. "So, Lady Irene, are you proposing a toast to your defeat?"

"Well, I certainly feel like drinking right now." Thinking rapidly, I offered him the one I poisoned first. If I could take advantage of how Sacaenans were viewed, then… "Would you like some?"

"I would indeed." He held out his hand, and I dutifully passed it over. He took the bait. Thank you, Father Sky. "Cheers to the fall of House Hanover at long last." He laughed, but waited for me to drink from my cup before draining his. "Now then, I am in a good mood and am feeling merciful,
"Poison?" He stumbled back, struggling to stay awake. "But you're... you're Sacae..."

"Poison isn't a lie." I shrugged. "It's not my fault if you thought the glass was safe." Sacaeans were viewed as 'noble savages'. We were always 'honest' and always 'honorable'. But outsiders always imposed their views of 'honesty' and 'honor' on Sacaeans. Sometimes, it worked. Other times... "Poison is disliked among Sacaeans because of how easily it can wipe out a tribe. But that is during peace. During war, it is a weapon like any other, so long as you only use it on your enemies and do not drag non-combatants into it." My hesitation came more from how I knew Roy would see it, and from a childhood with Aunt Lyn. "I understand you will have a delightful dream as you die. So, sweet dreams, Baron Ailmi."

He managed enough strength to glare at me before dropping in a faint. He'd never wake up. I loved arrogant idiots.

A thunderbolt crashed next to me, blackening the tile by my feet. I glanced up at the ceiling, noting which 'hole' it likely came from, and casually waved. I figured it would unnerve whoever was up there.

"Mages, your leader is dead," Roy suddenly declared. He dismissed his ice-barrier and came to stand next to me, pointedly standing on that blackened tile. I shifted to grab the back of his shirt, just in case. "You can continue to fight. You might even kill one of us. But you will lose this battle. The estate is ours. If you surrender, you may keep your lives." He did not say the rest of the 'traditional' threat, and I knew why. He didn't want to give that order. "What will you do?"

For a long while, there was no answer. But then we heard movement above, and before long, a hidden door in the wall that I never knew existed opened up, revealing several mages who threw their tomes to the side, and held their hands up. They picked surrender.

"Secure them, and the area." The soldiers moved and Roy sighed, giving me a look. "Why didn't you warn about threats from the ceiling?"

"I literally had no idea those things were anything but decoration," I groaned. That was incredibly stupid of me. "I'm sorry."

"Well, things worked out, and it was going according to plan until then." He smiled shyly. "Maybe that was the first sign something was going to go wrong." Ha... "Regardless, though, we need to coordinate the other groups." Yes, we did. "But first, Irene, why were you carrying that much dreamflower?"

"Dreamflower, in small amounts, is used in different potions, Roy." I shrugged. "In the plains, we have a saying: 'the one who knows how you are put together also knows how to take you apart.' A knowledge of medicine was also a knowledge of how to kill a person painlessly. "He's lucky I decided against giving into my temper. I have other things that would have been a lot more painful."

"Like...?" Roy abruptly shook his head. "No, don't want to know. I really don't want to know." He sighed. "Well, let's secure the area." Yes, though now I was curious about something. "Why do you have that gleam in your eyes?"
"Actually, I'm wondering if we can poison some weapons now." I might make it a project. "You know… poisoning our enemies with ebrove might just be-"

"IRENE!"

Aside from the whole 'by the way, there are literal holes in the ceiling and secret passages not one of us knew about, so beware fire raining down on you' thing, the battle to retake Hanover went smoothly. Our losses were minimal, and we gathered enough caphredil to those among us who were poisoned. I had actually been startled, but it seemed like during the battle, Wuotan and Fiona managed to find a lot more patches than the one I had been aware of.

However, I learned that over half of the servants who had been working here in Uncle Mark's absence died trying to protect the estate. The maid and stable worker didn't make it either. I didn't know any of their names, and I just felt like the worst. So, I found myself on the roof, lying on my back and staring at the clouds slowly drifting by, trying to think of why I never learned a single name. I suppose you could blame my being young, and only being here rarely, but that didn't seem enough of an explanation. They died protecting their home, my family's home.

The door to the roof opened with a quiet creak, but I didn't turn to look at who it was. Either they would say something or leave me alone. I wasn't sure which I preferred.

However, footsteps came closer, so I glanced over to see who it was as they sat down next to me. Klein. Klein was the one here. "I thought I might find you up here," he said, looking up at the sky. "The roof is surprisingly comfortable."

"I suppose," I mumbled. I sighed, sitting up now. It was hard to wallow in self-pity when Klein was around. "Did you need something?"

"No, I just wanted to check up on you." He turned to smile at me. "Word has spread about Lord Mark, and I know you're not really 'recovered' from learning about Aunt Katri, or Uncle Rath." If we wanted to be technical, I doubted I was 'recovered' from Uncle Hector's death all the way in Araphan.

"I'm honestly more upset that I don't know the servants." Was that a bad thing? It could be. "How are you?"

"Shaken." He sighed, looking back at the sky. "I had convinced myself that my parents were fine, that Erk and Priscilla were fine, but when I heard Aunt Katri was dead, it shook that belief." He sighed. "So, now I'm scared that I'm going to find them poisoned or drugged." It didn't help that the explanation made 'sense'. It was hard to swallow them just standing by, especially because of something like Mom's death, so the only explanations were poison or hostages. "Clarine won't say anything, but I know this is all shaking her."

"Well, she's not that old, and was always a bit sheltered." I could seriously kill Zephiel one thousand times for shattering what innocent Roy, Lilina, Sue, Clarine, and all the children who fought with us had. I really could. Ignoring everything else, I wanted him to die for that reason. "Are you okay with moving forward?"

"Are you? You have no idea where any of your aunts and uncles are, or your cousins?" Yes, thank you, Klein. I had only been purposely avoiding thinking of all of that to focus on the ultimately false hope that Mom, at least, would be fine. "Charging forward could mean…" Yes…

"Liberating Etruria might cost them their lives." That was the unspoken truth none of us brought
up, for fear of Roy's resolve shaking. By liberating Etruria, we were putting them all at risk. Elphin made strategies knowing that they could kill his father. I made tactics, knowing that my aunts, uncles, and cousins could pay the price. Cecilia marched forward, knowing that her brother and his family might die. Klein and Clarine fought, knowing that there was a not insignificant chance that the only reward for doing their duty would be the corpses of their parents and elder sibling. Lalum kept up morale, despite knowing that the very soldiers she cheered up could be the ones who kill her father. I had not talked to Sue about this, but I knew she was thinking it too. "This isn't some grand tale, where we're guaranteed everyone is going to survive." Father Sky, we already had deaths. "So, Klein?"

"I am uncertain of the choice, but I know that if I didn't choose it, I would get quite the lecture from Mother." Klein smiled bitterly. "So, I walk forward with this army." We couldn't even hope. At least, I couldn't. Oswin, Uncle Hector, Dad, and Mom all died despite me hoping. "So, you're stuck with me."

"I think it's more of the alternative." I hesitated then, thinking. Klein and I ended up accidentally sharing a tent a lot even since Missur, and I was so tempted to just... ask. I was tempted to ask if I was just imagining things. The hesitancy in his face, and the way he leaned into me slightly, hinted he wanted to ask too. He wanted to ask about it. But this wasn't really a good time. Too much was going on, too quickly, and both of us knew it. So, I was some combination of disappointed and relieved when I heard the door creak open again. "Is someone there?"

"Well, yes, but I can leave if I'm interrupting?" Lilina stepped out onto the roof, smiling sadly. "I... um..." she stammered, ducking her head. "I heard that last part." Was that so? "Are you all really certain?"

"Lilina, the alternative is letting Zephiel keep Etruria," I pointed off softly. She only drooped. "War means tough decisions, same as ruling."

"Yeah, I suppose so." She sighed. "Can I have a hug?"

"Of course." I held my arms out to her, and Klein helpfully moved out of the way so that Lilina could just run over and collapse into the hug. "How are you doing?" There had been an unspoken rule to not chat about how we were all doing until our task was done, but I think I could get away with breaking it.

"I don't know." She shifted so that she was sitting between Klein and me, looking even younger than normal. "First, I heard of Father and Oswin and Araphan. The rebellion. Then there was Uncle Rath. Everything we encountered in the Isles." She sighed. "I feel like there is a wound in my soul that keeps getting ripped open. No matter how many times something bad happens, no matter how used to it I tell myself I am, it just continues to hurt." Oh, Lilina... "That isn't even going into me getting poisoned, and I've been feeling off since then, even with the-" She started coughing then, and I thought it strange.

Panic flooded me when I saw her hand and the blood speckling it. "Klein, get a healer!" I took Lilina's hand to make sure I wasn't overreacting even as Klein sprinted. "Father Sky..." I had thought her illness was under control. I had thought she was fine.

"I'm sorry..." Lilina continued to cough, more blood covering her hand with each one. "I'm sorry..." Had she been hiding this? No, I didn't think so.

But I think I had been so focused on my own troubles that I never even considered that she might be getting worse. I think I had been so focused on the war that I barely even thought about anything that wasn't directly connected to me, that I let myself delude myself into thinking everything was
fine and would continue to be fine, despite everything.

Had I always been this selfish?

Poison and stress. That was why Lilina's condition suddenly took a turn for the worse and, unfortunately, we had already used up all the caphredil we picked today. Since it was too dark to safely go out now, we had to leave it for the morning. So, no matter how much I wanted to just head out anyway, we let her rest, and had the War Council without her. I was still incredibly pissed off at myself for not following her illness more closely. Ever since I heard about Etruria, I had been focused so completely on that; I completely neglected the health of everyone else. It was just about Etruria, a country I hated but had so many ties to, and Mom. It was just about what could be saved, what I hoped to save, and never about those under my care as a tactician.

"What we need to do, more than anything, is to find some way to remove the enemy's main advantage, numbers," Deke pointed out. The Council was well underway, plotting how to proceed. "Having generals here help us get the main army's numbers down, but what about the provincial armies?"

"Before that gets answered, does someone mind explaining what these 'provincial' armies are?" Tate asked. I had a feeling she was more asking for clarification, and to ensure we were all on the same page. "I get that they're not under the control of the crown."

"Provincial armies are the personal forces of the Great Houses. They're more for internal conflict, while the main army deals with more external conflict." Deke shrugged off the strange looks. "I worked for Little Master Klein's family for a while. You hear things."

"Why do the Great Houses get their own forces?"

"That I don't know. Little Master Klein?"

"In theory, it's supposed to be a deterrent to a tyrannical ruler," Klein answered easily. He shrugged. "In practice, it's just simply tradition. When Saint Elimine founded and ruled Etruria, it was much more like Lycia in that they were five separate provinces working together. Unlike Bern, which was always a firm monarchy."

"Tradition, and as a means of asserting the power of the Great Houses," Cecilia added. She crossed her arms, frowning slightly. "It's important to note that there are reasons why the Great Houses have lasted so long in a constantly changing political landscape, and why they were firmly reestablished after the Etrurian Civil War decades ago. Part of it is the heroic legacy, like how Ostia continues to be the leader of the Lycian Alliance because it is the house founded by Roland, but there are others."

"Then that's the answer," Ekhidna sighed. She didn't look too impressed. "Even the good houses in Etruria have their darker sides." No small part of me wanted to protest, but I knew I couldn't. After all, Grandfather and Uncle Mark had at least passively allowed the atrocities in the Western Isles, and Mom had run away from it. "Well, whatever, right? We need to figure out a way to not get stampeded. Our army is... how much smaller?"

"We are somewhere around one-tenth of the numbers Etruria could send against us."

"Yeah, that. And this isn't a story. The 'heroes' don't get a guaranteed victory." That was true. So, I needed to think. What was a way we could do this? Ideally, we'd just bring them over without a fight, but was there a way we could do that quickly? We didn't have that much time, and too many
slow plans.

I stilled as I realized something. Uncle Mark and Christopher were in Aquelia. They, legally speaking, could be considered 'missing'. Uncle Mark never married, which was why Christopher was his heir in the first place, and Aunt Maria didn't have any other living children. Margaret, Aunt Anastasia's daughter, was the heir to Caerleon first, and would only be considered an heir to Hanover if all other lines were exhausted. The same could be said of Marcius, Uncle Nicky's son, since Uncle Nicky relinquished his right to inherit when he became Etruria's liaison in Ilia. That wasn't going into how I had no idea where any of these people were. Legally, they were missing too. Mom was dead. That all meant…

"We can just order it," I whispered. All eyes turned to me, most questioning. But Elphin's eyes were sharp. He had come to the same conclusion. I gave him a little glare, since we could solve a lot of these problems if he came out of hiding, but I was just going to assume he was being dramatic. "Given the current political climate, legally speaking, Klein, Cecilia, and I can make claims to 'Active Ruler', since all the current leaders of the Great Houses are incapacitated." I smiled. "This means we can take command of the provincial armies, and bring them into ours."

"I completely forgot that was a thing," Klein sighed. I knew he didn't actually forget. He actively didn't think about it. But I was the tactician, and I had a job to minimize casualties. This would do it. "But it is true. We already have Hanover anyway, and a few messages will bring Reglay and Eir into the fold." He nodded to Perceval. "Of course, Perceval here is the leader of Caliburn, so we likely could get them anyway. So, that's four of the Great Houses, right there."

"Is there a way we can get the fifth?" Roy asked. His eyes were serious, and I knew why. He was taking my earlier suggestion. He was using us, so that we would not be seen as invaders. I knew he didn't like it. But this was what a leader did: using his resources to his absolute advantage. "Who is the fifth, again?"

"Caerleon," I answered. I shrugged. "We might be able to win them through Hanover, though. My cousin is the heir, and the house basically adopted Uncle Raven, so he might be able to do something."

"Things would move smoother if we had them." Roy closed his eyes and nodded. "It will also give us time to work on winning the populace, so that we can chase the enemy into Aquelia." He opened his eyes again. "I would like to find Bishop Yodel quickly, though. I would rather Lilina be cured sooner rather than later, and it's probably a very good idea for our healers to be trained in how to tend to illnesses." Yes. "But I suppose we can adjourn the meeting for now, since at this point, it'll be just speculation, and I'm sure Elphin and Irene want more time to be evil and spread rumors." A ripple of laughter eased the tension in the room, and I honestly wondered how long it had been since any of us really had fun. "We'll have another Council in a couple of days, barring emergencies."

The group dispersed, going about various different tasks. I, however, snagged Astore by the arm. After all, if we were getting an influx of recruits, there were some very big risks, and I didn't mean just illnesses or potential conflicts.

"Astore, I have a very specific job for you," I whispered as we headed down the hall. I wasn't sure if Roy thought of this, but it was my job to consider all possibilities. Mom's lessons were clear: a tactician was in charge of keeping her group safe. I had neglected that job because of my own problems and selfishness, but I wanted to do all I could to not fail again. "I doubt we have any enemy spies among us at the moment." There were the Bernese, but I didn't think they had the ability to contact anyone. "But if we start getting more people…"
"Oh, good, I didn't want to be the person to mention that little elephant," Astore half-joked. His eyes were serious, though. "And I doubt it too. I've been keeping an eye on the Bernese, but they mostly just seem to be in awe that we saved them." I was right, then. "But I'll personally check any new recruits we get, and I'll also send word to Ostia to get more proper spies. Chad and Cath are good, but it's clear they aren't trained for the job. And I'd like it to stay that way." Yes, I did too.

"Thank you, Astore." I smiled warmly at him. "I appreciate it."

"It's part of the job, Lady Irene." He bowed to me. "And yours is getting rest for today. I can tell you're thinking too many things. You need to sleep and let the issues rest."

"Am I so easy to read?" I sighed. "But, I think you're right." At the moment, I was more focusing on how much I hated myself than actually working to fix any problems. "If anyone asks, tell them that I went to bed early, please. That's what I'm going to try and do."

"Of course. Pleasant night."

"You too." I waved him goodbye as I walked off, my feet automatically taking me to the room I always used when I stayed at the estate. I wasn't sure if room assignments had been given, but it was hard to break habits.

Apparently, though, I wasn't the only one to assume that I would use this room. After all, when I opened the door, I found Sue sitting on the bed, absently looking as a portrait that I knew were in the box I got from Dad, not her.

"Oh, is the meeting over?" she asked, setting it to the side. It was a sketch Grandpa had made, of Dad teaching me archery while Mom and Sue cheered me on from the side. I was about five in it. "That didn't last long."

"It was just to come up with a general direction," I explained. As I closed the door behind me, I noticed the window was open. Had she been trying to listen to the dead? "How are you?"

"I don't know." She looked so sad and tired. "So much of our old lives are gone now. Dad and Mom are dead, any information about Grandpa is old, and we know nothing about our Etrurian family, except those who are here." Yes, that was true. "I started thinking about then, and then realized that we also don't know of our 'family' in Ilia either." No, we didn't. There had been absolutely no word out of Ilia. How much terror did the Ilians feel at that? "It feels like our Lycian family is the only one we know anything about, and even then, we suffered losses."

"Things have been so crazy, haven't they?" I sat down next to her and hugging her. What a horrible big sister I've been, just leaving her to Sin while I 'worked' and deluded myself. "It's entirely possible that we'll lose even more family, suddenly and without warning." That was just how war was. I could scream about it for days on end, but that wouldn't change it. "However, I know one thing for certainty."

"Yes?"

"We're both surviving this." I pulled back to smile at her. "I swear it, Sue. We're both going to survive this, and see Mom buried next to Dad. Even if you lose everything else, you will not lose your big sister, and I will not lose my little sister. I promise." The wind gusted through the open window, and for the first time, I let myself listen. Mom's laugh was on the wind, the laugh she had whenever we said something she was proud of. "Mom and Dad are watching over us. Have we ever failed when that happened?"
"No, I suppose not." She smiled back, though it shook. "And there's Uncle Hector too." Yes, he was watching out for us too. "Aunt Ninian." She had been for so long now, but I doubted her support would waver. "And… anyone else who might have passed."

"There's no way we can fail, then." I pulled her into another hug. "Come on. Let's get ready for bed. You and I can share a room tonight."

"Thank you."

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So, on Lyn's side of the family, canonically speaking, her grandfather, father, and mother all were poisoned. On Hector's side of the family, canonically speaking, his father, mother, and brother had consumption. I couldn't resist Lilina catching both 'curses'. Ebrove, dreamflower, and caphredil are fictional plants, ftr. Murder-holes are actually a thing; I did not make them up. In Tactician's Testimony, the Etrurian interlude had Katri given some street-children some coins, and then ask her father to help them. The maid and stable worker here are two of those children; the stable worker in particular is the only one with spoken lines.

Next Chapter – Interlude, Hope
Our plan slowly comes together. Soldiers pour in from all parts of the country, ready and willing to do away with the revolutionaries. Hanover is the most resistant, likely because of how 'low' I am on the inheritance line and because I am half-Sacaean. Grandfather and Uncle Mark might adore me, but that doesn't mean that Hanover will suffer a foreigner who they barely know. But I wear on them enough for the provincial army to relent, and so the recruitment focuses on bring Caerleon into the fold.

I focus my efforts in working with Elphin to generate strategies, making sure everyone is integrated, and checking on everyone's health. It's what a tactician is supposed to do, and I really need to start acting like one.

Soldiers, soldiers everywhere, and not a one to trust. Ten, in particular, were never to be trusted, based on Astore's initial findings.

"The worst part is that I don't know if that's too 'low' or too 'high' of a number for spies infiltrating," I sighed, leaning back in my chair. Astore just smiled, casually leaning against my desk. "How high have their infiltrated?"

"Not very," Astore reassured. "It helps that most of the leader and aide positions are filled already, and with people that have been with us for a long period of time." Judging by the list I had, every single person I knew the name of in the army was either a 'leader' or an 'aide' to one of those leaders. "And it helps that, contrary to most battles, we have a one-hundred-percent survival rate for said leaders and aides." It really was unusual, from my understanding, especially since each of these people fought regularly on the front lines. "But, they are here, and there's possibly more."

"Yes." I rubbed my temples, feeling a headache coming on. No wonder Mom swore by Dad's ginger concoctions for whenever she had to work. I had some steeping right now. "Who have you told?"

"For now? Just you. I imagine you'd want to inform our general and strategist." He grinned. "This, of course, means that you have to come up with the initial plan for dealing with them."

"Of course, I do." I gave him a little glare, and he laughed. "Very well." I had one idea, really. After all, for all I knew, these spies were only working with the revolutionaries because of hostages, or good pay when everything was going to hell. "Feed them information." He looked startled. "I don't care how, just do it."

"Even if it's a lie?"

"Sacaean do not lie because we view it as a sin, an insult to Father Sky and Mother Earth. But you are not Sacaean; you do not worship Father Sky and Mother Earth. Why should you be bound by my rules?" I shrugged. "Yes, I get angry when I am lied to, but honestly, who doesn't? It's just a deeper anger to me, because of my beliefs. But you're a spy. Lies are your shield. I'd have to be really petty to get mad at you over that."
"…That's way too mature for an eighteen year old."

"I grew up with Uncle Matthew."

"Point." He still looked skeptical. "You really all right with that? Really, really."

…Ugh… "Okay, the answer is 'no', but I think Father Sky will forgive me for it considering that there is a war going on." I bit back a sigh that time. I was starting to understand while Uncle Eliwood used to sigh so much. I really was. "Was there more to report?"

"Oh, right, I heard a rumor you might be interested in." His eyes were sharp. "There's a rumor that Prince Mildain is actually alive." There was…? "And, get this, the rumor apparently comes straight from the castle." Why would it…? Uncle Douglas. That was why. Uncle Douglas was doing what he could to protect the 'new Etruria' while standing with the 'old'. That was the only explanation I had. "Be convenient if he shows up."

"Yes, it would." I could say nothing more, and thankfully, he recognized that. "Anything else?"

"Just that we should be getting some 'spy' reinforcements from Ostia sometime later today." There was some noise outside, and he grinned. "And my people found Yodel in a dungeon far, far away, and have brought him here."

"…COULD YOU HAVE TOLD ME THAT PART SOONER!!"

"Thankfully, discovering it early means that Lilina should be fine," Yodel reassured me. "No lasting consequences whatsoever." He had gone through the entire infirmary, healing and tending to everyone there, and doing checks on everyone in the army. I invited him for tea in my tent after he was done, as a way to relax him. "Ah, your tea truly warms the heart, Lady Irene."

"The herbs are supposed to be good for fatigue," I explained, smiling. He had to be exhausted by now, but he didn't show one bit of it. "Thank you dearly for treating her."

"Well, she's still on bedrest, and likely will be until you all head to Aquelia." He set his mug down, leaning back in the chair to indicate it was time for serious talk. "General Roy informed me of what he would like me to do."

"I thought he would." I sat down in the chair across from him, to make sure we were 'even'. This was a talk between equals, after all. "You are not obligated, of course."

"Of course, but I think I shall take up the favor." His eyes sharpened. "But you have a question you did not bring up to him, yes?"

"Am I so easy to read?" I kept my tone light, but made a mental note to check on that. "The question is simply. Will my being a Sacaean be a detriment to this plan?" It was something I considered often. I was Sacaean. I did not follow the Saint Elimine Church. I was not ashamed of it, but would it hurt Roy in this situation? I did not know, but I did know Etrurians were capable of being that… petty, I suppose the word was.

"No, and I plan on using that for a… personal objective." He smiled warmly. "When I was younger, I traveled with a Sacaean Chieftain, and learned something terrible. He lost his wife and child to the thankfully now outlawed Knight Initiation. Before then, it had always seemed like a distant thing, something I knew only because a friend of mine was traumatized, but I paid it no mind, focusing on other, more personal projects. Such as ensuring that churches were safe havens to women escaping too entitled men."
"So, even you ignored it?"

"I was not born with my wisdom or my open mind, Irene. I learned both over many, many long years." He chuckled. "Remember, when I was growing up, anti-Sacaean sentiment was stronger than it was now."

"I suppose that's true." But we were far from the topic. "What personal objective, though?"

"Getting people to accept Sacaeans." Yodel? "As I mentioned, I traveled with a Sacaean Chieftain. He has been dead for over twenty years, but I still consider him a good friend." Ah... "Then I see you and Sue, who I have watched grow up, rolling your eyes at the scriptures, fully aware of the hypocrisy of many of its practitioners and, worse, its leaders." His smile warmed. "Of course, in the original scriptures, Saint Elimine spoke highly of the beliefs of the Sacaeans. It makes sense, considering that Saint Elimine was friends with Hanon, the Divine Huntress." That was true. You often forgot it, but the legendary heroes were all good friends. "This lovely rebellion is a perfect time to remind people of the truth of Saint Elimine's words. If we highlight how our revolutionaries are prejudiced against Sacaeans, you might find many shaking in their boots at realizing they share the same thoughts."

"Won't that simply make them defensive, though?" It was hard for people to accept a challenge to their worldview. 'Sacaeans were savages' was a fact of many Etrurians 'world'. "Will that not make them focus on other things, and try to put all the blame on that fact instead?"

"Oh, certainly. People will blind themselves if it means protecting their little bubble of a world." Yodel's smile was kind. "But if you do not challenge it at all, then nothing will ever change. That is another lesson I have learned in my long life."

"You're not that old Yodel."

"Ah, sometimes I feel ten years older than I am," He chuckled. "But I also have another trump card to play." That was? "The master tactician who is orchestrating this plan is Sacaean. Those who challenge the revolutionaries, who wield the sacred weapons of legend... one of their leaders is Sacaean. Just as one is Lycian, one is Etrurian, and, if we include Princess Guinevere, one is Bernese." His smile was deceptively polite. "It's a very good time to remind them that one of the Legendary Heroes was also Sacaean, and that some of their number fight in this war, and have fought longer than any Etrurian."

"...You're going to use Sue and me."

"Yes." At least he was honest. "And I plan on using the fact that you are of the Kutolah, the same tribe as Hanon, and are of her line."

"Is that much of an accomplishment after 1000 years?"

"People won't follow logic if you know how to phrase things." He laughed softly. "Besides, is this not what you all are doing anyway? Taking advantage of your backgrounds to draw people's loyalty?" Mmm... "I plan on using this as a chance to revolutionize the church as I have been doing for years. In exchange, I ensure that they will turn that fervor into a weapon you can use."

"Times like this remind me that you are Etrurian, Yodel." I scowled when his only response was to smile. "But yes, fine, I can agree to those terms. You're lucky I like you."

"Oh, yes, very much so." His eyes turned serious. "Now, let me outline my plan, and you can tell me if that will mesh with the plans you already have in motion."
"Very well."

The laughter of children danced through the air, and I couldn't help but smile at the sound. We had traveled to a town not far from the Hanover Estate as part of our 'humanizing our army' efforts. Some, like Sue and Sin, took some of the locals out on rides through the countryside. Others, like Allen and Shanna, were playing make-believe with the children. Roy watched over some of the quieter ones, using his ice magic to craft little ice animals for them to coo at.

It was just heartwarming to watch, really, and the indulgent and warm looks the adults gave us told me the plan was working. Ah, if only I could join in as well… but I had work to do.

"We really need to split the army into at least four groups," Perceval murmured. He, Cecilia, Klein, Elphin, and I were in the local tavern, looking over a map of the castle that we scribbled the secret passages we knew of on. We… had to be very careful to burn this map when we were done. "They can be led by General Roy, Cecilia, Klein, and myself."

"Make it 'five', and have that 'fifth' group be solely of fliers," I murmured, thinking rapidly. Who was likely in charge here? Who would Zephiel have left here in Eturia? "Did you hear of who was being left behind to watch things, Perceval?"

"When I defected, all the Wyvern Generals were here." Damn. "Ah, Princess-" We got some weird looks as Cecilia suddenly covered Perceval's mouth to prevent him from accidentally revealing that the Princess of Bern was in the middle of an Etrurian town who very much did not like Bern at the moment.

"I am 'Jenny' here," Guinevere laughingly reminded. I was glad she was taking this in good humor. Perceval's automatic politeness and formality had nearly revealed her and Elphin five times. Today. "But I saw you all were plotting, so I thought I'd listen in."

"Are you done giving baking lessons?" Cecilia asked, smiling kindly as she brought her hand from Perceval's face. He, looking sheepish, got another chair so that Guinevere could actually sit, right between Cecilia and me. "They looked popular."

"Yes, so popular that we made a bit of a mess. I only just now got the flour out of my hair." She smiled, sitting down neatly. After a moment, she consciously slouched, to make herself less likely to stand out. Astore had taught her that. "I yielded the floor to Wolt for cooking lessons. They look to be just as popular."

"Did you have fun?"

"Extremely." Her smile was bright, but it dimmed slightly as her eyes turned serious. "However, if I can help, I want to. Though, I don't think I can do much. I already told you what I overheard."

"We were trying to figure out who would be in charge here in Etruria," Klein explained. He smiled kindly at her. "As well as handling a general strategy."

"That said, if Zephiel left behind a general, I would guess it to be Narcian," I murmured. All eyes at the table turned to me. "Zephiel himself likely isn't there. Roy's power, and the poison he was infected with, likely sent him back to Bern to recuperate."

"Knowing my brother, he would also hang back just to see," Guinevere whispered. Her eyes were sad. "Granted, I do not know him as well as I used to. Clearly. But he would use this as a test, for both whoever he left behind and for us."
"Well, that just makes me more certain it's Narcian." I closed my eyes, thinking. "Brunja, as far as I know, is still out of the fight due to injuries, and her forces are still in the Sacae, trying to control it. Murdock's troops were in Ilia, and logically could be here as well, but I think they might still be having trouble holding onto it." There was still no word from Ilia, but in this case, no news was good news. We would have definitely heard if Ilia had completely fallen. "Logically, that leaves Narcian." I opened my eyes, and glared at the map. "But we might have some trouble there, if this really is a test."

"...Ah, yes, we will." Guinevere bit her lip, nodding. I noticed she pointedly didn't look at the map, and was touched by how she was making sure she didn't learn all our secrets. "At this point, Narcian has failed twice in his duties. He was repelled in Lycia, and he did not secure Arcadia." She frowned. "Actually, based on descriptions and names, I think it was his forces in the Isles as well, which would make it really 'three' failures. Such a thing is intolerable in a Wyvern General."

"Narcian is backed into a corner." I did not like this. He was backed into a corner, in a situation where we had hostages. "There's no way Mordred is making it out of this alive."

"That is assuming he is even still alive," Elphin quietly pointed out. The somber words didn't suit the laughter in the distance. I glanced over and saw Lalum teaching some children how to dance. I saw Lugh and Chad playing tag with them. Roy had moved to talking to the adults, reassuring them with kind and calm smiles. "It is entirely possible that he's already dead."

"Douglas is still there," Perceval gently countered. I knew he was more saying it to reassure Elphin than out of any real 'belief'. "That suggests there is still time."

"For how long?" There was no answer. "We need to progress under the assumption that either he is dead, or will die soon." His shaking hands belied his calm tone. "Not a word to General Roy." Those of us who knew his secret knew what he was really saying. 'Not one word of my identity.' At this point, I figured he was hiding it so that Roy didn't feel obligated to save his father. "Princess Guinevere, do you know typical aerial tactics for Bern?"

Guinevere immediately launched into an incredibly detailed report on not only how Bern typically used their wyverns, but also how Narcian did. We focused on the words, and made plans, ignoring the dark thoughts hovering over our heads.

After so many times of false hoping, it was very difficult to hope now.

"It looks like your appetite is returning," I noted with a laugh. Lilina simply smiled sheepishly as she set her empty bowl to the side. I think she more inhaled than ate the soup that had been in it. "Here, drink some of this. Even if your appetite returned, it doesn't mean that your stomach can take the food."

"Right..." she sighed. Still, she accepted the tea with a smile. "Thanks, Irene."

"It's no trouble." I sat down in the chair next to her bed, giving her a studying look. "How are you feeling?"

"Both better and not?" She sipped the tea, humming with delight. "Yay, sweet~" Well, of course. I put honey in it, just for her. "I am not coughing up blood, which is nice, but I feel rather weak."

"Well, you were sick."

"I know. But everyone is running themselves ragged while I'm just resting in bed." She set her mug to the side and reached up to touch my cheek. "You haven't been sleeping." Well, that was
true. My nightmares were as constant as ever. "Nor have you been eating. I don't think I've seen you have a full meal since we left Ostia, and I don't think you've had a full night's rest since we arrived on the Isles."

"Guinevere checks me daily. I'm not in danger of falling apart."

"Physically, perhaps." She sighed, her hand dropping to her lap. "Most of the soldiers think that you're well-adapted. That you were trained to be calm in the face of death. The more idiotic minded think you sacrificed your mom." They think I what. "Sacrificed her to get the resolve and fervor needed for us to reclaim Etruria."

"I don't know if that means they think me that ruthless or if that means they think me that clever and manipulative." I was more startled the thought was there at all.

"A combination, I suppose. After all, your tactics have involved assassination, trampling, ambushes, etc." My advocating having at least the spies and scouts carrying things of sleeping potions and poisons likely had not helped matters. "...Ugh, and now I'm tired."

"Go to sleep." I nudged her until she was lying down, and tucked her in, just as I used to. "If you're very good in the morning, I'll make sure the next strategy meeting is here in your room."

"You will?" Her face lit up with a smile, even as she struggled to keep her eyes open. "You're the best, Irene." She nodded off before I could reply, but that was just as well. I didn't really have one. So, instead, I smiled and left her room, closing the door with a quiet 'click' behind me and checking on her neighbor, Clarine.

To my not-surprise, Rutger was in the room too. To my surprise, it seemed he had been roped into helping Clarine make something. "Clarine?" I called. Clarine barely nodded and acknowledgement, though Rutger looked up and shrugged off my questioning look. "Clarine, what are you making?"

"What does it look like?" she retorted. I chose to not point out that it really looked like a mess of thread to me. "I'm making Lilina a good luck charm." Her fingers were covered in bandages; sewing had never been one of her strong points. "I'm going to at least make one for each of the leaders and aides in the army." That... was a lot. That was around forty-six people, give or take. She didn't even know most of them. I didn't, really. "Rutger is helping me make sure things don't get as tangled."

"I see." I hesitated, thinking of how to continue. I had planned on asking her about how she felt, and how she was. But the fact that she was going through so much trouble to make good luck charms hinting how well she was taking things. "Do you want help?"

"Not at the moment." She looked up and smiled slightly. Her eyes were red and puffy, though, as if she had just been crying. "I'd really like to make them on my own." Her eyes lit up. "Oh, but Sue was mentioning something about lucky charms too?"

"I'll send her over. You two can help each other." It might help Sue wallow a little less in guilt. "If you two are okay, though...?"

"We're fine," Rutger replied. His eyes promised that he would watch over her, and I nodded, knowing there was no one better. "Try to finish up your work so you can get a good night's rest." My only reply was to smile wryly as I shut the door and headed down the hall.

I ended up running into Tate not too far away. "Oh, there you are, Lady Irene," she murmured, jogging over. "Might I have a moment?"
"You really don't have to be so formal, Tate," I chided, smiling. She simply smiled back. "And you may have as many moments as you wish. What is it?"

"I wanted to talk a bit about the role my knights will be playing."

"The battle part or the prior part?"

"The prior." She and I started walking down the hall, mostly out of habit. We were both on the move too much. "I have a number of girls volunteering, but I know that some of them… well…"

"Should I talk to them directly and emphasize that 'volunteer' means 'comfortable'?" After all, if none of them were, then I could just come up with a different tactic. "I can go a logical approach at it if an emotional one won't work."

"Yes, I think so." She laughed a little. "We're so unused to employers that care for us that we have a habit of leaping at the chance to do anything we can, and the knowledge that this might help General Roy is enough to make them practically fall over themselves."

"It's amazing what a little decency wins you." Still, I couldn't help but smile. Roy certainly was doing well, holding everyone together. "I can talk to them after dinner tonight, but please, encourage them to come to me directly about specific questions. I really don't mind."

"I will." She frowned a little in thought. "Though, I am curious. Where did you come up with the tactic?"

"Mainly, it came from the knowledge that very few pay attention to the servants." I might as well use that… horrible realization… to some sort of advantage. "I'm willing to bet the revolutionaries pay less attention, and the Bernese, less still."

"It is still very unconventional." Tate started laughing. "Same with the weapons training." Yes… well… "I like it. If we're going to revolutionize the world, we might as well revolutionize tactics as well."

"I suppose." I started laughing too, feeling myself relax. "Hey, Tate?"

"Yes?"

"How are you doing?" I let my smile fall as she gave me a confused look. "Ilia. I've been worried about most of you because of the lack of word."

"Ah." Her smile faltered and she sighed. "Well, I'm worried for Juno. She gave birth only recently. And I find it strange that I've not heard anything from anyone," Aunt Fiora, Aunt Farina, Uncle Sain, Uncle Kent, Uncle Heath… you would think you would have heard something by now. "But if the heavens keep my niece alive, I will weather everything else. She's not even six months old."

"…If you would like, Tate, I can see about moving the army to Ilia after taking Etruria." I paused in walking, turning to face her fully. "I cannot promise anything, but I can see."

"Are you sure?" She looked startled. "I would think you would want to go directly to the Sacae, so that we can level Bern."

"Well, I can give you some logical reasons, but really, it came up because you, Zealot, and all of the Ilians have been such a vital part of the army." Yes, I did want to go home. Yes, I did want to see if there was anyone left. But… "I know none of you will ask. You will follow orders without question. But, that just means I need to pay more attention." I smiled wryly. "I know I've been
doing a poor job of it, though I promise to be better." I frowned as she suddenly started giggling. "What is it?"

"Well, it's multiple things, but part of it is... something I don't think I quite have the words for." Her smile was warm, but it almost looked like she was holding back tears. "But, I find it startling how such a kind person is also the one who comes up with pragmatic, unconventional, sometimes downright brutal tactics."

"Beware the nice ones?" I decided to just let it go, and laugh too. "Besides, you liked the poison idea."

"Of course. Unlike Lycia, Bern, and Etruria, Ilians don't think much about poison. We're trained in it because a lot of armies will try to poison us to not deal with us, or to get out of paying." I suppose 'honor' had no place when one fought 'lowly mercenaries'. "And... is that Lugh?"

I turned and saw she was right. Lugh was running up. "Sorry to bother!" he yelled. "Whoa!" He promptly tripped and would have fallen flat on his face if I hadn't lunged forward to catch him. "Thanks, Irene!" He promptly gave me a warm hug before popping back. "Emergency War Council meeting, though."

"Is that so?" I asked absently. I crouched down to brush him off, frowning when I saw the blisters on his hands. "Training?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Wuotan says I'm doing great with a sword!" He beamed. "He thinks I can use it in battle soon."

"Not with your hands blistered and bleeding." I automatically reached into my pack for some balm and rubbed it into his palms. "Go get checked."

"I will. But meeting!" He looked very earnest. "Very important!"

"Why is there an emergency meeting?"

"General Perceval and Miredy said that their messengers have word on hostages!" The words startled me, and I shared a wide-eyed glance with Tate. "So, you need to hurry."

"Okay." I ruffled his hair. "Thank you." He laughed, clearly having fun. "We'll head there right now."

"K!" And he was off, likely to go deliver more messages. Tate and I exchanged a look and bolted down the hallway too. After all, we had been waiting for information on any potential hostages.

Caerleon's Knight Commander managed to get a message to us via Perceval's Sieg. My cousin, Margaret, was apparently being held hostage in a fortress not far from Hanover Estate, along with many other hostages that he suspected were being used to control the other Great Houses. Miredy did a scouting, since a Bernese wyvern rider would catch less attention, and confirmed that there was activity. The Knight Commander stated that if we freed the hostages, they would join quite happily. Well, things got rather hectic quickly. "What we need more than anything is a distraction to lure most of the guards away safely," Roy stated, cutting right to the heart of the matter. The whole room was tense, everyone trying desperately to think. If we made one mistake, it was likely all the hostages would be killed. "Irene? Elphin?" He looked at the two of us. "Ideas?"
"Ideally, we'll have two separate distractions," Elphin murmured, eyes narrowed. "An 'obvious' one, and a 'less obvious, but still obvious' one. That way, they don't see through the deception. I can think of something for the first, easily, but we need to make it seem as if the second is the one we are covering for."

"If that is the case, I do have an idea," I replied. I wasn't sure how much I liked it though. "Igrene?" I turned to face her, and noticed her eyes narrowed immediately. "We do know that Zephiel is curious about Arcadia. If we can come up with some protections that make you feel comfortable, can you, Fae, Sofia, and Fiona be the second group?"

"It is possible," Igrene answered slowly, her eyes still narrowed. I knew she was weighing everything in her head, including how much she could trust us. "What did you have in mind in particular?"

"Fae can transform, yes? If she transforms, then de-transforms quickly, we can have some Elphin's group pretend to panic, and make the enemy believe we were trying to cover her going into hiding." I made sure to hold eye contact. "That is my general idea. I yield to you on whether or not the plan is even viable, or how to best keep you all safe."

"Well, I will admit Fae will be happy. Though she isn't keen on following orders, she does really want to help." She sighed. "Quick transformation, and then throw her dragonstone to Lady Fiona. In an emergency, she can transform. It's more painful for her now, and she can only stay transformed for so long without risking insanity and her body completely falling apart." But, still, in a worst-case scenario, she could keep them safe. "Sofia has control over shadows, so we can hide with that." How did she do that again? I was almost afraid to find out. "I'll talk to her and see if she thinks it's viable." Fiona was with Lalum at the moment, teaching her some dances. "But I have an… off-topic question." Her eyes darted to the side. "Where's… the spy?"

"Astore stated he would be late," Roy answered. He looked a little confused, but I thought of the conversation I overheard a while back. That had to be why she noticed. "So, let us proceed with those two groups."

"We will have a different problem at that point," Elphin sighed. I wondered if he was using this as a chance to also try to come up with tentative plans to save his father. No matter what he said, I knew he wanted to see him again. "Namely, there will be guards for the hostages, and we must make the assumption that these guards are ordered to kill the hostages as necessary."

"Then we must do what we can to ensure that they never think it necessary." That was far easier said than done. "Any ideas?"

"This is the point where I wish Astore would return to weigh in."

"Well, Lord Strategist, your wish is my command!" The timing was so damn perfect that I almost wondered if Astore had just been waiting for a suitably dramatic moment to make an entrance. "Apologies for being late," he continued, smiling brightly. "Our spy reinforcements from Ostia arrived, and I had to go be proper and greet them." He stepped to the side, and let two people walk in. "Welcome to the War Council."

Though the two wore hooded cloaks, I still managed to recognize them instantly, and I could not hide my shock. "Uncle Legault? Uncle Jaffar?!" I yelped, the noise echoing harshly in my ear. Uncle Legault grinned, pulling back his hood. Uncle Jaffar shifted awkwardly, and kept his hood up, even as he nodded. "What are you…? How does this…?"

"Ah, this is the best reaction."
"Only you would think the tactician's brain breaking is a good reaction!" WHAT WERE THEY EVEN DOING HERE?!

"Astore, let's not pull Miss Pup's tail," Uncle Legault teased, winking to the group as he came to stand next to me. Uncle Jaffar followed him almost like a shadow, and was almost as quiet. I could barely hear him. "She's liable to bite." He shrugged, bowing to everyone. "Anyway, I'm Legault. Technically, I'm just a 'valued ally' of Ostia, but considering the mess, I'm pulling overtime. The living statue behind me is Jaffar. I'm sure you all picked that up, of course."

"Ah, yes," Roy replied. He only looked mildly confused. "Lord Matthew sent you?"

"Yes, he did." Uncle Legault crossed his arms, looking mostly serious. "Basically, when Matty heard of the hostage situation, he figured Jaffar and me might be the best candidates to send along."

I would forever be amused how Uncle Legault switched between 'respectfully' using Uncle Matthew's full name and 'teasingly' using a nickname Uncle Matthew hated. "The thing with hostages is that you need to eliminate the threats silently and quickly. Assassins are good at that. And, despite it being many years, Jaffar and I are the best of the best." He smiled wryly. "We are, after all, two surviving members of the Black Fang."

"That was a group of assassins that mysteriously disappeared twenty years ago, right?"

"Well, the mystery is that we got played by Nergal, and the Campaign of Fire group had to break the puppets to save the world." Was that so? "Regardless, I was the Hurricane, and Jaffar was the Angel of Death." Those… those were some nicknames. "Let us handle the heavy work with eliminating the guards. Yes, we caught that last part. Yes, we were out there for a bit waiting for a lull. Dramatics."

"Well, you succeeded." Ha! "If that is the case, then let us briefly adjourn to gather information, and for Igrene to check with Miss Fiona."

The group dispersed, likely to do just that, but while they went to work, I bolted for Uncle Jaffar, just… staring. I hadn't seen him for ten years. He had been missing for ten years. How could I not…?

He looked tired, more so than I remembered. There was a scar on his cheek I did not recognize, and there was some grey threading through his hair. But his eyes were the same. They were still calm, and maybe a little cold, but with a fierce protectiveness in them that made you feel safe anyway.

"I'm very glad to see you," I finally whispered. I made sure to smile. This was… so strange. Those who I had hoped to reunite with died, while those I never thought to see again were right here in front of me. Was Father Sky telling me it was foolish to hope? "Is Aunt Nino all right?"

"She's fine," he reassured me. His face softened with a smile, just as it always did when he thought of his wife. "In light of everything, she opted to remain with Lyn." He hesitated before awkwardly patting my head, just as he did when I was a child. "I've heard of all the deaths. It must have been hard." Ah…

"It has. But I'm managing." I closed my eyes, though, and focused on how his palm was rougher than I remembered, but the touch was just as gentle. It was as if he was afraid of breaking whatever he tried to show affection to. "Lugh and Ray are here." I opened my eyes again to look at him. "I'm sure…"

"I doubt they remember me." His smile implied he thought that was the best thing for them. "But I will check on them later."
"Will you not speak to them?"

"I will… consider it."

"Okay."

"I feel like I'm going to have an apoplexy waiting," I grumbled. Due to the sensitive nature of everything, it was opted that Roy, Elphin, and I not be there, to help sell the impression that this was something spontaneous. At least, that's how I vaguely remembered it being justified. "Ugh…" It did not help that there was a distinct track record of me hoping for a reunion, and people dying. 'Waiting' implied hope.

"Yet even through frustration, your hands stay steady," Roy half-teased. He and I decided to wait together, so while he reviewed reports, I worked on making some medicines to replenish our supplies. "What are you making?"

"At the moment, I'm working on antidotes to dreamflower poisoning." Thankfully, no matter how much you overdosed, you really only required a small amount of the antidote. "There are rumors, after all."

"That's true." Roy hesitated a moment before nodding. "Irene?"

"Yes?"

"Why have I never heard you talk much about your Etrurian family?" He looked at me earnestly. "I just… find it strange."

"Mmm…" I paused in my work, leaning back to stretch a little. My back ached from bending over so much. "Truthfully, Roy, I'm not that close to them." According to many, Mom used to be very close to her siblings, but things between them became strained after she eloped with Dad. Grandfather admitted never knowing if it was because of the actual action, or because Mom hadn't told them before doing it. "I love them, and they love me, but it is a rather distant familial love. I know the basics, but I couldn't tell you Christopher's favorite color, or Marcius's favorite food."

"Really?"

"Yes." I went back to work. "I suppose it doesn't help that we rarely saw each other. Typically, unless the stars aligned just right, that side of the family was only together for festivals." In a typical year, I would see them once, for a few days, and that would be it. "We all have rather different interests." Margaret was the typical Etrurian noblewoman, while I was the slightly atypical Sacaean huntress. Christopher was the heir to Hanover, while I was the 'heir' to my parents. Marcius never liked staying still and thinking, charging into things, while I often over-thought. "I imagine if they weren't in considerable danger, I would not think about how they were until we were long past Etruria." I… should probably work on this hyper-focusing problem. Yes, it could be useful, but I forgot important things because of it.

"That seems sad to me." Roy, it was my 'normal'. "You're close to me, after all."

"We visited Pherae more than we visited Etruria." Mom and Dad were infinitely closer to their Lycian 'family' than Mom's blood relatives. "Etruria visits were split between Hanover and Reglay as well." I glanced up at him. "Roy, why are you asking?"

"It just occurred to me, really." He sighed, closing his eyes as he leaned back in his chair. "I suppose I was checking that you weren't ignoring your family for the sake of this army." Mmm…
"I think you are very brave, Roy." Anyone could hope when things were going well. Anyone could be strong when things were good. To hold on as he did now, in the wake of everything... that required a strength of spirit I did not seem to have. "I think you are very, very brave." Footsteps caught my ear, however, and I pushed myself up. "Someone is coming." Was it a messenger? Was it good news?

The bright smile on Chad's face as he slammed the door open hinted 'yes'. "Hostages free!" he reported, eyes shining. Both Roy and I sighed in relief. "Some were injured, but most are fine." His eyes sharpened slightly. "Bishop Yodel asked if you had dreamflower antidote?" I passed him the twenty vials I had made. "Good." He hesitated before continuing. "Your cousin is doped up, but he thinks that with the antidote and rest, she'll make a full recovery." Was that so? "The ones that don't need immediate attention are in the receiving room." He scampered off then, likely to deliver the vials.

Roy and I shared a glance and grin before leaving them room too. Using some shortcuts I knew, we made it to the receiving room in record time, and there, I got the second shock of the day. Uncle Erk and Aunt Priscilla were there, looking bruised and tired, but otherwise, they were just fine.

"Irene!" Aunt Priscilla called, holding out her arms for a hug. Without even thinking about it, I bolted for her, taking the offered hug as if I were five years old again, startled by a shadow. "Oh, goodness, it is so good to see you." She stroked my hair and I felt tears prick my eyes. I didn't want to cry, but her hug was very soothing. "We've been hearing so many things."

"So, we also have information for you," Uncle Erk added. Aunt Priscilla released me from her hug, only for him to give me one too. It was a little more awkward, but that was just how he was, and I smiled at how familiar it was. "Our guards liked ranting about things while we were within hearing."

"That is good to hear," I murmured. I stepped back, rubbed roughly at my eyes, and smiled at them. "It's good to see you both. How is everyone? Your son?"

"Cyrus managed to escape when Bern's forces overran the academy, but if your group can help us track him down, I would be grateful." Of course we would. "Master Pent was just fine when I last saw him. Of course, I had a knife to my throat at the time." Ah. "He's under the impression that Clarine was captured by the revolutionaries."

"Did no word reach him that she was with us?"

"The last word he had was when your group left Hanover to go back to Ostia." Was that so? "I imagine the revolutionaries have been strictly controlling the mail in preparation." Considering how Klein's letters never reached us, and how ours never reached him, I could believe that. "I did not see Lady Louise, but I have not heard anything, so I am assuming that if she is not well, it is
something reversible." That would be good. That would be very, very good.

"Erk!" The happy shout made me step back, as Klein appeared into the room and raced for Erk and Priscilla. "Priscilla! You're okay!" He was crying from relief as he hugged them both. I laughed as Erk awkwardly patted him on the back, and Priscilla cooed over him. "You're both okay…"

I moved further back as Clarine also ran in, Rutger trailing behind her as she all but tackled Priscilla off her feet. The four of them were laughing, even as Klein and Clarine cried, and the scene was heartwarming. But a rather sick feeling pooled in my belly as I watched, and though I didn't like it, I had to admit that I…

Footsteps caught my ear, and I glanced over to see Tate had come to my side. "Are you all right?" she asked me softly, and I was… ultimately very grateful she asked.

"I will have to be." But I did… feel a little jealous… even though I was so happy too… "Are you?"

"Yes." The room was starting to fill up with people, everyone cheering over the successful rescue mission. "For now, at least." She shrugged, smiling wryly. "We'll see how I feel about this when there's more information." That made sense. "But, I will admit one thing."

"Hmm?"

"I do feel like it's a little safer to hope." That… was a bit of a good point. Was that why Father Sky had led them to us? Was he trying to reassure us to not give up hoping?

"Irene!" Startled, I whirled, and had a split-second to brace myself as Fae launched herself at me, laughing as I caught her. "Fae helped!" she declared. I shifted so that I could hold her properly, and she wrapped her arms around my neck. "Igrene said Fae did a good job!"

"I'm sure you did," I cooed, freeing up a hand to stroke her hair. She giggled in response. "Any major problems?"

"No?" She hummed a little in thought. "Fiona and Wuotan were talking about some 'Jahn' fellow, but Igrene and Sofia didn't really react." It took me a second to remember that Fiona had requested Wuotan be with them during the operation as the extra guard. "Fae thinks they'll tell you in a couple of days when they're more certain." Was that so? "But Fae helped!"

"Yes, you did." It was clear that whatever seriousness was going on, Fae was just focused on what she did. Well, it was hard to complain about a child being a child. "You did a wonderful job."

She laughed again, clinging to me, and I looked over the room. The cheering soldiers and laughing leaders… there was definitely a renewed sense of 'hope' in the room. This was our first real blow against the revolutionaries, and that it had not only been a success, but apparently a resounding success… it gave everyone courage. It made them think that things would be okay. It made them, made me, think that no matter what happened, we could overcome it.

We still had work to do, of course, but everything was in motion. It would be time to storm the capital before long. But, I wasn't afraid, now. I knew we would win. We would win, and Etruria would recover, just as Uncle Douglas hoped.

Yes, I agreed with Tate. It did feel safer to hope.

Chapter End Notes
Author's notes: Fun fact. By this point of the game, you have around 44 units (the extra 'two' up in the chapter accounts for how I've recruited everyone from both paths of Western Isles). Meaning that, by this point of the game, there are only seven units left to recruit, one of which you cannot recruit except in the 'true ending' of the game. (We have eight, since I'm writing both Ilia and Sacae paths.) Recruitment is very frontloaded in this game.

Anyway, lots going on here. Hostages released, Legault and Jaffar make appearances. Erk and Priscilla make appearances. For the record, Yodel does not join in this chapter (that is in-game Chapter 21), but he does make an appearance. He makes a bit of a mention to Thief's Testimony here.

Next Chapter – Storming the Castle
Chapter 18) Storming the Castle

Aquelia was the largest, most prosperous city on the continent, if you looked at size, population, and total wealth. It was destroyed before the Scouring, but in the aftermath, Elimine made it a city of beauty again, and the place was specifically built to be as defensible as it was elegant. But defenses meant nothing when you had no one willing to man the walls.

Our efforts bore great fruit, and the knowledge that we rescued some of the hostages spread like wildfire in the plains. Yodel capitalized on that to declare that the Church was firmly with the Alliance. We had refugees and recruits flocking in from all sides, and those who could not reach us reached the revolutionaries. They were driven into Aquelia, and then, into the castle itself.

Etruria was almost ours. But what would its liberation cost?

The Aquelia of my memory was lively. Perhaps it was a place of masks, deceptions, but no one could deny that it was full of life and cheer, even when it wasn't busy. Today, it was even livelier than usual, but as I wandered through the streets, I saw the fear and worry in their faces. We should have Roy and Lilina take a walk through before the actual battle began. They had a good chance of being able to calm people.

My feet paused when I came on my destination, and my thoughts slowed as I looked at everything. Tate's group was infiltrating the castle under the guise of servants, helped by some actual, sympathetic, ones. They would get the outer gates open, allowing us to charge inside. Then, we'd have to cross the primary courtyard, and then the moat-lake-thing, and then go through the inner gates to reach the castle itself. That was the general strategy, but the timing was important. So, we had free time while they infiltrated, and set up paths for scouts and spies to take. I chose to make my way into the town, into the market, to find the town square.

The podium... stadium... thing was set up in the center, and when I approached, I could see some blood in the cracks of the wood, and I could smell even more. While logically I knew it couldn't be Mom's, it was enough to make me wonder what it had looked like. It was enough for me to wonder just how many others the Revolutionaries executed here, and how many got overshadowed because someone 'important' had gotten killed here.

Sighing, I rocked back on my heels and turned away. I had hoped that seeing the place would help me feel a little more settled, but instead, I just felt a little more lost. Maybe I would feel better when I saw where Dad died too. But that was going to be a long time, likely.

Murmurs made me pause, and I glanced up to see there was a small crowd not far away. Curious, I made my way over, and saw that there were two people playing chess on a makeshift table made from a barrel, their 'chairs' boxes that must have been lying around. One of them was cloaked, his hood hiding his face. The other looked to be an elderly man, laughing and joking about something I didn't quite catch.

"Checkmate," the hooded man murmured. Something about the voice was familiar, but I couldn't
"Bah, you're having fun beating all of us oldsters," the other man laughed. He took his loss without a care in the world. "Let's find you another opponent!" The hooded man simply sighed, but it was with a little smile. "Let's see… we'll find someone to give you a run for your money before sunset!" The old man's eyes fell on me, and he grinned. "Oh, look, we have new blood in the crowd." Um… "Do you play?" Automatically, I nodded, finding everything completely bizarre. "Come over here, then!"

Before I could protest, I was seated at the board, playing chess with the hooded man while the crowd watched. Father Sky, what was going on?

"White or black?" It took me a moment to realize the hooded man was talking to me. I couldn't really see much of his face, even sitting in front of him. I could only tell that he was broad, well-built, and wore deceptively simple clothes with a necklace I couldn't quite see the pendant for. "Which one?"

"I'll take black," I replied, reaching to spin the board so that black was on my side. "So, the first move is yours."

"Yes." I caught a little smile on his face. It was the smile of one truly amused, and having a lot of fun. "Let's see…"

We slowly settled into a rhythm, the clacking of pieces marking out strategies. As we played, I found myself drawn into the past. The last time I had played… well, the last time I remembered playing chess had been with Mom, just a month before all of this happened. I had actually beaten her then. At the time, I had been shocked and angry, certain that she had thrown the game. After all, how could I ever have beaten her in a fair match? So, I had thrown the memory to the side. I told myself that it didn't count, because she had gone easy, because she had let me win. I forgot about that 'victory', because I had been so certain that it hadn't been a real one.

But I remembered it now. It was hard not to. After all, the strategy this man used… was the same one Mom liked using when she played.

"What do you think of what's going on?" the hooded man asked at some point. He had just moved his rook to threaten my knight. "This 'reclaiming of Etruria'."

"I think it's done by people with courage to hope for the future," I answered, moving my bishop to threaten his king. "They hope for something better."

"How foolish." He moved his king into the corner of the board. "Hoping for something like that."

"Why do you say that?" I moved my knight to take a pawn and clear the way.

"Because all those in power are corrupt and cowardly, covering their ears and closing their eyes to the atrocities around them." He moved his rook back to guard his king. "Humans can be so… filthy, really. Flocking to power, betraying trusted allies, committing atrocities on so-called lesser."

"Well…"

"It is foolish to hope for something better, because there is no better. Those in power have taught their successors that these things are 'right'."

"Mmmm…” I actually didn't have a counter to that. After all, if I hadn't gone to the Western Isles, I wouldn't have even thought to be worried. "Perhaps you are right." Yes, perhaps he was. "Maybe it
is foolish to hope for the future." I moved my queen. "Check."

"A poor move." He moved his rook to capture my queen, as I knew he would. "You lost your queen." He laughed a little. "But I am gladdened to hear you listening to reason."

"Mmm…" I shook my head, and studied the board. Yes, this would work. This strategy had a hole in it, after all. When I had played before, I had thought Mom had been holding back, but I saw… I saw that wasn’t the case. This was just an inherent flaw of the strategy. That day… that day, I had won on my own merits. Perhaps she could have switched her strategy, but she hadn’t. That was her mistake, and that was why she lost. That victory… that victory had been mine. That knowledge, that realization, gave me courage to say these words blooming in my heart. "Actually, I’ve simply decided to make the future."

"Make it?"

"Yes." I moved my knight to capture his bishop and to block one of the squares his king could escape to. "I will not hope on the future. I will not bet on some distant descendant to right the wrongs of the world. I will do it myself, to ensure that the future is better."

"Is that so?" He moved his own knight, to threaten my rook. "That's rather naïve."

"Well, it's better to work hard than to just stand aside and watch the atrocities."

"And what if all your hard work ends with nothing but ash?" His voice sounded almost pained. "What if it just earns you a knife in the back, poison in a cup?"

"I keep going." My own voice was firm. "No matter what, I pick myself up, and keep going. I believe this world is worth fighting for, and so long as I do not give up, so long as I keep going, I will either succeed, or realize there was a better goal all along. If I give up, then all the work is for naught." Realizing it was my turn, I looked over the board again. "Oh, but I do need to correct you on something."

"Yes?"

"I didn't 'lose' my queen. I sacrificed it." I moved my pawn to the end of the board. "Pawn promotes to queen." I switched the piece out, and set the new queen down with a quiet 'clack'. "Checkmate." I leaned back in the chair, and shrugged. "If you give up because of one thing, even if it is a painful thing, then you will lose. I like winning."

"Interesting. I was taught that by a very skilled tactician." Well, it had flaws, just like everything else. "A good match." He reached over to shake my hand. "I will remember that."

"Yeah, sure." The crowd around us was dispersing, but this had been fun. "Do you want to play again?"

"I would, but sadly, I cannot. I am late for a meeting." He stood up, and his necklace swung forward with the motion, catching the light. I froze when I saw… saw it was a Sacaean pendant. More importantly, it was the twin of the one Guinevere wore. But the only one who should wear that was… "Farewell."

"Farewell." The words were automatic, and when I stood, I realized we were the same height. Thinking quickly, I ‘accidentally’ bumped into the table, making some of the pieces fall. "Ah!"

"Here." He and I both crouched down to pick up the pieces, and I used the opportunity to glance under his hood. I found amber eyes, dark and flat amber eyes, in the man's face. This was…! "…
Sacaean green hair?" Belatedly, I realized that my ponytail had fallen over my shoulder, and that this might not have been the best of ideas. "With amber eyes." Yes, this was not the best of ideas.

Well, I was found out. So... "I will not forgive you." I lifted my head up slightly, and I saw he had done the same. He could easily kill me here, but if he was going through the trouble of hiding, I was going to bet he didn't want people to know he was here. "But, I do apologize for calling you a 'liar', I suppose." The words burned my tongue, but it was the 'proper' apology among Sacaeans. Even if I hated him, I would keep my manners. "And I will see your head roll."

"You are welcome to try." He stood up first, and actually offered his hand. I was tempted to slap it away, but decided it wouldn't be worth the scene, so I took it. I was startled he didn't try to break mine. In fact, the grip was gentle. He was capable of being gentle? "But will you keep your resolve as the war drags on?"

"You slaughtered my people, killed my parents, devastated my family, almost destroyed my friends, ravaged the continent, and yet that is the answer I came to, after witnessing everything I have, after feeling everything I have." I glared at him and barely checked the urge to dig my nails into his wrist. He was still holding my hand. "I am not you. If the world breaks me, I will gather up the pieces and put myself back together. If what I lived for turns to ash, then I will find a new, better goal among the dust." I thought of his words at Missur. "I will counter your point, and will continue to do so. Humans might be filthy, and they might have dark emotions and intentions, but they are capable of good as well."

"Your evidence?"

"Roy."

"He is part-dragon."

"But he was raised by humans." Anger flooded me. "But would you want more? I can list them off. Marcus, Allen, Lance, Wolt, Bors, Elen, Deke, Wade, Lot, Shana, Chad, Lugh, Clarine, Rutger, Saul, Dorothy, Sue, Zealot, Treck, Noah, Astora, Lilina, Wendy, Barth, Oujay." I had barely talked to any of these people, but I knew their names, and I knew they were fighting for a better future too. "Fir, Sin, Gonzales, Geese, Klein, Tate, Lulum, Elphin, Ekhidna, Bartre, Ray, Cath, Miredy, Guinevere, Cecilia, Sofia, Igrene, Perceval, Garret, Fae." They were proof that I could be right. They were counters to his belief. "Fiona, Wuotan." The second you assumed the world was black and white, the second you believed that there was nothing good or nothing bad, you set yourself up for insanity. "All of the soldiers who fight with us, including some Bernese who we saved and now, they wish to trust. All those of Arcadia, who lived since the Scouring, and still believe in the future. The veterans of the Campaign of Fire, who fought long ago for this world, and who help us however they can." I felt the overwhelming urge to punch him when he started laughing. "Would you like to share the joke?"

"There is no joke, really." He... actually smiled slightly. It was not vicious, but it was broken and tired. If I didn't hate him so much, it might have actually made me sad. "A simple whimsy hit me, that's all. Would things have been different if I had taken Katri up on that offer, years ago, to visit Lycia?" ...Wait, what offer? "You are amusing, Irene. You set up a young boy as your 'king', and are determined to play the game." He bowed over my hand, as if we were at court, and he was asking for a dance. "Let's see if you can continue your course, while I continue mine."

He turned and walked away then, disappearing into the dispersing crowd, and I could only stare. One of these days, I was going to figure out why he didn't just kill me, since I seemed to accidentally give him ample opportunity because of my temper. Was it simply because I was Mom's daughter, and he was looking for a challenge?
"Irene!" At the call, I turned and saw Guinevere run up. "There you are," she sighed, pressing a hand to her chest. I glanced down at the necklace she wore, and confirmed that yes, it was the twin to the one Zephiel wore. They were the necklaces Mom had given them, twenty years ago. Even after killing her, he still wore it? "I was worried."

"I'm sorry," I replied. I hesitated, but decided to go ahead and ask. "Guinevere, did Mom offer to take Zephiel to Lycia?"

"Huh?" She looked confused for a moment before nodding. "Ah, yes, it was... about six years ago now? It was shortly before... Zephiel took the throne. Katri was heading to Lycia from Bulgar, and had wondered if he and I would like to come along. We had, of course, but because things were... hectic in Bern, we chose against it." I see. "I completely forgot about that. So much happened afterwards..." She shook her head, but not before I saw how she looked ready to cry. Whatever had happened, it clearly haunted her. "Why do you ask?"

"I heard about it and was curious." It was probably not a good idea to tell her right now that I just won a chess match against him, and had an argument. ...Father Sky, the weirdness of the situation was really starting to hit me now. Seriously, he could have killed me. Why hadn't he? I was also still reeling over the fact that he, for a few brief moments, had actually seemed like a normal person, capable of being gentle and having fun. "Did you need something?"

"Oh, yes!" She clapped her hands and smiled. "Tate's girls have paths cleared for the scouts."

"Ah, then I had best return." I smiled back. "Let's go." As I turned away, though, all of my instincts screeched, and I whirled, trying to figure out why the wind was whipping about suddenly, screaming in terror.

My eyes fell on a man standing in the distance. Red was the first thing I noticed. He had red hair, red eyes, had red tattoos on his hands and chest, and wore a red robe. He looked right at me, eyes narrowed as if he was trying to place something. When he realized I was staring, he smiled slowly and gave a mocking bow before bringing his hood up and walking off, in the same direction Zephiel had gone.

What... who...? Father Sky, what was this, and how much attention could I afford to give it?

"Irene?" Guinevere's voice was quiet and worried, and when I turned to her, I saw she was concerned. "Is everything all right?"

"...I hope so," I whispered. The wind... it was still trembling. "We have to make it so."

"We will." Her trembling voice screamed how scared she was of the future. "Shall we?"

"Yes."
Damn it! ’Damn’ was right. I had Narcian right in sight, and I couldn’t do anything. ”The Lycian rats are still around!” he ranted, gesturing wildly as he paced. I glanced around, curious whether I could use a chandelier or something to kill him. Unfortunately, the only way I could do that was to jump down from my perch. ”How did they come this far…?!”

”General Narcian!” A helmeted soldier burst into the room. ”Sir, Lord Murdock is here!” they informed him. I instantly scooted back, startled. I did not have expected him to be here. ”He’s-!”

”Step aside.” A third man walked in, and he instantly commanded attention. The slight lines on his face and the thinning of his hair were the only outward signs that he was anything over thirty. ”I told you that I did not need to be announced,” the man continued, his voice a rumble. His face was stoic, though. ”Go on.”

”G-General Murdock…” Narcian stammered as the unnamed soldier did just that. I was instantly torn between liking this Murdock, as Narcian squirmed from fear in his very presence, and wanting to kill him, since he was the one who captured Mom. ”What a pleasant surprise. What brings you all the way from Ilia?”

”Enough of your squirrely pleasantries, Narcian.” Murdock’s voice was definitely a rumble now. ”I believe you owe me some explanations.”

”I-I’m sorry, my lord…” It was hilarious to watch Narcian stumbled and stammer. ”B-But I don’t…”

”Your lieutenant failed on the Western Isles, your grip on Etruria is weakening, and you neglected your mission of capturing the hidden city in Nabata, as given by the king himself.” Murdock’s voice remained that same tone, making me wonder if the rumble was just his default. ”You were given leave in Lycia and Ostia, but not now. As such, I want your explanations.”

”W-well…” Narcian flinched back. ”Well, you see… there were many complications… and my men are just so-”

”I said ’explanations’, not ’excuses’. The explanation is that you, and you alone, failed.” Murdock’s stance shifted slightly, and he was somehow even more imposing. ”And you failed in your final test. Therefore, as King Zephiel ordered, you are to be demoted.” His glare cut off Narcian’s yelp. ”Galle will take your place, as he should have years ago.”

”Please, wait!” Narcian’s voice was high, and almost pathetic. ”One more chance! Just give me one more chance to right this!”

”Another one?” Murdock sighed. ”The Lycian Army approaches the palace. Stop them to prove that you are worthy of the title. If you succeed, I will negotiate with King Zephiel. But it must be an impressive showing. I am far fonder of Galle than I am of you.”

Murdock just walked away then, clearly not caring if Narcian managed to live up to the challenge. The silence that lingered after him was deafening.

I actually almost squeaked when Narcian suddenly broke it. ”R-rubbish! Me, demoted?” he ranted. ”Me?!” I was more surprised it hadn’t happened sooner. ”And my replacement is Galle?!” His voice was really shrieky. ”No, I’ll never allow that to happen! He’s nothing more than a savage dog pretending to be someone of worth!” Could I kill a person with a punch? I was sorely tempted. ”Filthy Sacaean!” Why did I have to have impulse control? I could drop down and strangle him if not. ”But what can I do?!” He suddenly paused mid-rant, looking like he just found salvation. ”Zeiss, of course. He’s Miredy’s brother.” Was that so? ”I can say he was leaking information to the
enemy!" Why did I choose to infiltrate without a bow again? "Messenger! Get here this instance!"
Well, I heard all I needed to, and staying would just lead me to do something ill- advised.

I ducked back down the passage, and made sure to take a different turn when heading out. It was best, especially in a case like this, to not exit the same way I entered. Instead, I dropped down into the 'queen's salon' or whatever it was called. They were rooms that the Queen of Etruria was supposed to use for her purposes, but had been sealed off when Mildain's mother died a few months after giving birth to him. In theory, no one was supposed to be here.

So, it came as a shock that two people were. One was Galle, and the other was a boy a little younger than me, with the same colored hair as Miredy. I could take a guess as to who he was. I did not understand…?

"What in Father Sky's name are you doing here?" I demanded, incensed. This was a location Mordred hated people going to. It hurt him for people to visit, as this was where he and his wife shared many precious moments just relaxing and planning for the future. Only people he gave permission to, only people Mildain showed the place to, were allowed. "Is all of Bern just waltzing into this place?"

"Fine words from an infiltrator," the red-haired boy growled. He scowled, but I could also see the fear in his demeanor. "Perhaps you should be answering your own question."

"I'm here because I actually have permission to be here. These were the Queen's rooms, and a lot of her stuff is here." It almost amused me that I was getting mad at this of all things. "That's why it's blocked off."

"It's still blocked off, Lady Irene," Galle reassured instantly. He looked sadder and more exhausted than he had in the Western Isles. "I moved everything back as we passed." The red-haired boy opened his mouth to say something, but Galle raised a hand to cut him off. "Peace, Zeiss. If this is a dead woman's rooms, we should not disturb her ghost by fighting in them."

"That still doesn't explain what you're doing here," I grumbled. This whole situation was bizarre. "Does it have something to do with Narcian?"

"Ah, you already know, then." Galle sighed, shaking his head. "Yes, it does. Murdock told me what was happening, so I grabbed Zeiss. I know Narcian, and I know he'd use Zeiss as a scapegoat." He hesitated before continuing, "is Miredy with you all?"

"She is." I felt myself relax as I remembered what Guinevere had told me. "She's doing fine, I think. She and Cecilia get along splendidly."

"I see." His smile was soft and relieved. "I'm glad to hear it." He really did look it, but he also looked so sad. It was hard to bear, really. He had told me of Dad's last moments, and I remembered how Guinevere had cried. "How is Princess Guinevere?"

"Torn between wanting to do the right thing and wanting to stay with her country." Things would get harder when we had to march on Bern directly. "Otherwise, she's fine. She's been adopted as an older sister by Lilina and Clarine."

"I'm glad to hear that too." Galle's smile faltered, though, and he rummaged through his pack to hide it. "Zeiss, you're too quiet."

"I still don't get what's going on," Zeiss retorted. That fear was still there, but this time, I knew it was because he was just lost. Everything about his world was falling apart in front of him. "I'm still
confused as to how the Lycian Army got here. The victories…”

"Zeiss, it might be good to remember that things are hidden from soldiers," Galle pointed out. He tugged out a small stack of papers from his pack, and looked at them with guarded eyes. "After all, Bulgar is described as a fair fight."

"That's ludicrous!" I immediately snapped, temper crackling. Galle simply sighed, but Zeiss jumped, eyes wide. "It was during the Sky Festival! No one was armed, and I highly doubt children can put up a fair fight even with them!" Zeiss looked like I had punched him in the stomach. "They seriously-?"

"Yes. It's called propaganda." Galle held out the papers to me. "These are yours."

"They are?" I frowned even as I took them. "Why would they… be…” My voice died, though, as I realized I knew the writing on the outside. "Mom…?" It was Mom's writing. I flipped through the papers, and realized they must all be letters. Each one was marked with a name. There were two for me. "How…?"

"When she learned she was going to be executed, she asked that she write letters. I already delivered some to General Douglas." Was that so? "Those are addressed to those in your army." There was even one for Perceval. Had Uncle Douglas refused to take it, or had it taken him that long to decide whether or not to go through with an enemy's last wish?

"You have my thanks." I put the letters in my own pack, worried that reading them now would shake my resolve. "I still haven't heard why you two are here, though."

"Oh, right." He laughed awkwardly. Zeiss just continued to stand there looking more than a little horrified. I had a feeling Galle had used the letters to distract me from telling Zeiss all the little things I knew about the war. "I've been instructed by General Murdock and King Zephiel to watch the battle, and not to interfere." He had to be pushing that order warning Zeiss. Then again, if Zeiss was Miredy's little brother, then he would have been Galle's as well, if he and Miredy ever married. "I need to return to that."

"Galle, hold on!" Zeiss finally yelped. He looked very lost, and very confused. "You said that you wanted to talk to Miredy, right?"

"…Yes, but I cannot think of anything to say that would not put more of a burden on her shoulders," Galle replied slowly. In his eyes, I could see that he had given up, and I really wanted to punch him. "It is enough to know that she is safe." He got a thoughtful look on his face, and he turned to face me. "Might I ask a favor, in return for delivering the letters?" His voice was soft, and his tone made it clear that he would not hold it against me if I refused. I hesitated even so, as he was technically the enemy right now. But he did deliver these letters to me, and I did not doubt that he, too, had to struggle with whether or not it was a good idea.

So, what else could I say? "If it is within my power," I answered, voice just as quiet. "What is it?"

"Take Zeiss with you." The words were clear and crisp. "He cannot stay in Bern now. Not safely. But he will be safe with Miredy."

"Why not take him with you?" I crossed my arms, narrowing my eyes. "You could also come with
us too. I'm sure Zeiss and Miredy would feel better that way."

"I am a knight, and I have my orders." The urge to punch him was rapidly rising. "I am in no danger, but Zeiss is. Please."

"...Fine." I sighed, biting back a growl. This was just bizarre. "Fine, I'll take him to the army and get him to Miredy. They can have a sibling spat or something."

"Thank you." His smile was relieved, and he turned to Zeiss, who looked very much like the ground just fell out from beneath him. "Zeiss, remember what I've taught you and pick your path after hearing Miredy's side, all right? Choose your own loyalty."

"You're really just going to leave." I couldn't believe this.

"I am. Thank you for taking care of Zeiss and Miredy." His smile was warm. "I hope you find what you need in the letters. She stayed up all night, writing them."

He turned and walked away then. I just watched him go. If only I were stronger... if I were stronger, then I could just knock him out and drag him with me. Maybe if I coordinated with Zeiss, we could...

What were with knights and their stupid pride?! I had issues with Uncle Douglas staying, but I could understand! Why was Galle so prideful that... that...?

...No, that wasn't it. No, that wasn't exactly it, at least. Sacaeans honored debts. That was why I had attempted to repay the debt I had with him the first time as quickly as possible; I had not wanted a lengthy debt to a Bernese soldier. That was why he had asked a favor now, to clear the debt I gained when he gave me the letters.

After all, he had a debt. He had a life-debt, to Bern. If I remembered that, then I had an explanation for why he refused to leave, even after everything Bern had done, even though Miredy was with us and he was sending Zeiss to us for safety.

He was not loyal to Zephiel. He was loyal to Bern, and that was all the difference. The Lycian Army was Bern's enemy. He had no guarantee that the country he loved, the country that took him in when his whole world was poisoned and slaughtered, would survive if we won. He had no guarantee that we would not ruin Bern. So, he fought against us, because he owed Bern his life. To walk away from Bern, without a guarantee or hope that it would survive and become better... it would be practically a sin. So, unless he could find that hope, he would remain with Bern as it was now.

...I wasn't sure... if I was going to be able to save him... but I did... hope... that I could keep my promise to Guinevere.

I used a different path than I had intended to escape the castle, so that Zeiss could retrieve his wyvvern. He was quiet the whole time, following me like a lost child, and I truly thought he might be younger than me. But maybe he was older. I had no idea, and no desire to learn.

In the camp, I called for Miredy immediately, and she rushed over to hug Zeiss tightly. The two got into a little squabble, of course. I could tell that even as I walked away, though I also thought it was clear that the argument was born from concern and guilt, with no real anger directed at either of them. I'd check on them later.

For now, though, I was with Roy, Yodel, and Fiona. Yodel was trying to give Roy and me a history
lesson. Fiona provided commentary. If my lessons had been like this in the past, I'd know way more about history than I did.

"The scriptures were quite clear on the matter," Yodel explained. His eyes were narrowed in slight exasperation. "Allow not dragons to return to this realm, for that would bring suffering to many."

"Yeah, the 'many' Elimine mentioned there are the dragons, actually," Fiona pointed out. She looked completely done with the 'lesson'. "The Ending Winter poisoned the air. Some might adapt, but most would die. She feared for them."

"Perhaps, but now we must send the dragons back to their world."

"This was our world. Then the Scouring happened and we were chased away." Fiona's tone grew waspish, and Roy and I exchanged a look. I was amused; Roy was fretful. "The Scouring devolved into a bunch of people fighting to keep their homes."

"Are you going to comment on everything?"

"Everything you get wrong." This was hilarious. "But continue. You were explaining to Roy why the revolutionaries hated the church."

"Ah, yes." Yodel coughed, more to gather his thoughts than to clear his throat. "We were researching the dragons, which was not looked kindly upon by Bern." So, of course, the revolutionaries didn't like that. "We discovered that the return of the dragons is tied to Bern's treasure, the Fire Emblem, but not how."

"It's the key to the seal on Idenn, who creates the War Dragons. The Fire Emblem itself is actually a dragonstone, created prior to the Scouring. Its original purpose was protection, but I suppose a fire dragon could use it to transform too." She shrugged off the dirty look. "I am somewhere around 2500 years old, and I lived through the time. I'm going to point out the fallacies."

"I think I'll be going now," I whispered to Roy. He gave me an incredulous look. "I'm too amused to play peacekeeper." Snickering, I waved as I walked off, barely noticing the betrayed look on Roy's face. He could deal with them. I wanted to check on other things.

That said, whatever half-made plans I had faded away when I noticed a very strange pairing. Guinevere and Wuotan were talking about something in soft whispers, and Guinevere looked a little distressed.

"Ah, Lady Irene," Wuotan called, waving me over. I waited until Guinevere nodded before coming to stand with them. "I seem to have worried Princess Guinevere and cannot find the right words to reassure her. Perhaps you can assist."

"Well, what's the conversation?" I asked, curious. Guinevere looked even more frantic up close. "Speak quickly. I'm not fond of those who bother Guinevere."

"I suggested that she keep the Fire Emblem with Merlinus." He smiled slightly as I gave him an incredulous look. "She wears it as a necklace, but fights in battle. A chain can easily snap."

"I am still confused as to how you know that," Guinevere mumbled. She touched the chain to the necklace she hid under her collar. "I'm certain Saul knows, but you weren't there for that conversation."

"The Fire Emblem gives off a unique energy, and I am an older magic user," Wuotan explained. "It's easy to sense. But, regardless, it's not something you want to lose."
"Well, yes, that is true." She glanced around furtively before bringing the necklace out. I was startled by how pretty it was. "At the same time, though..."

"If you're worried about someone stealing it, why not have Wuotan handle giving it to Merlinus?" I suggested. If this was important, it really would be a good idea to keep it safe while we were fighting. "The camp then thinks it's something he owns, and leave it alone."

"I will, of course, retrieve it when the battle is over," Wuotan added, quietly agreeing to the plan. Guinever bit her lip, though, clearly debating. "You can wear it then and reassure yourself that it is there. But in battle, that worry..."

"That worry could lead to my death," Guinevere finally sighed. She took the necklace off and handed it to him. "You have my thanks. I'm sorry for..."

"Princess Guinevere, you barely know me, and I figured out a secret. You have nothing to apologize for." Wuotan smiled softly as he closed his fingers around the Fire Emblem. I thought I saw it flash, but it had to have been a trick of the light. "I promise this will be kept safe, though."

"Thank you." She curtseyed to him. "You are too kind." It was also clear, though, that things were going to get awkward fast.

So, I came up with a distraction. "Oh, Guinevere, Zeiss is with us now," I told her. Her jaw actually dropped. "Why not snag Elen and go meet Miredy and him?" Her face lit up with a mischievous smile as she ran off to do just that. "I think I might have encouraged something."

"Perhaps," Wuotan laughed. He slipped the Fire Emblem into his pocket. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm..." I struggled for a word before shrugging. "That. I'm that."

"As good of an answer as anything." He patted me on the head, chuckling when I made a face. "My daughter used to react that way when she was confused by something." He had a daughter? Had he mentioned this before? I couldn't recall. "Of course, she was probably five at the time."

"I'm not five!" I scowled and he laughed again. "Where is your daughter, though?" Was he like Uncle Pent, and prone to leaving family worried while he fell into research?

"She died a long time ago," ...Was that so? "But she was happy in the end, and though I wish I had more years with her, I can be content in knowing that." Still, that had to be painful, right? It was painful to lose family, but it had to be even more painful to lose your child. After all, you raised them. "Sorry, you do not need an old man's ramblings right now."

"Do others remind you of her?"

"Oh, when you get old, you start seeing the same eyes in other people." His smile was nostalgic and sad. "Roy's eyes, for instance, remind me of my best friend, though the color is different. Blue to her red." That was rather funny, actually. Aunt Ninian's eyes had been red. "But, really, when you get a large group of people, you're bound to see some of the same habits. Overworking, not realizing that people are in love with her, the resolve to keep going despite being exhausted..." His smile fell, though. "I hope, however, that this will not become a second Scouring. The world has no need for another war like that."

"Well, we have the burning cities and lots of people dying already." I could only sigh. "How did the Scouring begin? I recall you mentioning there was more to the story."

"Hatred, really." He shrugged. "There's really no other answer, and this war is no different. Hatred
is the spark that dragged everything into madness." Mmm… "But I really must get this to Merlinus."

"Ah, of course. Thank you for talking with me." I smiled as he walked away, but it fell as I watched him disappear. I thought of how, in the desert, he had manipulated quintessence to help me. Was he half-dragon? Was he as old as Fiona? How long ago was 'long ago'? It was clear it was a pain that lingered, no matter how many years passed, but…

"Irene!" A hug knocked me out of my thoughts, and it took a few seconds of blinking to realize the tackler had been Clarine. "There you are!" she huffed, stepping back. "I've been looking for you!"

"You have?" I asked, curious. My eyes, however, fell to the three swords she held. "Clarine, why do you have those?"

"Rutger has been teaching me swordsmanship." Was that so? "And he told me that he thinks I'm skilled enough to use them in battle now." Well, considering how protective Rutger could be, that meant she did have to be skilled. I doubted she had any real strength, though, so I'd definitely keep the tactic of keeping her and him close. "So, I wanted to tell you. I can protect myself to a point, so you can divert some of the guards you keep for me."

"How are we adjusting for the lack of strength?"

"Attacking weaker points and lots of dodging." She sighed. "Lots of dodging. Rutger was insistent, since I can't wear armor."

"And this skill translate to horses?"

"I had Marcus observe, and he said 'yes'." Why was this the first time I was hearing of any of this then? Had I been that out of it? "Besides, Miss Fiona and Wuotan gave me these." She held out the three strange looking swords. "They're like the light brand and rune sword, but they're based on anima magic. Fire, thunder, and wind. They were fairly common before the Scouring."

"And where did they have them?"

"Well, Miss Fiona apparently used the fire sword during part of the Scouring. Wuotan talked to someone named 'Al' back at Arcadia, and Al gave him the wind and thunder swords. I think he meant for Lugh to have them, but he gave them to me first since I only have the swords as a weapon. I'll pick one I like the most, and then Lugh can pick from the remaining two." That would leave us one for… someone else who wanted a magic sword. "I'm leaning towards the fire sword. It's apparently able to boost magic, which would help me with healing."

"Why the sudden interest in swords?" That was what I was going to focus on for now. "Did you want to spend more time with Rutger?"

"W-well, yes." Her face turned a little pink, and I bit back a grin. "But honestly, Irene, the main reason is that I know I can't keep up magically." Clarine? "Lugh and Lilina are far stronger magically then I will ever be, and while Lugh chose to not learn healing, Lilina's skilled enough in staves to use them on the field. Her magical strength means she's better than me already." Her tone implied how little she liked that, but she kept on talking. "I have an advantage because I'm mounted, but Cecilia's recovering her strength, meaning that if I became a Valkyrie like her, I'd be stuck in her shadow." She shrugged. "But no one expects a healer to know swords. I'd have a hidden weapon that I can use to keep my patients safe until someone came to help."

"…Well, you thought this through." I sighed and ruffled her hair, making her squeak. "Make sure
to keep up your training."

"I will." She smiled brightly. "I'll do my best!"

"Then I have nothing to fear." I might have said more, but a bell cut me off. It was a crisp, clear sound, coming from the Cathedral. "Tate and her group have the gates."

"Then let us go greet them." Clarine nodded. "See you later, Irene."

"Stay safe, Clarine." Let the battle to retake Etruria begin, and end today.

Tate had the castle gates wide open by the time the cavalry charged through. I flashed her a smile and waved as I passed, and she grinned back before swooping down to stick near Allen like the plan dictated.

Perceval and I glanced at each other and urged our horses to go even faster. I overtook him easily, since my mare was a Sacaean horse, but that was fine. The scouts had stated Uncle Douglas was here, and Lalum and Elphin had wanted to talk to him first. Elphin wanted to see if he could get him to stand down; Lalum wanted to make sure she had her last goodbyes.

It wasn't long at all until we reached the bridge on the moat and there, in the center, was Uncle Douglas. The Great General, famous for his strength and defenses, was the sole guard. Archers and mages were lined up on the pillars, ready to bombard us.

We need to wait for Roy, though, so for now, we had to pretend we were caught in the trap. We would also make sure Lalum and Elphin got their requests.

"Father!" Lalum yelled. She waited until I came to a stop before dismounting and running over to him. "Father, we... we're here."

"Yes, I can see that," Douglas murmured. His smile was soft, but he looked like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. "I'm glad I could see you again, Lalum. I remembered when we parted that I forgot to apologize."

"Apologize?" Lalum looked so confused. "For what."

"I threw you back into that harsh world for the sake of the country." He shook and then bowed his head. "I am so, so sorry."

"Father..." She shook her head, and went over to stand right in front of him, so that he had to look at her. "You saved me from a life of poverty, pain, and starvation. You raised me as your own blood, despite all the ridicule thrown your way. I owe you my life. So, I'm very happy I could repay you, even if it was only a little. Besides, I wanted to, remember?"

"Yes, I suppose." He sighed, smiling wryly. "I trust the prince will continue being safe in your care, Lalum."

"Will you still not...?"

"I will hold until Mordred breathes his last. That is the promise I made, long ago, when it felt like everyone was against us." He shook his head. "But, if I die before him, I will die in peace. You and Prince Mildain are safe, and will continue being safe. That is all I could ever ask for." He patted her head, and tried to nudge her away. "Go. If someone saw you talking to me, you may be suspected of betrayal."
But she held her ground. "General Roy is too kind for such things, and Irene and Mildain will protect me." She held out her arms. "So, I want a hug."

"Oh, very well." He hugged her gently, and it was clear that he was afraid his armor would hurt her. She didn't seem to care, though. "No matter what happens, remember that you are my daughter, in this world and the next. I was very blessed, the day you came into my life. My only hope is that you find happiness in life."

"...If you survive, promise that we'll go on a picnic."

"Of course." He let go of her, and smiled fondly. I felt horridly jealous that Lalum got to hug her father, and got another hug, but I swallowed it to smile when he looked at me. I didn't want them to worry about something they couldn't change. "Irene, please, continue to look after her."

"Of course," I replied, vexed he even thought I would do otherwise. "But, if you're done, I think someone else is here to speak to you." After all, Perceval just caught up, and Elphin had dismounted.

"Am I going to have to worry about Cecilia and Klein showing up?" Uncle Douglas joked, laughing lightly. The burdened in his demeanor lightened slightly. "Or did you actually get permission this time."

"We got permission." I still maintained that it was all Elphin's fault. "Still..." I looked to Elphin, who seemed amused and resigned. "I know what you planned, but do you think it will work?"

"No, but I had to come and try anyway," Elphin sighed. He walked over to Uncle Douglas, standing next to Lalum. "But there's nothing I can say to convince you, can I?"

"I am afraid not," Uncle Douglas answered. His words were firm, and Perceval and I exchanged a look. His was more understanding; mine was more exasperated. "My prince, if my death can serve Etruria, then I give it freely."

"If you survive, then I want you to remember that your life can serve as easily as your death." Elphin's eyes were serious. "You risked everything to protect me. Your life, your reputation, your own daughter... all to protect me, and send me to safety. I will never forget that. Never."

"I live to serve." He chuckled, though, eyes sad. "I still hold a futile hope. I wish I could take you to see the king."

"Do not lose that hope just yet. Perhaps I can see him one more time, at least." Elphin laughed. "Roy has a knack for overcoming the impossible."

"Speaking of which..." I began, noticing Roy had arrived with the main army. "It's time. Elphin, Lalum, fall back." The two immediately did as I said, even as Uncle Douglas looked confused. "We're avoiding your invincible shield, Uncle Douglas." I held up my hand. "Fliers! Wipe out the archers and mages!"

"All cavalry remain back," Perceval shouted, urging his horse to retreat. My own followed easily, until we were level with Roy. "General Roy, we are ready."

"Are you certain?" Roy asked. His eyes were on Uncle Douglas, who had his weapons drawn. "I mean..."

"He will not falter, as a knight should."
"Knights should be more flexible." Roy, I loved you. "But very well. Make sure Lilina and Cecilia have the mages ready, and that Princess Guinevere has the infirmary set."

"Klein and the archers?"

"Irene checked in on them before charging."

"Of course she did. Why would she pass up the chance to talk to Klein?"

"Precisely." Oh, lovely, the two were bonding via teasing me. "Here we go." Roy held out his hands, and the air chilled. Rapidly, the waters of the moat crystallized and it was not long at all before it was all ice. A quick check proved it easily supported a horse's weight, and was not so slippery that a horse could not make a run. "All forces, ch-"

A roar cut him off, and suddenly, there was a rush of heat that made most of us scream. I bloodied my lip to keep quiet, and gaped at the blisters that had appeared on my arm. The heat alone had caused that, and the ice was perfectly melted. What just…?

A shadow fell over us, and I looked up and realized my error. Zephiel had been here. He had to have known about the moat. He also knew of Roy's ice magic, and how powerful it was. It was easy to figure out what strategy we would use, so he had a counter. He had a dragon here to make sure Roy's ice wouldn't hold.

Ahaha… ha… why had I not considered that? Why hadn't any of us considered that? Had we'd gotten overconfident in Roy's ice magic that we thought it infallible?

The dragon roared, fire flickering around his fangs, and I saw his gaze focus on us. On the bridge, we were trapped. There was nowhere to run. We could jump into the water, but that would only trap us in the water where a fire hot enough to char even those it did not hit was aimed.

Another roar, however, stopped it cold, and I knew I wasn't the only one who screamed as another dragon suddenly appeared. But this dragon landed in front of us, and did not turn to attack us. Instead, it snarled at the first dragon, and it took me a moment to realize what was going on. This dragon… was protecting us.

"You?" A voice echoed through my head, and I had no idea what was going on. "How are you…?"

"You destroyed Aquelia in the past, Jahn." Wait, were these voices the dragons? Was this how they talked when in dragon form? "I will not allow you to do so again."

"How are you transformed? You could not have made a dragonstone."

"I made one a long, long time ago." The second dragon glanced back, and I found myself focusing on the blue eyes, very different from the other dragons we'd seen. "I'll take him. Continue with your plan." Wait, how did it… he… know about…?

There was no chance to ask. With one powerful wingbeat, strong enough to nearly knock me over, the second dragon was airborne and… and Father Sky, he already had his fangs in that other dragon's throat!

The blood rained down eerily, splashing into the water. I had no idea what was going on. But a tactician had one duty: keep everyone safe and adapt the strategy to take advantage of unexpected things. This was a very unexpected thing. But that just meant I had to prove my worth.

"Roy!" I snapped, turning to face him. He looked at me with wide eyes, but soon, he set his jaw
and nodded.

His ice magic spiraled over the water, freezing it solid, and we were charging at last. This time, no one melted the ice. No one stopped us. No one could. At least, that was what I had originally thought, but another unexpected thing occurred as we finally made it to the inner gates.

"Come no closer!" The almost deranged sounding shout made the initial line pause, and it took me a moment before I thought to look up. There, on the audience balcony thing that overlooked the inner gates… there was Narcian. He had a runesword in one hand, and Mordred in the other. "I'll kill him if you do!" he snapped, placing the blade against Mordred's throat for emphasis. Mordred just looked like an oversized ragdoll from here. "Put down your weapons, and get on your knees, you filthy maggots!"

"You've already lost, General Narcian," Roy called up. He stepped in front of the soldiers, weapon in hand, and looked the perfect picture of a poised, confident general. It stood out especially considering he was talking to Narcian, who looked even more deranged than usual. "Please, let the king go."

"Please? Please?!!" Narcian cackled, and the sound made my skin crawl. "I am strong! I am wise! I am beautiful!" He was absolutely insane. "And, most importantly, I am right! Always!" He had gone off the deep end. "Me! No one else!" We were dealing with an insane general who was backed into a corner. This was way worse than I expected. "I don't lose! To you, to Galle, to anyone!"

"General Narcian, please-"

"You're nothing but a worthless child, born to a mother of even less worth-"

"I am Elroy of Pherae, son of Eliwood, Marquess of Pherae, and his lady, Ninian, daughter of the Queen of the Ice Dragons," Roy's voice carried through the air, and the soldiers held their breaths. "I am the General of the Lycian Alliance Army, come to assist Etruria at the request of the Rulers of the Five Great Houses, in accordance to the ties of friendship between our countries, and to repay the debt we owe Etruria for coming to our aid when Ostia was almost overrun. By you, General Narcian. You could not stand against us then, and you cannot do so now. So, please, let King Mordred go. You gain nothing from this, but if you surrender, you might-"

"ON YOUR KNEES, OR THE OLD MAN'S HEAD FLIES!" Narcian's screech echoed harshly in my ears. I drew Rienfleche to aim, but realized I didn't have a good shot. The angle was too harsh. A mage might be able to hit him, but they'd risk Mordred dying. "You're nothing! Etruria is nothing! All of you are nothing compared to me!"

Roy might have replied, but a soft laugh, strangely loud in the ringing silence, stopped him. "That your king promoted you to general is a testament to how far Bern has fallen," Mordred noted, almost absently. 'Almost' because his voice carried far, and I found myself remembering how he used to give speeches from here, powerful yet calm speeches. That was not a voice you did on accident. "Ah, my poor nephew… I should have intervened. I failed as an uncle, as a father, and as a king. But, Narcian, you will be rotting in the dirt before you can make me fail at the end."

"Your majesty, hold on a moment!" Roy called. He was still perfectly confident. "We'll be there shortly."

"General Elroy, I have a favor I must ask." Mordred lifted his head, and I noticed with a start that there was life in his face. I had not seen that life ever since… since Mildain's 'accident'. "My son lives." When did he…!? "Among Katri's things was a note to me, telling me such, and my Douglas
confirmed the words to be true." Mom? Wait, the letters Galle delivered to Uncle Douglas must have included… "If you see him, please, keep him safe. He is my only heir."

"Only?"

"I removed Zephiel from the inheritance." Holy… "As such, my son is the only one who can be king now." …Wait, that sentence… "Etruria has fallen. I failed to keep my people safe. I failed to serve my generals as they serve me. I failed the Western Isles. I failed all those who looked to me for guidance and protection." Mordred, hold on, this sounded like… "But Mildain will be able to pick up the pieces. Etruria is broken, but the broken can be mended. The infection can be purged." Mordred, this really sounded like…

"Sir?"

"The soldiers loyal to me know what they must do. You will be fine." Mordred tilted his head farther back, and shifted slightly. "I understand you have most of the city anyway. When you are done here, go to the Tower of the Saint to destroy the remnants of these revolutionaries. Roark and Arcardo have already run." His neck was bared. "I am gladdened to have seen you. I know the future will be fine, if you and yours are making it." He threw himself forward.

Roses were the house symbol for the Etrurian Royal family. White, red, yellow. White for purity, innocence, humility. Red for courage, passion, romance. Yellow for joy, delight, remembrance. The red one was in the middle, because there were paired meanings too. Red and white for unity. Red and yellow for jovial, happy feelings.

For some reason, that flashed through my head, as I watched Mordred's blood drip down from the balcony. Maybe it was because the blood reminded me of petals falling from a dying rose.

Something creaked, and I brought my head down to see the doors opening up. Etrurian soldiers were pushing them open. That had… been the signal. That had been what Uncle Douglas had meant. Mordred… sacrificed himself… for a 'new king' to take his place. Mordred… had used his death… as a signal that Etruria had fallen, so all those loyal to that country… should protect the future.

Something clicked in my head then, thunked into place, and then I was thinking again. If that was his play, then I had to do mine.

"Roy, ordered everyone forward," I whispered. I reached down to nudge his shoulder, sparking some life back into his face. "We can scream about this later, but we should prove, right now…"

"That we are worth the sacrifice," Roy finished. He took a shuddering breath, nodded, and… and freaking chicked a giant spear of ice at Narmac. Narmac ducked, but it shattered the glass windows behind him. "ALL FORCES, CHARGE!" Roy's voice cracked through the air. "Are we to be afraid of a simple general, who had to rely on dastardly tactics in order to even stand a chance? What is this pathetic man, who dares to call himself a knight? He is nothing compared to what we have faced! We have killed dragons!" The two fighting overhead both roared, with such a scary sense of dramatic timing that I had to wonder if Father Sky had intervened. "We fought and won against Zephiel!" Ah, we didn't quite 'win' there? "What is this poor excuse of a person compared to all of that?!" Roy raised his blade, catching the light. "So, charge! Retake the castle from these invaders! Retake Etruria from the corrupt and the wicked! Charge, and BUILD A BETTER TOMORROW FOR US ALL!"

The army roared in agreement, and charged, moving past us. I looked up, though, and realized something. Narmac wasn't there. He likely…
"Roy, I'm going to take a small group to intercept Narcian," I whispered. He nodded. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Take Perceval and Cecilia with you," he rasped. I passed him some water, and he took it gratefully. "They deserve it."

"...If you can spare Elphin too, I wouldn't mind having a bard. I'd rather Lalum stay with the main."

"Take whoever you want. I can adapt, especially at this point." He grinned. "After all, from this point, we can have Princess Guinevere and Lilina rally the troops."

"Clever." I grinned back. "Then I'm taking Klein, Clarine, Sue, and Rutger." I would also need…

"Lady Irene!" Miredy swooped down with such perfect timing that I could only stare for a moment. "I noticed Narcian attempting to reach his wyvern," she informed me. I nodded. "Do you want me to intercept?"

"Yes," I confirmed. I pointed to the far tower, the largest one with a wooden cap, where we could easily fight if it came to that. "Get him there."

"On it." She took off and I gathered my group. Rutger looked confused as to why I was bringing him along, but he just went with it. Up in the air, the dragons continued to fight, and Narcian tried to use them as a distraction to escape. But Miredy easily caught up with him, and kept him from leaving.

"Miredy, you disgrace!" he snapped. Clearly, he was trying to knock her off her guard. "You traitor!"

"My loyalty always lied with the princess, and so it shall remain," Miredy answered clearly, voice carrying even through the sounds of fighting. "Whatever respect or fear I hold for His Majesty, it is nothing compared to the admiration and love I hold for Her Highness."

"Trouble in front of us," Rutger pointed out, dragging my attention back to the ground. There were soldiers everywhere. "What's the plan?"

"Obviously, we need to break through," Elphin murmured. "A shame we chose to not come with our mounts." We had known we would be climbing a lot of stairs, especially since we were coming in from the ground entrance, not the castle one. "But we also need to make sure some of us are up at the top." Miredy's job was to keep Narcian from leaving, not defeat him. "Bait and distract? But then there are soliders inside…"

"Irene and I can climb the outside easily," Sue stated. She glanced at me to confirm and, after a moment, I nodded. While we had never climbed such a great height, Uncle Matthew had taught us how to climb up walls. It made me wish we had Uncle Legault and Uncle Jaffar with us, but they were with Uncle Erk and Aunt Priscilla, taking care of the freed hostages and liberating more while we focused on the capital. "While we do that, you can fight through."

"That would work." Elphin nodded, and plucked a few notes on his lyre. "Well, Miss Fiona taught me a few of the old songs. This will be a good chance to try them out." He played a little song, and there was a bit of gentle warmth flowing through me, focusing on my arms and legs. "That is a song to increase strength." Well, that would be useful for everyone but Cecilia. Though, I supposed she could bludgeon people with her staff if she wanted to use the strength boost. "It also boosts one magic." Never mind, she had the boost for her preferred way of attacking anyway. "Let's go,
before it fades."

"Mother Earth, guide you." Sue and I split off from them, while the rest readied to fight the soldiers. As I left, Klein caught my hand and squeezed it reassuringly, giving me a small smile. I smiled back, comforted by the gentle touch, before turning away and following Sue. She and I inspected the wall for the best place to climb and went for it, careful on our hand and footholds. The clashing of metal and the screeching of wyverns and dragons echoed eerily against the cool stone of the tower.

The climb was painful, though. When Uncle Matthew had given us lessons, we had worn gloves, and I could feel why he had with ever broken nail and scrapped fingertips. My knees were bruised, and my toes protested holding so much of my weight on such precarious footing. My boots were starting to fray from the stone. My arms and back screamed in protest of every movement. My bow dug awkwardly into my shoulder, and my quiver seemed determined to bore a hole into my waist and hip.

But eventually, we found the edge and I pulled myself up first before helping Sue over. Only then did either of us look down, and I gaped at how much we climbed. "I think Uncle Matthew is simultaneously going to kill us and be very proud of us," I whispered. Sue just nodded, wiping the sweat off her face with a bloody hand. "Sin is definitely going to kill us, though." She nodded again, and then pointed to the sky. Miredy and Narcian were close. "Right." Though, now there was a bit of a problem. "I'm not sure either of us can aim right now." I looked up, though, and noticed a rafter beam above us. "Got an idea." I pointed and she grinned. "All right. Let's wait for-"

Miredy had apparently noticed us first as she quickly went on a very aggressive offensive, knocking Narcian back. With another surge, she actually eviscerated the wyvern and sent Narcian flying into the tower. He landed not that far away from Sue and I as his wyvern fell. Of course, as he shakily pushed himself up, Sue and I jumped and used the rafter to swing back and then forward, adding more force to our kicks to his face. He made a really funny noise as he crashed back down, slamming into the wall of the tower's top. Sue and I shared a grin at how well that had worked.

"Yay, you're both here!" We both turned at the voice, and I saw the others walking up from the stairway. They were disheveled, bloody, but otherwise fine. "Here, I'll fix you two up," Clarine insisted, skipping over to us. "I'm so glad you two are okay."

"Father Sky's mercy, if we'd known it wouldn't have taken that long, we would've just gone with you," I 'complained'. After all, us climbing had only meant we got to kick Narcian in the face. Now, granted, that was a reward in of itself, but…

"It's not our fault that Elphin's song made Perceval and Rutger crash through everything." A groan caught our attentions, and we turned to see Narcian swaying as he stood, blood trickling down his face. "Oh, who's that?" …Wait, Clarine, hold on. You, of all people, should probably know him.

"You all dare…!" Narcian growled, glaring at us with wild eyes. His attention focused completely on Clarine. "You!" He pointed dramatically at her. "You're that girl!"

"Excuse me?" Clarine replied. She looked so confused, and, as the others joined us, I shared an amused look with Rutger. "Have we met?"

"What?!" Narcian's jaw dropped, and I had to bite back a laugh. "You've forgotten me!"

"Mmm, sorry, you're really not ringing a bell." She turned to Rutger. "Do you know him?" Rutger's response was just to nod and smile. "Huh. Then I guess I met him in Laus?"
"This is inconceivable!"

"Quiet, you. Your raucous voice is grating my poor ears." Clarine suddenly snapped her fingers. "Ah, yes, I place the voice now. You're the mangy dog who likes to dress himself up as a peacock." Clarine, I love you. "I wonder how this wind sword works." She drew it and it sparked into life, wind swirling about the blade. "Take this!" She swung it in front of her, and a giant blade of wind launched from the sword and flew towards Narcian. "That's how! Yay!" Of course, Narcian dodged, but it was still fantastic.

It was even more fantastic when Rutger lunged, and carved a beautiful gash on Narcian's arm. "You probably don't remember me, but I was a mercenary at Laus," Rutger explained calmly, settling into another stance. "I was the one who got Clarine out of there."

"A savage like you?!!" Narcian yelped. Rutger only narrowed his eyes. "There's no way a dog could outsmart a better!"

"I suppose that means you aren't my superior by any means." Rutger shifted, and when Narcian moved to clumsily block, Rutger kicked him instead, sending him flying.

He landed at Cecilia's feet. "Well, isn't this a sight?" Cecilia sighed. She had a tome book out, and magic crackled around her. "You know; a general really should face his death on his feet."

"Oh, like you?" Narcian grumbled. He pushed himself up, raising his runesword. "Ah, but dear Cecilia." His voice was slimy. "Back for more?"

"It was Zephiel to whome I lost, not you. And you couldn't even find me in the dungeons."

"Bah, you'll know my true strength now."

"I'll prepare myself for the disappointment." She tossed out a thunder spell and, while Narcian dodged, the blackened tile made it clear just how powerful it was. "Hmm… with this song, Elphin, I seem to be at my normal level of power."

"It is a shame that I cannot seem to stack them," Elphin sighed. Still, he played another song, and I felt like I was in the middle of a thunderstorm. "This is supposed to help with making killing blows."

"Then we should not waste it," Sue murmured. She brought up her bow and drew an arrow in one smooth motion. "Ah, I see how it works." She loosed the arrow, and it thudded into Narcian's collarbone, sending him stumbling back. "It sharpens the sight, allowing you to see the weaknesses more clearly." Oh, now that was interesting.

"Does it work for a sword?" Perceval asked. He lunged forward and crossed blades with Narcian. "Seems so." The two started to battle it out, Narcian holding his own only because of the runeblade's special property: health absorption, not unlike the dark magic tome, nosferatu.

However, Perceval didn't fight alone. Sue and Cecilia covered Perceval and Rutger as they fell on Narcian. Elphin played his songs to give energy, while Clarine kept up with the healing, and threw out a wind blade every once in a while.

Klein and I waited until we were certain Narcian had forgotten about us before bringing up our bows and aiming our arrows. We glanced at each other, and he nodded, giving me the first shot. As I fired, though, Rienfleche buzzed in my hand, and there was a small flash of light as the arrow left the string. The arrow thudded into Narcian's arm, and then it just… appeared to keep going, a bolt of light straight through his arm, even though a single arrow could never do such a thing. Arrows
plugged up with injury, but this one bled freely from both sides of the arm.

Was that…? Did Rienfleche just…?

I didn't have time to be shocked, though Narcian's scream of pain proved to be his last words. Klein fired his arrow just seconds after I had, and it flew true, striking Narcian in the head, between the eyes, and the force knocked Narcian's body over the edge.

Curious, we crowded around the edge, and saw the red splat even from up here. Narcian… was dead. We killed him. With his death, Etruria was free…

"The king." I wasn't sure who reminded us. I would guess Perceval, as he tended to be the serious and formal one, but the voice was so quiet that it was hard to tell.

But that reminder got us moving. We all rushed down the stairs, taking them two, three… sometimes even ten at a time. Round and round we went, and when we hit the castle entrance of the tower, we burst into the hallway, heading for the audience balcony. There, lying in a pool of his own blood, was Mordred. To my complete and utter surprise, he was still breathing. But I didn't even need Clarine and Cecilia to shake their heads to know that he didn't have long left.

So, instead, I looked to Elphin, and nudged him. It wasn't what any of us would have liked, but it was better than we had hoped.

Elphin hesitated before nodding and walking over, kneeling in the blood as he rolled his father's body over and cradled him. "Father?" he whispered. Mordred stirred, grimacing at… well, likely everything. "Father, it's me. It's Mildain. I'm right here."

Mordred's eyes blinked open slowly, and he smiled when he saw Mildain. His hand came up to stroke Mildain's hair, leaving blood in the gold locks. He didn't say a word, and I thought I knew why. His vocal cords had to be severed. But he could still smile, and in that smile, you could hear the words anyway. 'I love you. I am proud of you. I am so glad you are safe.'

"Say hello to mother for me, will you? We'll be fine."

Mordred nodded, his eyes filling up with happy tears. When he closed his eyes, they ran down his face, dripping into the blood.

When it became obvious that Mordred had stopped breathing, I began to sing, a Sacaean song of mourning and loss. It was the only thing I could think to do, with Mildain bowed over his father's corpse. Clarine cried into Klein's shoulder, while Perceval and Cecilia simply bowed their heads. Sue and Rutger joined me in singing, and the three of us turned the song from mourning just one person… to a song sung when those of the tribes lost too many people at once. The last time this song was sung was over twenty years ago, when the Lorca were slaughtered.

Now, though, we three sang it for Mordred, for the soldiers of Etruria who lost their lives in the coup, for Mom, for those of the Isles who lost their lives to Etruria's cruelty, for our soldiers who fell in the line of duty, for Uncle Hector, for all the Lycian soldiers who died during Bern's attempted conquest, for Dad, for the Kutolah, for all those who died when Bulgar was massacred.

We sang for all the dead. It felt appropriate.

Notes on Zeiss
• Miredy's younger brother, and childhood friend of Elen. A recent knight, he's still in training, but his potential is vast. His fighting style is so honest, after all, like someone he trusted very much taught him everything. It had to have been Galle.

• He seems hesitant to be here, and I'm fairly certain that he only is here because it's the safest place for him. Still, he seems intent on keeping his eyes and ears open.

• I worry about how he will fit in, but since there are other Bernese soldiers, I'm sure he'll eventually be fine.

• His affinity is thunder.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: This is chapter 16 in game, which reminds me of an easier version of FE5's chapter 18 more than anything. MANY changes here. In game, there's no indication of Zephiel or Jahn at all. (In fact, I think the game doesn't mention Jahn until after you're on the path to the true end.) While there are manaketes, there's no vicious dragon fight overhead. Mordred lives in game.

The idea of Douglas guarding the gates while on a bridge comes from the FE6 manga, as does the idea of Narcian using Mordred as a hostage (he attempts such in the manga, but it is foiled). The fire sword, thunder sword, and wind swords were all weapons in FE4 and FE5. Clarine taking up swords is partly inspired by Mist of FE9/FE10, and partly on the fact that troubadours in their 'original' incarnation did in fact use swords, promoting into a special version of the paladin class that allowed the use of staves, in addition to swords and lances. Klein taking the final blow is based on my playthrough where I was trying to weak Narcian for another to kill and Klein pulled a 1% crit. Douglas's conversations with Lalum and Elphin are more or less from the game.

Technically, Hugh is recruited in this chapter too, but Irene hasn't met or heard of him yet, so his notes are moved to the next chapter. This is also the first map where you can command Fae, but since Irene hasn't directly fielded her (yet), there are also no notes for her.

Next Chapter – The Glorious Ascension (gaiden chapter)
Chapter 18x) The Glorious Ascension

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 18x) The Glorious Ascension

The revolution is almost over, but the death toll is only going to increase. After all, the last of the revolutionaries are holed up inside the Tower of the Saint, a place of worship for Saint Elimine, founder of Etruria. It is a structure that predates the Scouring, though its original purpose has long since been lost.

Now we have soldiers and rebellious bishops attempting to make one last stand. Negotiations have failed, so now we're bringing the army's might on them. This is going to be a pain.

The Tower of the Saint was old, and the area around it was just as old, if not older. The ruins of old Aquelia, the one destroyed before the Scouring, separated it cleanly from the rest of the city. Even now, a thousand years later, one thousand years worth of wind and rain, you could see blackened stains on the stone rubble. Some of them were in clear outlines of bodies. How had they stayed so long? Father Sky's wind was subtle and slow in its strength, but given time, it would grind down even one of Mother Earth's mountains. How did the stains still stay? Was that simple a show of how powerful a true dragon's fire could be? Had Father Sky eased his strength here, so that the memorials to the dead could remain undisturbed?

"Thank you so much for helping us, sir." Roy's voice drew me out of my thoughts, and I focused again on him and Uncle Douglas. "We truly appreciate it," Roy continued, bowing slightly. "Especially since we were fighting not long ago."

"I am simply obeying my king's orders," Uncle Douglas replied. He looked tired, worn, but resigned. He had known at the beginning of the battle that Mordred would die. Likely, the two had talked of how. "Besides, you kept King Mildain safe, and saved Etruria. It is an honor to assist."

"Thank you." Roy gave me a look, and I simply smiled wryly in reply. Roy hadn't been surprised at all to learn Elphin was really 'Mildain'. "And how is he doing?"

"He's working," I replied, not knowing what else to say. There were a lot of things that needed to be done, and Mildain was stuck with a lot of the duties. Perceval, Cecilia, Klein, and Lalum were with him, helping where they could. "But I think they all plan on seeing this war to the end."

"I would be grateful," Roy murmured. His eyes were sad, though, and I knew he was kicking himself for not being able to save Mordred. "But can it be afforded?"

"It is common for rulers of Etruria to be out on the frontlines during an actual war," Uncle Douglas explained. Though his face remained stoic, his tone became very dry. "You may interpret that as you wish in terms of how Etruria has viewed the Western Isles Campaign." Mmm… "It's normally typical for the leaders of the Great Houses to be with the army as well, but given circumstances…” Perceval was the only Great House leader who hadn't been drugged. Uncle Pent and Uncle Mark were still being treated when we set out. Apparently, they'd been particularly 'rebellious' during all of this. I worried about permanent damage, and thus didn't protest when Clarine begged to be allowed to help treat the victims. Sue stayed to watch over our family.
"I welcome whatever aid they can give." Roy sighed, drooping slightly. "I am well aware of my youth, and need of advice."

"Is that so?" I asked, voice dry. I wanted to lighten the mood. "You seem old enough to hire mercenaries on your own."

"Irene!" Roy yelped before scowling at me. "His name is Hugh, and he needed money for his grandmother!" We really only had his word for that. "How is that bad?"

"Roy, Deke and his group aren't being paid that much, and they're an established mercenary group." I barely checked the urge to sigh. "The Ilians might, might, be paid that much, if they were lucky."

"Well, they all clearly needed a pay raise."

"Whose coffers are we taking from?"

"Bern will be in charge of war reparations, right?"

"If we win, then yes, Bern will." That was how it went historically. "But that doesn't change what is owed now."

"In that case, we'll take it from Roartz and Arcardo's treasuries." His eyes were certain. "It's not like they would have it anyway at this point." That was true. "Besides, didn't you complain in the past that Hanover had more money than it knew what to do with?"

"You can't just decide to take money from my family." Though, I did agree, and based on how Douglas remained quiet and let us banter, I'd say he agreed too. "We'll leave those sort of negotiations to Elphin."

"That's probably a good idea." He frowned slightly. "Also, what name are we using for him?"

"For now, I use 'Elphin'." It was possible it would change, but that would be his decision. He might prefer 'Elphin' to continue the bard act until it was time to rule. "We've stalled long enough, though."

"Yes, it's time to head inside the Tower, and oust the last of the revolutionaries." He sighed. "Why do I have a feeling this isn't going to be easy?"

"Is it ever?" I ruffled his hair, laughing when he squeaked. "Go rally the troops mister. I'll see about getting a map in case negotiations fail."

"See you soon."

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Roy's bad feeling turned out to be absolutely correct. The revolutionaries inside refused all attempts to surrender peacefully, and were determined to take us out with them. This resulted in little arrows of light screaming down at us, silence staves, berserk staves… we used our own status staves to even out the odds, but it was still incredibly annoying to deal with. If only we could just warp over to the leader to assassinate him… but you needed line of sight for warp to work, and we were stuck battling through floors.

Who even created status staves? The creation of the healing staff was credited to the Blacksmith Martin, but no one ever talked of who made things like 'sleep' or 'berserk'. For that matter, no one ever talked of who made 'restore' or 'warp'. Why were they never talked about?
"My pardon, Lady Tactician." The gentle voice startled me out of my thoughts, and I looked down to see the speaker was someone I didn't know at all. She was probably a new soldier, like Hugh, and since I saw no weapon, I guessed she might be a new healer. "I am a bit… familiar with this tower," she continued, voice soft. Her accent was strange, standing out because I had never heard it before. "Ah, but where are my manners? I'm called 'Ely'."

"Nice to meet you, Ely," I murmured, turning to face her fully. I barely bit back a groan as I realized someone had silenced Saul again, leaving Elen to 'restore' him so that he could 'restore' a berserked Fir. "So, what this about you being familiar?"

"Just that. I am familiar with the Tower, and its traps." She smiled gently. "If you would like, I can show you a different one that is on this floor. But, I do warn. It will kill everyone on the floor."

"I see." I closed my eyes and thought for a bit. While I certainly didn't mind killing all these revolutionaries, especially now, I… did have to consider morale. "Give me a moment. I don't feel comfortable making that sort of decision on my own."

"Of course." Her smile grew, and I got the distinct sense that she was very proud of me, for some reason. "I'll wait."

"Thank you." I stepped away from her, and looked around the field before waving my hand. "Roy, need you over here!"

"Coming!" he called over the noise. It still took him a bit to come over. "What is it?" he asked me as soon as he was close enough. "Oh, Lilina was wondering if she should just focus completely on healing so that Saul and Elen can focus on restoring."

"She and Chad both need to," I replied. I glanced around and hailed Cath. "Cath, tell Chad and Lilina to switch to healing duty only!" I waited until she saluted with a little wink and ran off before turning to Roy. "Okay, to what I was going to talk about."

"Right, sorry, I wanted to say that before I forgot." He wiped some sweat off his cheek, smearing blood instead. "What is it?"

"A new soldier knows the area, and knows something about traps."

"So, can we disable the magic arrows?"

"She didn't mention that. What she did mention was that there is another trap we can pull. However, from what I understand, it's a 'guarantee win', but it's also a guarantee 'all of the enemies will die'." I debated crouching to better look him in the eye, but decided against it. I didn't want to seem patronizing. "No second chances."

"I see." Roy closed his eyes, and I knew he was debating furiously. His fists clenched at his side as he weighed each option. When his jaw clenched, I knew what he had decided, even before he opened his eyes and I saw the sad resolve in them. "Let's go with it. I think we are all tired of this fight."

"I'll take Astore and head over then. Try to get everyone crowded together."

"I can handle it." He smiled slightly. "I've… gotten better at leading, I think."

"I know you have." I gave him a quick hug, and I tightened my grip when I felt him lean into me. He was getting tired, and I could not blame him. "I'll be back soon."
I pulled away, and yelled for Astore. It took him a bit of time, as he seemed rather determined to kill the enemies around Igrene without her noticing, but it wasn't long at all before we were following Ely up a hidden set of stairs, barely large enough for the three of us. I found myself a little unnerved at how little sound she made when she moved. Perhaps it was just the battle covering it up, but I could hear Astore's footsteps behind me. It was like she was gliding over the stairs, not stepping on them.

"Here it is," Ely suddenly declared, gesturing to a strange metal contraption resting not far from where the stairs ended. "Here's the machine for the trap." Was that so? "You might need to make sure all the connections are... well... connected, but it should still work."

"I'm assuming this won't be complicated?" Astore replied dryly. He pushed past me, crouched down by the machine, and peered at it. He flipped open a little metal sheet and whistled. "This is old. It has to be. You only see things like this in royal vaults nowadays, sacred and ancient treasures."

"Is there something different from this that makes you say that?" I asked, looking in over his shoulder. All I saw was a mess of metal. "It's strangely shiny."

"That's just it. This is old. It should be rusted. But whoever made, or modified, this thing last must have been a genius, because I think it's ready to go as is." He glanced at me. "You might want to make sure you're away, just in case I'm wrong and it explodes."

"I'm not sure how much I like that mental image. I sighed, looking at Ely. "Where is the 'safe zone' for this? Do you know?"

"You'll be fine on the stairs, but I recommend getting everyone you can on a different floor," Ely answered easily. She smiled sweetly. "This one should only affect this floor."

"Then we pretend to retreat," I murmured, biting my lip as I thought. A false retreat would draw the enemies out of their defensive formation, to chase down the 'weakened prey', and they wouldn't think of us using an ancient trap. "I'll go tell Roy. Astore, Ely, watch for a thunder bolt hitting the ceiling!"

I jumped down the stairs, leaving Astore and Ely to it. As soon as I hit the ground, I pushed through the chaos, shooting enemies as I needed, but focused on finding Roy. Rienfleche buzzed in my hand, hitting 'twice' for every one arrow. It had accepted me as a 'worthy user', and while its power meant that I could never reuse an arrow I shot, I was able to deal quite a bit of damage. I wasn't sure why it chose to accept me, and some part of me wondered if it was because Dad was dead, but I decided it didn't matter. It did, and I would work to prove to myself that I was worthy for it.

"Irene!" Somewhere between adding a new hole in an enemy's face and drawing another arrow, Roy actually found me. "Is it viable?" he asked me. I noticed his neck was burned. "Lilina got berserked." Father Sky... "She's fine now, and I managed to hold her down, but she's shaken, and everyone is-"

"Fall back to the stairs," I interrupted. He smiled in relief. "We're going to pretend to retreat, and have them all enter the floor."

"Understood." Roy brought up his hand to make sure he was seen. "All units, fall back and regroup! Get out of range of their staves!"

It took a moment to get everyone under control enough to make sure we were retreating, and not
stampeding down to the lower floors. But between Roy, Lilina, and Guinevere, we got everyone moving. As soon as the last one was clear, I ordered Lugh to throw the spell. It cracked through the air, blackening a spot on the ceiling.

Then, two seconds later, the trap went off. Burning stars rained from the ceiling, and incinerated all who remained on the floor, turning them all to ash. When the light cleared, there was… there was nothing but blood and ash. The enemy was gone, wiped out. There weren't even bodies.

Fear flooded my stomach, as I wondered how the army would view this. But then a great shout went up, "Saint Elimine destroyed the heretics!" It was soon followed by, "Saint Elimine has given us her blessings!"

From there, the soldiers just cheered, their morale soaring. I could only really stare, trying to decide if this was a good thing or not. Morale was important, yes, but they were cheering at the complete disintegration of people. Yes, they were 'enemies', and I had little doubts that some of them were horrible people, but…

I heard splashed footsteps and turned to see Roy at my side. He looked very pale, and I gave him a quick hug when I noticed he also looked a little green. He gave me a tight smile in reply, and closed his eyes, visible steeling his nerves. Then, with a little nod, he strode forward through the ashy blood, heading for the staircase. I followed him silently, Rienfleche in hand just in case someone escaped.

But no one had, and we climbed up without any sort of resistance. The stairs opened up to a large empty room, with a small shrine at the back-center, almost like a 'throne' in a castle. In silence, we approached the shrine, and I glanced around the area, curious. It seemed so… untouched. I thought I even saw children's toys tucked in the corners, fraying and falling apart thanks to time, but still recognizable. Had this place once been used as a sanctuary? Had children once lived in this tower?

"Is this it?" Roy suddenly whispered. I returned my attention to the shrine, and noticed there was something on the pedestal, a single tome. "Is this Aureola?"

"Yes, it is." At the voice, both of us whirled, and I was startled to see Ely behind us. "Aha, you must forgive me!" she laughed, moving to stand before us. "I could not help but join in." She smiled warmly, and there was suddenly a bit of a glow to her. "I should have simply waited by my tome, but I wanted to meet you all. You, after all, carry our hopes, and I tired of those people who use my name to justify their hatred.

"Your tome?" Roy repeated, eyes wide. He looked between the tome and Ely. "Then you…?"

"Ely is short for Elimine. Hilda called me that, from the time we became friends to my dying day." She grew serious. "And yes, this is my tome. My Aureola, forged by Martin, wielded by only me. It's price is… this." She drew back her sleeves and held out her arms. I saw long, angry red lines, like scabbed blood, but far smoother. "These are dragon's scales." Was that so? "Aureola destroys the body, as Apocalypse destroys the mind." She smiled wryly. "Truth be told, light magic in general harms the body. It is just… subtle in its price."

"It does? It is?"

"Light and dark are equal but opposite. Light magic might trump in a battle, but their sources are equal yet opposite." She shrugged. "Besides, anima magic also runs a risk of harming the 'self'. But unlike light and dark, anima magic has elemental spirits to help guide the force."

"That's why anima magic users have a higher risk of overextending. I remember Lilina telling me
about it." Still, Roy looked saddened. "But all light magic…?"

"Yes, though most do not know that price." She looked resigned. "Many have 'sickness of the spirit' which causes their bodies to weaken at unexpected moments." That reminded me of Uncle Lucius. "So, be careful on who you ask to wield Aureola. They must be of a strong mind, and a stronger body."

"But you will let us?"

"Why should I not? As I said, you carry my hope, just as you carry so many others." She grew serious. "However, I do have one thing to ask of you."

"Yes?"

"Do not pass on this burden." What did she mean by that? "In the past, we placed our hopes in the future. Yes, we ended the Scouring, but in our haste, our exhaustion, our desperation, we paid many prices. We lost dear friends. We almost destroyed the world. And there was one broken child we could not save, though we desperately wanted to, and we decided to leave her fate to the future." She held out her hands to us. "Please, save that child. By death or mercy… save her. Do what we could not. Do not place your hope in the future. Be that hope."

"…We will." Roy bowed to her. "I swear; we will do all we can."

"Then all will be well. You are the generation of so many hopes, and it shows in your skills, and your burdens." She smiled brilliantly, even as she glowed. "Now, I go to rest again." Her voice echoed, as if she was speaking from far away. "I shall pray and watch over you all, with the others. With my friends. We believe in you, so hold your heads high. Walk the path you think is right, and be mindful of those who fight with you."

The light brightened to the point of blinding us, but when it disappeared, so had Elimine. Her tome almost sparkled, as if echoing her laughter.

"Well, that was a thing," I deadpanned, unable to help it. It made Roy laugh, at least. "I wonder why she appeared." We hadn't seen Roland, Durban, or Athos, after all. "You think we'll see any others?"

"I don't know, and I'm not sure I want to," Roy sighed. He picked up the tome, eyes cautious. "We will have to be careful of who wields this."

"Is that really anything new?"

"Point." He shook his head. "Let's return to the others."

Outside the Tower, the soldiers were practically throwing a party. It didn't matter that we had completely devastated the enemy, made it so that they could not go through any sort of burial rites. To them, it was simply a sign of divine favor. We were favored by Saint Elimine, avatar of the divine, speaker of the gods. If there was any more need for proof, we wielded her tome. Aureola was in our hands, ready to be used to combat the 'wicked dragons of Bern'.

It made me feel ill, but what was worse was knowing that I had to use this fervor. War was bloody. War was hateful. We had to keep morale up, as the battles would only grow longer, more intense, as the war dragged on.

The Scouring was eight years of this? I was ready to drop from exhaustion after a few months!
But the exhaustion wasn’t even the worst part. The worst was that with this, the trouble in Etruria was 'done'. Yes, there was still clean up, but I knew Elphin. I knew exactly how he would ensure the remaining nobles would be united and not fall to civil war as soon as we were gone. For the first time during all of this, we were going to bring the war to Bern. And that meant…

"Princess Guinevere?" Roy called softly as we lingered on the edges of the 'infirmary' that Guinevere headed. "Can we have a moment?"

"Of course," Guinevere replied. She tied off a bandage and picked her way around the injured to reach us. Her hair was falling out of her loose ponytail, and blood and mud had stained her dress beyond repair. But her hands were steady as she checked on patients as she passed, and I was glad to see them smile at her. Princess of Bern or not, she had our soldiers' respect. "What is it?"

"Over here." Roy gestured for us to go to a quieter part of the area, and glanced at me. While he had stated he could have this conversation alone, I wanted to be here for 'after'. "My apologies, but there is something we must discuss."

"…I know." Guinevere's voice was soft, sad. "We will march on Bern once things in Etruria are settled." Still, she tried to smile for the two of us. It just looked pained. "It's okay. I've known since Missur that this would happen eventually."

"Irene insists that we head to Ilia and ensure it's liberated before heading through the Sacae and reaching Bern, so there is a bit of time." Roy nodded at me, mostly to emphasize his words. "She promises to give her reasoning during the War Council meeting in a couple of days."

"But it is still attacking Bern directly. We are going to initiate the fighting, instead of 'reacting' to things they started." Guinevere closed her eyes before nodding. "Yes, I know. So, here." She hesitated a moment before she took off her necklace, the Fire Emblem, and hooked it around Roy's neck. "Here. Wear this."

"What is this?" Roy held the pendant up, and I swore something in it sparked. "It's so warm."

"That is the Fire Emblem, Bern's national treasure." She clasped her hands in front of her, and took a step back. "When we are in Bern, I will lead you to the Temple of Seals."

"That's where that sword is hidden," I whispered. I closed my eyes, thinking. "The sword Hartmut himself once wielded… if it is used against Bern…" It could bring the civilians on our side. But, then again, they could just become angered at us 'tainting' something so holy. "You mentioned Fiona told you that you couldn't wield it?"

"Yes," Guinevere confirmed. She sighed. "She was very certain of that. But we can ask her…" Though, she was in Etruria, paying her respects to the dead there. "Regardless, though, my brother is forcing the world into submission with military might. I cannot forgive him, no matter his reasons. The Fire Emblem serves as proof you have the trust of Bern's royal family." She tried to smile again, but she really looked like she was about to cry. "I will be remembered in infamy, a traitor to my nation. The people will resent me for the rest of my days, for I oppose their hope, their Zephiel."

"Princess Guinevere…" Roy breathed. He wanted to say more. It was easy to tell. But there was nothing to say. We had no reassurances for her. "I'm sorry."

"Do not be. None of this is your fault." She ducked her head. "I know I do not need to ask, but for my own conscience, I must. When we invade Bern, please, do all you can to avoid harming civilians?"
"Of course. We will do everything in our power." Roy hesitated a moment, but nodded when I nudged his shoulder. It was time for him to leave. "We'll talk later."

"Okay." Guinevere drooped as he walked off, and she started to shake. "A-ah…"

"It's okay," I whispered, rubbing her back. Yes, this was why I insisted on being here. I knew she was going to react like this. Even if she knew, even if she was prepared, it was still overwhelming. "Do you want to stay in Etruria?"

"No," she answered. Her voice shook, but her eyes were firm, even as they swam in tears. "No, I must see this through. I must look them in the eye. I will not run from my choice."

"We're here for you." But I could tell she needed a subject change. "Oh, right, something I didn't mention before because of… well… everything." I shifted to look her in the face. "I saw Zephiel here."

"My brother?" She looked startled, and that shock seemed to ease her shakiness. "Here?"

"Yeah." I wasn't going to mention that we had a long talk. That might be a little much. "Do you have an idea of why he was here?"

"Hmm…" She frowned a little in thought, calming down as she found something else to think on. "Well, I know what I would like it to be. Some sort of regret, or hesitation." She sighed. "Maybe just wanting to see Etruria? It was Lady Mother's home, but we never got to visit. Father never allowed it." Her eyes lit up. "Oh, though it could be…"

"Yes?"

"Well, something Father once rambled when he was very, very drunk was that our line wasn't 'supposed' to be on the throne, and that the proof was in our Archives, and somewhere in Etruria." How did you determine if a line was 'supposed' to inherit something? How did you make that judgment? "Zephiel had always been a little curious about it. Maybe he thought…" She trailed off suddenly, eyes pained. "I… I'm sorry. I cannot… I cannot speak of the rest right now."

"Of course." Clearly, there was a dark secret there. "But you think he might have been researching that?"

"He could have. Zephiel was always quite the scholar." She laughed a little, and it sounded sad. "Growing up, whenever there was a free moment, he was in the library, or the Archives. He loved learning and researching. He was never happier than when he was reading through some dusty tome, translating something. He had a good head for it."

"So, if Etruria's library is missing some old books, we know who to blame?" I smiled when she laughed again, this time brightly. "Are you feeling better?"

"I think I am steady enough to get back to work." Her smile was warm. "Thank you, Irene. Let's talk about it some more later."

"That sounds good." I waved her goodbye as she returned to the infirmary, letting my hand fall to my side as my mind whirled. It was trying to piece together something from what she just said. It knew I had all the pieces of the puzzle, and though I was a little too tired to know what, I knew it was figuring something out. So, I closed my eyes and listened to the wind to calm myself down. I heard Mom's gentle reassurance and Dad's quiet encouragement, and felt comforted by both.

But it wasn't long at all before the puzzle clicked into place, and I had an epiphany. Eyes wide, I
bolted through the crowd, hunting for Wuotan, the person who have me the initial pieces in the first place. I knew he was among those who came to the Tower, as part of the reserves who remained outside. So, he had to be somewhere around here. No one had gone back to Aquelia 'proper' yet.

It took me a moment to find him, though. He was a short distance away from the Tower, standing in front of what looked to be a ruined temple. He turned when he heard me, and while he looked curious, he did not look surprised. He had known I would figure it out. That was why he had even given me the hint.

So, I didn't bother politely greeting him or anything. "The Lady Hildegarde and Hartmut were lovers, weren't they?" I asked him bluntly, looking him in the eyes. His were sad, but also proud. "That's why House Hanover has a Bernese necklace. That's why Bern has two items that were originally hers. That's why Zephiel is focused on the house. We're the 'mirror'. We're the other branch, the hidden line."

"The line that Desmond tried to give the crown to, but Nicholas refused," he confirmed, giving me a bit of knowledge I had no idea about. Desmond had tried to make Grandfather the king of Bern? When did that happen? "Perhaps, on some level, Zephiel resents the house for that reason. If Nicholas had taken the throne, then maybe, just maybe, he could have had a happy life."

"Is that why he killed Mom?" Had I been wrong? Had he not respected her, liked her? Had he, in fact, hated her? "Is that why he's fixated on me?"

"I think it does play a part in why he is, yes." Wuotan closed his eyes, and I chose to not comment on how he hadn't really answered the first question. It was probably for the best. "But you are both the masters of the board. Roy is the leader, Mildain is the strategist, but you are the one who moves the pieces." I didn't much like comparing the soldiers to chess pieces, but I could see his point. Roy was the hero, and I helped him reach his goal. "Zephiel is a genius, one who had a goal that scorched him until he scarred. I do not doubt that he longs for a challenge, a rival. He thought he had it in your mother, but she could not be a 'full' rival. She was only a tactician, and in the game, he serves as both master of the board and the king piece." Mom could only be 'half' of his rival. "But he finds that challenge in you, and in Roy." I remembered him saying that. He called Roy my 'king'.

"Is that why he doesn't kill me?"

"Yes, though it is possible that there are other reasons." He opened his eyes again. "For all his faults, he does seem to care about his sister. Given how much pain the crown has given him..." I caught the hidden meaning. It was possible, possible, that Zephiel intended that Bern's throne go to my family. "Which, of course, can be another reason why he is fixated. If he did not wish to be 'king'... if he had wished to only be 'tactician'... then he would, of course, take more of an interest in his opponent than his 'rival king.' I thought of what Guinevere had said and thought he might have a point. She said he had been happiest as a scholar.

"Well, I suppose I'll have to give him a good 'game'." But a bit of anger bled through. "But, no matter what, I'm not taking the damn throne." I held my head high, feeling a little outraged at the mere thought. "I am Irene of the Kutolah, scion of Hanover. I am Sacaean, and I am Etrurian. I am not Bernese. Guinevere will take the throne, and she will lead Bern into a golden age."

"Well, let's not put too much pressure on her." Still, Wuotan looked proud. "Perhaps she and Lilina should talk. They're actually quite similar. Both 'princesses', both raised to rule, both the darlings of their fathers." Both were also incredibly kind. And, thanks to Wuotan's chess metaphors, I realized you could make a good case for both of them being 'queen pieces'. "Make a mention of it, though.
Guinevere should start preparing, especially since we are going to march on Bern before long."

"I will do everything I can to help her." It was another promise, but one made to myself. I would not let myself get lost in my own sorrow. I would make myself stronger from it. "Why tell me, though? Why give me the hint?"

"If you can understand your enemy, you can break them." His smile was far too kind for the words. "I want you to win, Irene."

"Well, just watch. I'll deliver a victory to surpass even the Scouring!" It might be a boast, but my words were firm. "I swear this to Father Sky." A thought, however, occurred to me. "I have another question, though, related."

"Yes?"

"Can Roy wield the Sword of Seals?"

"Yes." His tone was firm, with no hesitations whatsoever. "The Sword of Seals was crafted to be wielded by a child of two worlds, a child of dragons and humans."

"He's quarter."

"Three-quarters, half, and quarter are considered 'of two worlds' in the eyes of dragons." He smiled slightly. "Well, and all fractions in-between, of course." Was that so? "Once the Sword of Seals has bonded to an owner, it will not suffer another's touch until that owner dies." That made… wait, hold on…

"Then Hartmut was half-dragon." Had I known this? Was this said anywhere? It felt like new information.

"Yes, he was half-divine-dragon, son of Phoebe, once a priestess of the Divine Dragons. Kind and gentle, she was the first demon dragon, and was used until she was broken, before being discarded." He sighed, morose. "They then used what they learned from Phoebe to keep Idenn in line."

"That's the demon dragon of legend, then." I thought of her at Missur, but decided to leave my questions about her for another time. "What do you know about a… " What was the name? "Jan?"

"Jahn." He laughed a little, leaning against a fallen pillar. "Jahn was once a leader of a Fire Dragon tribe, and is the dragon who spearheaded the attack on Aquelia, sparking the Scouring."

"And that was in retaliation for something." What was that something? Did it matter to us now? "Why was he here, though?"

"Based on records, he was often intrigued by humans. My guess is that he is working with Zephiel, since Zephiel must be Idenn's current master." Why would a dragon leader have a 'master'? Yes, there was definitely something wrong with this picture. "Following that, he likely agreed to fight here to combat Roy's ice magic." He shrugged and winced. "I need to not do that."

"Are you injured?"

"Just some minor ones on my back, around my shoulder blades." He held up his hands when I narrowed my eyes. "I swear that they are minor. Already scabbed up. They're just in an uncomfortable spot."
"…If you say so." I sighed, looking at the temple at last. It was… "What was this place?"

"The Temple of the Sacred Flame, headquarters of the Dragon Knights of Aquelia." What were 'dragon knights'? "Their job was to step in when problems between dragons and humans became violent. The order was disbanded during the Scouring." That made sense. "The Lady Hildegarde grew up here, actually."

"I didn't know that." There was a lot about the Scouring that I didn't know. The legends weren't proving to be much help. "How far off are the legends from the truth?"

"Legends always have a grain of truth, but often, only that much." He smiled softly. "People disappear to make heroes look better. No one, in fact, talks of how the Eight Heroes weren't the ones in charge of the army." Was that so? "There was another, but he was lost to history."

"I see." I sighed, closing my eyes. "I feel like there's a lot I don't know, that there's a lot going on that I only know a handful about." It made me feel like I was flailing about in the dark.

"It makes sense. Your generation is an accumulation of many, many years of hope, which means many years of scheming." He patted me on the head, and smiled when I opened my eyes. "The Heroes put their faith in the future, to fix that which they could not." Elimine's ghost had said the same. "Your parents placed their hopes on you, doing whatever they could to prepare you for the battle they prayed would never come." That reminded me of Dad's letter. "They, themselves, were the hope of the previous generation."

"I feel like they just passed all the responsibilities to us without explaining anything." Though I tried to keep my voice even, a whine crept in anyway. "I don't like it."

"Of course not. You think you have an extra burden besides ending this war." He patted my head again. "But, really, you don't. End the war, and stop Idenn. Those are your only objectives. Any schemes people have, any burdens they throw on you, are tied simply to that." He shifted to look me right in the eye. "You have nothing else, really, to keep track of."

"…End the war, and become the hope everyone dreamed of." I sighed. "Well, damn, way to make things easy, ancestors." I scowled as he laughed. "Fine, fine. As I said, we'll end the war, and we'll do it our way."

If there was anything else, then… well, I wouldn't worry about it. From my perspective, all that was going on was the war, and keeping track of the soldiers. Sure, some extra knowledge might allow things to make more sense. Yes, extra knowledge might help me predict things.

But, ultimately, it didn't matter. There was just the war, and we would end it. Simple.

Notes on Hugh

- A **mercenary mage** Roy apparently hired during the last battle for 10,000 gold. I am still trying to figure out who thought letting Roy hire more people was a good idea.
- He seems almost like a 'middle ground' between Lugh and Lilina, more powerful than the former, and faster than the latter. He also seems to be far more durable than the rest of them. I'm tempted to have him become a mage fighter, like Wuotan, but with staves. I could always use more healers.
- I've talked to him only a little, but he seems naïve, but kind. Marcus notes that he bears a striking resemblance to Canas, the dark mage of the Campaign of Fire. Is that a coincidence or…?
Notes on Douglas

- **Great General of Etruria, King Mordred's best friend. The two have been friends since childhood. I wonder how he feels, outliving his best friend... I hope it's a feeling a never have to learn.**
- **Surprisingly kind and gentle, and a doting father. He's like an uncle to me, and babysat Mom when she was little.**
- **His age is catching up with him, so he has no room for growth. He's basically as strong as he ever will be. However, he excels in defense, perhaps even more so than the Ostian Knights, and has years of experience. Both are invaluable.**
- **His affinity is thunder.**

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: Legendary Light Tome get. This is Chapter 16x in game, which you only get if Douglas survives Chapter 16. There is nothing in canon about light magic harming the user's body; I just added that in to make it more of a counterpoint to dark magic. In game, there is no ghost of Elimine that shows up. That comes from how Durban and Roland showed up in FE7. The trap here also made an 'appearance' in Thief's Legacy. There is a minor reference to something in Thief's Testimony in this chapter as well.

Next Chapter – Interlude, Memorials
Interlude - Memorials

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude – Memorials

Thus, with a show of 'divine favor', the revolution in Etruria comes to an end. Things are far from peaceful, though. There is tending to the hostages, dealing with the uproar of Mildain's miraculous return, and reassuring the nobles that Lycia is here to help, not take over.

It's a massive headache, but we're stuck with it. Otherwise, Etruria would never become better.

King Mordred gave orders for four days of memorial services to be held. The first day was for those who died during the revolution. The second day was for those who died during the war. The third day was supposed to be for Mom and Dad, but Sue and I refused. It didn't feel right, having a whole day for them while others had to 'share' their day of memorial with others. So, instead, Elphin ordered the third day be specifically for the Bulgar Massacre. I couldn't remember who the fourth day was supposed to be for, but Elphin turned it to honoring 'the victims of the Western Isle Occupation'.

The first day was quiet. The second day had speeches, including ones specifically thanking Roy and Lilina for coming to Etruria's aid after suffering such horrible losses. The third day had singing, as well as Sacaean stories. I expected more grumbling, but surprisingly, there wasn't. I wondered if Yodel had already started shaming the mob, so to speak. Then again, considering how Elphin had always made it clear how much he liked and honored Sacaeans, they might have just decided it was smarter to be quiet.

The fourth day was loud, because Elphin revealed to the citizens just what, exactly, their soldiers had done to those of the Western Isles. He also revealed the 'true cause' of the supposed unprovoked attack that led to the Campaign, so I guessed he'd talked to Marcus at some point. Regardless, though, the revelations hit Etruria hard, and I truly wondered if we had broken the 'haughty', especially as the air of Aquelia became distinctly horror-tinged apologetic.

That was the mood of Mordred's funeral, held the 'fifth day', and that mood continued even into the 'sixth day', when our army went back to work.

"So, you're suggesting changing the 'name' of the army to Etruria?" Roy asked, voice carefully polite. He, Elphin, and I were in the 'King's Study', discussing the future of the army. "May I ask why?"

"Honestly, Roy, it's just politics," Elphin sighed. He didn't even bother hiding his aggravation. "I was looking at the laws, and there's differences in how much aid I can 'give allies' versus 'give my own army'. If the army is officially 'Etrurian', I get around the latter."

"I don't suppose you can..." Roy sighed, shaking his head. "No, never mind. Only a child believes that a king can do whatever they want."

"If the law wasn't so old, I could get away with ignoring it, but it actually predates our civil war, and was reinstated afterwards to protect Etruria's interests as we rebuilt." Elphin shook his head. "So, I'd face a lot more trouble if I did."
"I see." Roy fell silent, eyes narrowed as he thought. "What else would change with the name?"

"Nothing." Elphin smiled slightly. "Well, we'd have to do some formal ceremony of how 'I the King of Etruria entrust you, General of Lycia, with command of my army'." He made his tone mockingly dramatic, making both Roy and I laugh. "But aside from the politics, nothing would change. You would still be the leader, our War Council will be the same, and I will continue being your humble strategist, if you allow it."

"Oh, good, I was worried you'd have to leave. There's too much for Irene and me to do without your duties." Roy turned to me, eyes a little worried. "What do you think of how our army will react?"

"Some of the hotter heads might have to have things explained, but I imagine most of them are anticipating something like this," I replied, absently spinning my pen around my fingers. While they discussed, I'd been working on tactics. "I really don't see much changing."

"And will the Etrurian name be a problem as we move through Ilia and the Sacae?" Roy asked softly. His eyes were serious. "Forgive me, Elphin… Mildain…"

"Mildain for formal things right now, and this is not so formal," Elphin gently corrected. He smiled wryly. "I imagine it'll be easier for you to remember 'Elphin' for now."

"Well, yes." Roy smiled tentatively back. "Regardless, I mean no offense, but…"

"Ilia and the Sacae have both suffered greatly because of Etrurian hubris." Elphin nodded, and glanced at me. "So, that is a question. Will it?"

"Regardless of how Ilia views Etruria, Etruria is its best customer," I pointed out. "I doubt Ilia will care, especially since we have Zealot, the lord of Edessa, with us." I felt myself droop as I thought of the plains. "The Sacae… considering how hectic things are, and how many have died, I don't think anyone will care what army comes in, only that there is an army."

"So, we'll face opposition because we are foreign invaders," Roy murmured. He frowned heavily. "Then how did Roartz make it there?" Our latest intelligence had said Arcardo went north to Ilia and Roartz went east to the Sacae. "Bern?"

"The Djute might have help." I shrugged, leaning back in my chair. "Honestly, though, there's so little information from both places that it's hard to say anything. So, we might as well focus on our present, and then do our best to smooth any problems that might come."

"Very true. I'll do what I can." Roy smiled warmly. "Though, I'm not sure if it's much, but I will."

"I'm pretty sure you have half of Etruria basking in your adorableness."

"Th-they are not!"

"I'd have to concur, personally," Elphin teased. He laughed as Roy scowled at him. "What do you say staying here as a Lycian ambassador?"

"We can discuss that after Lycia has recovered!" Roy yelped. He looked a little frazzled now. "I mean… um…"

"Well, time to save the little brother who is subtly reminding us that he is fifteen," I laughed. Roy turned his scowl my way and I reached over to ruffle his hair. "Yes, yes, I know. Here, let me see if Uncle Legault or Uncle Jaffar have reports from Ostia. Some were due today."
"I can go."

"No, no, you stay here to be teased by Elphin. He's horribly out of practice."

"Irene!"

Laughing at Roy's yelp, I slipped out of the study and headed down the hall. I paused as I turned the corner, though, as I realized the hallway wasn't empty. Cecilia was there, looking out the window with a rather melancholic expression. I almost went to her, but then I noticed Perceval walking up and I decided just to hide instead. I was bound to get material for future teasing, after all.

"Cecilia," Perceval called, mostly so that he didn't startle her. I noticed that for the first time in a while, he wasn't wearing his armor, but dressed in casual wear, of dark blues and blacks. "You look troubled."

"Oh, Perceval," Cecilia murmured. Like him, she wasn't wearing armor. Instead, she was in a simple blue and green dress. I knew the dress; it had been a birthday gift from Mom just last year. "It's nothing, really."

"You are not one to look troubled over nothing." He moved to stand next to her, peering out the window. "And there is nothing on the horizon that I can see. So?"

"You are as stubborn as always." She smiled wryly. "I was just wondering what might become of Etruria, after everything."

"That is very much like you. Always dutiful and loyal."

"Are you certain you do not speak of yourself."

"Hush, tease later. I have a point." He turned to face her, eyes sincere and smile kind. "And that is this: there is only one answer to your question."

"Oh?"

"Etruria will regain... no, surpass its former glory. It will become more prosperous than ever before, and kinder to its people and those around it."

"Do you think so?"

"Of course. We will make it happen, with our own hands." He hesitantly took hers, squeezing them gently. "You mustn't lose hope, Cecilia. If the Etrurian Generals give up, then who will rebuild the country? Our prince... king... has his hands full already. We must do what we can."

"Yes, you're right, as usual." She laughed softly, shaking her head. "I suppose the magnitude of what we must accomplish overwhelmed me for a moment."

Footsteps caught my ear, and I turned to see Elphin walk up. He looked confused, so I pointed to Cecilia and Perceval before miming for him to keep quiet. He did so with a grin, hiding behind me to watch the two continue to talk.

"How is your brother doing?" Perceval asked. He made no move to let go of Cecilia's hands, and she didn't seem to mind one bit. "I understand he wasn't poisoned?"

"Not after the initial dose, no," Cecilia replied with a little bitter laugh. "He thought about being
more rebellious, but then decided it wasn't a good idea when he saw how much they gave Master Pent and Lord Mark to quell their 'outbursts.' I thought it smart, but I was sure some would think him cowardly for sitting and waiting. "Father taught him well, before passing."

"Of course he did. I can hear Nichol's lectures even now." His smile became nostalgic. "Those were fun days."

"Yes, they were." Cecilia laughed. "We were always making trouble for everyone, weren't we?"

"Of course. I never did like being far from your side, and you liked pranks."

"Well, you never stopped me, Perceval."

Elphin and I glanced at each other as the two trailed off into silence, smiling shyly at each other. Neither of us really wanted to interrupt, but we were both having a hard time biting back our sarcasm.

"You know..." he finally began, voice soft. He waited to see if the two heard him before continuing. "As king, I do have the power to arrange marriages."

"They will kill you," I hissed, glancing to make sure they hadn't heard it. But no, thankfully, both were off in their own world. "They would seriously kill you."

"That they would, but then later, I'd get to say 'I told you so'." He laughed a little. "Maybe I should do the same with you and Klein?"

"I will definitely kill you." I bit my lip, though, as I thought of him. "Besides, we might..."

"Oh, are you two reaching an understanding?" He patted my back reassuringly, smiling softly. "Then I shall hold off on teasing until then."

"I don't know whether to scowl or thank you." Footsteps caught my attention, and I turned to see Roy looking at us curiously. "Oh, hey there."

"What are you two doing?" he asked slowly, looking more confused by the second. "Oh, is the...?" Roy opened his mouth to greet Cecilia and Perceval, but Elphin and I quickly snatched him by the arms, and used our free hands to cover his mouth to keep him quiet. "Mmph!

"Is someone there?" Perceval called. Elphin and I shifted so that the three of us were scrunched up in the corner, where Perceval and Cecilia couldn't see us easily, even if they walked over. "Strange, I thought I heard..."

"I think Mildain, Irene, and Roy were holding a meeting in the King's Study," Cecilia murmured. She hummed a little in thought. "Maybe they were taking a walk to stretch their legs. They've been in there since... breakfast, actually. It's long past lunch now. I wonder if they've eaten."

"Knowing two of the group, they likely aren't hungry, and any food heavier than broth is liable to make them throw up." Perceval really knew Elphin and me sometimes. "General Roy might need food, though. He's still young, and growing."

"You're soft on him."

"I'm not soft on anyone."

While Cecilia might have replied, Elphin and I chose to ignore her and nudge Roy down the
After checking in with Uncle Legault, and finding no new news, I decided to go check on Uncle Pent and Aunt Louise in their rooms. Uncle Pent was asleep when I walked in, but Aunt Louise was awake and smiling. I assumed that was good news.

"Oh, Irene," Aunt Louise greeted, turning her smile to me. There was more grey in her hair than I remembered, more lines on her face. But her smile was the same. "You're always so attentive in coming to visit."

"Well, I try," I murmured, cautiously walking over. It was hard to look at Uncle Pent. I'd never associated him with the word 'fragile', but I couldn't think of another word. He was so thin, and so... it reminded me of Aunt Lyn, after she'd been poisoned. "How is he?"

"He's still in pain." Aunt Louise took his hand and squeezed. "But Lord Pent is stubborn. He'll make a full recovery. He just needs a bit more rest."

"I am glad to hear that." If there was one thing this war was doing, it was reminding me that my 'heroes' were humans, not... something more. "How are you?"

"Tired." That wasn't surprising. I doubted she had left Uncle Pent's side even once during all of this. "But relieved. My children are safe. My home will be safe. The losses are far less than I feared."

"Yeah..." I had no idea how to reply. It was good, but I couldn't help but feel a little... jealous. I thought that might be the word, at least, for the emotion gnawing at my stomach. I wanted my
parents. I wanted my Clan. I was jealous that… but then I felt guilty because it wasn't like I wished misfortune onto those who were thankfully spared more pain. "They come by here?"

"Of course, though Erk and Priscilla left earlier to take charge of the schools. There are a lot of wandering students who are frightened." She laughed a little. "Klein is doing what he can to fix things in Reglay from here. He's determined to see out the war with the army, though, so I'll take over when he leaves, until Lord Pent is recovered."

"So, you know that Clarine is coming with us." I was a bit hesitant on it, but Clarine had insisted, and I really did need a mounted healer for the field. Her swordsmanship also seemed to be going remarkably well, so I couldn't even make a token protest based on that.

"We had a 'discussion' about it." 'Discussion' was Reglay code for 'argument', but without yelling. "She also told me about Rutger." Her eyes danced mischievously, though I saw the worry in them. "Please, look out for her?"

"Always, Aunt Louise." I wasn't sure what else to say, though. "As best as I can." I probably needed to leave, but I didn't just want to be abrupt and…

"Mother, can you help me with… oh, Irene!" It was Klein to the rescue, apparently, since he opened the door without even knocking. "Actually, you'd be better for this," he continued, coming over to tug me out. "Mother, I'm stealing her."

"Do I get no say in this kidnapping?" I complained, letting him drag me out. Thankfully, Aunt Louise just laughed and waved goodbye as I shut the door behind us. "What is it?"

"I need a second pair of eyes on this." He leaned into me as he held out a piece of paper. A quick skim showed it was finances. "The Revolutionaries raised taxes, and hid them in all sorts of coffers by forging documents. This is how much is in Reglay's treasury."

"No offense, Klein, but it seems a bit much." It seemed more than what was in the royal treasury. "But I'm guessing that's why you need the second pair of eyes."

"Yes, because all the math checks out, but I know there's something wrong."

"Let's see…" I frowned over the paper, studying it closely. He was right, though. There was no 'convenient' mathematical error that I could find. So, how could it have been…? Ah, wait, maybe it was… "Klein, is it just me, or does it seem like some of the values are too large?"

"Too large?" He shifted as he checked over the paper, and some part of my brain decided to take notice that he'd recently been in the bath, and there were some water droplets dripping down his neck. "Ah, you're right. That's far too much for…" He sighed heavily, rocking back on his heels. "Damn, that should have been the second thing I checked."

"Considering how you've been locked up in the Reglay Study here since before breakfast, I imagine you're not thinking clearly." Carefully, I reached up and touched his cheek, frowning at how pale he looked. "When was the last time you slept, Klein?"

"Last night." He leaned a little into my palm. "Though, I'm not sure how 'good' of a sleep it was."

"Take a break. You won't be solving anything if all the numbers blend together in a blurred mess."

"I just have to fix things quickly."

"If you go too quickly, you'll make mistakes that take even longer to fix." I gave him my best
'scolding' look. "Go take a break."

"I…" He sighed again, grasping my hand as he pulled away. "Oh, very well. I'll show Mother these, and then I'll go bother Deke like I did as a child."

"How is he doing?"

"He still refuses to come see Mother, but he says it's just because he wants to surprise both of them at the same time." Klein looked a little cross, but there was nothing to be done about that. "He also mentioned some promise to you?" Oh, right, I'd forgotten about that. I'd get it later. "Regardless…" He hesitated a moment before lifting my hand and kissing it gently. "Until later, Irene." His eyes were earnest, and that made my face heat up. This wasn't the first time he had kissed my hand, but most of the time, it was playful, to make me laugh. This time though…

"Until later, Klein." The words felt more of a promise, but one neither of us were really certain about. Still, I couldn't help but smile, and he smiled back, just as hesitantly. He quickly ducked his head and headed into his parents' room, though, likely to make sure we didn't just stand there staring at each other like idiots.

There were better things to do with our time.

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After checking on supplies and weapons, and being promptly chased away by Merlinus who insisted I worked too much, I decided to check in on Uncle Mark. To my surprise, and relief, he was awake and coherent. That was an improvement from yesterday.

"And there is my precious niece," he instantly greeted, voice warm. I knew he was forcing himself, though. After all, if he were well, he'd have his eye patch on, and it was on the nightstand next to him, revealing the scarred mess normally hidden underneath. I'd been told, as a child, that he'd been kicked by a horse when he was younger, about eleven, but I never really heard much about the incident. He and Mom seemed rather determined to forget whatever it was. "I was beginning to think you were a figment of my imagination."

"I've been working!" I protested, sitting in the chair next to his bed. I leaned forward slightly to study him. He definitely looked exhausted, and he seemed sadder than I remembered, but given everything… "Are you okay?"

"I'm recovering nicely."

"I meant about Mom and Dad." I paused as I thought of something awkward. "You… do know about Dad, right?"

"When your missive reached Ostia, Lyn and Eliwood made sure it made it to me. It's probably the last message I got before all of this started." He reached over and stroked my hair. "But I feel like that's a question better put to you."

"I'm coping." I thought, ultimately, I was. "But you're not answering my question."

"I'm not sure how to answer. I adored Rath, even if I resented him a little, and I watched my little sister be executed." He sighed. "I'm sure I'll break down later. Right now, it hurts so much that I'm numb."

"You resented Dad?" Yes, let's focus on that. That was safer. "I didn't know that."

"Of course. I kept it very hidden. I'm sure he knew it, but I'm sure he also knew why." He grew
quiet, contemplative. "I… disliked that he took Katri from us. Yes, she made her choice, of course, but emotions are never quite logical. It didn't help that the two eloped or that I knew next to nothing about him. And it took me literally years to figure out why Katri fell in love with him."

"But… you did like him."

"Oh, yes, I loved him dearly. If there's anyone who was worthy of my precious little sister, it was him." He smiled slightly. "I didn't mean to let the resentment comment slip." That was a testament of how much the poison had messed him up. "But, Irene, I promise. I did love him, even if I still had my issues."

"Did you have them with Mom?" There was no answer. "Uncle Mark?"

"Well, I don't think I ever quite forgave her for eloping." His voice was very quiet, and his eyes turned distant. "Oh, rather, for not telling me. She had been gone for a year, stayed for only a few days, and then was gone for almost a year. When she got back, I find out that she'd been on some secret campaign, and that she nearly died from consumption. Which had killed Mother not months before." That sounded… hectic. "I had thought she was just going to visit her friends, that she would go to her Hector's coronation, and then she'd be right back. But she didn't come back."

"Mom was… rather selfish, wasn't she?"

"Well, it led to her happiness, and I can't blame her for seeking that. But I do for her not telling me. I know that's how the rest of us felt." He gave me a look. "You know; this is by no means how I expected this conversation to go."

"I'm practicing being unpredictable," I deadpanned. It made him laugh. "Is it working?"

"Considering all that I've heard, I think it is." He hesitated a moment before nodding. "Irene, do be careful, though. Zephiel is smart. It would not surprise me if he started taking up some of the tactics you are, to lessen the advantage you have."

"You think Bern would bend to the tactics a Sacaean came up with?"

"No, but Zephiel would." That was true. I couldn't deny that. "So, be careful."

"I'll try. I needed to change the subject, and it thankfully didn't take me long to think of one. "Oh, right, I… have this." I took off the family necklace, adorned with the wolf carvings Sue made. It felt like so long ago that I'd first put it on. "Here." I held it out to him. "I know it's supposed to be a good luck charm, but I feel if I have all the luck, then I'm not going to have much family left when the war ends."

"The carvings are Kutolah." Still, Uncle Mark took the necklace from me. "Won't you want it, just for those?"

"I have good luck charms from Dad and Mom, and both of them are dead." I thought of the carved-wolf-necklace I got from Grandpa, but couldn't bear to part from it. It really might be the last thing I got from him… "Sue is with me."

"You fear keeping it might condemn her." Well, considering everything, I thought I was justified in my fear. "Very well. I accept the return of the heirloom, and shall wear it. Christopher has the bracelet."

"I heard my name!" Christopher poked his head in, smiling warmly. Seeing how lively he was, I almost forgot that he was actually covered in bandages. As soon as we attacked Aquelia, he had
decided it was a great time to attack the guards. The worst part was that he had somehow won. "You're not telling her about the white river thing, are you?" he asked, comically dismayed. "Please tell me you're not."

"Christopher, I was there for that," I retorted, rolling my eyes as I twisted to face him. I laughed, though, when he gasped dramatically. "You okay?"

"I am making a full recovery and, even better, so is Margaret."

"Thank you, Father Sky…" I couldn't help but be relieved. Margaret had been dosed with so much dreamflower that there was a very real threat of permanent damage, if she ever even woke up. "Anything on Marcius?"

"He's safely resting in the Caliburn estate, with Perceval's full permission, and he'll remain there until the roads calm down." Christopher sighed, leaning against the doorway. "I don't know if I'm glad he didn't make it to Ilia or not."

"He was trying to meet up with Uncle Nicky, right?"

"Yes, since he couldn't get in touch with any of us." He turned his attention to Uncle Mark. "Mother and Aunt Anastasia are fine, though Uncle Jacob might lose the leg." Uncle Jacob had been hooked up to some torture devices, from what I heard. I didn't know more; I didn't want to. "Mother said that she can handle the estate for a while, though, since we're likely busy here in Aquelia. She does have a lot of practice."

"Managing her late husband's lands for your cousin, since I snatched you up as my heir to get out of marrying," Uncle Mark murmured. He looked surprisingly thoughtful. "But this all does remind me." Uncle Mark tapped my leg to catch my attention. "Irene, might I ask a favor?"

"You may ask, but I wait to answer until I hear it," I replied slowly. I barely checked the urge to grimace. "As much as I would like to give you an open agreement, I have duties."

"Of course." He looked very serious. What was he going to ask? "Do you mind being Hanover's official representative in the army?"

"That's a good idea," Christopher agreed when I didn't say anything. He moved from the doorway to stand behind me. "After all, you can't go. You're not in full health. And I can't go, because I have to work in your name. Considering everyone's health, the only able-bodied members of the House are Mother, Irene, Sue, and me." Aunt Maria was busy already, so that left Sue and me. "Though, even if you could do work, Uncle Mark, I'd prefer Irene to go. I've really no head for war, for all my strength at arms."

"That's why you never signed on to be a knight," I mumbled, remembering that conversation, long ago. Grandfather had been so happy about Christopher's refusal, but it had confused the rest of us. "Oh, all right." I sighed, unable to help it. "But I am the tactician. I can't command them directly."

"Of course," Uncle Mark reassured, with a small smile. "Honestly, this is mostly for politics. It wouldn't do for Hanover, of all the houses, to not have a representative. We are the oldest of the Great Houses, alongside Reglay."

"Of course." War seemed equal arts fighting and politics. I was tired of both. "Anything special I have to do?"

"Do? No." Uncle Mark reached over to the nightstand and pulled something out of the drawer. "This is another family heirloom, but this is given to whoever is the representative during war." He
passed me a pendant, and waited as I studied it. I had never seen it before, but then again, we'd
never been officially at war before. "They say the Lady Hildegarde was given it by one of the
leaders of the army, who governed the it before being killed by a traitor. It was a sign of his trust in
her. She carried it with her as she took the title of tactician."

"I wonder what it meant back then." I could ask Fiona about it, or Wuotan. Fiona lived through it,
and Wuotan just seemed to know everything. "So, I keep it on me as a visual indicator that I am the
house's representative?"

"Yes." Uncle Mark smiled wryly. "Sue won't be mad, will she?"

"No? I don't think so, at least." Still, I smiled back. I was glad he had considered her feelings.
"Though, I am curious as to why me and not her?"

"Age plays a part of it. By my eyes, you're both too young, but you're at least older." He shrugged.
"The other is that you already hold a position of leadership, and she seems to still be looking for
her path. I didn't want to put more pressure on her."

"As always, Uncle Mark, you are wonderful." I tucked the pendant in my pocket and leaned over to
hug him. "I'm glad you're all right."

"And I am glad you are too. Please, do what you can to stay that way. I've outlived too many
family." He pulled away, and shifted to lie down again. "Ugh, I'm getting old. I have to rest."

"I'll handle the rest, Uncle Mark," Christopher reassured. He rested a hand on my shoulder and
smiled when I looked up. "Just some political things. It won't take long, and then you and I can
catch up a bit, Irene. It's been too long."

"I suppose it has," I replied. I smiled back. "Let's grab Sue."

"Of course. I wouldn't dream of teasing you without her help." Oh, Father Sky, what did I just set
myself up for? "Let's go."

Christopher was true to his word, and he and Sue teased me relentlessly over cookies. Afterwards,
though, I sensed Sue wanted to talk to someone other than me about her problems, and suggested
she and Christopher go for a ride. Sue had jumped on the idea, so Christopher went along with it. I
had planned on going to work, but Lalum caught me before I could, and whisked me off to have
tea on the balcony, the one that overlooked the Royal Gardens.

"Father bought these for me, but there's really far too much!" Lalum laughed, clearly delighted. "I
want to dance out of here, not roll!"

"This is why you've enlisted not only me, but also Roy and Lilina to help you eat them," I
deadpanned. Roy and Lilina looked so adorably confused as they sat at the table with us. "Well, go
on and eat."

"I'm still startled you're a noble, Lalum," Roy mumbled awkwardly. He then winced. "That came
out wrong."

"It's fine. Not many people expect a dancer to be of nobility," Lalum laughed off. She was
determined to keep in a good mood today; I wondered if it was because she knew how tired we
were. "That's why I switched back to that when I left to take care of Mildain."

"Does anyone else have secret legacies?" Lilina asked. She quietly sipped her tea, and hummed in
delight. "Oh, this is really good. What is it?"

"Echinacea, an herb that grows mostly on the Plains. It's supposed to help support the immune system, and it'll be winter soon. That's when there's lots of illnesses." That was also why we had to leave soon. If we were going to liberate Ilia from Bern, we had to do it before winter came to the north. "There's also a bit of elecampane?"

"I don't know that one."

"It's one of the herbs used by Sacaeans to help treat consumption," I explained, smiling softly. I'd taught that to Lalum, actually, when we were younger. "It helps with coughs, and is supposed to help strengthen the lungs."

"Sounds like a tea we all should be drinking regularly," Roy noted. He smiled as he sipped it. "It's good. Is there honey in it?"

"Just a bit," Lalum answered. She pouted suddenly and poked the plates of sweets over to us. "Eat too. Seriously, I don't want to eat all of this!"

"Well, if you're certain..." Roy picked up one of the little tarts and bit into it. "This is good!" He then promptly devoured it, and took another. "These are really good."

"They are!" Lilina agreed, around a cookie. She had crumbs sticking to her face. "Ah, how long has it been since we had sweets?"

"A while."

"Of course, the way you two are eating, you'd think you haven't eaten since spring," I teased, just drinking my tea. I just... wasn't hungry. I was pretty sure it was just stress, and grief, making me lose my appetite, but it might be good to check that I wasn't sick if this kept up. "You two are so adorable."

"They are~" Lalum agreed. She laughed as both of them pouted at us. "Oh, don't be so mad. I'm just happy you two are acting your ages. This war is far too sad already."

"That is true." With a very solid victory behind us, it seemed like everyone was taking the time to relax. Just earlier, I'd caught Lugh, Ray, and Chad pulling pranks. I could only hope that Uncle Jaffar would talk to Lugh and Ray soon. "So, please, keep eating. Uncle Douglas will be thrilled to hear that they were devoured." Fast footsteps caught my attention, and I was on my feet, instantly alert. What was going on? Was there an emergen-?"

"Roy!" What was Fir running up? Why was her face really red? "I... I need to ask you something!" she blurted, face turning redder by the second. "It's really important, and I know it's awkward, but I have to get this off my chest!" Wait, what was going on? "Roy, I... I..." She wasn't confessing to him, was she? "I need help talking to Noah!" That... that made a little more sense, actually.

"Wait, what?" Roy yelped, jumping back a bit. Of course, since he was sitting, he mostly just managed to almost tip over his chair and awkwardly fall briefly into Lilina's lap before straightening. "Why me? We've barely talked!"

"Well, you have a bunch of girls in love with you, so I thought you might be good?"

"Since when?!" Roy looked to Lalum, Lilina, and me. "Help!"

"Oh, I don't know," Lilina replied. Her eyes were wide with innocence, but her tone was a little
sulky. "If you have so many girls liking you, then maybe you are-"

"I don't know what she's talking about!" Roy snapped, face as red as his hair. "Besides, it's not like I like any of them! I like you!" An awkward silence fell as Roy's face went even redder. "I… uh…"

"Thank you, Fir, for startling that out of him," I deadpanned. I had no other reaction. Lilina was gaping. "Lalum, how about you help those two and I help Fir?"

"Sounds good to me!" Lalum giggled. She helped the two of them stand up and nudged them inside the castle. "Come along, children. Big Sis Lalum will help you two communicate."

I waited until they were gone before standing and hugging Fir. She leaned into me instantly, shaking slightly. She was really scared, or confused. Maybe she was both. I could understand that.

She pulled away as the shaking stilled, taking deep breaths. "I'm sorry," she mumbled, looking down. "I just…"

"It's okay," I reassured, stroking her hair. I just had to focus on calming her down. "So, this is something you don't want to talk to your father about."

"No way." Her reply was so immediate that I had to laugh at it. "He'll freak out. More than me." She whimpered, leaning into my shoulder. "What am I supposed to do? I swore to live by the sword, but my mind is always wandering back to him."

"Fir, is it the path of the sword to run away?" I hugged her again, rubbing her back. "I don't think you should run, at least."

"But…"

"It's okay to be scared, but the person you need to talk to most about this is Noah."

"He probably hates me, or thinks I'm weird." Her voice wavered, like she was about to cry. "I've been running from him."

"Then face him head on. That's what you want to do, right? Otherwise, you wouldn't have burst here, asking for help."

"R-right…" She took a deep breath and pulled away. "Um… if it goes… weird… can I…?"

"You can hide behind me." I smiled at her, and nudged her towards the balcony doors. "But go on. Be brave. You fought dragons."

"Right! This should be nothing!" She and I both knew it wasn't, but her smile told me she was going to try anyway. "I'll tell you later!" She ran off, likely to go confront Noah before she lost her nerve completely.

Just as she left, though, there was another visitor to the balcony: Fiona. "I had heard you were having a little tea party with Roy, Lilina, and Lalum," she murmured, looking confused as she walked up. "Though, I don't see them?"

"Roy accidentally confessed, so Lalum is helping to mediate," I explained, sitting back down to drink my tea. "I was dealing with something else."

"I'm surprised you let her take over your 'big sister duties'."

"Fir needed me more, and I'd likely just tease the living hell out of both of them."
"I see." She laughed a little, leaning against the balcony railing. "I remember when this garden was first planted. Elimine was insistent. Flowers for the new age, or something. I forgot her official reason. Her unofficial one was that she wanted to see something blossom from the scorched earth again, and flowers are good for healing a battered spirit."

"I saw her ghost in the Tower." I turned to Fiona, curious. "She mentioned desperation…"

"The last year of that war was nothing but exhaustion and wanting to end things before we lost too much." She laughed bitterly. "Of course, we lost a lot anyway. Maybe we wouldn't have, if we had been slower, but others would have died in their places."

"I can't imagine eight years of war." Less than one was enough to make me want to sleep for decades. "Oh, I learned about the Lady Hildegarde and Hartmut."

"Now, how did you…?" She groaned, head dropping. "Never mind. I answered my own question." Was that so? "What are you going to do about it?"

"Use the understanding to defeat Zephiel, and keep it quiet. It's not like I want the throne." I wanted Guinevere to rule Bern. She'd be good at it. I knew she would. "Why didn't they marry?"

"Forgive me, but I don't..." Fiona sighed, drooping even further, somehow. "It remains a sad memory. They were together again, and they lived long lives, but it remains sad."

"I'm sorry for bringing it up." I needed to change the subject. "Oh, the pendant."

"Pendant?" Fiona turned to face me, looking rather curious. "What pendant?"

"Ah, this one." I pulled it from my pocket and handed it to her. "Do you know it?"

"Oh, this pendant…" Fiona's eyes were nostalgic and sad as she held it up to the light. "Marius's pendant…"　

"Marius?"

"He was the first leader of the human armies during the Scouring. And, honestly, he was it for most of the war. He was killed by… a madman during the final year." She passed the pendant back to me. "To this day, I don't know if he knew who had killed him. But maybe he suspected something. Maybe that's why he made sure to pass on his pendant to Hilda."

"What was it?" After hesitating a moment, I decided to slip the necklace on, noticing the pendant hung a little lower than the wolf-carved-pendant Grandpa gave me. "What did it mean?"

"At one point, it was the mark of a Dragon Knight Commander, but Marius gave it to Hilda as a prayer. Her eyes were distant. "It symbolized his hope in her, in the rest of us. His hope, his gamble, that we could end the war. It was a physical reminder of how much he believed in her, and in us." She smiled warmly, eyes slowly focusing back on the present. "I'm glad it's still here. I'm glad it holds such importance for the house."

"It's sad that you only hear about the heroes." Though, I wasn't sure who it was sadder for: the ones forgotten, or the heroes who had to deal with everyone placing their hopes on them. "How many others were there?"

"There were many. But on that final day, that final battle…” Fiona's voice softened. "There were eleven of us. The eight heroes, me, Hilda, and Sacaes. Who was 'Sacaes'? "You might know the last one by 'Amir'." Oh, that was Hanon's brother. I should look into why he'd shared his name with the
plains. "We fought, and won, but at high costs." Her eyes focused on me. "I hope you won't have to."

"War is all about sacrifices." But, that didn't mean I couldn't try to minimize them. "Oh, there's Fir and Noah." I stood up and leaned against the railing so that I could watch them below. I couldn't hear them; the wind blew their voices away. But I could see Fir fidgeting, ready to bolt, and I could see Noah's eyes widening before he caught Fir's arm and whispered something that made her beam.

"War is also all about unlikely connections." Fiona looked so amused when I glanced at her. "It's a strange thing. Because of the Scouring, I lost so much, but I also gained a great many friends."

"I suppose war is just like everything else in the world: both good and bad." The difference was whether you could make it mean something. The difference was whether or not you could build a better future from it. We would, though. I was certain of it. "Do you want some tea? I imagine Lalum, Lilina, and Roy will be a bit."

"I would love some." Her eyes danced with amusement. "Perhaps you can tell me a bit about Klein? I've heard a few things."

"Father Sky above!"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Perceval and Cecilia's conversation is based on their A support; Noah and Fir's is... mostly based off their A support. Have some of Irene's blood relatives. Have some confessions. Mildain/Elphin wanting to make Klein his little brother as a child comes from the Elphin-Klein A support.

Next Chapter – Ocean's Parting (Beginning the Ilia route)
Chapter 19) Ocean's Parting

It took a few days, but eventually, Etruria recovered enough for us to leave. Prince Mildain refused a formal coronation until the war's end, and so, the only ceremony we had to endure is him entrusting the Etrurian army to Roy.

Now, we make our way to Ilia, intending on liberating it from Bern's control so that we only had allies at our back. For it was time that we went on the offensive, for everyone's sake.

The people of Aquelia lined the streets to watch us march off, waving and cheering for us. Their well wishes ease our tired spirits, but I can only worry as we press forth. There's little information about the situation in Ilia, but we know that Murdock's forces hold it. Even if he, himself, isn't there, there will be no easy battles. If, by some miracle, I am wrong about those elite forces, though... no, it still will not be easy.

Winter is coming, and we're going to the land of eternal blizzards. We were going to lose so many to the cold. I just know it.

Even long after we left Aquelia, the populace lined the roads, watching us pass. As we got further from the cities, though, the looks on their faces changed. Those in the cities had been cheerful in their hope, likely because we had just liberated the place. But out here, the people felt the war more keenly. They knew, a little better than the city-folk, how deadly this was going to be. I could tell by how their hope was hidden behind fear, desperation. I wondered how, but then realized what it was when I saw just 'who' was watching. They were the very old, and the very young. They were the injured and mothers with children.

Between the revolutionaries and our own army, all of those who could fight or help with the war had been conscripted. Bern's army was too large, and there had been too many losses between Lycia, the Western Isles, and the revolution. Those in the city didn't feel that loss keenly, or, at least, it was not 'collective'. It was a few patches of neighbors who mourned and fretted together. It was easy for an outsider to miss.

But in a village where everyone knew everyone... that fear was everyone's. So, when we marched past, they were desperately trying to find their loved ones among the uniforms, and they knew, knew, that they would be all be in heavy mourning before a week was over.

It was rather sobering, and it added to my worries. There were more people than ever in the army; one could make an argument that our army was the strength of half the continent. That meant an increased chance of illnesses spreading rapidly, more food to make, larger camps, more inventory to keep track of... and that wasn't even going into the number of spies in the army. Astore, Uncle Legault, and Uncle Jaffar had identified thirty new spies, with even more 'potential' spies, and they all had to be kept tracked of. They were all fed misinformation, rumors, some truthful but undamaging things... it was a mess. It was an absolute mess.

It was almost a relief, really, when we arrived at Remy. It was the boundary province between
Etruria and Ilia, and at least while we were fighting, I wouldn't have to worry about things. But the thought that I was relieved to be near a battlefield, just so that I could stop thinking in circles, was enough to make me feel ill. Though 'feeling' ill was apparently the closest I was to being sick. According to multiple healers, aside from some exhaustion, I was 'the picture of health'. This was despite my appetite being next to nonexistent, and despite my sleeping schedule being more of 'nap for thirty minutes because I fell asleep on the paperwork again'.

I thought of how, in her logbook, Mom had written down how many times she had broken down, often very dramatically. I wondered why I hadn't yet. Maybe that was Dad's influence. Maybe I inherited my strength of will from him, and that was keeping me steady. Maybe they were lending me their strength.

I wished I could ask them. But even if I did, I doubted I'd hear an answer on the wind. It was probably just as well. There were other things to wonder about.

We brought the army to a stop as we came near a village. We wanted to make sure they were evacuated; the soldiers milling about in the distance already screamed that there would be a battle here today.

Everyone began snapping orders, falling into patterns. Infirmary was set up. Messengers were sent to the village. Scouts went out, of the mounted (led by Sue and Sin), flier (organized by Tate), and unmounted (led by Astore, with Chad and Cath as his support) varieties. I dismounted and made my way to Elphin and Roy. They were standing in silence not far from me, looking over the area. I deliberately kicked a stone to catch their attention, and both turned to face me.

Still, Elphin waited until I had taken 'my place' on Roy's other side before murmuring, "Perceval mentioned that the sea-level drops around a certain time of day, exposing a sand bar that can be crossed."

"I wonder where at," Roy mumbled, eyes narrowing. He pointed to a spot not far from us. "Maybe there? It's the most 'sloped part of the coast here."

"Yes, I think so, but I'll ask Perceval to confirm, if we're going with that."

"Yes, we'll plan our attack to begin shortly before the sandbar shows, and then we'll use it to sneak around." Roy glanced at me. "Can we do that?"

"I'll give you a better answer about how plausible that is when the scouts return," I answered him firmly. He nodded, expecting the answer. "But even if not, there are other ways to circumvent the enemy's frontlines." I smiled slightly. "Did I tell you that Zeiss took up magic and is now slingling spells from a wyvern?"

"No, you didn't," Roy laughed. It sounded a little forced, but I didn't blame him. "I did know that you had Miredy take up axes?"

"I suggested it; she decided to take them up herself after a few practice swings." I shrugged. "Some of our other Bernese soldiers have taken up similar things. Some stuck with Bern's normal practices, but that's fine. Between them and the pegasus knights, we have every weapon type among all the fliers, including healing staves." Then we had the 'odd' combinations on the ground. They were things that made sense, but didn't occur to people because they weren't 'the norm'. "There's a few formations I won't mind trying."

"From those books you got in Arcadia, right?" Yes, the books Alberich gave me were amazing. "We'll have to go to the War Council soon."
"I think we can afford to stay out here a little longer," Elphin reassured. He smiled faintly and patted Roy on the back. "This... will be a very memorable battle." Yes, it would. After all, this battle was different.

This was our first battle as the Etrurian Army. This was our first battle as a whole, cohesive unit, and this is the battle both sides would remember the most. More importantly, though, this was an army that meant to invade Bern. This was a force that could only be matched by Bern's army. This... was an army built to end a war. There were more people than ever before, and there were going to be more injured, more dead than ever before. More sounds, more blood, more... everything. This was half the continent, armed and ready to destroy the other half, if need be.

I was going to be sick.

The bay was a rather pretty blue. At least, what we were calling a 'bay' was a pretty blue. It was the bit of water 'trapped' when the tide changed and exposed the sandbar, and really, it was a very, very pretty blue. Not that the tide had exposed it yet, of course. That would be a little while longer. But it was pretty.

I clutched at my reigns, mostly to hide their shaking. On the surface, the battle plan was simple: decoy force and strike force. The decoy force had flanks and frontlines. Well, obviously they did, but I had to think in short little sections. The flanks were headed by Deke and Ekhidna on one side, Igrene and Hugh on the other. Cavalry was split into four groups: Perceval and Cecilia led one, Zealot and Noah led the second, Lance and Allen led the third, and Sue and Sin led the fourth. Rutger and Fir led the strike force, with Clarine as the sole healer of the group. Guinevere and Lilina led the mages, and they were carefully interspersed throughout the lines, hidden near the fliers, who waited to lift off.

Movement made me focus forward, and I realized the enemy had settled into their own lines. Ideally, we would have already struck, but it was hard to pull an ambush like that with so large of an army, especially in an area so enclosed. They had known we were here, and charging recklessly would have caused more harm than good.

So, instead, we had prepared, and Father Sky, I hoped we had prepared enough.

My eyes flitted to our own frontlines. Spear users were in the front, kneeling and bracing their weapons against the ground. Those wielding pikes were behind them, also bracing their weapons. Behind them were the archers, who would move at Klein's command. Knights, with their lances and heavy armor, stood close by, ready to defend. Uncle Douglas and Bors commanded them.

We stood in silence for a long while, just staring at each other, waiting for someone to break the tension mounting. The stalemate stretched on and on. Each second felt like eternity. My muscles ached from how tense I was. It hurt to breathe.

But then, suddenly, the enemy army charged, bellowing war cries, but the front lines did not flinch. All I could think was how, just a few months ago, weeks ago... hell, even just a few days ago, a large portion of that frontline had been farmers, craftsmen, those who never thought to wield a weapon. But now, even with an army bearing down on them, they held firm. They didn't flinch.

I wondered why. Was it because Bern and the revolution had slaughtered so many? Was it for Prince Mildain? Was it for Roy? I had no idea. I wished I could ask.

But there was no time for anything, because Klein suddenly yelled, and all the archers suddenly had their bows up and notched. The 'twang' of hundreds of bows snapping, the sound of hundreds
of arrows 'swishing' up into the air... no point in aiming, really, as the enemy was so clustered together that even without aiming, the arrows would hit *something*...

The arrows arced gracefully down, and the war cries were drowned by screams of pain.

Some went down. Their fellows didn't care; they stumbled over them as if they were just rocks in the path. I wondered how many died because they were trampled by their own army.

Klein yelled again, and two more volleys were loosed. But then, the archers had to duck behind the knights, as the first of the enemy crashed into the line of spears and pikes.

The sound was horrific, and nothing that I had ever experienced before. At least, I hadn't to this *degree*. Screaming, *screeches*, of anger, of pain... The clang of metal on metal... the 'slice' of metal through flesh... the squelch of soldiers ramming themselves on the spears, on the pikes, to knock them out of the way for those who followed...

The bay wasn't blue anymore. It was a strange... crimson... red... yellow... it wasn't blue anymore. That's all I was going to focus on. I had my own job.

"Miredy, Zeiss!" I yelled, signaling their groups to take flight. The wyverns were going to be the aerial vanguard. "Tate, Shanna, prep!" The pegasus knights would fall in afterwards. "And... now!"

Arrows, magic, lances, swords, axes... they rained down from the skies as our fliers bombarded the enemy. They didn't have many fliers, so we held a distinct advantage. Now, we had to keep it.

"All forces charge!" Roy roared, brandishing his rapier to direct the troops. The sandbar must have appeared. That meant the strike force was moving. "Don't hesitate for anything! These people brought war to our lands, and we will show them why that was a mistake!" Roy, where did this flair for dramatics come from? Uncle Eliwood? Aunt Ninian? Was it just a little thing all his own? "Give no quarter!" It didn't matter. The soldiers loved it, especially when he charged with them, ice magic in one hand and sword in the other.

I didn't fight alongside him, though I kept Rienfleche in hand. I couldn't. Everything was too chaotic, and I had to change tactics on the fly as more information came in, as lines broke and reformed, as... *everything* seemed to happen at once.

However, at some point in the fighting, after a moment that felt like both eternity and nothing, I noticed something that seemed just plain *wrong*. None of their cavalry was out. Despite multiple scouts confirming the numbers, they weren't here, fighting. Where were they? Why weren't they here?!

"Irene!" There was Roy, splattered with blood. I had no idea when he'd made it back to me. I knew he wouldn't be able to give me an answer either. "You've noticed too, right?" he asked. His tone implied he knew the answer. "About the cavalry?"

"Yeah, I was just freaking out over it," I growled. Arcardo led here, or so the scouts said, but even he couldn't have been stupid enough to *dismount* his cavalry, right? He had to know we had our own. "Elphin..."

"He doesn't know. The scouts don't know. No one does." Roy's eyes were worried. "I asked Tate and Zeiss. Nothing. Sue doesn't know. *No one* has an answer."

"We have to think. They can't have just vanished." Were they inside the castle? No, that would be ridiculous. Well, they could be reserves? There were forts about where they could hide. But that would be a lot of people to hide, just for reserves. Were they closer to the sandbar? It was possible,
but surely not all of them. Arcardo knew less about the area than we did. "Flanks?"

"I'm waiting for a second confirmation, but the first reported none." Damn. Then where…

Behind. If they weren't in front of us, or at our sides, then logically, they were behind us.

"They're going to catch us in a pincer!" I snapped, livid. We were so focused on the front that I didn't even think to make sure we couldn't be…! "We need to redirect…!" But, we had difficulties. Most of the army was charging forward, and changing momentum in the middle of all this chaos would be… trying. "Father Sky…" Think… think… "Lilina. Lilina and her group can pull back easiest." The infirmary was at our backs, and it did have guards. "Though, if Fae transforms, then it really means-"

"Yeah, about that," Roy groaned. He pointed behind me and I didn't even need to turn to know that Fae's adorable little dragon form had likely popped up. "How much trouble will we be in if I head back?"

"It would be a lot; the army will think you're retreating." I grit my teeth. "You and Elphin handle the front. I'll take charge of the rear!"

"Be careful." Roy dove back into the fray, rallying the soldiers who were slowly realizing what the fluffy large thing in this distance was, and meant.

I twisted and urged my mare to her absolute fastest speed. It was dangerous in such chaotic conditions, but speed was of the essence here. Our backs were the weakest part of the formation; there were only a handful of fighters, mostly there for the infirmary.

Of all the stupid decisions we had to have made…

The sound of wings caught my ear as I burst from the main lines and I slowed slightly as I saw Tate and Zeiss both heading for me. I only slowed, of course. We had to keep moving. "Please tell me that nothing else is going wrong," I deadpanned. In the distance, I saw Fae fighting. "Please."

"No, General Roy and Lord Elphin adjusted the line so that two groups of fliers could come with you," Tate explained. She smiled grimly and nodded at Zeiss. "We volunteered. Figured flying mages might be a little more useful battering horses."

"And fliers can evacuate people if need be," Zeiss added. His hands were tight on the reins, but his voice was even. "Lady Lilina is going to try and get her group to catch up, but things are difficult."

That was an understatement. "So, orders?"

"Orders right now are to make for the infirmary, and organize the back lines," I replied. I smiled slightly at them. "Thank you."

"Just following orders." He looked away when I gave him a look. "Also, Elen is there. I want to help her."

"She is capable of fighting." She and Saul were surprisingly proficient light magic users for those who had just started learning.

"Will she fight or freeze?" That, however, was a very real concern. It was one thing to train; it was a completely different thing to fight.

"She is a healer," Tate reminded. Her gaze was forward, eyes narrowed as we were almost there, almost within shooting range. "She spends much of her time tending to the wounded, and these are
people who will kill her and her patients. You never want a healer angry at you." Healers knew how to take you apart. "Zeiss…"

"Right, we need to split off," Zeiss murmured. He waited, however, for my nod. "Up!" Both of them took to the air, leaving me 'alone' to continue heading right for where the enemy cavalry were doing their damndest to bring down Fae. A dragon had strong defenses, but she couldn't stay transformed forever.

As soon as we were in range, I brought up Rienfleche and fired. The first shot went wide, but the second caught one in the chest, knocking him off and sending his horse into a panic. Then, while the enemy tried to adapt to the hole in their line, I caught up and slowed, dismounting to give my mare a break. She was so tired… poor dear, I've been working her far too hard.

Shaking my head, I looked over, and nearly had a heart attack when I saw one cavalier heading straight for a crouched down Elen. But then, Zeiss was between them, blocking the oncoming weapon with one gauntlet, and casting a thunder spell with the other, right at their head. A little disoriented, I tried to figure out why he wasn't mounted, before realizing that he'd literally jumped down from his wyvern to get in between. Well, that was… dramatic.

As he crouched to tend to her, though, I focused on the other 'target'. "Fae?" I called, looking up at her. Even as a dragon, I could see her swaying. "You can transform back, Fae. I'm here."

"Fae is tired." Her voice, still as childlike as ever, echoed through my head. Light wrapped around her as she shrunk, and soon, she was back to her human form. "Fae is really tired," she repeated. She had enough energy to toddle over and hug my leg, though. "Thank you."

"Of course." I bent down and got her up on my mare. If the worst happened, she'd be safe. "Okay, now, where are the oth-"

"Lady Irene, the heavens have truly blessed us with your lovely visage!" Saul joked as he came over. His robes were checkered with fresh and dried blood, and his smile was forced. "Ah, happy days!"

"I don't think anything about this is 'happy'," I pointed out, eyes narrowed. The cavalry outnumbered us by a lot, but that could work to our advantage…

"Speak for yourself. I've Marcus on the edge of death, but with more defenders, we run a chance of saving him." His cheer dropped, eyes serious. "I'd be dead if not for him, mind. Dorothy took a bad injury and dropped, and then the enemy came…"

"I'm sorry." Damn it all… "Wuotan and Fiona?"

"Inside amputating someone's destroyed leg. The injured don't stop bleeding because we're under attack, and we ran out of numbing herbs, but if that leg doesn't come off, the soldier will definitely die. He'll likely die even…" He shook his head. "Sorry, that came out more caustic than I intended."

"No, I'm sorry." We should have left more guards. We should have watched for attacks from behind. "Go inside with Elen. Zeiss, Tate, and I will handle the defenses until more arrive."

"Keep Fae out here, please." His eyes were serious as he glanced at her. She was half-asleep in my saddle. "She doesn't know what's going on inside. The blood confuses her, and we're dealing with… okay, there's a few illnesses that we didn't catch, and we might also have the beginnings of a lice infestation, and-"
"You need me to keep the cute dragon kid out here, where she can't get in the way on accident. I'm assuming that's why she was even out here to start." I shrugged at his wince. It had made sense at the time. It made sense now. "Go. Leave everything to me."

"Then we are in your very capable hands." He gave me a smile and a wink. "Bring us a miracle, oh grand tactician!"

"Saul, just get to work." But still, I cracked a smile, and he grinned in triumph. "I have my own job to fix."

I wondered if we could steal the horses when the enemy was dead. They really did look like good ones… well, that wasn't a priority. I'd show them just why it was a bad idea to attack our infirmary. I'd make sure they learned that lesson very well before Mother Earth took them.

Destroying the enemy cavalry was a lesson in quick thinking. Magical assaults, aerial bombardment… anything and everything that could take them out, we used. The most dangerous tactic had definitely been generating a giant wall of fire to spook the horses and to give us a barrier, but Wuotan had volunteered for that job when I thought of it, and he'd controlled the flames well enough to keep all of us from burning.

As soon as things were clear, though, Saul and Elen dragged us into helping in the infirmary. They needed every bit of it. We had more healers in the army, thanks to the Church of Elimine throwing their lot with us, but many had never seen injuries on this scale before, assuming they had healed anything worse than a particularly bad papercut.

Of course, as Saul said, they'd run out of numbing herbs. Worse, they'd run out of most of the 'safe' herbs for sedation before a minute had passed. I liked working on the patients that had passed out from the pain. They didn't scream and squirm as much.

"Irene, you need to go rest." The kind voice barely penetrated through the haze in my head. It took me a few blinks to realize it was Zealot, of all people. When did he get here? "Your hands are shaking," he murmured, taking my hands to still them. I'd been stitching up someone's stomach after shoving their guts back inside. The smell should be nauseating, considering all the blood and everything, but I was far too used to it. "You can't stitch straight like that."

"But…" I tried to protest. There were still so many wounded. There was no end to them. "I…" I had training. I had medical training. I couldn't use staves, but I could tend to those that didn't need it, saving the magic. I could buy them time.

"You won't help anyone by falling flat on your face." He took the needle and thread from me and pulled me up. "Go rest, Irene. At the least, you need to clean up. You're covered."

"I…" No, he was right. I was covered in all sorts of bodily fluids. My hands were clean, of course. I'd washed them. Every time I had a new patient, I washed them. But, dirty as the rest of me was, I ran the risk of catching some sort of illness or, worse, passing it to one of the wounded. "Sorry, you're right."

"You went into work mode. It's fine." He nudged me towards the door and sat down on the crate I'd been using as a chair. "I'll take over for you."

"Okay." I hesitated, though. "The battle…"

"We won, as I'm sure you figured." He smiled warmly. "We did rather well, thanks to your tactics,
General Roy's orders, and Lord Elphin's strategies. There's less wounded and dead than expected."

I glanced around the infirmary, where the injured were packed tightly together, almost like rats in a cage, and there was barely any room to walk without running the risk of tripping over someone. This was less? There were hundreds here, or so it seemed.

"I'll take your word for it," I finally whispered. Then, I saluted him and picked my way out of the tent, not really wanting to talk to anyone anymore.

When I got out into the blinding sunlight, my brain dragged itself out of its daze, and I grimaced as many things barraged me at once. I itched. I ached. I smelled. I looked like I'd been dragged out of hell facedown. The camp was loud. The camp was busy. There was a long line for the bathing tents.

So, I decided to just step out of the camp for a little while, posting word to the guards, and went to a nearby river, downstream of the village. Then, I stripped down and jumped in without a second thought. The cold jolted me back into wakefulness, and eased the pain in my back and arms.

Sighing, I undid my ponytail, and was glad that I had stored Dad's ribbon safely in my tent when I noticed how stained the ribbon I had in my hair was. It was more blood than cloth, and completely ruined. So, I threw it to the side and ran my hand through my hair, jerking at the knots. The particularly bad ones I just ripped out, uncaring of the pain in my scalp. The water rippled around me, slowly taking off the first layer of blood and filth from my skin. I'd have to scrub the rest, but of course, I didn't have soap on me. I supposed I could use sand…

The sounds of footsteps caught my attention, and I turned, carefully grabbing a few rocks to throw as weapons if need be. But, thankfully, the person was Guinevere. Strangely, though, she had a towel, a change of clothes, and a small basket with soups.

"Before you ask, I was looking for something to do since I was chased out of the infirmary," she explained as she set down everything down on some rocks. "Klein said he saw you heading towards the river, likely for a bath, and asked if I'd bring you a change of clothes."

"Of course he did," I whispered, smiling softly. I swam closer to the shore and snagged one of the bars of soap. "I was just wondering about how I was going to get the rest off."

"I figured by how you were glowering." She sat down on the edge, taking off her shoes to dangle her feet in the water. "Miredy dragged me out when she saw the lines for the baths. I didn't want to leave, but I've exhausted my magic for the day." "I think 'exhausted' summarizes everything." There was something refreshing about taking a bath, though. "I forgot to ask. Is Arcardo dead?"

"He was captured alive, actually. Mildain, however, is going to carry out his trial here, with foreign witnesses, and he's going to let Ekhidna be his executioner. So, he'll be dead before long. I think after we finish with our own dead, so that the people have someone to focus their rage and grief on. But maybe it'll be reversed, so that the funerals can provide some sort of release."

"How many dead?"

"I don't know." She sighed, shaking her head. "I keep being told that the numbers are low. But I see a line of bodies, some looking like they're sleeping and others mangled beyond recognition, stretching the length of the camp. Twice." Considering the size of our camp… that was far more people than I wanted to think about right now. "They were working on a third line when Klein
snagged me."

"I bet he was carrying one of the bodies."

"Practically everyone who isn't helping in the infirmary is. Well, those the healers haven't all-but-bound to their beds to make sure they rested." She watched the water, and I noticed her gaze focused a lot on the trail of rust-colored water disappearing downstream. "It's only going to get worse."

"Is that so?"

"Our army's code dictates that every officer must be capable and self-sufficient. Bern becomes all the more dangerous because Galle will now be a Wyvern General." She sighed, looking up at the sky. "I'm sure that's why Zephiel kept giving Narcian such dangerous, impossible tasks."

"Either Narcian would succeed, and he'd win, or Narcian would fail, and he'd win." All I could think was that Narcian likely had screwed up a lot of plans by fleeing instead of dying. But that was no longer the case. In order to liberate Etruria, the only country with enough people, with enough power, to stand against Bern… we had killed Narcian. There was no other way to go about it. "He still got what he wanted, even though we won." Damn him.

"Zephiel was always intelligent." She drooped. "My poor brother… I wish…" Her voice cracked, but her eyes were dry. I wondered if she was cried out. "No, never mind."

"If you say so." However, this did seem like a good opening, so as I continued to scrub, I glanced at her. "Have you thought about what you will do after the war?"

"I… haven't, really." Her gloom deepened. "I've… avoided it."

"Won't you rule?" I kept my gaze sharp, even as she jerked her head up to stare. "You're Zephiel's sister, and his heir. By all rights-"

"I can't rule!" Her voice was somewhere between a squeak and a yelp. "I can't! It's Zephiel's, not mine!" It was probably wise to not remind her that if we were going to end this war, Zephiel was going to die. "B-besides, people will say that I joined Etruria to steal the crown!"

"You joined Lycia first." But I could see the very real fear in her eyes, and decided it was best to stop the conversation there. If I pushed, she'd run. "Just think on it, Guinevere. You can't run away from it. I won't let you. It's not good for you, or for your country."

"I…" She sighed heavily. "You're right. But… later. Much later."

"Of course. I won't speak of it again until you bring up the conversation." I felt guilty at how relieved her smile was. But, I knew I had to bring up the idea. "Though, if you want some ideas, Lilina would be a good choice. You two are surprisingly similar in many ways."

"We are?"

"You're both powerful magic users, for one. You're both princesses, essentially. You're both very kindhearted, and will break your hearts for your people without a second thought." I shrugged. "She can give you a perspective I cannot and, perhaps more importantly…"

"She… might be able to understand a bit better, and I could help her, since she will rule Ostia when all of this is over." Yes, that was exactly it. "I will think on it. I do like spending time with her, but whether I can bring up that conversation…"
"As I said, I will not bring it up again until you do." I twisted and grimaced as I ran soap through my hair. This was just a pain. "I am incredibly tempted to cut my hair." Actually, that... did seem like a good idea. I had worn it long because of Mom, really. I had loved how long her hair was. But, it might be better for me to get all this weight off my head, literally. Besides, Dad had kept his hair short...

"I have a dagger if you want it." She reached under her skirt and pulled it from a thigh sheath. She laughed at the dumbfounded look on my face. "I'm Bernese. All noblewomen keep knives on their person. I have a pair of heels back at the castle that are designed to hold them too." She smiled wryly. "'Death before dishonor' is prevalent in Bern as well, so the daggers are also there for noblewomen to kill themselves if their homes are overrun." That was something I had to be careful of, especially when we actually made it to Bern. "But the ones you saved seem to think there is 'honor' in serving the army. I think they're curious as to what would make me 'betray' Bern for it."

"That lines up with what I'd been thinking." I accepted the dagger from her, used the soiled ribbon I had thrown to the side to more easily gather my hair in a ponytail, and cut my hair before I could think twice. I instantly felt... lighter. It was nice. "I wonder how many people will have heart attacks. How bad of a cut is it?"

"You just need the ends evened out." She tilted her head to study me. "But, it suits you. If I may be so bold, I think it suits you more than long hair."

"Well, it's done now." Still, I couldn't help but look at my reflection in the water. It was a bit unnerving, since I had long hair for most of my life. Now, though, it was above my shoulders, just a bit longer than how Dad had worn his. When the ends were evened out, it would likely be the same length.

What startled me the most, though... all my life, I had been told how much I looked like Mom. Everyone would comment on it, more so as I grew older. But now, with my hair short, I didn't see much of Mom in my face. I thought, actually, that I looked most like Dad.

I... rather liked that. I rather liked that a lot.

You would think that, after a grueling battle and losing so many people, the camp would be somber once the bodies were all buried. But victory, Arcardo's death, or just the realization they were alive made them cheerful, and the camp was basically throwing a party. The only somber part was the infirmary, to lessen the chances of disturbing the healers on watch duty and waking the wounded.

After bathing and changing clothes, I felt human enough again to think to ask about people I personally knew. Marcus's condition worried me the most, but I'd been reassured that, while the injury was major, especially for a man his age, he would recover. That had been so much of a relief that I almost broke down crying. It took a bit to realize that I'd been absolutely terrified of losing yet another person who helped raise me. I hadn't even registered the fear on the field, but off it? Off it, I felt it clearly.

I shook my head almost violently, and made myself focus on the camp. Elphin had brought out his lyre, and some other musically inclined people joined in to perform a very lively tune. It was so lively, in fact, that many had started dancing around the main fire. Fiona and Wuotan danced, both laughing at something I couldn't hear. I caught sight of Sue dancing with Fae of all people, reminding me of festivals back on the plains, where Mom would dance with a little Sue while Dad and I watched from afar, watching all the colorful people laugh.
My thoughts almost went down that memory-path, but I kept looking at the present. There was still plenty to see. Rutger, for instance, was teaching Clarine a festival dance, one typically performed at the Sky Festival. Fir and Noah weren't far from them, Fir blushing madly, but smiling sweetly as she and Noah spun. Hell, even Perceval was dancing, but that was more because Cecilia had dragged him into it.

Others, of course, danced alone, or in larger groups. But I found my attention drawn to those not dancing. Deke and Uncle Douglas, for instance, were just watching with fond exasperation, sharing ale and laughing. Lance and Lot were playing chess, or trying to as Shanna teased them. Tate would try to scold her, but then be distracted by whatever Allen had said, making her squawk and even blush. Zeiss and Elen weren't far from them, smiling softly at whatever they were talking about, before Zeiss laughed at Elen's sudden blush. Miredy and Guinevere were near, watching over the two fondly, and I resolved to ask the two about them later. For now, there were other things to see.

Sofia and Ray held my attention, mostly because of their past interaction. But all Sofia seemed to do was thrust a book at Ray before scampering off, quickly being dragged into the dancing thanks to Fae. Thankfully, Sue adapted before long, and Ray didn't seem inclined to chase. Instead, he sat down to read through the tome, eyes alight with bright curiosity.

I let my attention roam before it settled again, this time on Astore and Igrene. They chatted about something, serious and tense based on their postures, but then he said something that made Igrene slap him. His wry smile as she stormed away made me wonder if he had done that on purpose. It made me remember their last interaction, and I filed it away for later. That might become a problem.

But what troubled me most was that Roy wasn't among the group. He was apart, frowning at the sky. That certainly wouldn't do at all. So, instead, I made my way towards him, and tried to decide, based on his posture, if I needed to be 'tactician' for him, or if I could just be his 'older sister' for right now.

The way he slumped as soon as he saw me told me that it was the latter. Roy was worrying over something, not as 'general' but as 'himself', and 'he' needed his 'big sister'. How long had it been since I had just been myself? It felt like forever.

"When did you cut your hair?" he asked, mostly to say something. He still looked confused, though. "I don't think I've ever seen you with short hair."

"You were a baby when it was last over my shoulders," I replied, fiddling with the ends. Clarine had insisted on evening out the ends for me, and a look in the mirror had proved me right. It was the same length as Dad's. "But what has you here, glowering at the sky? Father Sky does not take kindly to being glared at."

"I suppose frowning at the ground is just as bad." He sighed, shaking his head. "I heard something... troubling."

"It's been a bit since something troubled you as yourself, not as 'the general'." I rested a reassuring hand on his back. "What is it? Are you having trouble with Lilina already?"

"N-no, I... think I'm okay on that front?" His face went as red as his hair and his voice was distinctly squeaky. "Th-though, we've only really talked about our feelings, and... well..." He trailed off into mumbling, so soft that even my hearing couldn't make out anything coherent. "Wait, you're distracting me!"
"Teasing. I'm teasing you." I smiled at his sulk. "So, what is it?"

"Ah, right." Slowly, his blush faded and he was back to frowning. "Merlinus told me-"

"Oh, great, what did he do now?"

"You haven't been mad at him in a while." Yes, but that was probably more because I didn't interact with him anymore. There was too much going on, and while I liked checking over inventory, most of those reports went to Elphin now, as the strategist. "But he told me something I can't quite wrap my head around?"

"Is that so?" The wind blew, and I thought I heard quiet weeping on it. Why? "What was it?"

"He told me that Zephiel killed his own father." Roy looked so troubled. "How could…? I mean; I was told he threatened Guinevere too, and I don't understand that either, but…"

"Since I highly doubt Merlinus was in Bern at the time, he's likely going off rumor, and it is important to remember that while rumors may hold a grain of truth, there is no telling what that grain might be." I sighed, looking up at the stars. Some part of me wanted to read them, but the rest of me flinched away. That was still too raw of a wound to even try. "But, Roy, we should remember that not all parents are loving and, even those who are, can make mistakes." I thought of Dad's letter, which revealed that Grandpa had thrown him away. I thought of how Grandmother, in her love, had been horrible to Mom, to the point that even twenty years later, Mom had been deathly afraid of turning out like her. "But you never hear anything good about Desmond." That was when you heard of him at all. Bern seemed all too determined to forget he had existed.

"So, you think it might have been justified?" Roy still looked confused. "But why? Why wouldn't a parent love their child?"

"Considering we were blessed with good parents, Roy, I doubt we'll ever understand." I ruffled his hair before looking at him seriously. For one brief moment, I had to switch to 'tactician'. "But Roy, even if that is true, you cannot-"

"Don't worry. I will not falter." His eyes were certain, and he switched back to 'general'. "I can sympathize with an enemy, though. If I make them human, then I don't ignore the plights that shaped them, and others. At least, that's what I think."

"We have to keep focused." I sighed, though, and smiled softly. I was tired of being tactician for a night, and I knew he was tired of being the general too. "But this does remind me. It's been a while since you confided in me. Do you need to?"

"Maybe later." He looked at me worriedly. "What about you? Do you need…?"

"I'm coping, Roy." At least, I thought I was. I felt it, at least. "If I feel like I'm breaking down, I will run to the nearest adult."

"You promise?"

"I promise if you promise the same."

"Then, I promise." He suddenly grinned, eyes lighting up. "Klein, what are you doing over here?"

"Looking for you two!" Klein laughed, walking up. Like most of the others, he wasn't dressed in armor. In fact, he was in very casual clothes, like the ones Uncle Pent would wear when he snuck into town. "People have noticed you're not around, and it's making them fret." He crossed his arms,
looking almost comically stern. I could see the very real 'lecture' behind the laughing tone, though. "They think that if you two aren't around, it's because there's something wrong."

"Ah, I'm sorry. It's my fault," Roy explained. He was still smiling, and his eyes were a bit mischievous. "I was alone in my thoughts and Irene came to bail me out."

"I am unsurprised." Klein hesitated a moment before bowing with a little flourish and holding out his hand to me. "My lady, might I have the honor of a dance?"

I hesitated as well, but took his hand silently, flushing from embarrassment. His hand was warm as it closed on mine, and there seemed to be something almost electric in the air as he tugged me into the dancing group.

All hesitancy fled, though, as the two of us threw ourselves into the music and simply danced and laughed with everyone else. When I got tired, I'd likely join the singers, and maybe Elphin, Lalum, and I would perform to give everyone a break. Maybe Wuotan could be persuaded to tell us stories. But that would be later. For now, I was dancing with Klein, and I planned on enjoying the moment.

I couldn't keep moping. I couldn't keep being… well, I could be exhausted. War was tiring. But I had to find the cheer in things. I couldn't despair forever. That wasn't fair to myself, and I knew my parents wouldn't want it.

This war was going to be horrible enough. So, I just had to create my own little bits of happiness among the horror, and help others do the same. That, too, was part of my job as tactician. My worries were well-founded, but I wasn't alone. I just needed to open my eyes and look around if I ever forgot that.

Things were going to get worse? That was fine. I'd make them better. We would make them better. I knew we would. After all, we could smile and laugh. We could find joy in the world.

That was our advantage over Zephiel. We found beauty in the harshness of the world. And I would exploit that weakness to give Roy his victory.

Notes on songs

While not tactical in nature, I feel like songs are important for our morale. Though, maybe we could hide messages in songs…? Hmm…

- Sacaean and Ilian songs have an emphasis on vocals, with little instrumentations typically. Sacaean songs lean more towards flutes and drums for instruments, while Ilia relies more on stringed instruments. Music is deeply tied to the cultures of both, surprisingly enough, and play important parts in funerary rites. I was startled to learn how similar they were, actually.
- Etruria, unsurprisingly, favors hymns and choral pieces more than anything. Even the folk songs tend to be slower, more to make you listen and rest. While there are songs designed for dancing, they're only played during festivals. They also have opera, but I'm not too fond of it.
- Bernese songs, apparently, don't have a lot of vocals. They favor strong, complex instrumentation. What songs they do have, though, focus a lot of courage and hope. According to Guinevere, Elen, and Zeiss, Miredy is an excellent singer, so maybe we can convince her to perform for us soon.
- Lycia songs tend to be fast-paced songs, designed for dancing, and it often seems like most tavern songs on the continent originally came from Lycia. They're also incredibly catchy, so
if you hear one, you're likely going to have it stuck in your head for half a year. I know from experience.

- Western Isles is a bit trickier, as the long campaign in Etruria made some of the local culture fade away. But some things still remain, including songs. Most of their songs actually tell stories, and it's not uncommon to have dancers 'act out' the song as it's being performed.

- Arcadia stands out, though, as most of their songs are actually sung in another language entirely. Sofia doesn't know the translations at all, and Fiona only knows a little bit. Languages change as time goes on, and according to Fiona, the songs came from long before the Scouring. In fact, it preceded another great war that shaped the continent into what it was before the Scouring reshaped the continent again. I guess history repeats itself, but I'm really curious about this 'war before the Scouring'. I'd never even heard of it!

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: So, this is Chapter 17A, Ilia route. You unlock this route if Thany and Tate's gained experience surpasses Sue and Sin's. Just as in game, Arcardo dies here. Roark, however, will be saved for the 'Sacae' route.

Sofia and Ray's little 'interaction' is based on their B support. Astore and Igren's is based on their B support. Sue and Fae are grouped up as a reference to the fact that they have in-game supports.

Next Chapter – Interlude, Confessions
Interlude – Confessions

With Remy conquered, we make our way into Ilia. The cold is almost unimaginable, and the knowledge that it would just get worse makes me wonder if this is a fool's errand. But the Bernese forces here are part of Murdock's elite troops. Killing them, and bringing Ilia to our side, would help us greatly.

So, we press on through the snow and ice. All the while, though, the Ilians give us a sobering reminder: 'Winter is coming.' We needed to have Ilia secured and be moving to the Sacae before it truly hit. Otherwise, we were going to be stuck until the thaw came, and who knows how much Bern could destroy in that time.

"Why is it so cold?" I grumbled. I was bundled under bunches and bunches of blankets, and I was still freezing.

"It's because it's snowing." Sue pointed out logically. She smiled when I glowered. "Scoot over. I need more of the blanket."

"Oh, sorry." I shifted, and tried to go back to work. We were stopped for the day due to poor traveling conditions (aka, our feet were freezing to the ice-covered ground), and while work never stopped, I was determined to do all that I could while in my tent, out of the snow. "Better?"

"Much." She curled into me, laughing a little. "You're very warm."

"Well, I'm glad you think so." I was freezing. But hey, if Sue wasn't, I could deal. "Are the horses all right?"

"Yes, though I left ours in care of Zealot and Noah." She made a face. "I thought I was used to cold, but Ilia is far colder than the plains. I've never seen so much snow."

"Yeah, I underestimated how bad it would be." This would only get worse too… "So, you left the horses to them and then came to leech heat from me?"

"Of course." She curled into my side a little more, laughing. "That's what big sisters are for, right?"

"You are…" I sighed, shaking my head and laughing. "Fine, fine. Yes, that's what big sisters are for." I went back to my reports, though, frowning over the words.

"What are you looking at?" She lifted her head slightly to peek at the papers before flopping back down. "Tactics?"

"No, I'm looking at the reports from the infirmary." I tightened my grip on the report, as if I could crush the bad news out of it.

"Is it bad?"

"We have a lot of ill and injured, Sue." Perhaps it was because the cold forced us to bunch up, but
illnesses were spreading like a wild fire in the plains. We had many soldiers slip and fall in the ice and snow, giving themselves concussions or breaking their bones. We even had a few that managed to catch frostbite, though thankfully there were no amputations yet. "The Ilians are doing what they can to advise us on keeping warm, but this weather wasn't made for tents." No one had suffered hypothermia, yet, but there had been some close misses a few times. We were going to have some people freeze to death before we reached Edessa. I just knew it. "At least, our tents aren't made for them."

"These tents aren't made very well." Sue sighed. "I miss our gers." She snuck a hand out of the blankets and took mine tightly. "I miss home."

"We'll see the plains soon." When Ilia was liberated, we would head to the Sacae. "We'll liberate Bulgar too." We would ensure the dead could rest.

"When the war is over, where will you go?" She sounded so small, like she was five again. "Do you know yet?"

"…No, I don't." I looked to her, and saw how sad she looked. "There will be a lot of work to be done, reconstructing the continent. As tactician, I am partly responsible for the mess. I don't want to leave it all to other people."

"I do."

"You want to leave it to other people?"

"No, I know where you'll go." She looked sadder. "You'll go to Etruria."

"If this is another bit of teasing on my crush on Klein-"

"No, it's not just that." She held my hand a little tighter. "I know you'll go there, because you'd want to make sure it's better. You want to make sure no one forgets and ignores. You want to make sure it changes." She curled into me even more. I was reminded of when she was little, and scared of the monsters hiding in the shadows. "You've never been one to just walk away."

"I…” I wasn't sure how to respond. I couldn't call her wrong. Those were things I considered. I had also considered Lycia, and helping it rebuild. I had considered the Western Isles, acting as a doctor as it recovered. Sometimes, rarely, I thought of the Sacae, of Bulgar. "Sue…"

"It's okay." She finally smiled. "I told you. This was why I want the strength and courage to leave your shadow." It took me a minute to remember what she was talking about. We had this conversation when we were on vacation in Hanover, back when everything was a little less worn. "This is why I want to find my own path. I don't want to drag you down because I'm scared."

"Sue…"

"So, it's okay." She clung to me tighter. "Leave… leave the plains to me. Leave our home to me, and Sin, and whoever else comes with us when the war ends. Rutger, I think. Maybe even Clarine."

"…I have the most darling little sister." I set the report down at last and shifted to hug her. "But are you certain? Mom and Dad are…"

"Everyone grows up, including me." That was true. I just thought she was growing up too fast because of everything. "I won't be alone. You and I won't be separated. You are always my sister, even if we live in different places. Mother Earth will reassure me you are well, just as Father Sky will tell you I am well. And we can visit, just as we visited our friends and family growing up."
"That is all true, but…"

"I'm okay. You are not only my protective big sister, especially now. You are so many things, to so many people." She looked up at me. "But, more importantly, you're yourself. Sometimes, I wonder if your insistence on not confessing to Klein all this time was because you didn't want to leave me 'alone'. But I won't be alone. I'm okay."

"…" I sighed, shaking my head. "I feel as if this is an argument I cannot win."

"Of course not. I've spent a long time coming up with this argument." She smiled slightly. "Though, until we part, I would like to cling. Is that okay?"

"Always." I stroked her hair and smiled back. "Well, if you're going to work on the Sacae, you better have some plans. Have you some ideas?"

"It depends on the damage, but based on what we know, I do have a few." Her smile turned shy. "Will you listen?"

"Always."

"It's still so strange seeing you with short hair," Lilina commented. She hummed as she brushed my hair. "What do you think, Clarine?"

"I think it suits her," Clarine replied. She frowned slightly as she carefully pinned a flower to my hair. "Though, this flower suits her more." I had no idea what sort of flower it was, but Clarine was very insistent on putting it in my hair. She'd already done the same with Lilina: one with crimson petals and a gold center. I didn't know it either. I didn't know any plants, really, that grew in snow. "You should keep flowers in your hair, Irene."

"I somehow doubt they'll survive a battle," I pointed out dryly, attempting to continue reading my reports. The two of them had just appeared at my tent, and refused to leave. I didn't have the heart to tell them to go away when all I was doing was reading. "There's really no need to kill flowers for it."

"Oh, please, it's not like there's not a bunch of them." Clarine sat back on her heels, beaming. "We'll just put more in, or you don't wear one in battle."

"I'll get Klein to do it~" She grinned. "Far more fun anyway."

"Father Sky, Clarine." I looked back to the reports, though my thoughts drifted over to Klein. We hadn't talked much outside of a professional setting, due to everything going on. That dance had been fun, and I knew there was… ah, I couldn't avoid it forever. I also couldn't shake the feeling that Sue was right about why…

"Done!" Lilina cheered, startling me from my thoughts. She giggled and moved behind Clarine, taking down her ponytail. "Your turn~"

"Thanks!" Clarine laughed, clapping her hands. "I'll brush yours when you're done!"

"Oh, that'll be great!"
"Remind me as to why you two decided to invade my tent instead of sticking to your own?" I asked, a touch exasperated. I was trying to work, after all. That was why Sue had eventually decided to go check on Roy and left. "I love you two dearly."

"And that is why!" Lilina declared, smiling warmly. "We decided that you needed a bit more cheer, and we know you love us, so even if we annoy you, you'll let us stay!"

"Clearly, you know me well." Still, it was hard to concentrate with them laughing every two seconds. "However, if you're here, I'll make you be serious."

"How so?"

"A simple question. What will you do after the war?" I bit back a smile as both of their expressions blanked, and as they remained silent, I went back to work. The only sounds in my tent were my pen and Lilina brushing Clarine's hair.

Finally, though, Lilina whispered, "well, I will rule Ostia." She sounded small, and she looked small when I glanced over at her. "Father is dead, and Mother can only be regent until I am sixteen. When this war ends, I will become the Marquess of Ostia, and rebuild Lycia." She sighed, still brushing Clarine's hair. "Though, that will be complicated."

"Why?" Clarine asked, tilting her head back to look at Lilina. "You used 'complicated' instead of 'difficult', so I'm assuming it's political."

"It is." Lilina stopped brushing Clarine's hair and shifted to sit next to her. "Many lords died when Araphan fell. There are lords and a council, but honestly, they don't have much claim. They hold onto power because of the war, but legally, most of them will have to cede their power to Ostia."

"I can see the complication."

"That is only part of it." Lilina shook her head. "Lycia is an alliance. We are a country made of many lords who swear oaths. But so many died that Ostia will control more than half of Lycia. In fact, it will control most of it."

"I'm guessing that when you marry Roy, that would bring the rest of it under your control." Clarine smirked as Lilina squeaked and blushed. "Come on~ You had to have thought about it."

"I… um…" Lilina only went redder. By this point, I returned to my work and just listened. "I'm being serious!"

"So am I. Mostly." Clarine shrugged. "Well, why not just make it a kingdom if its going to be-?"

"No." Lilina's voice was firm, and her eyes were serious. "Lycia was founded by Roland as a nation of alliances, because the land within Lycia is so varied. It is a nation that respects individuality and freedom, and honors the bonds of friendship. I will not have that ideal die with my father. It's a nice one."

"Okay, no need to bite my head off." Clarine hummed in thought. "Well, in that case, why not just 'give' the land to others? Isn't that what Roland did anyway?" She snapped her fingers. "Oh, you could give the land to some of the leaders here, as thanks for their help. You'll still get grumbles, but everyone will be war heroes. We all know how much people listen to them."

"That's… true." Lilina frowned a bit, biting her lip. "Though, many of the Lycians are knights. I'm not sure if they…"
"Knights might be sworn to their lords, but their job is to protect the people and to guide their lords." Clarine smiled. "You don't have to force, of course. Talk to Roy and you two figure it out together. Like a married couple~"

"Clarine!" Lilina scowled as Clarine laughed. "Well, I said my piece. What about you?"

"I…” Clarine's laughter abruptly cut off, and she grew strangely hesitant. "Well, I know that I don't… really want to return to Etruria. At least, not as a 'proper lady'."

"Really?" Lilina sounded surprised. "Why?"

"I've seen a lot." Clarine's voice was soft. "I've done a lot. I can't be content with going back to the court and being a pretty little doll to be married off. Not after all of this." She sighed. "So, part of me thought of enlisting, and aiming to become Cecilia's successor to Mage General."

"What's the problem?"

"Well, I'm not that strong magically. That's why I went with swords in the first place." Clarine drooped. "And, honestly, most of me wants to be with Rutger. I think I love him."

"I think you are. Most of the camp does." Lilina snickered as Clarine squeaked. "And most of the camp thinks he loves you too. But he is hurting."

"I know. And that's another reason why I want to be with him. I'm a healer. I want to help him heal. If nothing else, I'm good at making him smile." Clarine sounded very proud of herself there. "So, I think I want to just… stay with him. I think he'll want to go to Bulgar and help it rebuild, at least at first. Do you think the people there will accept a healer, even if she's Etrurian?"

"Aunt Katri was Etrurian, and the Kutolah loved her." Lilina smiled warmly and took Clarine's hands. "I think you'll be fine. But you should talk it over with him too."

"Right, I can't be a complete brat and force my company on him. That leads to yelling." There was a long awkward pause. "Irene hasn't said a single word."

"...No, she's been working the whole time." Lilina sounded grouchy as both of them looked towards me at last. I absently waved at them, still working. "Ugh, Irene!"

"Revenge! We must take revenge!"

I had two seconds to brace myself before the two fell on me and attempted to tickle me. I turned the tables on them quick, but it soon escalated into a bizarre pillow and blanket fight that quickly brought Merlinus's wrath on us. None of us care, of course. It was just Merlinus, after all.

Some time in the afternoon, I left Lilina and Clarine to gossip in my tent and headed to Cecilia's tent to continue working. Since Klein was also there, we quickly switched into discussing tactics, army deployment, and what Eturia would need to do in order to recover.

"With the people's favor behind us, we can make some drastic changes quickly," Cecilia murmured. She smiled, looking as pleased as the cat that caught the pigeon. "That'll be wonderful."

"The people might be behind us, but the nobles, not so much," Klein pointed out, deflating Cecilia's smugness somewhat. He shifted in his chair and pointed to the stack of papers sitting on the table in front of us. "Those are the current laws, and not even a king is immune."
"But some of these laws are ridiculous."

"Yes, but we can't just discard them. The nobles will want to hold onto their power, and they'll call Mildain a tyrant if he just goes about as he pleases."

"What about suggesting 'drastic-drastic' changes?" I murmured, mostly to keep the two from arguing. Both of them were right in this situation, so it would just go in circles. "From there, you can suggest the 'drastic' as a compromise, right?" I squirmed as both of them just stared at me. "No?"

"It… couldn't be used for all of the things, as they'd catch on," Klein whispered. He frowned, and I knew he was thinking rapidly. "But there are quite a few that can. If they're spaced out slightly…"

"And if we combine them with a few very drastic ones, and a few that seem drastic, but that we back down on, we keep up the appearances of compromising as a whole," Cecilia murmured. She was back to smiling, and she even giggled. "Yes, a combination of things."

"The question then becomes what. We know that the occupation of the Western Isles will end, and all Etrurian forces will be called back."

"There are bandits, and years under Etruria's tyranny have left them with little defenses. Are there plans to account for that?"

"That's what Mildain and Perceval are working on now, actually. They've been holed up with Ekhidna since breakfast."

"Ah, I should have expected that." Cecilia frowned a little. "Then what about our relationship with Ilia? This would be a good time to…"

"Of course. We can push protections. Mildain has been wanting to, and we all know Perceval would put all the weight of both Knight General and Caliburn behind that. Father would too."

"That is definitely one of the very drastic then." Cecilia hummed a little before turning to me. "Do you have ideas for Etruria's relationship with the Sacae?"

"Sadly, that sort of talk will have to wait until we have an idea of what the damages really are," I sighed. I leaned forward, resting my arms on the table. "There's too little information to make plans like that. There's barely enough to even plan for reconstruction."

"Very true, but it might be nice to… suggest talks of increased trade," Klein pointed out. He smiled slightly. "I imagine that trade will be more important than ever for Sacaeans as they try to rebuild. I mean… Bulgar…"

"Yes, Bulgar. It'll need help. Sue and Sin have some ideas, but materials…"

"It should be a joint effort between all the countries. That way no one country can try to pressure Bulgar." His smile grew as I immediately choked on a laugh. "Yes, I know. But not all of the bigots are dead, and there was talk of submission prior to all of this."

"We'd lose too much of our culture if that happened. Sacaeans fight with everything they have. Bern knows this."

"Bern feels it." Klein looked thoughtful and turned to Cecilia. "How long do you think it'll be before Brunja will be able to fight with her injuries?"
"It highly depends on the damage, and you'll notice that everyone is quite certain to not tell us," Cecilia answered. She sighed, resting her hand on her cheek. "Based on what Miredy knows, though, I would assume… a few more months. We might make it to Bern before she can."

"It'll be that long?" I asked, startled. Yes, I knew she was injured badly. After all, I felt a little bit of pride that Dad had crippled her so, considering what all she did. But she had been injured during the massacre at Bulgar. That was one of the first battles of the war, and it had been months. "Are you sure?"

"No, I'm not sure, but I do know that she 'reopened' the wounds with her magic. That slows healing, and deepens the injuries." Cecilia shrugged. "I'd suffer the same if I tried to fight at my full strength as I am. At the rate we're going, the war will be over before I am completely recovered." She made a face. "What a showing for Etruria's supposedly strongest mage."

"If anyone is passive-aggressive about it, send them to one of us. We'll gladly correct their wrong opinions." I narrowed my eyes as I studied her. "But speaking of your injuries, you're in pain."

"Why can I never hide anything from you?" She playfully sulked and made Klein and I laugh. "But yes, I am. It seems the cold makes my scars ache."

"If that's the case, Klein and I will leave you to rest." I stood up, Klein not even a second behind me. "We'll get this to Mildain, and have him go from there. I'm sure he'll want to talk to Uncle Douglas about some of it anyway."

"I wish I could protest, but I think I'll be snappy before long if I don't rest now." She smiled sweetly. "Thank you both."

"Rest well." I followed Klein out of her tent, and made sure the tent flap closed behind us. I hoped she was actually going to rest and not just read reports while she happened to sit in bed. But I couldn't be her babysitter either.

"Should we make a 'do not disturb' sign?" Klein half-joked. He snickered as I gave him a look. "I'm sure we have spare paper somewhere in the camp."

"I'm not hunting for it," I deadpanned. It made him laugh. "Come on. Let's get to Elphin and jump into whatever talks they're in. If they're not in the middle of an argument, I'll be surprised."

"Now, now, it'll be good practice for him." Still, he led the way through the camp. "I think they're at Perceval's tent. Elphin was complaining about how he has memorized the thread count of his."

"He had the time to count?" I grimaced as I realized my footing wasn't sure. "Oh, great. I think the snow froze."

"It's been frozen. Do you want my scarf?"

"I'm already wearing one, Klein. Two would look ridiculous." I barely checked the urge to growl. I hated the cold. "I wouldn't want you to freeze your neck off."

"I think it would be freeze my head off." He snickered as I rolled my eyes. "Come on. That was funny."

"Sure, it was, if you have a poor sense of humor." I made my voice purposely haughty. "It'll take more than poor jokes to move a tactician's heart of stone."

"You should be careful that the soldiers don't take you for granite." He grinned triumphantly as I
burst into giggles. "Got you."

"That barely even made sense!" I was lucky there wasn't anyone around. They'd be wondering if I snapped. "Damn it, Klein!"

"I do what I can." He shrugged. "Besides, everyone in the camp knows you're kind at heart, even if they wonder how insane you are."

"Oh, well, that's lovely." I made a face and he laughed again. "Well, so long as they keep following Roy, I think we'll make it through."

"Yes, we will…. Whoa!" He slipped on some ice, but I caught him before he fell. "Thanks, Irene." He sighed, and turned to smile at me. "I'll be glad when we're… out of the…" He trailed off, and I wasn't sure why. I wasn't sure I cared. My thoughts focused on how we were suddenly quite close. It shouldn't bother me. We'd been close in the past. We've napped together, after all. Being close wasn't unusual. But I focused on it, hyper-focused even. I focused on how his breath ghosted my face, fogging up in the cold. I focused on how red his cheeks were, chapped slightly from the wind. I focused on how he looked right at me, gaze never wavering. I focused on how he made no move to pull away, no move to make me let go of him.

He shifted suddenly, or maybe I was the one who shifted suddenly. I wasn't quite sure. All I knew was that one of us moved, and then… then we were kissing. It was soft, gentle. 'Feather soft' was the only term I could think of, but that didn't capture how warm the kiss was, and really, it gave a bizarre mental image of pressing a wad of feathers to your mouth.

Then, one of us jerked back. I wasn't sure who again. I wasn't really sure of anything except that my face was bright red, and I was staring, and oh, Father Sky, Klein and I just kissed.

We both had the same reaction: turning and running and not looking back. I wondered, though, if he pressed his fingers to his mouth, as I did, not quite certain if that was real or not. I wondered if his thoughts focused on the lingering warmth, like mine.

I wondered if he regretted it. I wasn't sure I did.

I hid. There was no other word from it, and I wasn't so delusional as to pretend I was doing anything else. I hid in my tent, bundled under blankets, and tried to work. But it just made me frustrated, because I kept making mistakes. I kept making simple mistakes at that, things that I should catch, but I just couldn't focus.

Father Sky above, I was a tactician, not a… a romance novel protagonist! I had a job! I shouldn't be shaken by… accidentally… kissing my crush. But I was. I was shaken by kissing him, and I was shaken by how both of us had run. Did he hate me for it? Did he… like me? That seemed to be what everyone… yet…

I growled under my breath, and threw the papers I was working on to the side. They were basically illegible thanks to all the crossing out and other errors. I had to start over. I had to focus. I couldn't just…

"There you are." The voice made me yelp, and I could only stare, wide-eyed, as Tate entered my tent, making sure the tent flap was shut behind her. I hadn't heard her at all. "You missed dinner," she told me, glancing around my tent curiously. I couldn't think of a reply, so I just hid under the blankets, biting back a groan. "What's this?" She bent down and picked up the papers I'd thrown. "…These are…?" She looked to me. "What happened?"
"You can tell that quickly?" I muttered, mostly to avoid answering. This was embarrassing. "How?"

"You don't make errors like these. You make logical ones, or stupid ones that make sense in the moment." She sat next to me and peered at my face through my blanket cocoon. "So?"

"...Klein and I accidentally kissed." I barely heard the words, and I was the one saying them. "So, now I'm panicking like a-

"Like a person who is afraid of a relationship with a dear friend changing, even if it is a change you're pretty sure you want." She poked some of the blankets back to better look at me. "Like a person who worries that people will think you're giving him special treatment. Like a person who worries about whether the army will think you're compromised. Like a person who is keenly aware that we're in the middle of a war, and that war is like a monster that devours everything in sight."

"...Damn, you're good." I sighed, drooping. What else was there to say? "So, yes, I'm hiding in here, trying to work, but my thoughts are scattered."

"Thus the mistakes." She nodded and closed her eyes to think for a long moment. "Still, you should confront him on it."

"What."

"Klein. You should confront Klein on it." She opened her eyes again and made sure to look very serious. "If something is distracting you, you need to remove the distraction."

"But..."

"That is your responsibility as a leader."

"But..."

"Besides, look at it logically. You can't avoid him forever. You're both on the War Council." She gave me a no-nonsense look. "And as soon as both of you are near each other, everyone is going to know something weird happened, and they'll jump in."

"So, it is better for us to just work it out on our own before it becomes a problem the whole army becomes invested in." I groaned, curling more into my blankets. "Why do you have to be right?"

"Because I'm me." She smiled wanly at my scowl. "Go on. I'll check over your work for you, and fix what I can."

"Well..." My vague annoyance faded as I noticed something... "Tate, are you okay?"

"Hmm?"

"You look like..." I almost said 'about to cry', but then I remembered something. I remembered thinking, long ago... "Tate, don't you like Klein too?"

"I do." She still smiled for me. "I love him. But, he doesn't love me. He loves you." She sounded so sure of it, like she was saying 'the sky was blue' or 'it snows a lot in Ilia'. The tone made my heart ache. "It hurts. I won't pretend it doesn't. But I like you. I want you to be happy, just as I want him to be happy." She reached over and tugged me up. "Which is why, of course, I will be very vexed if you let this chance pass you."
"Okay." I gave her a hug. I had to. "I'll go look for him. You hide here for however long you need." That was what she really wanted to do. She wanted to hide and mope for a bit, because the man she loved didn't love her back. I didn't doubt that she would check over my work for me, of course, but that was to help her hide. "Okay?"

"Thanks." She hugged me back and then pulled away to nudge me out of the tent. "Go on." She was still smiling, but I could see she was about to crack and break down. "When I'm calmer, I'll tell you some silly things he did back at the Isles."

"That sounds good. I'll share some childhood antics, some really ridiculous ones." I lingered a bit, still hesitating, but she waved me on, so I left the tent, gathering my courage and determination. I would do this. I wouldn't run from this. I had so many people supporting me. There might be all the reasons in the world to be afraid, but there was no reason for me to let that fear stop me.

Well, that was the theory. I was still very tempted to run back to my tent, Tate's annoyance be damned.

"Ah, Irene!" Perceval walked up then, smiling warmly. It was too warm of a smile for business, so I had a feeling there would be no convenient distraction. "I've been looking for you," he explained, snagging my arm and dragging me after him. "I've tried to send Klein to you, but no one seemed to know where you ended up." He sounded far too pleased. I wondered if he got the story from Klein. "He's by the river." We reached the path and he pushed me down it. "Go on."

"Everyone seems rather invested in this," I complained. I looked up at him, serious. "Why?"

"It's the same reason why we smile at General Roy and Lady Lilina, and the other couples that are slowly forming." He patted my shoulder, and his smile softened. "Things like this are good for the army, in my opinion. They remind the soldiers that their leaders are humans, and it gives everyone something to smile and tease about."

"Is that so?" My face was red, but I'd still make sure to get the last word here! "Then go confess to Cecilia, okay?"

I ran down the path before he could say anything, and I bit back a laugh as I heard him yelp. Then, however, I focused on the path, making sure to not slip and fall on my face in the mud. It didn't take me long to reach the river, fast moving and glittering among the snow. It took even less time for me to find Klein there, and he stared at me with wide eyes, like he wasn't sure he was really seeing me.

"Irene?" he called hesitantly. I nodded and stepped a little closer. "I…"

"I love you," I blurted, before my courage faded. My face went even redder as he stared. "I… love you, Klein. I have… for a bit." My courage started fleeing and I ducked my head. "So… um…"

"Irene." He tugged me into a tight, warm hug. "I love you too." His voice was shaky, like he was certain this was a dream. "I've loved you forever, really. Ever since we were children."

"I'm surprised they lasted that long." I leaned into him, smiling. "I mean… considering some of the things we got caught up in."

"Honestly, a lot of the antics just made me love you more." He tightened his hug slightly. "But I was always so sure you wouldn't look at me like that. That you would stay in the Plains."

"Well, the future is ever changing." I pecked up at him, and my smile grew when I saw he was blushing just as much as I was. "But, I love you. So, we can plan… our future… together, if you'd
"Among all the other plans." The words were dry, but his smile was sweet. "That sounds like a dream come true, my lady."

"Dork." I leaned back into him. "But it makes me smile. You have always made me smile."

He didn't reply, just continued to hold me. But that was fine, because all the things he wanted to say, I knew. I knew from his hug and from his smile.

Maybe it was a little stupid to start a relationship during a war. But, honestly, I thought it might be more encouraging. It was just one more reason to reach my goal, one more motivator and one more comfort. Considering everything, I thought I would need that comfort. Then there was Perceval’s reassurances…

Besides, Klein was warm. I hated the cold.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: And Klein-Irene is official. Yay! Also some serious talks. Clarine mentioning her fears of 'being a doll' comes from her A support with Klein. Otherwise, it's just dealing with the cold and starting to focus on life after the war.

Next Chapter – The Frozen River
Even with small... antics aside that make the army laugh, we continue to march on. It isn't long at all before we reach central Ilia, and the thick forests that characterize it. Our progress slows to a crawl as we try to navigate the trees, and more of us fall ill by the day.

This journey isn't easy, and I cannot shake the feeling that the worse is yet to come.

War was a mix of fighting and politics. Whenever you weren't fighting, you were planning, and those plans had to involve playing politics, so that you could reconstruct without stepping on too many toes. This meant a lot of meetings. Now, meetings were all well and good; they helped ensure that while leadership was Roy's, the full burden wasn't his. He was the strong and respected general, but he wasn't put onto a pedestal, like the heroes of the Scouring. He was 'one of them', who just happened to have a few weird powers and more responsibilities. By working with everyone, that extended to Elphin and myself. I was the borderline-insane, but respected tactician. Elphin was the calm strategist, who ensured Roy and I could perform our 'miraculous' feats with the maximum efficiency, and he was also the kind king who listened.

It was good. But the amount of time these meetings ate up was enough to make me grumble quietly about them anyway as I left a Leadership Meeting with Roy and Elphin to head to my tent and prepare for a War Council. Scouts had already been sent ahead to check the area based on rumors of a Bishop-Turned-Commander of Bern operating in these parts.

I sighed as I entered my tent, closing my eyes for a brief moment to simply rest them. Then I shook my head and turned to my desk, prepared to work. I smiled, though, when I saw one of Klein's love notes resting on top of a carefully stacked pile of paper. A quick check proved that the papers were everything I needed for the War Council. He had taken the time to organize it for me so that I could actually have a break. So, I smiled softly and picked up the note to read it.

Another reason why I complained about the meetings was that it left me less time for all of my loved ones. Klein and I might have confessed and were a couple now, but we'd barely had time to say two words to each other, and there were just times where we did have a few moments, but we felt like we were neglecting our other loved ones. So, we started simply exchanging letters, left on our desks whenever we had enough of a free moment.

Mine always ended with a little Sacaean proverb or some silly anecdote from our past to get him to laugh. His always ended in poems, probably because that was the traditional way to court someone in Etruria. They made me smile.

When I finished reading it, I tucked it into my treasure box, the one I'd 'inherited' from Dad. I'd moved the ribbon into there, as well as Mom's earrings and the notes from her. It just felt right to keep them all together.

This did lead me to a minor problem. I actually had free time. I hadn't had any in so long that I had no idea what to do. So, first, I composed a reply to Klein, and went to drop it off in his tent. I knew
he wouldn't be there; Elphin had wanted to talk to all four of his generals after our Leadership meeting, so he'd be there. From there, I went to check on Roy, Lilina, Sue, Clarine, Rutger, and others in the group. Most of them were busy, so I left them little notes too and went on my way. Before long, I found myself at the practice grounds, and saw that Tate and Miredy were drilling the fliers. Miredy handled the physical weapons; Tate handled the magic.

I waited until there was a break and then walked over to talk to Tate. "Hey," I called, waving. She instantly smiled and waved back, before drinking some water. "How's it going?"

"Everyone seems to be doing well," she answered with a little shrug. "Miredy and I figured out a way to combine the drills Ilia and Bern use. It helps the Bernese soldiers move a little faster and helps we Ilians in putting a little more power behind physical blows."

"How are the mounts handling the magic?"

"The wyverns balk a little more, but since they're more vulnerable to it, it makes sense." She pointed to Zeiss, who was chatting with Miredy. "Zeiss seems to have gotten his wyvern to cooperate the most, and he's showing the rest the tricks he uses."

"That's good to hear." Flying mages were definitely one of our biggest advantages. "That the wyverns dislike it certainly does favor Zephiel not getting his own fliers to cooperate."

"Miredy says she doubts Zephiel will be able to get most of our unique tactics because Bern is very prideful at being 'the best' at warfare." She rolled her eyes and I snickered. "So, while the soldiers closest to Zephiel might switch because he makes a compelling argument, the soldiers outside his direct influence likely won't."

"So, essentially, we're likely to be fine until we're actually in Bern." By that point, we hopefully would have ways to counter it. "Oh, right, this all reminds me. Didn't you switch to light magic recently?"

"I did." She nodded, smiling slightly. "I have an equal talent between light and anima magic, but I prefer the former. It's sharper, faster. I can cover my people better."

"That works for me." I smiled back. "I just have to keep track of who wields what. I don't want to give you an order to fireball when you don't have a fire tome."

"And, of course, making sure the numbers are accurate help us with getting supplies." She shrugged. "That's another reason too. We have far too many anima magic users, and barely any light or dark magic users."

"That is true." Elen and Saul were learning, but they were permanently assigned to infirmary duty as our best healers. So, out of those who actually were on the front lines, we had Guinevere and a flier who used light magic. We barely had more dark magic users: Ray, Sofiya, and a couple of the fliers. Meanwhile, every other magic user in our army wielded anima. "We're running low on anima tomes."

"We do have some vendors further into Ilia that specialize in tomes. We can buy some then." She grew silent then, eyes narrowed slightly. "You know…"

" Hmm?"

"As we get deeper into Ilia, we'll learn who of Ilia sided with Bern." Her eyes grew hard as she looked to the horizon. "Some might be willing to trust the other countries, but I think many just think they'll be choosing between two tyrants."
"Some will then choose Bern because they're better at war." It was easy to fill in the gaps from there. More war meant more pay for a mercenary and Ilia depended on that system. "Tate, you have any idea how high tariffs are for Ilia?"

"I don't, but Zealot will." Her eyes lit up as she caught my thought. "Oh, we can work on lowering that! That'll lessen the strain on the mercenaries!" The unspoken words were obvious. 'Those that survive will not have to do five people's work to make up for those who died.'

"We do have many leaders here." I smiled warmly. "Most of us are 'on break' right now, but it seems like lately, our breaks are really making plans for peace, so do you want to go track down Zealot?"

"As soon as I finish this drill." She smiled back. "I don't want to skimp them."

"Of course. May I watch? We have time before the War Council."

"Of course."

Our first real battle in the cold was not as much of a disaster as I feared. However, it also wasn't going as well as I could have hoped.

"I wish I could say that you two have done enough," I murmured, smiling ruefully at Miredy and Zeiss. Not only did we have the cold to deal with, but the enemy soldiers were more than eager to burn down villages, meaning we had to move fast. So, all of my tactics had fliers handling the brunt of the assault. Normally, this wouldn't be a problem, but we had ballistae, archers, and status stave assholes who loved using fliers for target practice. "But unless your wyverns are experiencing hypothermia like some of the others, I simply can't."

"We'd be insulted if you did," Miredy reassured with a kind smile. She seemed perfectly fine, not bothered by the cold at all despite opting against wearing some more covering armor for warmth. "Zeiss and I are fine."

"Yes, we are," Zeiss agreed. Still, he gave her a sheepish look. "I'm sorry for earlier, though."

"It's okay, Zeiss. I'll keep you safe." Miredy's smile turned a little sad, and her eyes unfocused as if she was remembering something. But then she shook her head and turned her attention back to me. "So, your orders, my lady?"

"They're unchanged," I replied, curious about what happened. I decided that Zeiss must've gotten ambushed. "We still need to confirm that the villages are safe while the main army presses forward towards the castle. Shanna's group in particular was under siege. Prioritize her."

"Understood," Miredy replied. She bowed and moved to her wyvern. "Up we go."

"Good luck." I watched as her wyvern launched herself into the air, and then noticed that Zeiss didn't immediately follow, just gripped the reins of his own wyvern tightly. "Something wrong?"

"No, it's nothing," he immediately dismissed. I gave him a droll look and he sighed. "It's… nothing for you to worry about. I just… can't accept simply being protected. I want to become stronger so that I can protect her too, since she's already hurting so much."

"Is that so?" I murmured. I could understand that. That sad smile… "I wish I could promise you both more."
"We made our choices."

"You didn't get much of a choice."

"I could've left after you got me out. I chose to stay and see what vision Princess Guinevere has." He sighed. "I just wish things weren't so painful." He shook his head. "I'm heading up."

"Stay safe." I stepped back as his wyvern launched into the air, kicking up snow. It wasn't long at all before he caught up to Miredy and the two of them were back to the fight.

I watched them for a moment before turning my attention back to the army. The dense forests were slowing us down considerably, to the point that burning them had been considered a very serious option. Ultimately, we decided against it. The wind would make the fire unpredictable, and we didn't want the Ilians to think we planned on razing the country to the ground.

Still, the whole thing was almost boring. Most of the fighting was with the fliers. The rest of us tried to make it to the castle, fighting some soldiers along the way.

"Lady Irene!" Fiona's voice echoed through the trees long before I actually saw her step out from behind a trunk. "Last of the ballistae is seized," she informed me, smiling. "Fae got a little enthusiastic about it, though."

"Did she?" I asked, debating how to take it. I decided to be amused. After all, Fiona was smiling. "Is she okay?"

"Well, we had to pick out a few arrows." Fiona snickered. "She got really into a breath attack, lost her balance, and promptly fell on her butt, squashing a few of the enemy soldiers. So, their weapons got a little stuck in the feathers and scales."

The mental image alone was enough to make me laugh. "Oh, Father Sky, I almost wish I had seen that!"

"Just almost?" Her eyes danced with humor. "Regardless, Fae is going to be making her way back to here soon, and she'll want a hug."

"Of course." I wasn't surprised. Fae appreciated hugs a lot, especially when things went a little... weird. Having to have arrows plucked from your ass because you sat on some enemies was definitely weird. "Should I stay here or go greet her or-?"

Fiona stiffened suddenly and lunged, dragging me to the ground and shielding me as the wind suddenly roared, whipping up the snow to blind us. I heard the sound of water freezing suddenly and wondered if Roy had done something. But when the wind died and I brushed the snow off my face and Fiona's arm, I decided it likely wasn't. After all, I was pretty sure Roy would've warned me before freezing the river.

"That was running water," I whispered, staring at the ice. Some of the braver, or more foolish, soldiers carefully walked across it, testing the weight. "It was freezing cold so we couldn't swim it, but it had been running." That was why we didn't have Roy freeze it in the first place. It took too much effort for him to keep it up. "A cold snap that could flash-freeze river should've killed us all."

"Not necessarily," Fiona murmured. She kept a protective grip on me even as we both sat up. "If a user of dark magic got hold of one of Aenir's spells..."

"Aenir?" That was Roy's grandmother. "She had spells?"
"Oh, yes, but most of them could only be used by other dragons. Someone of dark magic could replicate it, though." She bit her lip, thinking. "Aenir had one trick that let her pick and choose what her magic froze. She liked it best because then she didn't have to worry so much about the power of her spells."

"...Can Roy?"

"I don't know." Slowly, she let go of me and helped me stand. "Well, this will speed things up." She nodded to where a few mounted soldiers were actually leading their horses across. "Avoid the trees and cross the ice."

"That's assuming we can cross without falling on our faces or, worse, our weapons." I could see a few near misses already. "I need to go help with that. When Fae comes, tell her that I'll give her extra hugs when things settle."

"I will." She gave me a worried look. "Stay safe."

"We'll try."

Thanks to the frozen rivers, the castle was seized before long and we quickly set up everyone inside the walls, blissful to have strong protections from the cold. We sent scouts to check the place for anything and, before long, we found a prisoner in the dungeons. Roy and I met with her, leaving Elphin to deal with the aftermath of the battle.

"So, you are the one who used the spell," Roy murmured. Both of us did our best to be polite. The prisoner, Niime, was an old woman, likely as old as Yodel, and we both knew that a magic user that old likely knew thirty thousand ways to deal with rude children. "Why did you only freeze the rivers?"

"As I told Martel, there was nothing that suggested what the spell would do," she replied slowly. She shrugged, clearly having no cares about it. "There was a line about 'choosing targets', but he wouldn't listen. He wanted rain to flood the rivers. With how cold Ilia is, though, he would've only gotten hail anyway."

"That would've harmed both armies, though more-so ours than the enemy." The enemy had a place to retreat to. "But why would you join the army in the first place?"

"Bern has something I want to study." She paused, gauging our reactions. We made sure to be politely interested. "Ah, what good children you are. It's so nice to see respect for the elderly."

"We try, ma'am." Roy nodded. "Might I ask what you wished to study?"

"The dragons."

"...Is that so?" Roy kept his voice neutral. "And what have you learned?"

"Sadly, nothing that satisfies my curiosity." She shrugged, smiling slightly. "I do believe, though, that Bern has resurrected the Demon Dragon."

"We have determined this already. The presence of the War Dragons, artificial lives, proves it."

"Truly?" She sounded impressed. "I really must see what scholars you have. It took me ages to find even that much."
"We are very lucky indeed." Roy shrugged. "We have fought dragons before, and even had one help us in Aquelia."

"Interesting, very interesting." She chuckled, her smile growing. "I wish to learn more. Elder magic is the magic of knowledge. I am certain I can be of assistance."

"This is a campaign, not a simple trip of pleasure. So long as you are all right with that, I have no quarrel."

"Good, good." She laughed again. "I look forward to seeing your army's continued successes." She walked off then, clearly ending the conversation.

I waited until she was gone and the door shut before I deadpanned, "So, how long do you think we can keep Fae, Sofiya, and Fiona away from her?"

"We'll leave it to them whether or not they wish to associate with her," Roy sighed. He rubbed his temple, and slowly relaxed his shoulders. "I, for one, don't want her to know I'm quarter-dragon, or at least talk to her about it. I'm sure she's a nice lady, but I have a feeling that when it comes to knowledge…"

"She'd think of you as an object to be studied, and not as a person who struggles." I had that same feeling. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but it was certainly uncomfortable. "I think I'll talk to Igrene. Sofiya and Fiona can hold their own, but I'm a little worried for Fae."

"I'll go talk to her, actually." Roy smiled. "Princess Guinevere wanted to talk to you."

"Is that so?" I wondered why. Was it our earlier conversation or something else? "Then I'll go find her. Tell Igrene that if she wants, Fae can stay in my tent."

"I will." His smile turned sheepish. "You mind making me something for headaches?"

"I've got a bunch of it already made." I shrugged. "I should just keep a steady supply. It's made from a lot of easy to find herbs, even here in Ilia, and I've a feeling most of those on the War Council are going to need it. It'll free up the healers, and I find the work soothing."

"I'll work with the others to figure out a good 'spot' in our camps after I talk to Igrene." He turned away, waving. "See you later, Irene."

"Try not to work too hard." I had meant it as genuine advice, but my tone make it sardonic instead, and Roy laughed at the absurdity of the thought. We were all working too hard.

So, shaking my head, I left the room too and hunted for Guinevere. Elen helpfully pointed me towards a balcony away from where the main group was congregated, and I found Guinevere there, staring towards the horizon. Based on how the sun was somewhere behind us, I realized she was looking towards the east, towards Bern.

"Hey," I called softly. She squeaked and whirled, smiling sheepishly when she saw it was me. "What are you doing here, freezing your ass off in the cold?"

"I am wearing a very warm coat," she replied with great dignity. Her smile softened. "Besides, I'm not that averse to the cold. It snows in Bern during the winter, especially when you head closer to the mountains. We have a Winter Ball every year in Bern, actually, as part of our Midwinter celebrations." She laughed, eyes lighting up. "Those are always incredibly fun. We dress up in masks and everything."
"I'm sure it is." I moved to stand beside her, looking down at the still frozen rivers. "Roy said you wanted to talk to me. Do you still?"

"Yes." She sighed, her breath fogging in front of her face. "Just… give me a moment."

"Of course." I waited in silence, looking up at the sky. But it was cloudy, just as it had been before, with a gentle snow falling down and dusting everything in sight.

Finally, though, she took a shuddering breath. "I've… been thinking on what you said," she mumbled. She still looked directly to the east. "About becoming queen."

"And what have you thought?"

"...I thought about how no one had ever offered me the crown before." Her hands shook as she crossed her arms. "Not even Father had… he offered the crown to my future, imaginary husband, but not to me." She hesitated before adding, "please do not ask about that part just yet. I can't…"

"Of course." I thought of the rumors Roy fretted over and all that I had heard. I could take a few guesses, and I could not blame her for wanting to avoid talking about it. "So?"

"I still don't think I can rule." Her voice was soft. "But… I can't avoid it… just because…" She shook her head. "I made the choice to go to Lycia in an attempt to end the war. I do not wish to run away from the consequences of that choice. I do not wish to leave reconstruction to someone else."

"I love Bern. I love my home. So, even if all of them hate me, even if all of them think that I was just an opportunistic bitch, a bastard child who subverted the laws to reach above her station… I will help them recover."

"Guinevere…" I might have said more, but footsteps caught my ear, so I turned instead and saw Wuotan walking up. "Oh, hey, Wuotan."

"Hello," Wuotan replied, bowing slightly in greeting. He smiled when Guinevere smiled. "Forgive me, but I couldn't help but overhear."

"Oh, no, it's fine," Guinevere reassured. She laughed a little, and I thought her face was red from more than the cold. "It's nothing I'm keeping secret. It's just Irene was the one who put the thought in my head."

"So, of course, you wished for her to be the first to hear your answer." His gaze became serious. "However, if I may point out something?"

"Yes?"

"Are you unaware of the old law of Bern that allows younger children to, legally, seize control of the throne from an elder sibling?" His smile became bitter as her expression blanked. "I see that you are."

"What old law?" She tilted her head, and I saw her shaking again. "What is it? Who set it up?"

"Ultimately, it was a law of the 'old' kingdom, the one that ruled the east before the Scouring. You won't know the name; it was forgotten within a few years of the Scouring anyway." He shook his head. "Hartmut, however, chose to keep it in specifically for circumstances where the eldest child, and thus the 'proper' heir, was not the best ruler for the country."

"What is it then?"
"It's a duel." Something about the way he said the sentence made my blood run cold, to the point that the snow felt warm. Guinevere outright froze. "As a child of Hartmut's blood, you hold the right to challenge Zephiel to a duel with the crown as the wager."

"I…" Guinevere's eyes widened and she started trembling. "I…"

"Guinevere," I whispered, touching her shoulder. She nearly jumped out of her skin from fright, so I shifted to just look at her instead. "Guinevere, listen to me." I waited until she focused on me before continuing. 'I will not ask you to do that. I will *never* ask you. So, do not feel forced.'

"It is, of course, simply a choice," Wuotan added. He looked sympathetic. "Perhaps it is cruel of me to even offer the choice, but I feel it would be crueler to make the choice for you. You are an adult, capable of making your own choices."

"I…" Guinevere rasped. She coughed to clear her throat and finally settled on sulking. "I'm sure I'll thank you for it in a few weeks."

"That's rather quick. I expected a few months." He smiled warmly. "You should rest."

"Yes, I should." She turned to me. "This… doesn't shake my earlier resolve. For the record."

"I know," I reassured. She smiled in relief. "Go on. Talk to Elen or someone."

"Maybe I'll give Zeiss advice for courting Elen, actually." She giggled, and stepped away. "I'll talk to you later."

"Until then." I waited until I was certain she was out of earshot before giving Wuotan a droll look. "I know very well that your little comment was also directed towards me."

"Yes, it was," Wuotan admitted without hesitation. He moved to stand beside me, pointedly taking the side Guinevere hadn't been standing on. "It is, after all, your choice as well."

"I made mine." I sighed, leaning against the railing. "I'm giving my 'king' a victory, and I'm ensuring that my 'queens' are prepared to battle." The more I thought about it, the more I realized Lilina and Guinevere really were the 'queens' of the board. Both were powerful magic users, with Lilina having the raw power and Guinevere having the ability to use two different kinds. Both also gave the army legitimacy. The core, the heart, of the army of Lycian, and Lilina's presence showed that Roy had the support of that heart. Guinevere was the Princess of Bern, heir to its ruler. With her, you could argue that the army was 'saving' Bern from a tyrannical ruler. "I am ensuring that as many of my knights, my bishops, my rooks, and my pawns as possible make it home, and ensure that they devastate the enemy." Every one of us played an important part, even the people I only knew as faceless soldiers. I would never forget that.

"And then you will retire to Etruria with your lover and help rebuild the continent." Wuotan laughed softly. "It's admirable."

"Well, thank you, I suppose." I sighed, drooping. "I hate that I can think of everyone as chess pieces."

"You keep that they are human in mind." He patted my shoulder. "You're fine."

"I wish I could believe that." I wished I knew how I learned to think that way. Mom didn't; her logbook was testament for how she never could. Did I pick it up from Dad? Was it just something uniquely me? I had no idea. "But I need to keep moving. If thinking of everything as chess helps keep us safe, then I'll keep with it, even if it makes me uncomfortable."
"That is all you can do." He suddenly laughed. "So, we have another scholar?"

"Niime is rather impressed by what we know." I looked up at him. "When do I get to hear how you know a lot?"

"Oh, eventually, I'll give you an answer." He nudged my back. "Come, though. You have work to do."

"That I do." I looked over the land, and groaned at all the snow. "I hate the cold."

"You'll hate it more before long." He sounded so serious that I felt myself grow afraid. "Based on the weather, we're due for an early winter, much earlier than the Ilians originally anticipated."

The very thought made me freeze and it felt like it took forever to get my voice to work enough to ask, "How bad?"

"There will be a blizzard before long." His voice was quiet. "And if the Ilian knights who side with Bern don't take advantage of that, I'll eat my cloak."

"...The next battle is going to be rough." I had to get to Roy. I had to confirm this with the locals. I had… "I need to get to work."

Father Sky, please… please let us survive this and not get trapped. Please.

Notes on Niime

The Hermit of the Mountain, a wise and knowledgeable woman. Uncle Pent would freak if he heard. Her age, however, makes it harder for her to fight. Her greatest asset is her knowledge.

Apparently, she's Hugh's grandmother. This makes so many things about Hugh make so much sense.

Studying the dragons, and is impressed by how much we already know. It's enough to make me wonder who Wuotan is, really.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: This is Chapter 18 of the Ilia route, one of the few times where a weather change in game actually helps your main army (though, it's often too late to help you reach the villages). In game, Niime is the one who first mentions the demon dragon, and that the dragons have returned, but we did that way earlier, so her job as "Miss Exposition of the main plot" isn't there. In game, you also get a different conversation with Guinevere detailing the past, but I'm saving all of those discussions for the Sacae route. Miredy and Zeiss's scene is based off of their C support.

Next Chapter - Bitter Cold
Wuotan proved correct. Winter was coming early to Ilia, for the first time in decades. While we still had time before getting 'trapped', we wouldn't be able to avoid blizzards. The Ilians reassured that they'd be 'weaker', but the first blizzard we encountered was bad enough. It was clear just why Ilia had never been conquered before. 'General Winter' gave a severe disadvantage to invaders, and the Ilians knew how to take advantage of it.

Worse still, we were leaving the forest and entering the mountains, meaning that fliers held all the advantages. We were definitely getting ambushed. The question is only 'when'.

"Must you tease me?!" Lilina laughed, trying in vain to hide how red her face was. She squirmed as I poked her cheek. "No, we haven't kissed."

"Yet," I finished, grinning at her before switching back to brushing her hair. I should've been working, but I needed a bit of a break. "You haven't kissed Roy yet."

"Irene!" Her face went even redder, matching Roy's hair actually. "Meanie!"

"You knew you opened yourself up for teasing when you came in here." I brushed out the last of her tangles, and pinned her headband in place. The blizzard outside howled, reminding me of why we had stopped here for the day. "Have you thought about changing your clothes?"

"I think a lot of us are going to change our looks either here in Edessa, or at Bulgar." She leaned back and smiled. "I like my clothes, and we keep them clean, but all the battles and all the scouring for blood are starting to make everyone's clothes threadbare. Elphin sent for some from Etruria, but that's definitely not reaching us until we make it to Bulgar." She tilted her head. "Why? It seems like a random change of subject."

"I can see where your clothes have been mended." They'd been mended well, but they'd been fixed so many times that it was obvious anyway. "None of us placed much importance on clothes when packing for Ilia." We had focused on medical equipment, and things to protect us from the cold. "But Lalum pointed out that we should look 'nice' when we invade Bern."

"That way we look impressive." She straightened, humming as she thought. "Everyone's armor needs work too. Dents need to be banged out."

"Some pieces just need to be outright replaced." Weapons needed to be as well. We repaired and tended to what we could, but some of the swords had been sharpened so much, they were going to break with one good hit. "We'll have to restock in Edessa." Food supplies were becoming a problem. We hunted and foraged, but with winter here, both were scarce.

"Well, I always did want to lose some weight."

"Lilina, you're fifteen. Your focus should be on being healthy." I wasn't going to point out that 'not eating' wasn't a good way to lose weight. I knew she was simply trying to joke about a serious
thing, so that she could keep calmer. "Furthermore…" I trailed off as I heard rapid footsteps approaching the tent. "Oh, Father Sky, what happened now?"

I had expected a panting page delivering some sort of frantic message about an argument or a needed meeting. I got a blood-splattered, exhausted page with wild eyes, giving me a message that seemed unnaturally calm: "Lady Irene, you're needed at the infirmary."

I bolted from my tent, barely bothering to throw on a cloak as I stepped out into biting wind and stinging snow. The blizzard was even worse than earlier, but still, I ran. People who had the misfortune to be outside stared, open mouthed, as I blitzed past them, slipping and sliding in the ice and mud, to get to the infirmary as soon as possible. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw others boil out of their tents, desperately trying to tug on clothes and even shoes as they followed me to the tent.

I stopped dead in my tracks when I made it there. I finally understood why Zealot had said the battle had gone 'well' after Remy. Back then, while there had been a lot of injured and even more dead, they could at least be set up in the infirmary tent and laid in neat rows respectively.

But here? Here, the injured overflowed the tent and were set up haphazardly wherever there was space as other, less injured, people desperately tried to put up some sort of shelter to keep the snow off. Blood was everywhere. The snow on the ground was a mucky crimson-brown, and turning more crimson by the second. Scarlet stains patterned everyone's clothing and bandages. The dead were stripped down and set to the side in piles to make more room for the injured; their clothes were ripped apart and boiled to provide more bandages.

I thought of all the descriptions the Saint Elimine Church had for hell, and decided it was paradise compared to what I was seeing now.

"Who was hit?" I asked. My voice was treacherously calm, but the relieved looks the soldiers nearby gave me told me they were glad someone was able to keep an even head. We'd see how that went later, when the shock faded. "What happened?"

"It was our company, Lady Irene…" Shanna limped over, one eye glittering with determination. The other was hidden under a bandage. Half of her head, in fact, was bandaged, as well as her neck, stomach, and legs. One arm was in a sling, a clear indication of a broken arm or broken collar bone. She hobbled with a makeshift crutch, so I wondered if she had broken a leg or ankle. "Sorry, 'Second Company'," she clarified. It still took me a moment to remember what, and more importantly, who, she was talking of. The army was large enough that we started separating everyone into companies. Those I knew by name or, rather, those Roy knew by name, were put into the leadership roles. It was the same thing as before, but more 'formal'.

The 'Second Company' was led by Deke, with Shanna, Lot, and Wade as sub-leaders.

"What happened?" I repeated. I reached over and helped her sit in a chair. Her bandages were stained crimson, and I saw the bruises mottling her back. "Who got you?"

"Don't know 'who', but I know what," she answered. She didn't sound like herself. She sounded tired, and in pain, when I was used to her smiling and laughing at everything. "We got barraged by ballistae. Not a big deal. We got the shields up, and when it stopped, we set the fliers to scout ahead. But as soon as we were cleared…" Her voice caught and she coughed to clear it. "The spears came. Spears and magic."

"Magic?"
"Yeah." She nodded, and winced as a cut on her neck reopened. I dabbed the excess blood off with my sleeve. "I don't think they have trained flier mages, but they likely flew mages up with them to simulate the same thing."

"What happened then?"

"The ground forces got slaughtered." She nodded over to where two soldiers were being particularly hysterical as the healers tried to tend to them. "Those two… Captain… Deke protected them, but he's bad off."

"It's Deke, and he still needs to keep a promise to me. He knows very well that I would hunt him down even in Mother Earth's meadows and drag him back so that he can keep it." My light tone made her smile at last. "What got you?"

"More arrows." She drooped. "We heard the screams and turned back to try and help. Then we got…" She shuddered and her voice caught again. I shifted to hug her gently, all too aware that she was the same age as Roy, Lilina, Clarine, and Sue. "I fell. My pegasus actually tumbled me off. Saved my life, and his. Most of the rest…"

I had so many responses. 'You did well' and 'it isn't your fault' stood out. But neither of those felt right to say, not when she looked so fragile, not when she was covered in bandages and bruises.

So, instead, I whispered, "I am glad you still live, Shanna." I kissed the top of her head, just as Dad would do, whenever I woke up from a nightmare. "Listen to the healers."

"I will," she promised. Her voice was thick with unshed tears, and I knew it was hitting her, all at once, how close to death she'd been, and how many had died. Even if she was a mercenary (in training), it had to be startling. "…Thank you…"

"Always, Shanna. Do not be afraid to come to me, if you need a shoulder and cannot find Tate." I ruffled her hair and went to Elen to offer my assistance.

She snatched me by the arm before I could even open my mouth and it wasn't long before I realized that she and Saul had recruited anyone and everyone with any sort of idea of how to tend to a wounded person. Father Sky, even the ones who specifically treated the horses and those who just helped forage for herbs were here, dragged into the work.

But that was the last thought I had for a long while. My world narrowed to my hands and the injuries they tried to fix with herbs, needle and thread, and bandages. It didn't even matter just who I was working on, and after a while, I felt like I was in a battle again, too tired to see anything and forced to trust instinct and training because damn if my brain had enough energy to try and process anything.

At some point while I worked, the world turned grey and spun. Then, the next thing I knew, I was blinking blearily at a dozing Guinevere. Slowly, feeling as if my skin was going to stretch and crack from how bloody I was, I sat up and glanced around, trying to figure out where I was.

"You're awake." Elen came over and crouched down next to me, giving me a small smile as she passed me some water. "You ended up working yourself into a faint," she explained. I nearly groaned at the mere thought. That had to have been fantastic. "You saved Saul and me some trouble, doing that. We were debating getting out the sleep staff to knock you, and some others, out. We did end up doing that to Clarine."

"Please tell me it was discreet."
"Oh, no, not at all." She laughed weakly at my groan. "Regardless, after you fainted, Klein caught you and brought you to a different tent."

"So I didn't even get to enjoy being carried by my boyfriend?"

"Would you have let him if you were conscious?" She managed another laugh as I scowled. "Miredy got Princess Guinevere to come here to rest 'for a brief moment', and moved you to rest in her lap instead of the ground. That's when she passed out."

"I see." I finally downed the water, coughing a little as I choked. "Well, where do you-?"

"It's done." She shook her head and took the cup back from me. "You didn't pass out until you tended to the last of the ones Saul and I threw at you. What few were left were tended to." She smiled slightly. "If you don't believe me, I will point out that I am talking to you instead of running around like a headless chicken."

"Chickens can run around headless?" I shook my head at that weird mental image. "I'll take your word for it. We don't really have chickens in the Sacae."

"It's a popular saying in Bern. We might be a mainly military country, but you can't raise and keep an army without a steady supply of food, so we have extensive farmlands." She held her hands out to me and helped me stand up. "You should change your clothes."

I glanced down at me and sighed. "I need to just burn these." I eyed them critically. "Though, can they be reduced to bandages?"

"Your cloak might, but I think the rest of your clothes are just too stained." She sighed, shaking her head. "What we need, though, is shelter. The blizzard has cleared up for now, but every single Ilian has sworn that we're going to be hit by another one before long."

"We're in the calm in the middle of the storm." I shook my head. "I need to get moving. If we were ambushed, then they know we're here."

"Get a bath before you do anything substantial." She gave me a stern look. "I don't want you catching, or spreading, diseases. We're having hard enough of a time, as you well know." She nudged me towards the flap. "Go on."

"Yes, ma'am." I managed a smile and she softened to smile back. "Can you or Saul get me numbers later?"

"Of course." She hesitated before ducking her head. "We're likely going to lose the whole company." That was… because of how we had the army set up, each of the companies was made up of anywhere between 150 to 250 people. The Second was one of our larger ones, if I recalled correctly, so the death total was going to be closer to 250…

Oh, Father Sky. We hadn't even gotten to the 'real' part of the battle yet.

She turned away then, likely to check on Guinevere. I lingered a bit, just in case she thought of something else, but she made a shooing motion, so I took the hint and stumbled outside.

The sudden sunshine made me wince and I squinted and rubbed at my watering eyes, waiting for them to adjust. When they did, I wished they hadn't. The injured stretched on and on, filling up the immediate area easily. Some of the soldiers, those who hadn't been dragged into the initial treatment frenzy, were helping with feeding, washing, and setting up temporary shelters that could hopefully keep the worst of the cold off of them.
The dead were still piled high. Soldiers lingered around, worried eyes checking if they could see someone they knew in the pile. That, alone, told me we had some unaccounted for. Some were missing in action, and likely would never be recovered. It was entirely possible there wasn't anything left of them to recover.

I saw Tate among those looking, and, though her face remained stoic, her tired, worried eyes told me exactly who she was trying to find. So, I made myself walk over to her, feeling as if my legs had been replaced with blocky, clumsy stones.

Thankfully, I didn't even have to catch her attention. She saw me instantly and, perhaps longing for something to do, she immediately snatched my arm and dragged me over to the bathing tents. She had me set up with a warm bath before long and all but threw me in, confiscating my clothes. She promptly returned with a towel, some clothes that I thought might actually be hers, another cloak, and some soap. Then she fussled over me for a bit while I waited for the heat to wake me up a little more and I could actually scrub the first layer of blood off me. When it was done, she helped me change the water for a second soak.

It was only then that I felt coherent and human again, and as soon as I did, I turned to her and whispered, "Shanna was alive, last I saw her."

"Was she?" she murmured. She gave me a tired, but thankful, smile. "I'm glad. I helped out where I could, since all mercenaries are given basic medical training, but since I just had basics, I was tending to the minor cases, and wasn't allowed to where the more serious ones were."

"She's the one who gave me the report. She was bruised, bloody, and had a broken arm and leg." I closed my eyes and pictured how small and sad she'd looked. "She was worried about Deke."

"General Klein told me that Deke should make a full recovery, though he has more scars now." She smiled slightly as I sighed in relief. "You were worried too."

"Yeah..." I shook my head and glanced at my arms. "Okay, do I still have blood on me, or am I just still seeing it?"

"The latter. It's out of your hair too." She passed me a towel. "You want?"

"Yeah." I stood and took the towel, drying myself off. "Did you get me some of your clothes?"

"My tent was closer, and you and I are about the same height. With you being so tired, I didn't want you taking a bath without someone nearby to keep an eye."

"Right, there was a good chance that I could've hurt myself." I slipped on the clothes she passed me, noting how warm and soft they were. Ilians took very good care of their clothes. "Besides, now that I think about it, I think most of my stuff is in the laundry. Sue wanted to wash all of them since we had an 'early' stop."

"I did see some clothes drying by her tent, so she might've just finished when everything happened." She looked hesitant before nodding. "Are you up for being serious?"

"I think I need something to drink first." I smiled slightly. "Besides, the bathing tent isn't really good for serious discussions."

"Point." She laughed softly. "Then let's head to my tent."

"Sounds good." I pulled on the long socks she'd brought me, before slipping on my boots. They had blood ingrained into the soles, but were otherwise rather intact, so I went with the comfort of
wearing my own shoes. Once they were on, I followed Tate to her tent. When there, we found that someone had left a couple of packets of 'hot chocolate', a luxury Ilian treat. I guessed it was Merlinus, as I couldn't think of anyone else who could've even secured it.

Tate certainly seemed rather chipper about having it, and set about making both of us a mug. I sat down at her table and made myself relax. My brain was back to thinking again, and I went over everything Shanna had told me to get a feel for just who we were fighting. I had conflicting feelings about them. On the one hand, I hated them for doing all of this to our soldiers. On the other hand, I couldn't help but admire the efficiency, brutal as it had been. Then there was the part of me that was angry, and not just at the pain they had inflicted; I was angry that they had stolen my tactics. Still worse was the tiny part of me that was flattered that someone else had used my tactics, even if it wasn't quite the same, and even if it had been used to kill the people I wanted to keep safe.

It all made my stomach turn into knots. The only things that saved me from throwing up was the knowledge that I hated the person more than I admired them, that I was angrier at the pain than at them for 'stealing' my idea, and that the flattery was drowned by how much I wanted to see them fall.

"Here." Tate set down the mugs and jolted me out of my thoughts. "They should be cool enough to drink now," she told me as she sat down. She sipped her own mug and smiled. "Oh, this is a good mix."

"I've never had it before," I replied. Still, I took a sip and couldn't help but smile. "But I do like chocolate."

"I'm surprised. We get it from Etruria." She got a thoughtful look. "Then again, I think they got it from the Western Isles."

"Then, knowing my family, this never made it anywhere near there." It did beg the question of why I never had it when I was in Aquelia, but maybe Mom had steered me away from it. "Still, it's good. With luck, this can help the Isles recover."

"Very true." Her smile warmed before it dropped entirely. "Of course, the whole point of moving here had been to be serious."

"Yes." Still, I took a deliberate sip, and savored the taste. The warmth was soothing. "Do you know…?"

"Who did it?"

"That was going to be my… oh… tenth question, I think. But I'm guessing you know what all happened, if you have an idea of who did it."

"Most of the Ilians know because this tactic is favored by a specific captain." Her eyes were hard. "Captain Sigune." The name was familiar. "My sister's best friend and rival, and my teacher." That was why, then.

"Oh, good, I didn't want to be the one to bring that up." Both Tate and I leapt to our feet at the voice. She lunged for her lance and tossed me spare so that I was armed. It was only after we did all of this that we realized the speaker had been Zealot. "Hello, you two," he greeted, completely unperturbed by our reaction. He absently sipped from his own mug, and I wondered if it was the same drink. Did the whole camp have some? "Might I sit?"
"Ah, of course," Tate mumbled, ducking her head shyly. She glanced at me, and noticed my grip. "You know how to use a lance."

"I'm better with a bow, but I know a few tricks," I answered. I slowly sat down and leaned the lance against my chair before taking my mug again. "Considering all of my work, though, I think 'a few tricks' is the limit of my current training. If I added any more practicing to my schedule, I think I'd lose what little free time I have."

"And your work would suffer, because you need those little bits of free time in order to keep some form of sanity," Zealot agreed, smiling slightly. He shook his head when Tate offered him her chair, and instead sat on her bed. "Regardless, I figured this would be where I'd find both of you."

"How did you guess me?"

"You'd immediately ask either Tate or me whether we knew what had happened, and then gently lead into whether or not we knew who did it. It's how you are." His smile grew as I pouted. "General Roy is tending to the injured while Lord Elphin is playing to help soothe the army's spirits. Those are important jobs, but a tactician would need to gather immediate information."

"I'm not sure how much I like being predictable."

"It's good for the soldiers. It makes you reliable." He shook his head, and his smile fell for seriousness. "Regardless, this tactic is a favorite of Sigune. It's something she and Juno would argue about."

"Not that Juno really 'argues'," Tate murmured. She sat down at last and sipped her own hot chocolate. "It's more like they had 'intense discussions' over it before conceding that both sides had a point, and agreeing to disagree. It's how they are."

I glanced before the two of them and saw the pain in their faces. This was an old friend of the family. So, I asked, "do you want to sit out this battle?"

"I appreciate it, but no." Tate shook her head. "This cannot be a battle Ilians sit out in. Ilians inflicted this damage on our army, our allies."

"So, Ilians need to be the leading the charge," Zealot continued. His eyes were hard and serious. "Sigune might be my wife's best friend, but at the moment, she is an enemy. The Code dictates what we must do."

"...If you are certain, then I will provide the tactics to get that," I whispered. If they were both so resolved, I didn't have a right to tell them otherwise. "But you two will have to argue your case to Roy. I know he worries for your emotional health."

"We will." The words were a promise. "So, get ready. Sigune won't wait for us. As soon as the blizzards return, she'll strike."

"Then I'd best get ready," I sighed, shaking my head. "But I will finish my drink first. If you two can advise me on things to watch out for during a blizzard, I would be grateful."

This was going to be a very, very long day.

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Things that I could do without: reduced visibility, and stave assholes. Where was the enemy finding all these damn sleep and silence staves anyway?!
"Damn this snow..." I growled under my breath. The snow and ice battered us, and I swore I was going to get bruises. "I can barely see my hand in this."

"Did you say something?" Roy asked. He looked just plain fine in the cold, and I barely resisted the urge to grumble something about ice dragons. "The wind is howling."

"I did, but it was thinking aloud." I sighed, and pulled my cloak around me a little tighter. I didn't have my mare, because I didn't want to risk her injuring herself in this weather, but I regretted that now. She was warm. "Don't worry about it."

"Why not? It gives me something else to worry about." He turned his attention to the skies, and I followed. The battle had been raging for only a few moments, but it felt like eternity up there in the skies. We had disabled the ballistae, and the cavalry were breaking through the front, but everything held still up there.

From here, I saw Tate, leading the vanguard of fliers, and forced myself to relax. I tried to comfort myself by remembering that no one I knew by name had died yet, despite all logic dictated that one of them should've by now. But then my mind pointed out that they might've and I just didn't know. After all, there were some people I knew only by name, barely by face. Would I even know it, if they fell?

It wasn't a good thought, considering we were facing a pragmatic enemy. I thought I could see Sigune from here. Her armor and bridle were slightly fancier than the rest, and even from here, I could see the harshness in her posture. I could believe it was her.

"I think they're moving," Roy whispered, pointing up. I grit my teeth as I realized he was right. The two groups of fliers were beginning to fly towards each other. I held my breath as I saw Tate signal 'down', an obvious one. It was an Ilian one, so the enemy knew not only the sign, but what it meant. Instantly, Sigune led her forces above to escape and regroup. But while we had some fliers below, the bulk of our aerial forces had actually been above. They fell for our trap, and it was a brutal one, easily the most brutal I had ever thought of.

The Bernese soldiers in our group, especially the wyvern riders, had begged to be allowed to assist on the frontlines alongside the Ilians, and there was an advantage wyverns had over pegasi that I had never known until today, that apparently not even Mom had known: wyverns were bred to fly at higher altitudes than pegasi. They couldn't tolerate the cold as long, but a battle warmed them up enough for that not to be a problem. Their riders trained to ride, and fight, in those conditions. Wyverns were also known for their fierce loyalty, and it seemed like they didn't like what Sigune's soldiers had done anymore than the humans in our army did. They were out for blood, meaning that for every wyvern rider I had in the sky, I really had two fighters, ready and willing to rip the wings off of the enemy.

The bloody feathers that fell with the snow showed just how vicious Bernese and their wyverns could be. The bodies that fell after showed how resolved the Ilians and their pegasi were. The churned, but open path in front of us, giving us a straight shot to the fortress, showed how determined the Ilians and their cavalry were.

And this battle showed, more clearly than anything, how loyal all of them were to our army and alliance.

Roy and I joined in with the fighting, but it didn't last long. The main part of Sigune's forces had been her fliers, and by trapping them in a vertical pincer, we had torn them to shreds. Sigune herself fell quickly, thanks to Tate launching a brutal Divine spell to knock her clear off her pegasus. Down she fell, and Tate trailed after her, keeping just enough distance to make sure she
couldn't catch Sigune.

I watched their path down, and left Roy to command the forces to rout the enemy. I found them shortly after Sigune hit the ground and Tate had landed, kneeling next to her. To my surprise, she wasn't quite dead yet, though the blood trickling through the snow made it clear that she wasn't going to live for much longer.

I knelt beside her too, mostly so that I could see her face. I was surprised by how 'intact' she looked. I would've thought she had splattered, but I supposed reality often was unrealistic. Then again, maybe she would've if she had hit with an impact hard enough to kill her instantly, instead of her dying slowly.

"You…" she suddenly whispered. Her eyes were unfocused, but they had locked onto mine at some point during my studying. "You're back?" She smiled sweetly, too sweetly for how harsh she had appeared. "Hey… I know I'm not little anymore… but can you tell me about the princess in the tower again? I love that story… Juno told it… all the time, but we couldn't remember the ending… what was it…?"

I had no idea what she was talking about, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her that. "They lived happily ever after," I said instead. She laughed, the sound breathy and bloody. "They lived in peace."

"A happy ending, of course…" Her eyes closed. "I wish I could tell Juno…"

Two breaths later, and she died. As soon as she was, I gave Tate the most 'what the hell was that' look I could manage. She simply shrugged, shaking her head. She didn't know either. I thought about who else I could ask, before I decided it didn't matter. Well, it didn't matter to me, at least. It had mattered to her, and it gave her some measure of peace as she died. That was better than most soldiers had. That was better than what she had given some of our own.

I couldn't decide if I was angry at that or not. It was like when we saved those Bernese soldiers, way back in Arcadia. It felt like a betrayal to my own to find any sort of comfort in it, but at the same time, it felt like a betrayal to myself to be bitter about it.

You just couldn't win in a war.

Sigune had been operating out of a nearby fortress, so after the battle, we quickly seized it for our own army. The healers in particular were relieved; we'd lose less people to the cold. We already had lost many of the injured, and we added to their burden because of the battle.

I did a shift at the infirmary before being shooed out for another bath. After that and a change into clean clothes, I hunted down Roy and Elphin to request we move our 'normal' meeting to tomorrow. Both agreed with relief, so I knew the ambush and all the battles were starting to get to them too. After that, I talked to a page to look into how many people I knew by name were actually alive. To my infinite surprise, I'd been right; all of them were. Father Sky really must have some sort of plan for them, because some of them had been around since the first battle in Pherae.

With all of that settled, I made my way to the room I'd thrown my stuff in prior to going to the infirmary. When I opened the door, though, I could only stare. Everything was set up perfectly, which was a bit unusual. Normally, I had to ask a page to do it for me while I went to meetings. But that wasn't what made me pause. What did was that it wasn't just my stuff. Klein's things were in here too. I wondered if I'd thrown my stuff in without noticing it was occupied, but decided that wasn't it. Klein always took rooms closer to his soldiers, while I took rooms closer to Elphin and
Roy. In a fortress like this, that meant the complete other side of the building.

"Irene?" The voice made me turn, and I saw a frazzled Klein running up. "Sorry, I'm sure you're busy," he sighed, running a hand through his hair. Blood speckled his neck, a sign that he'd missed a spot in his own bath. "And I'm sorry for the weird question, but have you seen my stuff?"

"Yeah," I answered, pointing inside my room. He looked as confused as I felt. "Here."

"Pardon?" He peered inside and his eyes narrowed. "Now, why is that?"

"I have no idea. I was hoping you did."

"Not a clue."

"But we have plenty~!" Clarine's giggling voice answered all the questions in a heartbeat, and moving to face her showed she had conspirators: Lilina and Sue. "You two don't spend enough time together!" she continued, voice lofty. Sue and Lilina nodded and crossed their arms, grinning like the cats that caught the bird. "So, we moved everything! We also set up everything for you so that you didn't have to worry!"

"We thought it would be a nice gift considering everything," Lilina added. Her grin softened to a sweet smile. "Irene picked a large room, so if you two want separate beds, we can ask someone to move one in."

"We almost did, but then I pointed out that you likely didn't even use the bed when we were in fortresses," Sue explained. She laughed, clapping her hands. "So, here is our gift to you."

"You three…" I sighed, unable to keep from smiling slightly. It was sweetly overbearing of them, and I knew they had good intentions. I was surprised Clarine went with it, but since Klein and I had often accidentally shared tents while we were in the desert, I suppose she decided she didn't care. "Okay, I won't lecture you. Klein might."

"No, I won't," Klein replied. He smiled slightly. "Instead, I put a task to you three." All of us looked at him curiously. "Do the same thing for some others. I charge you with five, and one of the five must be Perceval and Cecilia."

"You're going to unleash hell." My voice was dry, but my smile widened as the three of them looked elated at the prospect. "Oh, go on, you troublemakers. Just don't provide fodder for fights."

"Okay!" the three chorused before running off. Laughter echoed through the halls and brightened the place up immensely.

I glanced at Klein, who shrugged, and the two of us went into the room to figure out how this was going to work. It was too much effort to move everything again, especially in a place we'd stay in for a few days at most. Besides, it would do the soldiers good to have something to gossip about.

I could deal with embarrassment if it kept morale up.

Notes on Snow Combat

_Fighting in the snow isn't much different from fighting in the rain. Your movements are slowed, though it's more because of ice and slush instead of mud._

_Visibility is also hindered, but in most cases, it's not too bad. However, in a blizzard, you might as_
well treat the battle as if you're fighting in the fog.

The biggest danger of the snow, though, is the cold. Hypothermia and frostbite are not fun, and not easily healed by staves even with the healers aren't overworked.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: So, this is chapter 19 of the Ilia Path. Though her appearance is brief, and her stats as a boss are rather laughable, Sigune came across as someone very pragmatic, so I thought she'd be far more likely to actually set up an ambush, and to utilize 'new' tactics. The battle part with the pegasus knights was inspired by a scene in the Oosawa manga adaptation of FE4. The story Sigune mentions as she dies is a callback to a scene in Tactician's Testimony. The notes for snow combat take influences from both FE6 and FE7. Headless chickens running/flailing about is a thing, with one infamous story of a headless chicken living for 18 months.

Next Chapter - Ilia's Salvation
Chapter 22) Ilia's Salvation

When the blizzard passed, we took our healed and healing forces towards Edessa. Those too injured to move were left at the fortress under guard and healer care. It was a risk, of course, but the other option was to take people and knowingly lead them to certain death, likely before we even made it to Edessa.

Edessa serves as the capital, only major city, and headquarters for the Ilian mercenaries. Zealot is its reigning lord, a direct descendant of Barigan. In his absence, the city is governed by his wife, Juno, and guarded by the mercenaries not on duty. However, Murdock apparently had launched a brutal, efficient assault, and so Edessa fell into Bern's hands.

This battle will mark the end of the Ilian Campaign. We cannot afford anything but a decisive victory.

It wasn't often that a Leadership Meeting dissolved into laughter, but even a week later, Elphin and Roy were positively tickled by the 'new room assignments', and couldn't stop laughing as they shared all the gossip that resulted from it.

"The best one is Perceval and Cecilia," I giggled. I was as guilty as them when it came to laughing too much. "I swear; all of their soldiers basically went 'finally!' and started teasing the hell out of both of them!"

"It seems like the soldiers also like the very idea and its spread," Roy laughed. He was actually starting to tear up, and had already fallen out of his chair. Elphin and I had moved to the floor too so that he wasn't too embarrassed. "Though, there were some arguments?"

"There are some love triangles, there are some who dislike the shove, among other things," Elphin explained. His eyes still danced, though. "But little arguments are good for an army, especially of this side. They let other grievances slip, and they can be fixed."

"Besides, it would be impossible for there not to be arguments, especially with this weather," I added. I glanced out the window, and grimaced at the snow. "Everyone is cooped together, there are just a lot of people in general, it's cold, and we're waiting."

"When are the scouts due again?"

"Based on when they left, any second now." We were finally close to Edessa, and had sent the scouts and spies out to survey the area. "We haven't even been able to have fun in the snow, because most of it came with a blizzard."

"And everyone is still recovering from that sudden ambush," Roy murmured. His eyes clouded over in pain, and I knew he blamed himself. "How are they recovering?"

"The latest message from Deke said that those who survived are recovering just fine," I answered, pulling that message out of my stack of papers. There had been seventy survivors from the Second
Company, which 'made up' for the lower than normal casualties during the actual battle. "They'll be ready to move again before long, so by the time we've secured Edessa, they should be ready for battle."

"Those that wish to." Roy sighed, drooping. "I'm sure some will want to stay or go home or..."

"I wouldn't be too sure," Elphin said. He smiled slightly as Roy looked at him curiously. "Roy, remember, you have the support of the Church, and there was 'divine favor' at the Tower of the Saint. Religious fervor goes a long way. The frankly brutal way we retaliated to the ambush shows that you are protective of your own, and that you will make the enemy pay for each drop of blood your people spill. They saw you in the infirmary, doing what you could to help."

"But that's just..." Roy shook his head. "Irene's the one who came up with the tactic."

"Yes, and believe me, her star is high with them too. All three of us, actually, seem to be quite popular." His slight smile told me that amused and surprised him. "But what Irene and I try our best to make clear is that we do not move without your consent. I am the strategist; she is the tactician. You are the undisputable leader of the army, and the soldiers know it."

"I..." Roy sighed. "I shouldn't be happy that they're willing to die for me. Actually, most of me feels uncomfortable, but I can't deny some part of me is happy."

"You can't win during a war," I murmured, thinking of my own conflicting feelings as of late. However, that stopped when I heard soft footsteps outside the door. "Come on in!"

"Oh!" The child-like tone of the gasp told me who it was even before the door slowly creaked open and Fae poked her head inside. "How did you know Fae was there?" she asked, eyes wide. "Fae was being super quiet!"

"Irene has magically powers," Roy instantly deadpanned, making Elphin and me snicker. "What brings you in here, Fae?"

"Fae heard laughter and wanted to see." She skipped inside and promptly sat in my lap. I automatically wrapped my arms around her in a hug, and she giggled. "Igrene is super sad about something, and Sofia is with Ray about something. Fae's bored!"

"I suppose waiting is a bit boring." Roy smiled and held out his hand. "Here, you mentioned wanting to play a 'counting game'?"

"Yeah!" She hummed as she took Roy's hand, and I couldn't help but smile. Sue and I had played it with Mom and Dad a lot, when we were little. "Hee~"

"How about I play while we... well, play?" Elphin suggested. He was already standing. "I'll be right back with my harp." He left quickly, a definite skip to his step. It made me remember that it had been over a week since we'd done a little concert. We'd have to have a big one, to celebrate Edessa's liberation.

"We should talk to Zealot about who among the Ilians would be willing to perform," Roy noted, thinking the same thing I was. "That way there can be music all night while you three still get a break."

"We can extend it to all of the army," I added, unable to keep from smiling. The idea just seemed like... fun. "Oh, we should arrange a huge party! Ilia has festivals."

"An Ice Festival!" His eyes were glittering now. "Aunt Florina mentioned that was a popular
winter one, and it didn't really have a 'set' date!"

"That's right!" I remembered how I'd always wanted to see it, but not even Mom was willing to travel to Ilia in the dead of winter. "Oh, that would be so much fun!"

"I'll…!" He paused and looked down at Fae, who was lost in her own world. "Er… I suppose I should wait until she's done."

"Yeah, that's a good idea." I smiled softly as she played the game and cheered when she reached her 'goal'. "Having fun?"

"Yeah!" she laughed, clapping her hands. Roy pulled his away and hunted through our papers, likely to check our funds and how much we could spend on a party. "It's lots of fun!" She leaned back to look at me. "Do you know the game?"

"I do," I murmured. My smile faded slightly as I realized just where she must've learned the game. It was common to Etruria, and I had never seen it played anywhere else. That reminded me of something I'd been wanting to ask her for a while. "Hey, Fae?"

"Yes?"

"Why did you…?" I had no idea how to word this. "May I ask why you hurt when I told you my parents were…?" That didn't seem like a right way anyway.

"Fae is always alone." But Fae knew, instinctively, what I wanted to ask. "Papa is gone because of Fae, Fiona leaves because of Fae, Sofia only comes by rarely, Igrene come by rarely..." She sniffed, her eyes filled with tears. "Sofia had a friend, Morgana. She came by a lot, but then Fae did something bad, and she never came back. Sofia got all sad when Fae brought her up."

"Fae…"

"S-so, it's Fae fault too, and Fae…" Now she cried, but I turned her so that she could cry into my chest. "Fae liked your parents. They were like a mommy and daddy. Fae wanted to see them again, but…"

"I understand." I really did. She had abandonment issues and she just knew so few people. Her father was in a coma protecting her. Fiona kept her distance to keep Fae safe. Igrene was busy with her work, and from what I understood, Sofia had a lot of duties in Arcadia as well. She had such a small world. Of course it would hurt miserably when someone died. She was young, for a dragon, and it meant part of her world just disappeared. "Say, Fae?"

"Yes?" She sniffed and pulled away, making a little face when I used my sleeve to wipe away her tears. "What is it?"

"We'll have to talk to Igrene about it, but do you want me to see if you can live with me or one of the others after the war?" I stroked her hair as her eyes widened. "I can't promise that it'll be all fun. I'm human. Most of us are. That means that, one day, we'll… have to leave, probably far too soon for you."

"Why?"

"Well…" I tried to think of how to explain this. "Fae, you know how you get really sleepy when you're tired?"

"Yes?" She tilted her head curiously. "Igrene tries to get me to take naps too, but I don't like them."
"I didn't like them when I was little too." Now, I longed for them. It was funny how that worked. "Now, you know how when you try to stay up while sleepy, you're very sad?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Sofia gets grumbly when she's super tired." That… was an entertaining mental image. "Why?"

"As humans live, Fae, they slowly grow tired. They're fine for a long while, but eventually, their energy reserves dry up, and then they just become sad." I made sure to smile. "When that happens, Mother Earth comes to them and takes them to her meadows, where they may rest in peace and happiness. But Mother Earth must protect her meadows, so those who travel there cannot return."

"Can I go see them?"

"You would never be able to come back." I tapped her nose, and smiled as she squeaked. "Then those who remain here will be sad."

"Ooooooohhhhh…" She still looked a little confused, but there was some understanding in her eyes. "Oh, and humans have 'less energy'?"

"Yes. So, if you live with me, you will…" Now that I thought about it, this was probably really cruel.

But she smiled brightly. "But Fae could see everyone!" Her eyes sparkled. "Fae could meet people, and then…and then when you leave, Fae can go to them to be sad? Like now?"

"Yes, and you could run through the trees and grass…you can see the blessings Mother Earth gives to those who do not live in her meadows. You can see the care of Father Sky. You can befriend others, and learn of the world."

"Fae likes that!" Her smile somehow grew brighter. "Fae will ask Igrene!"

"Why not talk to Fiona about it, actually?" I had a feeling Igrene would refuse instantly, just because her job was guarding Arcadia. She'd be duty bound. "I think she'd like it."

"Okay!" She laughed, and while some part of me still worried this would ultimately be cruel, I couldn't help but feel delighted at how eager she was. "Oh, Elphin!"

"Yes, I've returned," Elphin laughed, walking in with harp in hand. "Fill me in on whatever plots you concocted while I was away. I can plan and play."

"That sounds good to me," I replied, hugging Fae again to keep her from bouncing too much and headbutting my chin. "If you're taking requests, let's go with 'The Crown of Flowers'."

"Ah, always a popular one." He sat down and plucked a few notes to check the tuning. "But you'll have to sing."

"Of course." I waited as he played the introduction, and as Roy glanced up from reading to smile. "Come, little children, to the kingdom of thorns…~"

We got through three and a half songs before the scouts returned with their reports. After that, we dropped Fae off with Fiona, who had opted to not join us in the War Council, and joined the others in the main room.

Astore was receiving treatment for a messy injury to his arm when we arrived, and he grimaced at
our alarmed looks. "Looks worse than it is," he reassured us. He pointed to Lilina, who was treating him. "Trust me. She'd have me out of here, report be damned, if it wasn't."

"I almost did, but Igrene was the one who pointed out that it only looked worse than it was," Lilina murmured. I glanced at Igrene, a little startled, but her face was carefully stoic. "Cath is being treated for a broken bone."

"She got sighted, and I dragged her down and lost my footing because of some damned ice." Astore sighed. "Damn, I'm getting old."

"Nonsense. You're as wonderful and helpful as always."

"Thank you, Lady Lilina." He smiled softly. "It does my old heart good to hear that."

"In that case, do you mind if we go ahead and get your report?" Roy asked, taking his place at the head of the table. Elphin and I fell in at our own corners, adapting for how Astore and Lilina would need their own space. Klein stepped next to me, and snagged my hand to squeeze it, making me smile. "I'm assuming it's important if you don't want to wait for your arm."

"Yes, please," Astore replied. He waited until everyone was ready, though, looking at us cautiously. "So, you want the bad news or the ambivalent news first?"

"No good news?"

"The ambivalent might be good, but that's a big might."

"Then let us start with the bad."

"Well, we've got hostages again, and they're heavily guarded." His eyes glinted from anger. "Lord Legault and Lord Jaffar are still hunting for weak points and what the hell happened, but near as we can tell, the Bernese approached some mercenary groups, got them on their side, and then used them to drug the rest. Bloodless occupation, but they had some deaths because the idiots didn't realize that you have to be careful when drugging a person because too little does nothing, and too much kills them." He sighed and shook his head. "Sorry, that one really got me."

"It's fine." Roy hesitated before nodding to himself. "Do we have numbers?"

"There are a hundred newer graves, but impossible to tell if they're from that until we actually talk to someone." Astore shook his head, and almost shrugged, but Lilina tapped him on the shoulder to tell him to not do that. "Lord Legault managed to contact Commander Fiora, but it was through the bars of her prison. But through her we can confirm that her, Captain Farina, Sir Kent, Sir Sain, and Sir Heath are all alive and well. They fear breaking out because all the hostages are in separate groups, but their mounts escaped and are circling around scaring the daylights out of the soldiers."

"Is that the ambivalent news?"

"Nope. That is the fact that ol' Murdock isn't here." He smiled grimly as we all stilled. "When we retook Etruria, Murdock moved out of here, alongside the new Wyvern General, Galle."

"That... can only mean one thing, really," Guinevere whispered. She clasped her hands in front of her to hide their shaking. "It means Murdock is worried for Zephiel. His loyalty is..." She bit her lip. "Murdock's first job as a soldier was protecting Lady Mother, Queen Hellene. He took that job seriously, even after he was assigned other duties. He clawed his way up to the title of Wyvern General, a near impossibility for a commoner at that time, and continued to protect Lady Mother and Zephiel. His loyalty was never with Father. It was always Zephiel's."
"Meaning the only reason Murdock would leave Ilia behind is that either Zephiel ordered it, or Murdock is worried," Miredy added. She frowned slightly. "Either way, I can see why it's ambivalent. We don't have to deal with General Murdock and his elites, but we also don't have him serving as a 'check'."

"What do you… oh, no, I get it." Guinevere sighed. "Most of Narcian's men who ran… would've run here."

"And they would've been the ones left behind. Meaning we need to expect their pride overcoming their honor, especially if they think they're near death." Miredy grimaced. "We also need to remember that the younger recruits would be left here, skilled but young. They likely don't have a clue on how to face death with dignity; they still believe themselves invincible."

"And we have them cornered, here in Edessa," Roy murmured. He frowned over the map, tracing the area around Edessa. "There's nowhere, really, they can run. They can go to the air, but if there's a blizzard soon, their wyverns will freeze. They can go to the mountains…"

"The mountains can be inhospitable during these months," Zealot pointed out. "It's likely they might've gone to one of the old shrines to hunt for Maltet. They might even already have it. Very few people know where it is, but if they have hostages… those few will talk."

"Who all knows?"

"I do, as do a few of my old retainers. I told my wife shortly before I left, just in case…" He paused, and I could see him hiding a wince. "We have a newborn daughter."

"...I see." Roy paused and then looked to Miredy. "I hate to ask…"

"I hope that they will keep the children safe," Miredy answered easily. She sighed. "But I cannot promise. This war has been a lesson in who can keep their morals when scared for their lives."

"That's not even mentioning that babies require care that they might not even think of," I added. Still, this was getting too depressing, so I made myself smile. "However, Mother Earth is very protective of children, so if there were any deaths, I think we'd be seeing a lot more things like avalanches."

"Does she typically interfere like that?"

"Well, that's what our stories tell. It's the same with Father Sky." I gave her a sober look, but also gave her a slight smile to let her know what I was doing. Her own slight smile told me she knew it too. "Father Sky let Bern know His displeasure at the Bulgar Massacre clear. I heard you lot had some very bad storms."

"That we did. Galle even mentioned it was his wrath." Her eyes clouded briefly with sadness before she shook her head. "Well, far be it for me to question gods. Perhaps we can have a little faith in that."

"...Thank you both," Zealot murmured. His own smile told us that he knew we were trying to cheer him up, and while he worried, he was appreciative of the effort. "But for now, we need to think of what to do."

"Well, if we can liberate the hostages, it'll be easy," Astore stated. He rolled his shoulder and flexed his arm cautiously as Lilina brought her hands away. "Excellent work, my lady. You're a natural." Lilina's bright smile almost made me curious, but then I realized something. This was uniquely her. Her parents could kill, but they couldn't really heal. She could. It was no wonder she
was happy about it. "But if we can liberate them, it'll be fine. There are mercenary groups near, just waiting for a chance. They're willing to join our cause."

"But it would be hard to call it a 'victory' if the civilian hostages are slaughtered," Roy murmured. He frowned heavily, staring at the map. "So, what if we set a trap?"

"It depends on what sort of trap," Elphin instantly replied. He drummed his fingers on the table, frowning. "What are you thinking?"

"Simple. I pretend to be cowed by their might, and 'open negotiations' for surrendering to ensure the safety of the survivors." Roy's eyes lit up with determination. "Zealot can stay with me, to help with the facade. We'll do offers, and counter offers, while a few small groups sneak in to free the hostages."

"You can emphasize that you're young, Roy," I pointed out. All eyes turned to me. "What? He is young, and it's not my fault if these idiots take that for a weakness. He doesn't even have to lie about anything." I shrugged. "It wouldn't surprise me if they think he's just a figurehead anyway."

"I think it's been a long while since anyone has seen you actively plot to trick people," Roy laughed. He smiled and nodded. "And it's all really true. The only real 'lie' is that I'm interested in surrendering."

"That is a lie I believe Father Sky and Mother Earth would forgive, since there are children's lives at stake." Though, I did feel a bit uncomfortable. But, we had the lives of children at stake. I'd ask for forgiveness when they were safe. "Let's use that as a starting point, and plan from there. Zealot, Tate, can you two give us the geography of the land too? That'll help us figure out safe places to take the hostages when the fighting starts."

I could only pray Father Sky and Mother Earth would give us their blessings, because there was a lot that could go wrong.

Messengers went back and forth, back and forth, their brightly colored uniforms standing out sharply against the white snow and grey stone. Roy was doing his best to give the impression of a child in way over his head, who 'naively' believed that everyone could be saved. The Bernese Commander, whoever they were, was eating the act up, likely looking more to the glory of defeating Roy when no one else had managed. Well, they could just be as afraid, but I wasn't very charitable to enemy Bernese.

While this was going on, our small groups snuck into Ilia, using the cliffs and forests to hide from sight. I was one of the ones who went in, tagging along with Tate. If this all went really bad, I wanted to be there for her, as she had been there for me. Besides, Tate had volunteered to go after the most heavily guarded place, a room within the castle itself, believing that's where her older sister was. She needed all the help she could get, and I was a good shot.

"We're coming up on it, based on the map Chad gave us," I whispered to her as we snuck through some of the lesser known paths of Edessa. "Guinevere's group should be well in place."

"I can't believe that she volunteered to give herself up, just so to help the trap," Tate whispered back. Her slight smile was both grateful and worried. "Bern isn't kind to traitors…"

"Miredy and Elen are with her, and Uncle Jaffar is watching closely." I'd been hesitant as well, but Guinevere was adamant, and I couldn't fault her logic. Giving up a 'traitor' did make the Commander think Roy was serious enough to sit back and listen to counteroffers, instead of
demanding unconditional surrender. "Guinevere is protected by her title. She is Zephiel's sister."

"Let's hope they don't realize he tried to kill her." She held up a hand to stop the rest of the group, mostly made of her own pegasus knights, and peered around the corner, pulling back quickly. "Damn…" She moved away so that I could look too, and grimaced when I hissed a far more creative curse. "That's more than Chad said."

"They must've increased the guard." That meant they were acknowledging the idea that we were setting a trap. "Why couldn't they be stupid like Narcian?"

"If they're really his people, they had to be smart to survive him." She sighed. "Damn him. He's causing more trouble dead than alive."

"He really is." We moved the group back to an intersection, and huddled together to figure out what to do. "Well, let's get the obvious out of the way. We have to find a way around."

"The question becomes 'how'. I, at least, don't know of any secret ways in there." Tate sighed, and looked at her girls. "Do any of you?"

There was a murmuring among the pegasus knights, and I stepped apart slightly as a silent sign of 'I have no freaking clue'. A couple shot me smiles and it seemed like my admitting to not knowing earned them some respect. I simply smiled back, and looked around the area, taking 'watch'.

A flutter of movement caught my eye, and I turned to face it. A little bit of long, very pale blue, hair twisted around the corner, as if someone had been there, and hid suddenly. I raised my hand to catch everyone's attention, and pointed to the hair. Tate nodded, and, without prompting, she and I crept towards the corner. The hair remained until Tate and I were just there, before disappearing. We both swung around the corner, and caught sight of a woman running away from us.

I froze when she glanced back. The face was different enough so that I didn't think her Aunt Ninian, and certainly Aunt Ninian never wore the pants and long jacket ensemble this woman wore; Aunt Ninian always wore dresses of white and silvers.

But the woman's eyes and hair were the same color as Aunt Ninian's, and that alone was enough to make me wonder if this woman was an ice dragon. Her slow smile made me think she could read my mind, and then she disappeared around another corner.

All of that told me one thing: she wanted us to follow her.

"So, shall we chase?" I asked Tate, looking to her. "Based on her coloring, I'd say that's an ice dragon."

"...The people of Ilia have a good relationship with the Ice Dragon," Tate whispered. She bit her lip before nodding. "Yes, let's follow her. The stories all say that the Ice Dragons who lived here were kind, and helped us. This would be her home as much as it is mine."

"Let's let your girls know, then." I waved as the woman peered back around the corner. She smiled and nodded before disappearing again. "I don't suppose it occurred to her to just… talk to us?"

"Maybe dragons speak another language." Tate paused before tilting her head. "Actually, how do the people of Arcadia know how to communicate with us? If they were separated for so long…"

"I guess the few travelers they get? I have no idea, and don't feel like trying to logic that one out with everything." I grinned and she laughed. "Come on, before the lady gets mad and stops helping."
"Just a moment, then."

It didn't take long to tell the others what the two of us planned, and then Tate and I were off, chasing after the lady. She was always very careful to keep ahead of us, never letting us get too close, as she led us in a long circle around and around the castle. I would've been suspicious, except we literally ran into no Bernese soldiers. We didn't even have 'near misses'. Somehow, this woman was keeping us out of danger while leading us in circles. It was almost unnerving.

Being led into a dead-end room with no sign of the woman? That was definitely unnerving.

"She had to have come here, right?" Tate whispered. She turned slowly, as if the woman was just… hiding really well in the corner. "Right?"

"Yes, there's no other way," I replied. I bit my lip as I thought. "Maybe there's a secret door?"

"Maybe." She shrugged. "That's the only explanation, though I have no idea where it might be."

"I guess we just knock on the walls?" I sighed. "That's how it is in the stories, at least. It would be far more convenient if there was a 'here it is' sign."

"If there was one like that, then it wouldn't be much of a secret." She ducked as I mimed a punch at her head and laughed. "Well, you take advantage of your height to look up?"

"Oh, right, I am a head taller than you."

"Irene, did you forget you were one of the tallest in camp?"

"...Maybe." I made a face as she snickered. "Secret passage open now."

"Right." She was still laughing a bit as we carefully checked every damn brick in the wall, looking for anything that might suggest a secret passage.

As we worked, I keenly felt the passage of time. The longer we took, the likelier the chance that Roy would be the one trapped instead of the Commander. We really didn't have a lot of time, but, at the same time, I couldn't shake the feeling that this was important. This was the answer to our earlier question. I thought Tate suspected the same, since she hunted through the bricks with fierce concentration.

I was just about to give up, though, when I hit a brick almost out of reach and heard a different noise. "Hey, Tate?" I called. She instantly came to my side. "Might've found something, but one of us will have to get on the other's shoulders."

"Better you," Tate replied. She shrugged when I gave her a concerned look. "It'll take less time, since you know the brick, and I'm strong enough to pick you up."

"If you're sure." I hooked Rienfleche on my back and she crouched down. "All right then..." It took a couple of tries, but she managed to pick me up. "Move a little to the right." I braced myself against the wall while she maneuvered, to keep from falling on my back. "All right..." I tapped along the wall again, and found the strange noise. "Here..." I ran my fingers over the bricks, and soon was able to pry out enough to open up a hole in the wall, a very clear path. "Okay, brace yourself Tate." Slowly, I pulled myself inside, moving Rienfleche to my hands and shifting my pack to hang off my front because it was a very, very tight fight. "Tate... can you hear me?"

" Barely," she replied. Her voice was muffled. "I'm going to use your leg as a lever up. There's no way you can turn to pull me."
"Let me get a little further in." I crawled forward, grimacing as my clothes caught on the stone. This was not going to be comfortable. "And… there." I bobbed my leg just in case she didn't hear me, and felt her grab on. "This is going to be a pain." I held my leg steady so that Tate could use it to pull herself up, and regretted it almost instantly. I might have strong leg muscles thanks to all the riding, but this was a very awkward angle.

Thankfully, though, Tate was quick and it wasn't long before she pushed my leg in so that she could climb in after it. "This is… really tight," she noted grimly. She made a little noise. "Why am I wearing a skirt?"

"Don't all the pegasus knights wear skirts?"

"Yes, but now I have bare skin on this stone." She sighed. "Oh well, let's get going."

"Here's hoping we won't have to make dozens of turns." Slowly, I crawled forward, grimacing as my knees and palms protested. I was incredibly grateful to not be claustrophobic, since this was incredibly tight. It could not be emphasized enough.

But, strangely, the path was very, very linear. There were a few 'turns', but the holes were barely big enough for a mouse. So, we just crawled forward, trying our best to not blister what little air there was with curses.

At some point, Tate murmured, "I wonder if this was an air circulation tunnel."

"That is… what exactly?" I asked, curious. I hadn't heard the term before, but then again, I'd never studied architecture.

"Basically, they help redirect smoke. Most of them are too small to crawl into, though." She grunted at something. "This one is the largest I've seen, and both of us are nearly too big."

"It would be easy for a child, though." I wondered if that was what it was made for: helping children escape. "That would explain why it was covered."

"True." She was quiet for a long while. "Please tell me that we're almost at an end."

"Well…" My eyes narrowed as I noticed something. "There's a dead end. Ideally, the stones will push out, because otherwise, we're going to have to crawl through this place again, backwards." I smiled slightly as Tate actually whimpered. "I wonder how the bards would glorify this."

"I have no idea, but if I hear a song, I might ignore bardic immunity."

"That's a thing?"

"In Ilia, it is. Normally."

"Oh, I never knew that." We reached the end, and I knocked on the bricks to test how much they moved. Thankfully, they moved rather easily and I caught the bricks before they dropped randomly, setting them in the little bit of space under my stomach.

It turned out to be a very good thing, as the room was filled with people. "Oh, hello there." One woman looked at me impassively, tucking her baby a little closer to her chest. She had purple hair, darker than Aunt Florina's, and calm eyes. "I didn't realize those were removable," she murmured. "Then again, it's quite high up."

"Yeah, well, we found it on accident," I replied. I frowned slightly as I realized something. Her
face was similar to... "By the way, would your name happen to be 'Juno'?"

"It is." She looked at me curiously as I grinned and I heard Tate squeak. "Why?"

"If someone can help me out, Tate is actually in here behind me. Shanna is recovering from some injuries, but will make a full recovery, and Zealot is helping Roy buy us time."
"Oh!" Juno passed her baby to an old woman and reached up to take the bricks and help me squirm out. I nearly toppled onto my head, but some others caught me and set me on my feet. The group soon did the same for Tate, and Juno hugged her tightly. "Tate, what are you doing here? You're supposed to be...?"

"It's a long story, Juno, but I finished my job and joined the army here," Tate replied. Slowly, she hugged her sister back. "You... you're okay..."

"Yes, I'm fine," Juno pulled back, and smiled, looking ready to cry from sheer joy. "Oh, come. You should see Artemis. I'm sure she misses you."

"Th-then she's okay?"

"Yes." Juno took her baby back, and both Tate and I peered at her. I noticed her hair was the same shade as Zealot's. "General Murdock gave strict orders to protect all the children, and even had his healers assist with the pregnant women." I felt a bit conflicted hearing that. I was glad for it, but this was also the general who took Mom hostage. "It hasn't been comfortable, but we haven't been battling death every day."

"That's... good." Tate smiled softly. "That's... very good."

"Oh, stop being standoffish. Come over and talk to everyone, Tate. I know you get terribly lonely."

"I-I do not!"

I laughed a little as I watched Juno effortlessly lead Tate into the group of people, all of whom were glad to see her. I stayed apart and felt myself grow... sad. That was the word. This group of people, and how they reacted to Tate, made me think of the Kutolah, and how we all welcomed the hunters back from a ride. The last full day I had with my parents... Mom and I had greeted Dad and Sue, after her first official hunt. Those days... would never happen again. At least, they wouldn't as they did.

Something about the thought made me pause, and it wasn't just my own sadness. It was something else, something I had forgotten...

The letters. In the wake of everything, I had completely forgotten about those precious letters. A quick check proved that they were in my pack, and as I flipped through, I realized they were all single sheets of paper, and there was one for every survivor of the Campaign of Fire, that she knew of. I paused as I noticed the names 'Dart' and 'Geitz', and wondered if I'd ever be able to give it to them. But then I kept flipping through, noticing that there were some for her siblings, her nieces and nephews... everyone she knew, she wrote a brief, final letter too.

Mine was the last one, and I tugged it out slowly. My hands shook as the implications hit me. These were Mom's last words to me. This is probably not something I should be reading right now, when we were in the middle of an operation.

But I couldn't help it. Now that I remembered, I had to read it. I had to know. I knew Dad's last moments. I needed to know hers too. So, I scooted into a corner, smoothed it out on my knee, and read it, easily imagining Mom's voice as I read them.
' Well, it seems like the only way to proceed is to sacrifice the queen, Irene. I'm sorry I cannot think of a better move. The board is set, my sweet daughter. I know you'll bring your side to victory, and I'll see it from the Meadows, should Mother Earth be willing to accept me. I hope so. I can be with Rath again, and I can actually watch over you, during your last battles.

I love you, Irene. Being your mother brought me infinite joy, and no small part of me wishes we could have enjoyed the days with the Kutolah forever. But I knew those days wouldn't. After all, you were already 18 and I knew it wouldn't be long before you found your path and walked it.

I worry for that. You're my daughter, after all, and I never did make things easy for myself. But, then again, you're Rath's daughter too, and you inherited his strength and sense.

Keep an eye on Sue, since she definitely has inherited my fragility. Well, I probably didn't need to write that. Like me, you're protective of your own. A little wolf, the child of two lone wolves. But you're never alone, sweetling. Listen to the wind, and you'll hear my reassurances.

Goodbye, Irene. I wish I could've seen you one more time among the living, but... well, do you remember the last time we played? How you sacrificed your queen to win the game? I know you'll do so again. It's not... well, part of it is faith, but it's also knowledge. The sky is blue, I love you, and you will find victory in this damnable war. This is your game now.'

It ended there. I had a feeling she didn't know how to end it, so she just cut herself off. I couldn't help but smile, though, and a strange calm just settled over me.

She had sacrificed herself, but she had tried to find other ways. That told me she hadn't the intention of dying when she used herself as a hostage to protect Sue and the Kutolah. That she had tried to play the game, and just... lost. She 'lost' against Zephriel, and set things up so that I could win.

It reminded me of how Dad once complained about Mom's tendency to use herself as a shield, with no regard for her own health. It reminded me of how Grandpa would describe Mom as 'too kind', and that her kindness would likely get her killed.

I looked down at the last sentence again. 'This is your game now.' Yes, it was. It was mine. It was Roy's. It was Lilina's. It was... all of ours. Wuotan had said our generation was the inheritor of many, many people's hopes. They had played 'the game' and lost, but had prepared things for us. They had 'played', and now it was our turn.

And we were going to win.

The plan for freeing our group of hostages was simple. I climbed back through the cramped tunnel and made my way back to the group to let them know what happened. Then, Juno would call the guards, saying that her baby needed something. When their guard was down, Tate would strike from her side, and we'd strike from ours.

It went... surprisingly smooth, and I was instantly suspicious, but there was no time to fret as we led the hostages out of the castle, sending a group to escort them to the camp. From there, Tate and I hunted for one of the scouts, to determine how the other rescue efforts were going. To my surprise, they were going very smoothly, and truly, all anyone had been waiting for was our group. I was still very suspicious of everything, but we really did just have to roll with good fortune when it came our way. So, when I had confirmed that all the hostages were safe, I ordered the archers to shoot fire arrows straight up.
As soon as the arrows fired, Roy called off 'negotiations', and launched his assault. At that point, the white snow turned a muddy red, and the grey stone was splattered crimson.

"Don't explode buildings without telling me!" I snapped, unable to believe I had to even say that. But, apparently, some rather enterprising mages had utilized some flour stored in some sheds to blow it up. "They need their supplies, damn it! You've seen their winters!" However, I was pissed off because those said mages hadn't bothered to check if they'd catch allies or not, and now I had two squads down at the infirmary instead of supporting the cavalry, meaning poor Lugh and Cecilia had to make their squads work twice as hard. "Fall back to guard the infirmary." The mages in question grit their teeth, telling me they didn't think they were wrong, but they listened, showing they at least respected me. I'd leave it to Marcus or, better, Merlinus to explain to them how stupid it all was. "Honestly..." This was a chaotic battle, worse than usual. I'd dismounted a while ago to lend my mare to the infirmary to cart wounded, so I was on foot.

"Irene!" Roy raced up, speckled with ash and blood. "Problem," he told me. I could only groan in reply. "What happened before I got here?"

"I had a couple of hotheads blow up a building," I explained, waving his concern away. "What's the current problem?"

"The Bernese managed to split our forces, our defensive soldiers on one side, and our less protected mages on the other."

"So, they're attacking the mages..." I trailed off as he shook his head. "No?"

"No, they've got their mages attacking our heavy armor knights." He looked grim, and I couldn't help but grimace. They wouldn't have good resistance, and the heavy armor would make the magic hurt all the more. "Bors, Barth, Wendy, and General Douglas are keeping everyone together, but..." If they knocked out our defensive line, we'd be far more vulnerable.

"Why do we not have our fliers...?" I groaned as he shook his head. "Let me guess; archers have the entire area guarded."

"Ballistae. Edessa is set up with a lot of anti-flier defenses just in case."

"Why does Edessa have to be crazy prepared?" I sighed and looked around, biting my lip as I thought. The enemy had taken the roofs, so... "Damn it..." My eyes focused on a cliff that seemed to overlook most of the city. "There. If we can somehow get enough mages and archers there, we can snipe their mages."

"We might be able to ferry a few, but it'll be slow." Roy's eyes widened at something. "Sir!" He stepped towards something, and I whirled to see there was another civilian not far away. I was almost certain he was not one of ours, because he was rather distinctive. He wore black robes, edged in gold, with an equally dark mantle wrapped around him. He wore a black garb on his head, wrapped around his right eye, and he had short teal hair and a matching beard. "Sir, it's not safe here!" He also wore a soft, almost pained, smile, as if he was looking at the sun and marveled at its light even as it scorched him. "Sir!"

The man didn't reply. He just pointed to the side and beckoned us to come a little closer. Roy and I glanced at each other, and slowly approached him, our weapons at the ready. The man's smile softened as we came closer, and urged us to continue following him. As the screams of the dying echoed, Roy and I did so, both of us wondering if we really had time for this. He was the general and I was the tactician. We couldn't leave the army for long.
But then, I realized we were heading up and I wondered if things would, once again, be horribly convenient. I was proven correct when we came to the end of the path, and found ourselves on the very cliff I'd been looking at.

"Roy..." I whispered. He nodded and raced back down the path. He'd send me what we'd need. "This has been a very bizarre day." Shaking my hand, I turned to the man. "Thank... you...?" But he wasn't there. The man wasn't there, and when I bothered to look back down the path, I realized there were only three sets of footprints: Roy and me coming up, and Roy coming down.

I thought of the woman who Tate and I never found. I wondered if they were both Ice Dragons, come to help. I wondered why they had wanted to help, and how they disappeared so quickly.

But then Lilina, Hugh, and Wolt ran up with their mages and archers, and I had to set about helping them. Assuming I didn't forget about the two later, I'd ask... someone. But for now, we had a city to save, a country to liberate, and that would take all of my focus.

That was probably the last bit of convenience of the battle. The Bernese attempted to explode a few of the buildings themselves, outright set places on fire to try and herd us, and we just barely kept them from trampling the fields into the ground.

Afterwards, there was tending to the injured. I had the mages who started the explosion business tend to their victims to hammer home just why the whole thing had been stupid. I tended to what injured I could, before Elen chased me out to get cleaned up and to 'take a break'. That typically translated to 'gather casualty reports, inventory reports, check on civilians, make sure no one was throwing up' and every other thing that needed to be done. During this, I learned that Juno actually planned on joining us, and I left while she and Zealot were 'discussing' it. It seemed like a good idea when I realized she was flirting with him while also giving some very logical reasons. I didn't need to watch that.

At some point, though, I stumbled into the stables of Castle Edessa, mostly to check on my mare, and realized there were other people here, people I hadn't seen in what felt like forever.

"Little Moon!" Uncle Sain cheered, abandoning whatever he was doing to give me a warm hug. "Ah, your visage is-!"

"Sain, don't just drop your cleaning tools!" Uncle Kent snapped as he stepped out of the stable. He had the most exasperated look on his face. "You're the one who asked for help."

"But, Kent, look!" Uncle Sain swung me in front of him, as both justification and shield. "It's our Little Moon!"

"She's not really so little anymore." Still, Uncle Kent's exasperation softened for a smile. "Marcus, Merlinus, and Bartre told us about everything. The last thing we heard is that Araphan fell." That... was a lot. "It must've been hard."

"It's been hard on everyone," I murmured. I wondered what it was like, being cut off from everything, and when you were saved, you learned of how many friends you lost. "Aunt Lyn was fine."

"Well, of course, Lady Lyn is," Uncle Sain declared loftily. "She is, after all, our lady." Even all the way here in Ilia, twenty years later, married with children, Uncle Sain was as loyal as ever. "Bosom companion, perhaps we might visit her when things are calmer, though."

"Yes, I do worry for her, since Lord Hector has passed," Uncle Kent murmured. He shook his head.
"Well, you're going to be useless for the rest of this, so why don't you snag Fiora, Farina, and Heath? I'm sure they'd love to see Lady Irene, Lord Roy, Lady Lilina, and Lady Sue too."

"Of course!" Uncle Sain gave me another quick hug. "I'll be right back!" With that, he was off like a bolt, with a cheer that seemed half-forced.

"You had him go as a distraction," I whispered. Uncle Kent shrugged, peering at me. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing." Uncle Kent studied me closely. "I just... never noticed how much like Rath you look and act."

"Act?"

"Rath always held himself still, giving an impression of calm confidence and reassurance. He was skilled, he knew it, and he also knew his limits. Lady Katri never did learn her 'limits', and felt her imagined ones all too keenly." He smiled slightly. "You push yourself and everyone to their limits, but you do not push more. You give the impression that no matter what happens, you will weather it with the same impassiveness."

"...I guess I've grown up a bit more than I've thought." I smiled slightly, not quite sure how to take the comment. I certainly hadn't felt anything like that. But if that was how everyone saw me, then I could... it would be a good thing. "Then again, you've not seen me kicking myself for stupid decisions."

"Perhaps, but I do know one thing." Uncle Kent's smile turned sad and nostalgic. "Lady Katri was never one to think calmly even when she was hurting. You can, and that is something you got from Rath."

"How are you so certain of that?"

"I traveled with Lady Katri for a long time." He had. Uncle Kent had known Mom almost as long as Aunt Lyn had. "Rath could keep his head. Lady Katri would work through the pain, but she was rarely 'calm' about it. Sometimes, it even got very dramatic."

I thought about her logbook, and ultimately agreed. "I suppose so." I wondered about Dad's calm. Perhaps he was like me. He hadn't actually been calm; he had just managed to keep it off his expression. Maybe, like me, he had learned how to do it without... ever meaning to, without realizing it until someone else pointed it out.

I wished I could talk to Dad about this. Then again, I might've never even had this little 'problem' if he was still alive.

"How is everyone?" I asked, changing the subject. "Your kids?"

"Everyone is fine, thankfully," Uncle Kent answered. I breathed a sigh of relief at that. "Of course, all of them aren't in Edessa at the moment and, frankly, we'll likely keep them there. They're not trained enough."

"We do have fourteen-fifteen year olds."

"Hush, don't tell them that." He smiled slightly, and a laugh escaped me. "We're having enough trouble with the technically trained enough leaping to join."

"I see." Another thought occurred to me. "Where... is Uncle Nicky?"
"Lord Nicholas helped with evacuations, and is currently managing a refugee camp a few days march away. He sent us messenger birds to reassure us of what is going on; he'll likely remain with them until the war is over, since it is filled with non-combatants."

"Tell him…" I shook my head. "No, I'll write a letter myself. Can you see that it is delivered?"

"Of course." Uncle Kent reached over to ruffle my hair. "Have you been sleeping?"

"I do when I can, but…" Footsteps caught my ear, and I turned to see a page racing for us. "What is it?"

"Lady Irene!" the page called. They skidded to a stop in front of me and managed a salute. "Confirmation of Bernese soldiers at the Temple of Ice, where Maltet lies. General Roy requests your presence."

"We're chasing after them," I murmured. I turned and smiled at Uncle Kent. "I'll see everyone when I'm back. Tell them I'm sorry."

"I will," Uncle Kent promised. He looked sadly proud, for some reason. "Stay safe."

"I'll try."

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Notes on Juno:

_Former Flight Captain, who retired when she married Zealot. Though no one says anything, I think she retired because she didn't want her child to face the pain of parents killing each other on the field._

_She's… definitely out of practice, but she brings with her a wealth of experience, and she's frankly an amazing teacher. I might have her train the fliers more than be on the battlefield, but like how Marcus trains the cavalry._

_She's also very motherly, and instantly takes to the younger members of the army. I'd worry, except she's also careful not to be patronizing. I suppose raising her siblings, and being a Flight Captain in a country where 14, 15 year olds have to fight on a daily basis makes her very good at that. I'll ask her to watch out for them, since… my own duties don't let me._

_Her affinity is light, like mine._

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Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: And this is the final 'main' chapter of the Ilia route (with an attached sidequest). Juno is route-unique char that you recruit through this route, and with her, you can use the FE6 Pegasus Knight Triangle Attack. In game, this is where you'll fight Roartz, but he's moved to the Sacae part, so there's just a no-name commander here. Morgana is a character technically canon to the games, but is unnamed. She is mentioned in the Fae-Igrene supports. I worked this quest differently than in the main game, so have some Fe7 chars show up. Who can guess the identities of the mysterious woman and man?
Chapter 22x) The Spear of Ice

We've successfully taken back Edessa, and now, Roy leads a small strike force to some ancient ruins in the frozen wastes of the mountains, where Maltet is said to rest. If we can seize the ruins, not only will we have ousted the last of Bern from Ilia, but we might just get another Divine Weapon to use.

...We were getting a lot of them, and we hadn't used any since fighting the dragon on the Isles. Maybe we needed to fix that.

The Temple of Ice was situated in a hidden grove between mountains, not far from Ice Dragon Mountain. It was, apparently, built in the image of another temple around here, on the mountain itself, and utilized the natural barriers of the snow and ice to guard itself, unlike some of the other places. According to Fiona, it had two entrances, set up so that if the Temple was overrun, people could still sneak in. Hearing that, Roy decided we'd split our strike force into two groups. He and Zealot would enter through the front, acting as a bait force. Fiona and I would enter through the back entrance, along with a small handful of people. Those who were not traveling with us were guarding and reinforcing Edessa itself, to make sure Bernese couldn't use this as a distraction and return.

I shivered under the cold, and pulled my cloak a little tighter. My group consisted of Fir, Rutger, Clarine, Noah, and Tate, and they lingered behind Fiona and me as we rode. Well, most of us rode. Fiona was very insistent on not riding, not even on Tate's pegasus. Something about how she hadn't ridden anything since Barigan was alive. It was probably a good thing, since the path was rather treacherous. Barigan hadn't want anyone to just waltz up to the secret entrance, and it showed. If Noah's horse hadn't been trained for terrain like this, and if Clarine and I didn't ride Sacaean mares who were very good with their footing, we likely would've lost people to the path itself.

"Fiona, do you mind if I ask you something?" I whispered, mostly just to have something to say. Because of where we were, everything was very quiet. Even the local animals avoided this place.

"Of course you may," Fiona replied easily. Unlike the rest of us, she didn't seem bothered by the cold at all. She had even given her cloak to Fir when Fir started to turn a little blue. "What is it?"

"During the battle, I encountered two strangely helpful people."

"Oh?" She looked intrigued. "I'm guessing there was something strange about them?"

"Well, one was a woman who looked enough like Aunt Ninian that I thought she was an Ice Dragon. The other was a man who very literally disappeared.\" I studied her reaction, and noticed how pained her eyes became. "So, I thought they were both Ice Dragons, and-"

"There are no Ice Dragons in Ilia anymore. They died, they went through the Cave, or they made a living elsewhere. The Ice Dragons did not join the dragons during the Scouring, for the most part. Those the humans didn't kill, the dragons did." She shook her head. "The Dragons operated on a 'with us or against us' mentality. Humans did too, of course, but humans had a little more wiggle
room, so to speak."

"Then… who did I see?"

"Ghosts, likely. Specifically, the ghosts of… Roy's grandparents."

"That would explain the woman's resemblance to Aunt Ninian." Still, I frowned. Ghosts were those barred from Mother Earth's meadows, or those who chose to return temporarily. "Why would they be here?"

"He is likely trapped here. Aenir lingers to keep him company."

"Why would he be barred, though?" I thought of his soft smile. It had been kind, and he had helped us. "He seemed…"

"...He was, at first, a kind man." Her voice was very soft. "A family man. He loved his family more than anything. So, when they disappeared, he devoted everything to reuniting with them, or at least, his children." Her smile was sad. "But… to get that sort of power, you must dive into the darkest parts of elder… dark… magic. The deeper you go, the more you must give up. Eventually, he lost everything."

"So, he loved his family more than even his morals."

"Precisely." She sighed, looking up at the sky. "And now, he is a ghost, condemned to linger here as punishment for his crimes."

"What all did he do?"

"I told you about my father, yes?" She waited until I nodded. "Did I give you a name, then?"

"Ah, I think so. Nergal or… some… thing..." I trailed off, realizing I knew the name from somewhere else to. I'd never thought about it, since it was 'just a name', but it really was… "The Campaign of Fire. He was the one they fought."

"And the one the previous generation fought indirectly, close to forty years ago." She smiled bitterly. "Nergal did a lot of wrong for what started as a 'just' goal. Ultimately, he lost himself until all he could remember was that he wanted to open the Dragon's Gate. His selfish desire to see his children again, while understandable, cost thousands, maybe even millions, their lives. He is condemned, and it will take quite some time for him to be redeemed. If, that is, he can be redeemed at all."

"...Mother Earth does bar some from her gentle embrace and her meadows, but she is not unfeeling." I shook my head. "It will likely take some time, but if he continues as he did during that battle, using his status as a ghost to help, then her anger will cool and her heart with thaw. It may be a very long time, but I believe he will, in time, be forgiven."

"Really?" She looked slightly skeptical, but even more confused. "Any reason why you're so willing to 'forgive' him?"

"I suppose it helps that he is in the past. I know people who suffered because of him, yes, but since no one ever talks about him, he feels like someone from the distant past. I frowned slightly, trying to organize my thoughts. "I do not wish to look down on your suffering or anything, but it all just feels distant. Perhaps it would've been different if I'd heard, say, Mom talk of him, instead of simply reading about it through her logbook. But, perhaps, in a small way, I am thankful to him."
"Thankful?!" Now she yelped. "Why?!"

"If not for him, I would have never been born, and neither would have Sue." I waited for her to reply, but she only stared. "If not for him, Dad would've never been thrown out of the Kutolah because of a prophecy, and if Dad had not been in Araphan, Aunt Lyn would've died in Araphan, never freeing Caelin. So, Lilina would not have been born as well. Aunt Ninian and Uncle Nils would've never been saved from the Black Fang, so I doubt Roy would've been born." I felt a little self-conscious, and I turned my gaze forward. "Perhaps it is selfish to be thankful to a madman just because his actions, ultimately, led to me being given the gift of life. But I love my life. I love my family. I had… have… the best parents, and the kindness of the Kutolah. I have a mess of Uncles and Aunts who I adore, and who I know adore me in return."

"And this war?"

"This war… is simply a dip in the path, ultimately. Well, it's probably more of a drop from a cliff, considering how banged up I am!" I couldn't help but laugh. "But I'm still here. I'm still alive, and even if I am battered and broken, I am picking up the pieces and rebuilding myself into someone who is hopefully stronger. I still have my wonderful friends. I still have many of my Uncles and Aunts, even if some have gone to Mother Earth's meadows."

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"This war… is simply a dip in the path, ultimately. Well, it's probably more of a drop from a cliff, considering how banged up I am!" I couldn't help but laugh. "But I'm still here. I'm still alive, and even if I am battered and broken, I am picking up the pieces and rebuilding myself into someone who is hopefully stronger. I still have my wonderful friends. I still have many of my Uncles and Aunts, even if some have gone to Mother Earth's meadows." My heart keened as I thought of my parents, and the wind rustled with reassurances. I knew they were watching over me. "I even have a boyfriend now! I'm growing up, basically, with bunches of responsibilities I didn't want, but will do my very best at." I shrugged. "And all this joy and sorrow… I never would've experienced any of it if Nergal hadn't descended into madness. Uncle Eliwood would've never have met and fallen in love with Aunt Ninian. Mom and Dad would've never met. Uncle Hector and Aunt Lyn would've never met. So many friendships would've never been forged." A thought occurred to me. "Oh, and for all we know, Zephiel still would've been able to do his war thing even after Nergal had scorched everything, and then Eliwe would really have been in trouble! But the fact does remain that the bonds forged during the Campaign of Fire eventually led to the best possible 'board' to defeat Zephiel." I laughed again, this time a little more bitterly. "Perhaps that was Father Sky and Mother Earth intervening. Perhaps Nergal was always doomed to failure, but they gave him free reign so that Zephiel could've been stopped. In that case, then he was simply another pawn on the board, and realizing that is probably a better punishment than I could ever devise."

"...You are..." Fiona started laughing. "You are the weirdest girl I have ever met, and I knew Hilda."

"Hey!" I pouted, which made her laugh harder, before shaking my head. "All that rambling aside, I again want to emphasize that I don't want to demean what you suffered. I just..."

"You are able to see the good more clearly, because he did not hurt you directly, and because you are the result of some of the very few bits of good he brought about in his too long life." She continued to laugh. "I cannot say I fully agree with you, but I do see your point. My own scars hurt too much, but tending to you, Roy, Sue, and Lilina... that was one of the very few completely untainted joys in my very long life." She smiled softly at me. "So, I guess I can say, ultimately, I am grateful to him as well. Regardless of how he ended up, he did bring Aenir great happiness while she lived. That's why she likely stays with him, though I do hope she bounces to those meadows for a good rest. She deserves it." Her smile grew. "And while he brought great pain, I have watched those who fought that Campaign, and saw how they were so happy ultimately, despite or perhaps even because of that pain. This war has brought sadness to them, but many often say it is better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all."

"Though he is still an evil person who must earn his redemption. Mother Earth would not cast him out otherwise."
"Precisely." She laughed again, before giving me a strange look. "You… are very strong. Stronger, I think, than the Eight Heroes."

"Pardon?"

"All of us were breaking back then. It took years… decades even… to even believe we actually won, instead of not lost. We kept stumbling forward, the shards trailing behind us, and gave up a lot." She shook her head. "But you, Roy, and the others… you actually take the time to fix yourselves. Perhaps it's because you had stable, and warm, childhoods, but you make sure of it. You're exhausted, but you keep going, and you make sure you can walk, not merely limp." She smiled again, bright and cheerful. For a second, I wondered if this was the sort of smile she wore long ago, during the Scouring. "That ragtag bunch of misfit messes would've been so proud of you all. I know I am."

"Now you're just teasing me!" I flushed hotly and ducked my head. "Seriously…!"

She just kept on laughing, and I had to admit that, even if I did think she was thinking too much of us, it was rather soothing and invigorating to be compared favorably to those she held in high regard even now. It just fueled my certainty that we would end this war, that we would win this.

We liberated Edessa and now, we were securing Barigan's spear. This was the next step to our victory. I knew this with all my heart.

We spent the rest of the trip in silence, and were inside the temple before long. Once there, we realized that the Bernese soldiers had made their own defenses to 'make up' for the lack of defenses in the Temple itself. They had destroyed parts of the wall to block hallways, turning things into a maze. However, their efforts just weakened the walls, meaning it was easier for us to break down the walls and open up new paths.

Some part of me felt bad for destroying the Temple, but the only other choice we really had was let the Bernese have the place, and that just seemed like a bad idea.

"Clarine, berserk that sniper!" I ordered, ducking under a magic spell. I had no idea what kind it was, and neither did I care. "Rutger, when she lands the hit, go after the druid they were guarding." I grinned as the two managed my orders, and almost laughed as the sniper turned of the other druid, one that had been trying to Sleep my soldiers. There was something morbid and wonderful at watching an enemy go berserk and kill his own people. Perhaps this war had knocked some moral sensibilities from my head, but I was really tired of status staff assholes.

"Lady Irene!" Fir raced up, and I nearly yelped at how blood splattered she was. "Oh, it's not mine," she instantly reassured. She smiled warmly. "I just decapitated someone and the blood went everywhere." She paused. "Wait, that's not something I should say with a smile."

"It's fine. We've all gone a little insane." I shook my head. "What is it?"

"Noah and Tate have broken through the far wall, and we have rejoined General Roy's forces." Her eyes grew serious. "Throne room is close. Orders?"

"Tell Tate and Noah to punch through to the throne room. I will follow shortly with Rutger, Clarine, and Fiona." That assumed I could find Fiona. She had disappeared in the fighting, and while I doubted she was dead, I did still fret. "Go on."

"Got it!" She grinned and raced off.
I watched her disappear into the fighting before waving my arm. "Clarine, Rutger!" I called. I fired an arrow at someone trying to sneak up on Rutger. "Come on. We're pushing forward. Where's Fiona?"

"Fiona moved to Noah and Tate, so I'm sure she's already got the message!" Clarine called back. She cut down an approaching attacker with the wind sword, and then healed Rutger before he sliced and diced another one. "We're joining the others?"

"Yeah, and with a bit of luck, they'll have the enemy leader captured or killed by the time we get there."

"I hope so. I'm super tired. How are you and Rutger not exhausted?"

"We are," Rutger replied. He shrugged, and then rolled his shoulder with a wince. "We just have a lot of muscle memory keeping us upright. But it's been over an hour of fighting, and that was with hiking prior. I guarantee you, Clarine, we're both tired." He paused and then looked at me. "Though, I will admit that I have no idea how you're able to think. My mind is half-numb with fatigue, and it's hard to string together simple thought processes that aren't 'kill this guy' or 'keep Clarine safe'."

"Well, I do hang back a bit in the fighting, if you've noticed," I pointed out. I chose to not also point out that Clarine's face went bright red. He hadn't even noticed, another sign of how tired he actually was. "But I can think through anything, it seems. I must've gotten it from my dad."

"I can believe it. That day…" Rutger's eyes clouded with pain, and I wondered how much he hurt from Dad's death. I couldn't make myself ask, but maybe when we were in the Plains… maybe when we were in Bulgar, I would. "He was clearly thinking through a lot, and thinking clearly."

"That sounds like him." I smiled softly. "But, well, we're going to be late if we linger here too long."

"Right. Forward." He smiled back, just slightly, but Clarine beamed like it was the best thing in the world to see. "Lead on."

It took a bit to maneuver through all the corpses and blood, especially since 'not fighting' for a while had dropped us out of our battle-fever, meaning fatigue was clawing at our limbs, and every little bruise and scratch we had was really making itself known. But when we found the hole Tate and Noah had made, we found our tenth wind and burst through, joining the fight. It didn't escape me that the soldiers cheered when they saw me, and I made sure to get a rather showy kill before snapping orders, just to continue bolstering morale. Morale played such a huge part in battles that I couldn't help but make sure I took every opportunity to make sure it remained high, even if the little bit of bravado was going to cost me later.

At some point during the mess of blood and orders, I learned Tate and Zealot had taken down the enemy commander, and Roy was calling for the Bernese to surrender. Those that did would be treated fairly. Those that didn't would be eradicated. Those that fled… well, we weren't chasing them. There was no point in chasing people who didn't want to fight. They had their family and friends too, just as we did. Of course, some soldiers wanted to hunt them down, but Roy made his view on the matter clear, so there was only a few bits of grumbling.

"I. Am. Tired," Roy groaned as we entered the hallway to the 'inner sanctum' of the Temple. Zealot had shown Roy and I where it was, but did not enter himself. Something about it being forbidden for him to. "Wait, shoot, I can say that, right?"
"Yes, Roy, it's just me," I reassured. I grimaced and whimpered as I tried to stretch, and got a wave of pain down my back. "Ugh, why did I make that shot? I think I strained my back."

"I don't even know how you made it." Roy shook his head. "You spun the arrow, more or less jumped out of the saddle while your horse also jumped…"

"And I definitely hurt my back doing it, so don't worry. Sue and Sin have too much sense to pull off something similar."

"I'm worried about others doing it!"

"Roy, the only mounted archers you have are Sue, Sin, and me. Yes, we have some fliers, but none of them are going to jump out of their saddles, since there's a very long drop."

"Okay, point." He laughed a little, and it sounded tired. "I think when we're done here, I'm just going to jump into the bath, and then sleep for days."

"If only." I laughed a bit too, but let the sound die as we stepped into a small room of glittering blues and whites. A spear of similar colors rested on a pillar in the center of the room. Maltet. "So, this is the Divine Spear."

"Yes, it is." The echoing voice almost made Roy and I scream, and we both had our weapons drawn and aimed as a man flickered into existence in front of us. "Perhaps I should have given you a bit more warning," he laughed, smiling softly. "Rest easy, children. I am Barigan."

"Oh, so this is like when we met Saint Elimine and got Aureola," Roy murmured. He slowly sheathed his rapier, and I reluctantly returned an arrow to my quiver. I kept Rienfleche in hand, though. "Why is it that we didn't meet Roland, Durban, or Athos?"

"It is simple, really. Roland and Durban met the previous wielders, and gave their warnings then, when their curses were most likely to cause tragedy. Athos, meanwhile, is simply resting. He lived for a long time, and now enjoys being among the company of his friends at long last." His eyes narrowed slightly, and his smile grew. "You... have Aenir's blood in you, don't you? I can see her power."

"I am her grandson, by my understanding. Is that a problem?"

"Not at all. I loved Aenir. I am pleased to meet her grandson, especially after she did so much to help us." His smile grew even further, but became distinctly sad. "I am also glad to see a child of human and dragon heritage, even if the dragon part had been hidden."

"Really?" Roy looked a little startled. "I thought... Well..."

"None of us really hated the dragons, not even Hilda and Elimine, though their initial comments hinted otherwise." Barigan shrugged. "That was why Fiona stayed with us until the end."

"That makes sense, but still, you fought to remove the dragons."

"We fought for our homes, child. That's all the Scouring became, at the end. Humans and dragons fighting desperately for their homes." He shook his head. "For my friends and I in particular, we fought for a dream."

"A dream?"

"Yes." He nodded, and smiled slightly again. "Ultimately, our dream became to lay the foundations
for the future, a future where dragons and humans could live side by side again. Unfortunately, to gain the time to lay those foundations, we had to end the war, and end it decisively. It was the only way forward we could see. But we did so, executed the one responsible for the Scouring, and rebuilt the continent." He shook his head. "Sadly, our dream, our hopes, had to be passed down. We laid a heavy burden on all of you for that dream, and you pay the price. You do not have to forgive us, but I do hope you can succeed where we could not."

"I'm rapidly learning that a lot of people put their hopes on us," I deadpanned. I couldn't help but let my exasperation through. "That's rather lazy."

"I wouldn't quite call it lazy, so much as having a dream far beyond the scope of our strength," Barigan defended. His smile became rueful, though. "I can see why you think that. But, I think that so long as you continue to your goal, you will fulfill our hopes without trying. You make your own fates." His smile fell and he gestured to Maltet. "Because of that, I ask that you wield Maltet, if you are willing to bear the price."

"What is the price, exactly?"

"The price is the curse of Foresight. So long as you hold Maltet, you can see a few heartbeats into the future."

"That doesn't sound like a…" I trailed off as logic filled in the gaps. "Wait, no, it is. Just because you can see the future… it doesn't mean you can change it."

"A curse that Athos knew all too well." Barigan smiled sadly. "But that is the price. If you are willing to bear it, then please, take Maltet, and use it to end the war you fight."

"We will take it, as I am sure there is someone in the army who will willingly bear that price," Roy replied. He stepped up to the pedestal and lifted Maltet, teetering a bit as he adjusted to the weight. "Thank you, Sir Barigan."

"No, thank you, for taking up our burden, and our dream," Barigan murmured. He slowly started fading away. "I will be watching over you, alongside so many others. Never feel as if you are alone. You have your friends, your soldiers, and all of us."

"I'll remember that." Roy smiled warmly. "Promise."

Barigan laughed, smiling broadly, and disappeared, leaving only the echo of his laugh behind. Roy and I lingered a bit in the room, just until the sound faded, and only then did we leave the inner sanctum.

"I wonder why they stayed," I murmured as we walked. "Was it to explain themselves?"

"Maybe," Roy whispered. He studied the spear. "I… like it. I like hearing they weren't perfect. It makes me feel better."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." It was good to remember that the 'heroes' weren't perfect. It let me finally realize just what our parents had tried to teach us, had tried to tell us, but couldn't find the proper words for. It let me realize why Uncle Eliwood thought we had surpassed them long ago. "Oh, speaking of ghosts, I asked Fiona about the man."

"Really?" He glanced at me. "And?"

"The man was your grandfather." I frowned slightly as he simply nodded. "That's it? No reaction?"
"Well, I suppose after everything, hearing that my dead, never-before-met-grandfather helped us out isn't that surprising." He laughed a little. "I suppose it should still be a little startling, but it isn't. Not sure if you noticed, but his eyes were as kind as Mother's." He smiled slightly. "No idea why he was there, but I'm glad he was!"

Roy ran ahead then, likely to give some motivating speech about receiving the Maltet while I slipped through the shadows to take care of the reports. So, I lingered back, watching him leave and thinking a bit before shaking my head. He could learn later, just why his grandfather was a ghost. Right now, we had a war to fight. When it was over, I'd tell him.

It was a promise to myself, and it would just be another reason to win this war. I almost looked forward to it, even if I knew the battles would only get harder from here. But winning this war… would mean everything to all of us at this point.

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Notes on Festivals:

*Once again, I notice a similarity to Ilia and Sacae. Their festivals are filled with cheer and music, with an emphasis on traditional stories being told, but otherwise unchecked and free. There's also copious amounts of alcohol.*

*Etrurian festivals are a little more structured, with days devoted to certain themes. Alcohol is forbidden until sunset most days, to lessen the chances of riots.*

*Lycian festivals are more like Ilian and Sacaean, but there is an emphasis on dancing instead of stories. There tends to be three or four drunken brawls every hour whenever one is held.*

*Bernese festivals are rooted in older traditions, despite being a country firmly devoted to the Saint Elimine Church. They have festivals for good harvests, for the rain, and even ones to placate the spirits of the dead, to 'keep them from becoming envious'. How they're celebrated depends on what sort of purpose it holds, but all of them have a somber feel to them, despite the fun and cheer.*

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Chapter End Notes

Author's note: And now we have Maltet, and some philosophical discussions. This chapter's gimmick is that you have to break through bunches of walls, which only have '40 HP' instead of the typical '100 HP'. Maltet's price is based off of how the only ice dragons we see, canonically, in the Elibe games both have the ability to see the future. The 'showy kill' Irene and Roy talk about is based, a bit, on the Nomad Trooper critical animation (Specifically the sword one, adapted for bow).

Next Chapter - Interlude, Festival
It's done. We have liberated Ilia, and have obtained Maltet. We went through a formal ceremony where Zealot, Lord of Edessa, entrusted Maltet to General Roy, which also doubled as Zealot and Aunt Fiora formally declaring their allegiance to the army. It's a major victory as now, Bern only has a foothold in the Sacae and their own country. Slowly but surely, we were pushing Bern back. Slowly, but surely, we were winning.

Now, though, we rest. It's been a very long few weeks, and it'll be even longer to Bern. So, instead, we celebrate our victory, and gather our strength for the next push.

"So, most of the Bernese soldiers we've captured have chosen to fight with us?" I asked, a little startled. I hadn't expected any, but both Roy and Guinevere asked to talk to them. "Seriously?"

"I wouldn't say most," Astore replied, leaning back in his chair. We were in my room in Castle Edessa, and he was giving me his latest spy report. "I'd say it's about half, a little over at most, and I'm certain some of them intend to be spies."

"If they can get information out, I would be surprised." Ilia's weather had helped us in a few things, one of which was that it limited the number of messenger birds that could be sent out. "When we're in the Plains, though, that certain increases."

"You better be a little more open in how many plans you and Prince Mildain come up with, because the chances of the spies successfully passing information increases with both size and lack of distance."

"Yes." I glanced at the map on my desk and felt a little… jittery. Roy had confirmed earlier today that the ultimate goal of the Sacae Campaign would be to liberate Bulgar. We would be right on the border there. "Elphin and I will make sure we don't really say which plans we discard." It wouldn't be my fault if they couldn't pick out the 'actual' plan. "We should also expect defectors."

"Might help make the army a bit more manageable."

"Don't remind me…” I groaned and rested my head on my desk. "I don't even know most people's names, and barely anything about most of the ones I do!" There were just so many people...

"You're one person, who is juggling far too much." He gave me a scolding look. "Don't fret."

"But I keep up with some!"

"Yeah, the ones who can make time to go to you. The rest fill their time with extra practicing."

"Logically, I get that…” But I felt bad. I barely interacted with Chad or Lugh anymore for instance, and Father Sky, the last time I remembered talking to Cath, we were infiltrating the Hanover Estate. These were people I'd wanted to keep an eye on! "But…” A knock on the door cut me off and I jumped to my feet before realizing that the knocking was 'polite' not 'open now there is an
emergency'. "Come in?"

"Irene, should you really be working right now?" Uncle Heath poked his head in and smiled. His hair had more white streaked through it, but that was the only real sign of his aging. Mom used to tease him about having a 'baby face'. "Astore, you shouldn't encourage her overworking habits," he chided, nudging Astore's non-braced leg. "It's bad for her."

"I am but a humble spy," Astore instantly joked. He leaned back more in his chair, tipping it back so that it balanced on its back legs. "You think I hold any power over her bad habits?"

"You're certainly not helping her break them." Uncle Heath shook his head. "Regardless, it's a rest day. That means you rest, Irene."

"To be fair, there's a lot of work."

"To be fair, she won't get much done if she collapses," Uncle Heath snagged my arm and tugged me out of my room. "Farina, you were right. She is in here."

"Of course I was right!" Aunt Farina popped up, bouncing a little on her toes. "Hey there, little one," she cheerfully greeted, conveniently ignoring that I was much taller than her. "Come on. You're dressing up!"

"I'm what," I deadpanned. She snatched my hand and dragged me after her. "H-hey, wait!" I turned back to ask for help, but Uncle Heath and Astore simply laughed and waved as she tugged me down the hall. "Oh, come on!"

"Relax! You'll look great!" She knew damn well that wasn't my issue with this! "Oh, Fiona, perfect timing!" She tossed me into some room and blocked the doorway as Fiona stepped out of the neighboring room and looked at us curiously. "Will you make sure she doesn't escape? I need to snag some dresses!"

"I suppose," Fiona replied. She looked a little baffled. "Have fun?" She waved as Aunt Farina skipped off, singing something off-key. "What's going on, exactly?"

"I think everyone is conspiring against me," I groaned. I glanced around the room, looking for a way to escape, but unless there was another convenient hidden passageway around here, my only options were the window and the door. However, the window wasn't a good option, since we were three or four floors up, and there were really no nearby trees. "I don't suppose I could convince you to let me go?"

"Nope." She laughed as I groaned again. "Besides, this is the perfect time for a bit of teasing." She smiled slightly. "It's about our conversation at the temple."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. I didn't point it out then, as it didn't have much to do with your point, but you're taking yourself far too seriously, so I simply must mention it." She leaned forward slightly, eyes dancing in mischief. "If Nergal hadn't gone mad... Ninian and Nils would've never gone through the Gate in the first place, so your thing about how they would've been caught without Lyn if Nergal had remained sane..."

It took me a second to even remember what she was talking about, and another to process it. As soon as I did, though, I flushed in embarrassment. "I-I was rambling!" But, she was right. I mean; my whole point was still correct, but that was a bit...
"Yes, yes. But you *were* wrong." She hummed a little, almost like she was laughing. "It's good to remember you're not always right."

"Just for that, I'm telling everyone you're performing tonight!" It felt childish to say that, but at the same time, I couldn't help but… like being a 'child' again.

Maybe that was the real reason for her telling me that. Maybe I *was* taking myself too seriously.

Aunt Farina had a lot of fun having me try on bunches of different dresses and boots, and after a while, I started having a bit of fun too. I'd never really been one for fashion, but there was something nice about not thinking about tactics and army structure for once. I drew the line at make-up though, and thankfully, Wuotan came to my rescue. He wanted to show Roy, Lilina, Sue, and me something, and only after he promised Aunt Farina that it had nothing to do with work did she let me go.

It ended up being quite the little hike, right past a shrine, and the going was cold. However, the path did open up before long, and we stepped into a beautiful ruined temple, with snow and ice coating everything.

"What is this place?" Roy breathed as we stepped slowly into an open room. It reminded me of the 'receiving room' in Etruria's castle. "Why does it feel…?"

"It feels sad," Sue whispered. She clung to Lilina's hand as she looked around. "Mother Earth… her voice is sad here."

"I was going to say strangely nostalgic, actually."

"Roy, you have never been here."

"Exactly."

"It is likely the blood within you answering," Wuotan explained. While the four of us gawked, he had walked ahead, barely paying any attention. "This is the Temple of the Ice Dragon. Prior to the Scouring, this was the home of Aenir, the Ice Dragon Queen, and her family. According to the records, your mother spent the first ten years of her life in this place."

"So, Aunt Ninian lived here?" Lilina whispered. Her eyes narrowed slightly. "I imagine it was very lovely then."

"There are a few pictures, sketches really, that managed to survive the Scouring. They show a warm place, a sanctuary from the cold. The people of Edessa would hike up here for festivals, and for advice and answers. She was their protector, and they loved her for it." Wuotan shook his head. "Regardless, I thought you four might want to see where Lady Ninian spent her childhood."

"Thank you." Lilina smiled. "So, can we just… explore?"

"I went through earlier and found no traps and no weak spots in the floor or ceiling. I suggest caution, but you should be fine."

"Okay!" Lilina laughed, the cheerful sound echoing, and she tugged Sue after her as went down one hallway. Roy went down a different one, and Wuotan followed him, likely because Roy would have the most questions.

I wandered alone, and made my way down a hallway hidden by the throne in the room. I wandered
down the broken path, noticing the ice clinging to carvings on the walls. It was hard to see through the frost, but it did seem like it was trying to tell a story. I wondered just what it had been.

The hallway abruptly stopped at a broken door that creaked eerily as I opened it. I stepped inside what had to be a living room, one covered in frost, dust, and mold. It connected to a small kitchen, with a charred and gunked up wooden stove, still filled with the ashes of its last bit of fuel. Set up near was a rotted table with the remains of four chairs and four clay plates and sets of silverware set up for a meal. A pot nearby was filled the the frozen remains of what I thought might've been a soup, before time and animals had taken most of it away.

I wandered through, realizing that this must've been Aunt Ninian's old house. I stepped down a side hallway, and found two sets of rooms. One had two beds, small and splintering, with ratty blankets and mildewy pillows. A small nightstand, suspiciously intact, stood proudly between them, and a portrait rests on it. Cautiously, I picked up that portrait, and instantly recognized Aunt Ninian in it. Yes, she was simply a child, and time had turned the paper yellow, and muted the lines. But her smile was the same, and I had a feeling on who I'd see in it anyway. With her were the two ghosts, confirming what Fiona had already stated. The young boy in the picture was the only one I hadn't seen before, and that told me exactly who he was: Uncle Nils.

"I see you found the living quarters of the Temple." Wuotan's voice made me turn, but strangely, I wasn't surprised he'd found me. "I imagine the owner would have quite the heart attack, if she saw how dusty everything is," he continued lightly. His tone made it sound like he'd known the owners. "If there was a heart to attack, that is."

"I'm sure ghosts have other things to worry about," I replied lightly. I studied him, though, as he walked through the room, and realized something. He navigated the room very well, but there was a little something… off about his movements. He 'moved out of the way' for things not there. He 'reached' for things not there. It was as if they were old habits he had fallen into, and he hadn't realized it. "Wuotan." I waited until he looked at me, and still hesitated before I asked. "Just who are you?" He knew things no one else did, and that celebrated scholars were surprised to see. He knew Fiona well. He knew the prices of the Divine Weapons. He had manipulated quintessence.

"I am Wuotan, a traveling scholar." He laughed a little. "That's the easy answer, isn't it?"

"You should know by now that I rarely take the 'easy' way."

"That is true." He smiled slightly. "But might I ask you to wait for that answer? I'll tell you when you capture Bulgar and begin your preparations to invade Bern."

"Because that's when you'll give us an explanation only makes sense when you explain your past."

"And because I do believe Princess Guinevere is preparing to make her own preparations to explain something to you and Lord Roy, and that is more important." His smile widened. "And I do think that young Deke owes you an explanation as well."

"I can't interrogate him! He's still recovering!" But I knew he was right; Deke did owe me that. I also had little doubts that whatever Guinevere might want to tell us, it was far more important than my curiosity. "I'll hold you to it, though, and much more firmly than I have him!"

"Of course. I actually look forward to it a little." He laughed softly. "Just… not here. The dead should rest without having to listen to boring lectures from the living."

If he was what I suspected, I doubted anything about him was 'boring'. But I smiled and nodded anyway. "Let's go return to the others."
"Yes, let's."

After we left the Ice Dragon Temple, the others threw themselves into helping set up the festival. I went back to my study to do a bit more work. It was mostly trying to figure out just how we were going to make it through without turning the 'Sea of Grass' into a 'Sea of Muddy and Bloody Grass'. The Djute, the traitors and kinslayers, migrated the lands closest to Etruria and Ilia, meaning we'd likely hit them first hand. Then there was the unofficial 'Law of the Sacae', where all the tribes of the Sacae, from the largest to the smallest, would unite against foreign threats. Unless Sue, Sin, and I could come up with a way to convince the tribes that the Etrurian Army, led by a Lycian General, was not a threat, then we'd have dozens upon dozens of massacres. This wasn't helped by how the tribes had long memories, and Etruria had severely wronged Sacaeans in the past, and not just in the form of raiding settlements and killing everyone within. I couldn't deny the very, very, real possibility that the Sacaeans would call Sue, Sin, and I 'traitors', and that we would actually be a detriment…

Knocking startled me out of my thoughts, and I blinked owlishly as the door opened, with a surprising amount of light streaming through. That was about when I realized that it had grown dark, and there was a lot of laughter and singing on the wind.

"I take it that you were so enthralled that you did not notice the time?" It took a couple more blinks to register that Aunt Fiora was in the doorway. She had a scar over her eye now, but it seemed as if she would retain most of the vision within that eye, so she didn't care. "Irene, are you listening?" she asked, voice lilting a bit with a laugh. "You seem like countries away."

"I wouldn't say countries…" I mumbled. I couldn't really deny that I hadn't been thinking of anything within Ilia, though. "What is it?" I sat back in my chair, and rubbed my aching eyes. I'd need to get some candles.

"I came looking for you. People have noticed you're missing."

"Really?" I glanced out the window, wincing at just how many people were swarming the little bit of the square I could see. "In all that chaos, how did anyone notice I was gone?"

"Ah, yes, how did anyone notice that one of the few Sacaeans in the group, and one of the tallest people in said group was missing, especially when she is the very recognizable tactician who everyone really wants to hear sing?"

"...When you put it like that…"

"That's really not even going into how Farina is particularly proud of how dressed up you are." She smiled and nudged me out the door. "Come on, silly. Your boyfriend has been looking for you too."

"...Oh." I flushed hotly and she laughed. "Ugh, I'm going to be teased forever about that, aren't I?"

"Of course." She smiled warmly and kept on nudging me. "Now, come on." She gently pushed me all the way down the hall and out the door, no matter how much I dragged my heels. Once there, she nodded in satisfaction. "Well, off with you. You look nice, by the way." She walked right back inside Castle Edessa, and shut the doors behind her in a very clear message: 'you are not coming back in tonight'.

Sighing, I shuffled my feet and glanced over at the Ice Festival set up. Stalls lined the main square and some of the side streets. Soldiers that I'd seen wield weapons with ruthless precision were
making snowmen and snow sculptures with all the care of handling baby birds. Others raced about in snowball fights and tag. Others danced to the music and sung off-key. Still others simply shopped as the snow fell gently over all of us.

Still, to my absolute surprise, many greeted me cheerfully as I walked through the crowd, hunting for anyone I knew. I couldn't quite understand why, since I rarely interacted with anyone nowadays, before realizing it was related to something Roy and I had been scolded about before. When I was here with them, celebrating, they believed things were fine, and would be well. If I hid, they assumed that there was a problem that I had to put my full resources into, and that was a cause for worry.

So, I made sure to smile and wave at those I passed. I listened to those who found the courage to approach, and even played a game or two, losing miserably. I was a bit mortified, but the way they laughed told me they didn't care. If anything, they found it endearing, which I supposed was a good thing. Though, I really didn't like losing.

"Irene!" Klein caught up to me just as one of the games ended, and pinned a flower to my hair. He smiled warmly, and I blushed, embarrassed for some reason. "There you are," he murmured. "I've been looking for you."

"I got… caught up in work," I mumbled, ducking my head. I glared up when he laughed, though. "You can't talk. You know damn well you do the same."

"Not today, though!" He grinned and I rolled my eyes. "But at last, I found you and gave you that flower. It's supposed to be a good luck charm."

"A flower is a good luck charm?"

"Well…” He coughed, flushing slightly. "Lucky in love and relationships?"

"I already have you. How can I be luckier?" I grinned as his flush darkened. "You know…” I glanced around, a little self-conscious and worried, but the nearby soldiers looked on us indulgently. A few were even making 'get on with it!' gestures. "Things have been so chaotic. You and I haven't really gone on a date, have we?" Shyly, I linked my arm around his and leaned into his side. "So…?"

"There's a few stalls over here I think you might like." He grinned and, almost hesitantly, he kissed the top of my head. "There's also a game booth here, and there's ice skating set up that might be fun…”

"You scouted."

"Maybe." He grinned sheepishly, and I laughed. "Come on. It's a festival. Let me spoil my lady love."

"Only if you let me spoil you as well." My face went red at how cheesy the line was, but his laughter made it worth it. "Let's go! And tease people along the way!"

"I'm right beside you. Always."
Author's notes: Feels like a long time since everyone got to be silly. The location shown here, Ice Dragon Temple, featured also in Thief's Testimony.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Plains
The festival proved a little more rambunctious than originally anticipated, meaning there were a lot of people nursing aching heads as we marched out early the next day. Roy debated waiting, but Zealot pointed out that more blizzards were on the way, meaning we didn't have the time. If we waited, we risked being locked into Ilia until the spring, meaning it would likely be summer by the time we made it to Bern, a bad time to be fighting, especially since summers in Bern could be scorching. So, we march into the plains, where the winters are mild, if chilly.

I've… finally come back.

As soon as we made camp, Sue and I went for a ride. We just… had to. We didn't even need to talk about it. As soon as the tents were up, I put word to the watch, Sue met me, and we rode. We galloped through the grass, bright greens and yellows blurring together as the wind whipped past us. We left the camp far behind, out of sight, because of course we'd know the way back. We were Sacaeans, children of the Kutolah. We could track anything, especially in the plains.

When we reached a river, we dismounted and let our horses graze and wander, cooling down after the ride. We both flopped into the grass, watching the clouds pass overhead, just as we normally did during a 'ride'. That, more than anything, solidified everything for me. I was back. I was back in the plains. I was… well, unfortunately, it did not quite feel like 'home'. I loved the plains. I was relieved to be back. But it did not have the same feeling as 'home', likely because this was not the lands the Kutolah wandered, because my parents no longer lived here to make it 'home'. But I was back. I was back, and I could almost cry from the sheer joy of being back.

"How long has it been?" I murmured, eyes narrowed as I studied the clouds. The grass swayed gently in the breeze, rustling like gentle laughter. "When did I leave?"

"I… think it's been about six months?" Sue answered. She shifted a little closer to me. "I think. I'm not sure. Everything blends together so much. It feels like lifetimes."

"Very true." But at the rate we were going, there was a chance we'd end this war before the end of the year. That… would be good, as we could start reconstructing in the spring. "When is Midwinter?"

"It's still a couple weeks away." Her smile fell. "I don't think we'll have a festival this year. I hope Mother Earth does not mind."

"I think she might be too busy tending to all the newly dead." I grimaced at my own words. "Sorry, I probably shouldn't have said that."

"Well, it's not like it's not true. I think Mother Earth might forgive a bit of sarcasm." She gave me a concerned look. "Are you doing okay?"

"Well, I'm not dead yet, so I'm…" I sighed. "Clearly, I'm in a bit of a sarcastic mood. Sorry."
"You always did get sarcastic when tired." She reached up, as if to catch a cloud, or the sun. "Sin has been quiet."

"Sin is always quiet." I shifted to look at her, noticing her concerned look. "But you mean more so than usual."

"Yes." She sighed, letting her hand fall back to her side. "Can I send him to you? I know you're busy, but he won't tell me things. Maybe he'll tell you."

"I wouldn't count on it. After all, we haven't interacted much ever since I made him focus on guarding you." Then, I had just... been busy. There was just too much to do, every single day. "Then again, he's always been half-afraid of me."

"That's because you punched out his two front teeth as children."

"That was because he made you cry, the bully." I made my voice purposely huffy and she laughed. "But all right, send him to me. If nothing else, I might be able to find things to distract him with." I paused as I thought of all the work I had. "Scratch that. I definitely will."

"Can I help?"

"I think I've given you all the things you need to do. You're in charge of the Third Company, remember?" In the wake of the original Second's destruction, we reorganized the whole army back into Companies, all of slightly smaller size. It had taken a lot of work to convince Deke to remain in command of the rebuilt Second, and he only agreed when I suggested making Rutger his co-leader. "Are you getting along with Allen?"

"Surprisingly, yes." She turned on her side to better look at me. "I thought Roy might've hit his head when he named Allen as my co-leader, but we balance each other well. He's surprisingly thoughtful for a hothead."

"Yes, I was surprised too." I also knew, though, that he spent a lot of time with Tate, coming to her for advice so that he didn't drag everyone down. "I don't think Lilina has forgiven me for naming her the leader of the First."

"She grumbles, but admits that you were right in that it'll be good practice for Ostia. Besides, Roy named Fir her co-leader, and they're getting along." She rolled back onto her back. "Clarine and Cecilia are doing well with the Fourth, Perceval and Lance are working surprisingly well for the Fifth..."

"Now we're back to working." I grinned as she yelped. "Well, that's probably a sign that we need to get back." With a groan, I pushed myself up and couldn't decide if I wanted to sigh or smile. "The sun is setting."

"Is it?" She sat up too and she chose to sigh. "It is." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "I missed this. The ride, just chatting, the sunset turning the plains into a rich orange..."

"Yeah, I have too." But, unfortunately, those days were gone. They burned with the war. But at least the view was still beautiful. "Let's get our horses."

"And take our time returning?"

"Yes, that sounds good." I shared a sly grin with her and we both burst into laughter, leaning into each other, as if we were plotting a prank on our parents, just as we used to.
No matter how much everything changed, some things remained the same, and I couldn't be more grateful.

We returned just before the sun fully set, and were drawn into various meetings and work, until I, at least, passed out at my desk. Klein woke me up just long enough for me to move to one of the two cots in our tent before I passed out again. After what felt like only an hour's worth of rest, which it might've been, I woke up to do more work, while Klein gave me a good morning kiss and walked out to get some of his own training in before running drills for the Seventh that he led. At dawn, Sin was at my tent, unwilling to talk about just what, exactly, was bothering him, but I had my guesses anyway, so I just gave him a very extensive list of things I needed done, making sure it would take him the entire day, and maybe even two.

Two hours after I sent Sin off, a page from Roy begged me to come meet Roy at the edge of the camp, as we had a visitor. I went along, curious, but I stiffened instantly when I saw the elderly woman staring silently at Roy, no matter how much he chattered. I couldn't help it. After all, the patterns on her dress marked her as one of the Djute.

Her eyes flicked over to me, and her eyes narrowed as she took stock of me. She knew who I was. As always, I wore clothing with the Kutolah's patterns, even if they were no longer the 'standard cut' a Kutolah huntress would typically wear. These were specially made by Hanover's tailors, sent along with other supplies for the army that managed to catch up with us just a couple of days ago, and Christopher had made sure that the patterns were perfect. She knew me as Kutolah, and there was only one Kutolah with Sacaean green hair and amber eyes: me. Even if I only knew her as one of the Djute, she would know me. I had to participate in some ceremonies during festivals as the granddaughter of the Kutolah Chieftain.

"So, the little wolf really is back with an army," the woman murmured. Her face was pinched, and I bit my tongue to keep from retorting. "My name is Zahra. I have come to speak with you, Irene of the Kutolah, and call on Father Sky's name and patience."

"I hear you, Zahra of the Djute," I replied slowly, formally. I knew the words, though before now, I had only really read about them. To call on both Father Sky's name and patience was... it was the traditional, and most formal, way of asking for 'peace talks'. "I must admit... I expected to either not encounter the Djute, or be a target of their arrows."

"It would be more accurate that I am Zahra of 'part' of the Djute. We are a divided tribe." She crossed her arms, shifting so that her posture was equal measures polite and challenging.

"Specifically, I represent those who chose to leave Monke, our chieftain."

"Ah, so he is exiled?"

"Or we are. It's hard to say. He still has many hunters with him, though. No doubt you will fight them before long."

"I see." I gestured for Roy to come stand by me, and he did so easily, though he gave me a distinctly uncomfortable look. It had been a bit since we were met with such... polite hostility. "Ah, my pardon for my rudeness. This is Roy, the leader of the army. I serve as the tactician. Might we get to the point of your approach? We're both busy."

"Very well." Her eyes narrowed slightly, and I knew I had committed some 'grave insult' in the politeness, but honestly, neither Roy nor I had the time. "I shall be blunt. Are you invaders?"

"No." I shook my head. "It is simply most expedient to cross the Plains to reach Bern. We're
'invading' there, to end the war."

"Ideally, we'd only fight in one location: Bulgar," Roy added. The woman's eyes flashed, but he held himself firm. "We seek to liberate it, and then pass across the border from there. Of course, if we are attacked, we will retaliate, but we do not seek conflict with any of the tribes."

"I see," Zahra whispered. Her words were clipped, and it was easy to see that she did not like talking with either of us. I wasn't sure why. Maybe we were too young. Maybe she didn't like outsiders. Maybe she was just like this with everyone. It could be anything, really. "Then, that sets my mind at ease. If you are not invaders, then the Law of the Sacae does not apply. I will spread the word. If you are telling the truth."

"Are you accusing Irene of lying?" Roy kept his voice polite, even as her eyes widened. I had to resist the urge to smirk. "After all, I am simply clarifying what she already said."

"That…" She made a face, and it was all too easy to see her thoughts. She really did not like us, but we were 'right', and we were her best chance at not losing all of her tribe, so she had to deal with us. It was strange, being on 'this' side of diplomacy. Normally, it was the other way around. "You are an outsider. She is not. But I retract the statement."

"I understand." He shot me a look, and I subtly nodded. "Though, if I may… would you and yours like to fight alongside us, so that you can see the truth with-"

"No." Her tone was blunt, almost like a slap. "We do not wish." She sounded almost offended we'd asked, and all I could think was that this was probably the first time Roy's charisma didn't win us unexpected allies. Then I wondered if we should've had Lilina speak with her. "If you liberate Bulgar, then we will assist. But only then. We have buried too many of our own for an outsiders' battle."

"I understand." Roy gave me another look, and I made a slight face to make him smile. "It seems you are done with me, though, so I shall leave you two to whatever formal farewells you must do."

He walked away, and I knew he was a little frustrated. But this woman hadn't really done anything, except maybe be a little rude, so there was nothing more to say.

I waited for him to leave before I focused again on Zahra, absently noting how she focused a lot on my eyes. "If I recall my studies correctly, then by calling on Father Sky, I am allowed a question," I began slowly. She instantly grimaced, proving she had hoped my education had not been so thorough. "Relax. I won't ask for weaknesses. I'll learn that on my own. Instead, I wish to ask… why you are here."

"I already told you," she retorted, speaking slowly as if she was talking to a particularly stupid infant. "I am checking."

"I am Sacaean. I know how to trick without lies, just as you do." My eyes narrowed as she sighed. Clearly, she'd been hoping I was stupid. "But let me rephrase. Why did you take the gamble instead of hiding?" I knew, knew, that from her perspective, it was a huge gamble. She could've been killed outright. She could've been captured and tortured. She knew nothing about us, only that we were 'Etrurian', and she was old enough to have seen the worst Etruria had done.

"...The same reason why Monke betrayed." Her voice was soft and monotone, and her eyes went glassy and distant. "When I was younger, about fourteen, some squires attacked for their… 'initiation'. They laughed as they skewered children, threw little children into flames. Every time I close my eyes, I remember. I remember wrapping myself around my little brother, hoping and praying that I could spare him. Then, I heard a strange clang and looked up." Her eyes became
even more distant. "An Etrurian stood in front of us, protecting us from the sword. A squire like the others, except he was not covered in blood and soot."

"One saved you?"

"Yes. Ender, Monke, and me... we escaped, thanks to that one who went against his fellows. Killed them all, from my understanding." Her eyes slowly focused on me. "Monke went on to become our chieftain, but that day haunted him. He learned, that day, that outsiders were too strong. Only an outsider could fight an outsider. That is why, when Bern invaded, he submitted to them. He thought it was the only way to keep the plains alive, and that all the rest were too foolish to realize." She shook her head. "Ender became the Diviner for the Djute, skilled in magic. He was glad for it, as he wanted to read the stars and rocks, to see if he could find meaning in that day. He learned calmness from that day, and how prayer can save lives."

"...And you?"

"I learned that while outsiders are hateful, evil even, there are some, some, who choose to be kind. I took the gamble that this army had some of the latter for leaders, for the sake of those who are left." I heard the words she left unsaid. She also took that gamble because she was old. If she was wrong, then she'd die, and the young would live. "Of course, I wouldn't have even considered if it Ender hadn't recommended it. Even the elderly listen when a Diviner gives their advice."

"I see." I tried not to squirm as I noticed her once again looking right at my eyes with all the intensity one would give a bug you could not tell was poisonous or not. "You keep looking at my eyes. Might I ask why?"

"...The knight who saved us that day..." A strange look crossed her face. It was both wistful and angry, thankful and guilty. While she did appreciate what that knight did, she also wondered why that knight hadn't saved more. Why had that knight saved her but not the others? Why, why, why? I was sure, if she could meet that knight again, she would have screamed, sobbed, and thanked them in equal measure. "He had the same colored eyes as you."

"...Is that so?" I thought of Grandfather then. He had been a knight, and he had amber eyes, just like me. But I didn't say more. I wasn't sure how this woman would react to that knowledge. I wasn't sure if she was sure. "How peculiar."

"Yes..." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Are you so certain you can win?"

"Hmm?"

"In Bulgar. Are you so certain you can win, assuming you even make it past Monke?" She shook her head. "The hunters of your own clan were our strongest, and yet even they-"

"They lost, because your chieftain betrayed." My words were clipped, and she flinched at my calm, yet harsh, tone. "They lost, because Bern ambushed during the Sky Festival, when none were armed. But even with those two key advantages, Bern nearly lost. Bern suffered losses far beyond their 'acceptable'. My father ensured that." I straightened, and held myself with all the dignity I could muster. Based on her wide eyes, I gathered it was impressive. "My father nearly killed them all. So, yes, we will win."

"Your father is dead." Her words were blunt, and I almost flinched. "Almost winning does not change that they lost, and with so many losses."

"Yes, he is, and yes, many are dead, but you are forgetting, or not realizing, something." The words
came far more easily than I would've expected. "I am stronger than my father, and I come with an army filled with people just as strong, just as fierce, and just as willing to see Bern falls." I shrugged, almost nonchalant. "So, we will win, and when we do, you will honor your promise of help." I bowed slightly. "May Mother Earth watch your path home."

I turned away, walking slowly and deliberately. I felt her gaze burn into my back as I left, but I did not turn back. I focused on the army camp, and all that I would have to do. I focused on what tactics I knew were common about the Sacaeans, and specifically, the ones favored by the Djute.

It was time to liberate the plains, and we would not fail. We were stronger than anyone had expected, especially us, and we would prove it.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: So, this chapter sorta takes the 'place' of Sacae!Chapter 17, where you'd kill Arcardo. But since that's already happened in the story, we get an interlude instead. 'Zahra' is mentioned in Thief's Testimony.

Next Chapter - The Law of the Sacae (Sacae Route Chapter 18)
After talking with Zahra, and getting the reassurance that no tribes will ride to Djute's aid that have not already, we press forward. With the Kutolah fallen, the Djute are the strongest Tribe, and they have allied themselves with Bern, the slaughterers of Bulgar. I have no idea why they'd think Mother Earth and Father Sky would be on their side after that, but clearly, fear has robbed them of whatever wits they might've had.

Now, we take our first steps in liberating Sacae. Words cannot express my joy. They really can't.

I tried to focus my breathing. Breathe in as I pulled back the arrow, breathe out as I released the arrow, hold the breath as it flew and hit the target. For once, my morning was not filled reporting and planning. I already had my strategy; I knew which one Monke would use. I knew Sacaen tactics as well as I knew my own name. The only difficulty was learning how many Bernese soldiers might, or might not, be with them. So, instead of frantically hunting through reports and inventories and whatever else I normally did, I had time to relax and train for what felt like the first time in forever.

The sound of thuds reminded me that I was not the only one training here. Actually, Igrene, Dorothy, Klein, Wolt, Sue, and Sin had all been here too, taking advantage of the surprisingly calm morning to get some good training in. Igrene was the first to leave, suspiciously at the same time Astore swung by to give me a brief report from Uncle Jaffar and Uncle Legault, though she had a good excuse of needing to check on Fae, since Wuotan and Fiona were babysitting and making sure she didn't get lost in the grass. Dorothy left soon afterwards, worried that Saul was causing trouble with his flirtations, while Wolt went off to go help make lunch. Sue and Sin stayed a little longer before leaving to check the horses, with Sue promising to check mine. About two seconds after they left, I realized what she and Sin were really doing: giving Klein and me time alone, since even the soldiers weren't near.

"I wonder if they think they're being subtle," Klein laughed. He brought his bow down and looked at me. "Well, what is the plan for today?"

"I thought I'd just shoot until my hands bleed," I deadpanned, bringing my own bow down and flexing my cramping hands. I wasn't practicing with Rienfleche; I wanted to be able to see the arrows hit and not destroy the target. Different bows had different feels, and my hands were no longer used to anything but Rienfleche. I wondered if Dad had this problem. "It's been a bit."

"I suppose." He slid behind me, eyes narrowed slightly. "Your aim is as good as ever though."

"Well, I try."

"As always, though, you try too much. You're tenser than your bowstring.." Klein's hands fell on my shoulder and he squeezed them gently. "Holy… you're a bundle of knots, actually." He started massaging my shoulders and neck and I squeaked and laughed as he happened to hit a ticklish spot. "Why are you out here instead of resting, if you're so tense?"
"Practicing always used to relax me." I sighed and leaned into him a bit. "It's just me and the arrows, with Mother Earth below me and Father Sky above me. But right now, I'm just so..." I sighed again. "Monke. My targets turn to him."

"Do you know him well? I've never really heard you talk about him."

"No, not really. He was always the Chieftain of the Djute, a friend of Grandpa. Now, he's a traitor, a liar, and a kinslayer." I ground my teeth. "Bern might've killed my people, but they only managed to succeed as much as they did because of the Djute. Bern slaughtered, but the Djute lied and betrayed. They spat upon Mother Earth and Father Sky. I..."

"It's been a bit since I've seen you lose your temper."

"...Well, my temper got me a scar over my eye, among other things. A scar that I do not think you ever commented on."

"Really? I thought I did." He started massaging my shoulders again, trying help me relax. "I am most distressed you nearly lost one of your pretty eyes."

"Oh, so it's my eyes you like?"

"I love you. I like pretty much everything about you, even if you have lost your ability to relax." He shifted to my side and, very deliberately, kissed the bottom of the scar, right by my right ear. "Why don't I read a story to you? Like when we were younger?"

"Perhaps, instead, I spoil you." I ducked my head, mostly to hide my blush. "What would you like, Klein? I could try to write a poem?"

"As much as I love you attempts, I think we can both admit you have no talent for it." He laughed as I pouted. "But truly, I'm glad to just have another moment with you." He tugged me into a hug and I leaned into him, burying my face into his neck. "We've been running around so much lately, with barely even time to write silly notes to each other."

"Well, we did have the festival..." Still, it was a bit nice to just... be a girl hanging out with her boyfriend. "But seriously, isn't there something I can do for you? Cook?"

"I've tried your last attempt. No."

"I was like five!"

"No." He laughed and I scowled. I tried to pull away a bit to sulk, but he held me a little tighter. "Well, how long do we have?"

"The scouts are due to return in about an hour. Why?"

"In that case..." He started to blush. I could feel the warmth, and see it creep down his neck. "What do you say... about planning for after the war? The two of us, I mean."

"...I like that." I smiled a silly little smile, even as I started to blush too. "Let's do that."

"You know; you look really good in white," I noted as Lilina spun around nearby. We were set up on the grassy hills above the Djute War Camp, waiting for Roy to give the command to charge and begin the battle. Our information from our scouts confirmed some wyverns about, and Miredy, Zeiss, Tate, and Shanna were ready to drop them out of the sky. "I never thought about it before."
You've always worn reds to contrast the blue hair."

"Well, I am still wearing red," Lilina pointed out. She flapped her red cloak for emphasis before giggling. "But I like this dress, though. Why did Christopher make sure there were new clothes for me? I'm not complaining, but these are tailor made!"

"The letter jokingly called you 'cousin', and then something about how scandalous it would be if family didn't look amazing while burning everything." I grinned as she laughed, and glanced around. Fir was handling the First Company right now to give Lilina a bit of a break, and it seemed like she was doing a good job keeping everyone organized and quiet. That made me decide to ask Lilina something. "Hey."

"Yes?"

"You know, with everything, I don't think we ever really talked about how you were recovering."

"From?"

"Everything." I gave her a worried look. "Uncle Hector died, and then you had a trusted general betray you. He poisoned your mother, tried to kill your friends, tried to marry you…" I stroked her hair and fixed her hairband. "Then… well, I don't want to presume, but damn it, these battles have been rough."

"And I found out that Uncle Rath and Aunt Katri died, though by that point, it was crying because I was just so tired." She shook her head. "I'm… fine, actually, though. It seems weird. It feels weird. But then I remember how Mom went on after she lost her tribe, how Dad went on after learning Uncle Uther died. This strength is something I inherited from them, but never knew, because it was never tested. Like how you keep calm and can think through everything, like Uncle Rath, despite… you know… crying because a flower was particularly pretty."

"I don't know how you remember that. You were like two when that happened."

"Three! I was three!" She giggled, keeping the smile, even as she became serious. "But, you know… I'm okay. I'm still healing. But I'm okay. I'm stronger now."

"I know." I sighed. "Father Sky… I wish you could've been children a while longer."

"You know…" She peered up at me. "It was only a year ago that you were considered a child. Well, maybe it's two now." She looked confused. "Oh, wow, how long has it been?"

"I've…" I shook my head and shrugged. "I think it's been less than a year."

"Whatever. Point is, stop acting like you're so grown up." She scowled as I gave her a look and then looked pointedly at the soldiers. "Oh, you know what I mean." She sighed, shook her head, and then looked up to the sparkling blue sky and smiled. "I love this feeling."

"Feeling?"

"There is some…" She trailed off and smiled as the wind ruffled her hair and dress. "I've always felt it a bit, but it feels so much stronger now. The feeling of peacefulness."

"That's the Plains calling to your blood. You are of them, even if you've been raised and will rule a city of stone and mountains." I grinned. "The sky is the same, as is the earth. Father Sky embraces us all, even those who cannot hear Him, and Mother Earth supports everyone, even those who cannot hear Her. Keep that feeling, Lilina. The next few battles…"
"They will be the hardest, yet." She reached out and took my hand. "But we'll win. The strength Father taught me, the skill Mother showed me, and the magic that is my own. I'll bring those to this and all these battles, and show why they had such faith in me. I am their light. I am their strength, their power, and their hope."

"Yes, we will." I squeezed her hand tightly and smiled. "This is our war. We didn't start it. But, by Father Sky and Mother Earth, we will end it, decisively, and rebuild everything." This was our board, and it would be our victory.

"Precisely." She smiled back. "Let's do this!"

"Why are there so many magic users?" Roy groaned as another druid tried to use Eclipse. "That spell doesn't even hit anything!"

"Well, we don't exactly keep a lot of attack spells," I pointed out. He and I were on the field, taking a breather as the battle raged on around us. "Most of the magic involves keeping the camp safe."

"I never associated Sacaeans with magic."

"Well, that's because we tend to keep them close to the tribe. Some choose further training to become the Diviner of the Tribe."

"Why dark magic though?"

"It predates the Scouring, when dark magic was called 'Elder' magic, and associated primarily with knowledge." My eyes narrowed as I noticed Rutger and Deke leading the second through another ring of tents. "He'll move soon."

"He?"

"Monke."

"Oh." He glanced up at me. "And what, exactly, is his strategy? You were practically laughing when the camp layout was explained."

"He's forcing everyone to charge for him, leading them into ambushes. It's a common tactic." I smiled grimly. "That's why… we have our own ambushers." I brought my bow up and shot an arrow straight up in the air. "Tate! Zeiss!"

"Oh, that's why you insisted on clearing out the hiding places first." Roy was perfectly calm as Tate, Zeiss, and their fliers emerged from behind the hills, tossing magic at the gers and emerging warriors. "It's… only warriors, right?"

"I hope so. That's what our scouts said." I couldn't deny the very real fear, though, that Monke had simply hidden some civilians, and that we were killing them. But, I couldn't… I could only act on the information I had. If I hesitated and over-thought, I would not be able to keep moving forward. I would not be able to help end this war. I would not be able to do anything. "Roy."

"Third and Fifth Companies, charge!" Roy yelled, voice booming across the battlefield. An arrow flew towards us, but Roy made a little gesture and froze it in the air. "I am way too used to that now."

"Well, the screaming does make you a good target. I've gotten great at dodging, personally." As if to emphasize, two arrows flew towards me, but I ducked under them. "And Elphin's got Fourth
adding to the charge, so that means…"

"First and Second, fall back! Miredy and Shanna, assist!" Roy's eyes narrowed. "Wait, over there…" He pointed to something on the horizon. "Hey, is that…?" His eyes widened. "Is he leaving?"

For a split second, I had no idea who the 'he' was. Then, as I looked out, I realized what was going on. Monke was leaving. Monke was leaving. Monke was leaving. Likely, he was going to get more reinforcements, or try to. But that didn't matter quite as much as the fact that he was leaving.

"Roy?" I whispered. I turned to him, and gave him my most pleading look. "I…"

"Take them and go," Roy replied, instantly knowing what I was asking. But, he gave me a worried look. "But promise to return."

"Always."

By the time I reached the end of battlefield, Sue and Sin had fallen in with me, and their eyes were alight as they realized just why we were leaving the field. In complete synchronization, the three of us urged our horses into a fast gallop, and we chased after Monke. We leaned against our horses' necks to help us go a little faster. Unfortunately, though, Monke's horse was just as fast, so while he never got farther, we also never got closer.

At one point, long after we had left the battle behind, I drew myself up, dropped the reins, and drew Rienfleche. Sue and Sin were only a split-second behind me, and aimed their arrows. Sue was the first to fire, and her arrow caught Monke in the shoulder. Sin was the second to fire, and it glanced off his side, making him sway. I was last, and I caught him straight in the back, a bolt of light lancing straight through him. At that point, he fell from his horse, right on his shoulder. He tried to scramble up as his horse slowed to a confused, fidgeting stop nearby, but the arrow in his shoulder and the wound to his side made it difficult for him to maneuver enough.

As he struggled, the three of us caught up and dismounted, all of us keeping a tight grip on our bows. The three of us looked at each other and Sin stepped forward, kicking Monke over so that he laid on his back. Before Monk could try to push himself up, Sin braced his foot against his chest to pin him, and brought up his bow and arrow.

"So, you're going to kill me?" Monke asked. His tone and accompanying laugh were mocking. "You three don't know anything about the world, you prideful-"

"This isn't about the world," Sin retorted. He put a little more pressure on Monke's chest, purposely making sure he had to prop himself against the arrow Sue shot into his shoulder. "This is about you. Traitor and kinslayer, a disgrace to Mother Earth and Father Sky."

"Disgrace? I was just trying to protect my people!" Monke's eyes were wide and wild, but not from fear. It was old, old pain in his eyes, and I thought of the attack Zahra told me about. "Outsiders cannot be defeated! The people of the Plains… we are not-!"

"Lord Rath turned their victory meaningless, all on his own, despite your betrayal."

"My strength is my own," I interrupted, bristling. How dare this coward…! "And its foundation did
not come from Mom. Mom was talented, yes. Mom turned that skill into genius, through hard work, luck, and a privileged background that gave her the time to take advantage of both. But Mom was not strong. Mom's talent was giving others strength, of utilizing their strengths. But she was not strong. Dad was strong. Dad taught me how to find my strength." I gave him my most impassive, yet cold, look. "So you keep his name out of your filthy mouth, kinslayer."

"Keep Mom out of it too, while you're at it," Sue hissed. Her eyes flashed in dark anger, almost snarling at Monke. "You don't know her. You just know her reputation. You don't know anything about either of our parents, and you don't know anything about us." She nodded at Sin. "Enough. Clearly, he's going to waste his final breaths."

"Yes, it seems so," Sin agreed. He aimed the arrow, and his eyes narrowed. "Beg Mother Earth for forgiveness and understanding, traitor. You will not find it among the living." He loosed the arrow and it slammed into Monke's head, knocked it back into the ground. He writhed for a bit, but Sin reached down and ripped the arrow out, twisting it for good measure to make sure it snapped and bled messily.

We watched. We watched as he bled out. We watched as he breathed his last. We watched how he managed just enough thought and spirit to glare at all of us with fierce hatred and heavy pity. We watched and there we remained, even as the sun began to set.

Finally, Sin sighed and looked up to the sky, closing his eyes. "Why does it feel empty?" he whispered. He clenched his fists, tenser than his bowstring. "Why does it feel… why doesn't it feel…?"

"Bulgar is still captured," Sue whispered. She bowed her head and hugged herself. "Maybe that's why. The Plains are still tainted by this traitor's actions. We have to purge the last of it, and then… then we can heal…" Her voice cracked and she threw herself at my shoulder as she started to cry. I hugged her tightly and held my free arm out in a silent offer to Sin. He hesitated before taking the hug, leaning into me as he shook and struggled to not cry. I held them as the sun set, and though I wished to sing some sort of comforting song to them, I bit my tongue. I did not want Mother Earth mistaking the song as a funerary song. I would not grace Monke with a song. Though I thought Mother Earth might forgive him in time, since she also would likely forgive Nergal, and Monke did have good intentions… I hoped it would be a very, very long time, and I would not pay him any sort of honor.

Kutolah blood stained his hands, and because of his betrayal, Dad had to make the choice to run or sacrifice himself. I would never honor him.

I focused my breathing. Breathe in as I pulled back the arrow, breathe out as I released the arrow, hold the breath as it flew and hit the target. It was dark, past midnight, and most of the camp was asleep. While I normally would be going through all the casualty reports, I felt a little disquiet again. Monke's final moments echoed through my head. His death was needed. I knew that. But, I couldn't forget that old pain. His betrayal was born from a lifetime of struggles, and if I did not acknowledge that, then there was no way we Sacaeans could move forward.

But it bothered me. It bothered me that I had a traitor lingering so much in my thoughts. So, I went to shooting to calm my heart, just as Dad taught me, and I was glad to see that, this time at least, I truly did feel relaxed as I fired my last arrow and smiled slightly. It was nice, to have that bit of normality again.

"You seem lighter." The voice startled me, and made me jump, and promptly tangle in my feet and fall face down in the dirt. "Goodness!" Someone hovered over me, and I groaned as they helped
"I'm sorry." Guinevere peered at me worriedly. "You normally hear people approach," she murmured. "I thought…"

"Well, there goes whatever dignity I had," I complained. I smiled, though, to make sure she knew I was teasing. "So, what did you mean by lighter? Did I lose some weight?"

"Well, maybe, but you always look fabulous, so I never really took notice." She shook her head. "But no, you just… there is still a burden, of course, and it still feels like you've got an open wound that just… won't heal." She shook her head. "But, at the same time, you seem… lighter."

"Well, dealing with that traitor helped." I sighed and made a face as I realized something. "Ugh, I think some dirt got in my mouth."

"Come now. Mud baths are an important part of beauty routines." She flashed a grin as I rolled my eyes. "I truly am sorry, though."

"It's fine. I shouldn't have been so careless, even if I am within the camp." I shook my head and sighed as I finger-combed dirt out of my hair. "So, did you need me for something? Were you on your way to a midnight tryst?"

"I most certainly was not!" Her face went as red as her dress briefly and she sighed. "These aren't exactly right circumstances for trysts anyway, with everyone too tired to eat, much less… any of that."

"True. Klein and I have been too tired to even write little sappy notes." I focused on her, noticing how pale she was. "So, what is it?"

"I…" She sighed, blush and cheer fading. "When Bulgar is reclaimed, when we plan to invade Bern, there's something I want to tell you and Roy." Her voice shook slightly and she clasped her hands in front of her. "I want… to tell you about Zephiel. About his past, our past. About our father. I want… to tell you two everything." She paused and then gave me an almost desperate look. "Please understand that I do not wish for you to…" She visibly groped for words. "I want you to understand. I want you to know him. I want… you to understand why I found all of this so difficult, why Bern loves him."

"But you are not telling us this in an attempt to ask us to save him."

"I am asking for him to be saved, but be saved… the only way he can be now." Her eyes filled with tears. "Zephiel… Zephiel needs to die. For the sake of Bern, for the sake of Elibe, for his own sake, he needs to die. That is the only way to save my brother." Her voice cracked. "So, I want you and Roy to know why. Why that is. Why he has…"

"I understand." I reached out and drew her into a hug as she began to cry, already mourning her brother. "I'll listen. I mean; I've got Deke and Wuotan telling me things. What's one more, right? Listening will be a good change of pace." My weak attempt at a joke won me a watery, broken little laugh from her as she continued sobbing. "Take your time, Guinevere. We're here for you."

"I know. Thank you." Her voice wobbled. "Hey, can I… ask about something?"

"Of course."

"The promise you made, way back at the desert. Are you still-?"

"I will do everything I can to save Galle, even if he's now a Wyvern General who will no doubt make my life hell. I gave you my word. Father Sky might strike me if I purposely break it."
"Right, right. Sorry." She laughed bitterly. "Sorry, I just-"

"You needed to hear it, because as we get closer to Bern, the chances of Miredy and Zeiss fighting Galle increase, and you're scared." I patted her back. "It's fine. Trust me; I would've snapped more if I thought otherwise."

"Right…" She started hiccupping as she pulled away and rubbed roughly at her eyes. "Oh, I must look like a mess."

"Guinevere, I have literally seen you covered head to toe in blood and gore, and you still looked like someone managed to do your makeup and hair. Crying is not nearly enough to make you a mess, even if you are now snotty." I grinned as she laughed and batted harmlessly at my shoulder. "Come on. I'll make you a tea for that killer headache you no doubt have, and you can bounce some ideas for how Bern will rebuild while I check over reports."

"Sounds good, except I request that I help you organize those reports." She paused. "Wait, you share a tent with Klein. Will he not-?"

"Klein is with Mildain, Perceval, and Cecilia, where Uncle Douglas has no doubt given up again in getting them to go to bed." I shrugged. "They're working on reconstructing the entire structure of the army, to avoid another situation like what we had."

"Oh, I fear for your married life. Two workaholics." Now it was her turn to grin and laugh as I blushed and swatted at her. "Well, very well, let's get to your tent, and when Miredy comes to check on me, we'll drag her into it."

"That sounds good." I took her arm and dragged her behind me. "So, I suppose the place to start is… truthfully, reparations. Won't Bern be footing a lot of the bills?"

"Mmm, actually, yes, but we'll have to supplement a lot of it with trade and…" The two of us babbled about her plans, often with me purposely playing the part of a belligerent noble, and when Miredy inevitably did come around, I just handed her a mug of tea I'd had warming, and we dragged her into the conversation too, focusing more on the armor.

All in all, it was a very productive night, even if we didn't pass out to finally sleep until dawn.

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**Notes on Father Sky and Mother Earth:**

They are the Gods of the Sacaeans. We worship them with numerous festivals and rituals, though some have been lost to time, war, and attempts at conquest. Most of the Lorca rituals, for instance, are lost, remembered by the handful of survivors and passed on, and there are other tribes that were completely wiped out by Etruria, Bern, and bandits.

Father Sky watches over us from above, and lets us listen to the voices of the dead through His winds. The reassurances have helped bolster many spirits over the decades, myself included. Storms are His way of cleansing the winds and skies, as well as making sure lifegiving water reaches us. However, harsh storms that rip the trees from the ground and cause flash floods are a sign of His anger. We have rituals to ensure that His temper is always calmed, and that is why the Plains has such even weather.

Mother Earth supports us from below, and provides a sanctuary for the dead to rest and watch over their loved ones. She welcomes all, worshipers and non-worshipers alike, but bars traitors, kinslayers, and other evil people from Her meadows. She grants us herbs to heal our wounds, and food to sustain us. Her anger comes from the shaking of the earth, especially earthquakes that
crack the soils, and things such as rockslides and avalanches. We have rituals to ease Her fury, and this is why the Plains have no mountains, for mountains are born from her fury as She rose up from below to tower and intimidate. ...Seeing how mountainous Bern is, I wonder what their ancestors did to anger Her so much.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: This is a chapter that, in game, tries to overwhelm you through sheer numbers. But if you've got a lot of dodgy folks, or a lot of tanky folks, it's rather simple. In game, this chapter would start a sequence of Guinevere telling Roy bits and pieces about Zephiel's past, but considering how Roy, Irene, and Guinevere are characterized in this story, we're going to save it all for a future chapter instead of breaking it up across… three or four.

Okay, so, this chapter was written after the FE Heroes site revealed canon localized names, but considering we have very few (if any) characters who have not been introduced, I'll be sticking with the names I've been using, though I might make a few jokes involving these new official localizations.

Next Chapter - Wolf Princess (Sacae Chapters 19 and 20)
Chapter 24) Wolf Princess

Monke is dead. The kinslayer is dead, but I still feel like… the longer we are in the Sacae, the more aware I become of this strange weight on my spirit. It grows worse as we set up camp within sight of Bulgar. The damnable Bernese have their flags flapping on the towers and walls, as if they thought they owned the place. It bothered me. It made me prickly.

It was just a little longer. We'd free it soon. I was certain of it.

"So, these are the latest reports," I murmured, flipping through the papers as I walked with Lilina towards the War Council tent. "We still have people out?"

"Yes, for secondary reports, though Jaffar is seeing if he can sneak in and do some assassinations," Lilina answered. She leaned over my shoulder and pointed to that two word report. "That one. He's very quiet."

"Always has been." I thought briefly of my childhood, where I'd often try to sneak up on him, and then sighed a bit. I'd hoped to chat with him more, but I didn't even know if he'd talked to Lugh and Ray, I'd been so busy. "Okay, so…" I frowned a bit. "Who is Gwendolyn?"

"Oh, that's Wendy." She gave me a curious look. "Did you not know Wendy is a nickname?"

"No offense to her, but I only know her as one of the few female armor knights. Of course I didn't know!"

"But… reports!"

"Whoever normally summarizes reports for me uses Wendy, not Gwendolyn!" I groaned, and shook my head as some nearby soldiers laughed at my little bit of rambling. "So no, I was never confused about it!"

"You're so ridiculous!"

"I don't need to hear that from you, Miss 'I am going to pull a prank with Sue'."

"That was fun!" She grinned. "The soldiers liked it too. Everyone has been so nervous."

"Well, yes, but that doesn't mean you're not ridiculous." We reached the War Council tent at last, and walked in. I grimaced when I noticed we were among the last to arrive. "Uh… was it earlier than I'd originally thought?"

"No, we all just finished early," Roy reassured. He smiled as we walked in, and Lilina took her place by him, while I took my place next to Klein, near the end of the right side. "We were all discussing what to do with this unexpected bit of free time, but you two are here now, so why don't we just start…" He trailed off, looking to the door. "Is someone running?"

"It's not quite a run," Deke noted. He frowned slightly. "Fast walk."
"Still. Why would-?" Roy stopped his question as the tent flap burst open, to reveal Uncle Legault. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, exactly," Uncle Legault answered. He was panting, and some sweat dripped down his face. "I'm sorry. I know you're busy, but we have visitors. Friendly." Uncle Legault wasn't looking at Roy anymore. He was looking at me. "Sacaean. And the patterns on their clothes… well…” He hesitated, as if he was scared to say. But he looked right at me and a single thought floated through my head. It was an impossible thing. It had to be. Yet, I couldn't help… "Look, I'm sorry again for interrupting, but the pattern on their clothes looks like… and, well, I swear the person leading them looks like an older Ra-

I was gone. I was out of the tent, running as fast as I could. I didn't even really have a direction, other than 'the edge of camp'. But I ran, heart thudding in my ears. It wasn't possible. It couldn't be possible. After everything, after everyone had… I had Sue. I had my little sister. To hope for more… it had been answered with nothing. There was no way. There was no way at all.

I whispered that under my breath to combat the growing hope as I basically flew through the camp. People yelped around me, and I knew I shouldn't be running. I was the tactician, and a tactician at full run was never a good sign. But I couldn't help it. It wasn't really like Uncle Legault to be so hesitant, and that made me just hope, even though I knew I shouldn't. Yes, we had a lot of good things happen, but…

But as I made it to the edge of camp, I found the visitors not far away, all Sacaeans wearing garb I recognized, with horses I knew. My eyes fell on the person in the center of the group, facing away from me. But I knew him. I knew him. Even if I could only see his back, I knew him, because I had so often run up to surprise him as a child…!

"Grandpa!" I shouted, the word burning my throat. When there was no immediate response, I stumbled, crushing disappointment washing over me. But then, the person turned and I realized I was right. The person here was Grandpa, and these… these were surviving Kutolah. "Grandpa!"

"Irene!" Grandpa caught me in a crushing hug easily. "Father Sky and Mother Earth, I thank you for your mercy," he whispered. "Irene, you're safe. You're safe."

"You're alive! You're really…” I felt so overwhelmed that I couldn't complete the thought. Instead, I leaned into Grandpa, not quite believe he was there.

He let go of me with one arm and I shifted slightly, automatically just knowing that Sue had followed me, and that Sue had rushed up for a hug too. I was proven right not even a split-second later as Sue crashed into him, crying silently. I lingered for a moment before stepping away, giving Sue time to have a personal hug, just as I had.

However, I wasn't 'un-hugged' for long. The others of the Kutolah reached for me, grasping my hands and hugging me. As they did, they cheered. "Our princesses! Our princesses have returned!" It was a chant, a rallying cry almost, and they gently pushed me to each one, so that everyone had a chance to realize this really was happening. I was here. They were here.

At some point, I realized there was a small group of Sacaeans standing to the side and I turned to face them, greet them. But the words died, however, as I realized the patterns on their clothes were not Kutolah. They were not Djute either. They were Lorca.

"You look surprised, wolf princess," one laughed, a woman about Galle's age, wielding a sword at her side. "The Lorca might've been massacred, but we are not dead quite yet. We remember our allies. Those who can have been assisting the Kutolah, both with the hunters in harrying the troops,
and assisting the Kutolah who left the sanctuary of Lycia to return to the Plains."

"Some left Pherae?" I asked softly. I couldn't really think of anything else. "But…"

"This is a battle for all of us. We are of the children of Mother Earth, graced by Father Sky. We are the descendents of the animals and we have inherited their fierceness. The Kutolah have the loyalty and strength of the wolves, while we of the Lorca have the swiftness and skill of the eagles." She grinned viciously. "My name is Aderyn, Princess Irene. Twenty years ago, Princess Lyn fought alongside outsiders to protect Elibe. One thousand years ago, Hanon led the plainspeople into battle against the dragons. Our Princess Lilina is with you now. We will not belittle ourselves by even considering staying out of this battle, and neither would those of the Kutolah who had the luck of Father Sky to escape the initial assaults."

I felt a little dazed right now, but I couldn't help but grin. "Lilina will love meeting you. I'm… not quite sure where she is…" I glanced around and noticed that the entire camp had apparently followed, and Grandpa was praising and hugging Sin while Sue lingered nearby. "Oh, she's over there." I held up my hand and waved, catching Lilina's eye. She looked a little confused, and then her jaw dropped when she saw the people I was near. "There we go."

"Excellent! We've been dying to meet Princess Lyn's daughter." She held out her hand to Lilina and Lilina rushed over, and actually knelt to her. "What an honor…" I stepped away then, more to give Lilina some time to herself, with the surviving members of Aunt Lyn's Tribe. I looked around slowly, just… startled. But then, I got ambushed by another of the Kutolah.

"Lady Irene!" Amalda raced up and hugged me tightly. "Oh, goodness, child, you had us worried!" she scolded. She instantly started fussing over me, before pressing something in my palm. I recognized it instantly as a hand-stitched talisman of protection. "That's from Maia. She made that one specifically for you."

"I thought Maia couldn't stitch anymore," I whispered, clutching it tightly. Maia was only about Aunt Lyn's age, but she had horrible pain in her hands. "Did she…?"

"We lost Lord Rath and Lady Katri. She doesn't want to lose you as well. So, keep it. It is her hope for you, and her prayers." She hugged me again before stepping back. "I'll be helping in the infirmary, so I'm going to check in out now."

"Ask for Elen and Saul." I waved as she ran off and pocketed the talisman before I realized just what Amalda had said. Blinking slowly, I looked around again, and now found Grandpa standing alone, laughing as the Kutolah swarmed Sue and Sin. Slowly, I walked towards him, peering at him a bit worriedly. He was thinner than I remembered, and there were some dark circles under his eyes, like he hadn't slept in a while.

"When you stare like that, I'm reminded of Rath," Grandpa murmured. He pulled me into a one armed hug and smiled slightly. "You cut your hair."

"I did, yes," I replied. "I like it."

"It suits you."

"That's what many have said. I think I look like Dad."

"You do. You act more like him than you did before." His smile grew. "You stand tall, and watch more. You listen to Father Sky and Mother Earth even as you grieve, and think things through. But you do not overthink as you used to." He tugged me a little closer. "We have been hearing the
rumors, Irene. I am very, very proud of you."

"...Thank you." I smiled back but it faded as I remembered why I had looked for him in the first place. "You know about Mom?"

"I know Katri is dead, yes." His smile fell and he looked up to the cloudless, clear blue sky. "I heard her on the wind. She made it to Rath, and she told me to hold faith." He sighed, shaking his head. "That day… they had a fey look about them. They knew that their paths were ending, that day. They saw Mother Earth at the end, waiting to lead them, and they walked to her with their heads held high, and yet, they did not simply go quietly. Rath spent his last moments buying as much time for survivors as he could to survive, and died striking critical blows against them. Katri, from my understanding, died shaking the betrayer's resolve, and setting things up for you. They were both defiant until the end, even if they accepted their deaths. I grieve that they had to die, especially before me. There were so many things that I…"

"...Dad's letter made a mention of… things."

"You mean my abandoning him." His tone was blunt. "I regretted it. I regretted every day. That he chose to forgive me is a miracle I forever thank Mother Earth for. That I could see the man he became, all on his own…" He smiled again, and it was wistful and pained. "That I could see him happy. He, Katri, you and Sue… I was blessed to see that. I was blessed, to have him as a son. I was blessed, to have Katri as a daughter by marriage. It comes to no surprise to me that Mother Earth would want to have them in her meadows. She likely fell in love with them too, and wanted them to rest."

"...I miss them." I leaned into his shoulder. "I… really miss them."

"I miss them too." He tightened his hug on me. "But Mother Earth has not taken you and Sue yet. I can ask for nothing more."

"...How about getting Bulgar back?" I stepped away and grinned at him. "Wait, no, don't ask Mother Earth or Father Sky for that. It is enough that they have allowed us to reunite, Grandpa. We'll make that miracle ourselves, and then they can celebrate in our triumph!"

"That is quite the boast." He laughed. "Yet, it does not seem to be arrogance. Very well, introduce me to your General, Irene. I've heard about Roy over the years, but I do believe this is our first meeting."

"You'll love him. He's adorable." I walked ahead, gesturing for him to follow me. "It looks like he's this way."

It took a bit to get things back under control. Roy had asked Grandpa if he wanted to participate in the War Council but, to my surprise, he refused, instead naming Sue, Sin, and me Kutolah's representative. I made a complaining joke about pulling triple duty, since I was also Tactician and Hanover's representative, but went with it, knowing that the bulk of such duties would be taken up by Sue and Sin anyway.

So, the War Council met again. Sin did not join us, instead talking with Grandpa about what numbers and supplies they brought, so it was the normal amount of people, a bit of a small blessing. By then, the scouts had sent back their secondary reports and, with it, a small piece of… disconcerting information.

"Astore's report says there are no graves nearby?" Klein asked, looking a little confused. He snuck
his hand around mine and squeezed it. I welcomed the comfort gladly, as I did not like the idea of the dead not being buried. "Not even a mass grave?"

"Not just his report," Lilina confirmed, flipping through it. She frowned, and glanced worriedly at Rutger, who looked tense enough to shake. "No signs of where bodies might've been burned."

"Did the nearby Saceans bring them out?"

"While it is possible, the sheer number of dead hints that would be… improbable," Sue whispered. Her eyes were dark with pain, and I had to admit, not knowing what happened to the bodies left an ill feeling in my stomach. "Especially considering how dangerous it would be, and how most of the dead would not have had their wills nearby, or read. Dad was an exception, because he'd had his will in his saddlebags, but most of the dead would've been buried nearby."

"Then what would Bern have done?" Cecilia asked. She glanced around, sighing a bit. "Princess Guinevere? Dame Miredy? I hate to make you answer, but our resident scholar, Wuotan, is off helping Igrene and Fiona keep Fae out of trouble, it seems."

"He's also helping Elen and Saul with the infirmary."

"Ah, yes, he is." She focused her attention on Miredy and Guinevere, who both looked hesitant. "They wouldn't have… well, there was a historical record I read that suggested…"

"I think that tactic was Lycian, actually." Guinevere whispered. She smiled slightly, but shook her head as Miredy made to say something. "No, please, let me." She took a deep breath and clasped her hands in front of her. "In Bern, we… well, the country follows the Church of Saint Elimine, but we do practice some of the old ways, things that… predate even the Scouring. There is one thing that… I hadn't thought about much, since we weren't really around… and then when we were, we made sure to follow everyone else's beliefs, because that's just polite and…"

"You're talking around it," Perceval pointed out. He stared her down as she winced. "Start with the pain part, and then give the explana-"

"I think they fed them to wyverns." The entire Council froze and Guinevere looked a little desperate as she blurted the rest of it. "B-but not as an insult or… or anything! I swear!"

"I think that's the first time I've ever heard of the practice." True to form, though, Perceval recovered quickly, giving her a blank look. "So?"

"Well, it only…"

"In Bern, we believe that those who die in battle are trapped," Miredy explained, taking over. Guinevere shot her a look, but she shook her head. "Let me be the blunt soldier, my lady." She looked over the room, but I noticed her hesitate as her eyes flicked over Rutger. *He* looked ready to scream, or attack, and only Deke's hand on his arm kept him in check. "We believe that those felled in battle, *especially* civilians… their spirits become confused and trapped."

"So how does eating factor in?" Allen asked. To my surprise, he was probably the second to actually calm down enough, and if anything, he looked curious. Lance, next to him, was a close third, though. "I'd think being devoured might confuse them more?"

"Our stories tell us of how the wyverns eat the bodies to tear the spirits free, and then carry them up to the heavens." Miredy hesitated a bit more. "I promise that, if this is the case, then it was not meant as an… insult."
"But Sacaeans believe that bodies have to be buried to reach Mother Earth's meadows," Fir whispered. She hit the nail right on the head for why Rutger was so tense, and why I had a hard time wrapping my head around this all. "I mean; I don't know much about the beliefs. I'm Sacaean by blood, but I was never raised in the culture. But I know that much." An awkward silence fell in response, and I knew that Guinevere and Miredy regretted explaining, if only because they knew, by now, how Sacaeans viewed death. Roy opened his mouth, to try and break the silence, but he hesitated, likely because he knew this wasn't really something to just… push aside, even if it was awkward.

But, finally, I closed my eyes, and sighed. "If the wyverns took their spirits to the skies, then they had to have encountered Father Sky," I began slowly. Cautiously, piece by piece, I tried to find some way to logic this, so that my heart would settle. "Father Sky lets us hear the dead on His winds. He, of course, knows the path to Mother Earth's meadows. I am… certain that He led the dead to Her." I opened my eyes and glanced around. I focused on Rutger, knowing that if he accepted this, then the rest would as well. "So, it probably… took longer, but considering how long it had been, I'm certain they're already there." I managed a smile. "Yes, I'm certain of it. We would've seen or heard the ghosts by now!" I wasn't quite certain how much I believed this, but I… knew I had to. The only other option would be believing they never made it, that those lost to the Bulgar Massacre were lost to the endless void between life and death.

I watched Rutger, winced as he tensed up more. But, slowly, he relaxed, bit by bit, and it no longer seemed like we were on the edge of Rutger assassinating Guinevere or Miredy in misplaced retribution. Finally, he nodded, and gave me a pained smile. Like me, the explanation didn't settle well, but it was better than believing the alternative.

"When Bulgar is freed, let's have a 'proper' memorial for them," Clarine suddenly suggested. She glanced at Rutger, and then at me. "That'll help any that are still stuck, right?"

"It might, yes," Lilina agreed. Slowly, the mood of the Council relaxed, though some awkwardness still remained. Guinevere and Miredy, in particular, looked uncomfortable, but they gave me grateful smiles, so I doubted this would be something that lingered, too much. "Mother always told me that one of the reasons why there is singing at Sacaean funerals is to help the dead find the path. Mother Earth adores music."

"Then let's do that and, in the meantime, this means that we don't have to worry about trampling corpses into the dirt, right?" Clarine kept her voice light, and I had to smile slightly at… how right she was. "So, is there anything else we need to be aware of before we start working on the plan of attack?"

"Uh… oh, yes." Lilina turned to another page of the report. "Astore also said Brunja was here."

"Oh, how lovely, we get another Wyvern General to fight and kill."

"Roartz is also supposed to be here, serving as the 'lord of Bulgar'." Lilina frowned and looked to me. "There's a place he can use as the lord?"

"There's no manor or castle, if that's what you're asking," I replied. The very idea of a 'Lord of Bulgar' was ridiculous to me. "The closest thing Bulgar has to that would be the temple." I leaned over the map and pointed to where it was located; Tate and her girls had drawn us as detailed a map as they could make without being caught, and I was very appreciative. "It's certainly large, but it's made so that you can sing there and be heard all over the city. So…"

"It's not exactly a place that has comfort," Sue added. She smiled slightly. "There are some big houses, though, mostly set up for traveling merchants."
"That is true. I suppose they could refurbish one of those into a manor, but…"

"There's not exactly a lot of things he'd consider comfortable." Sue sighed a bit. "There's probably lots of blankets, though. Nice, warm blankets of pretty colors…"

"That does remind me," Elphin began. He frowned a little, eyes distant. "Would it be… untoward if we replenished some supplies here?"

"It would depend if there is much of anything," Sue pointed out. She shook her head. "According to Sin, and Rutger…" She nodded to Rutger. "There was a lot of fire."

"Of course there was. What better way to chase people out into the streets to be cut down?" He paused and shook his head. "My apologies. I… did not mean for that to be so callous."

"That does… remind me of something," I began slowly. All eyes turned to me, and I closed my own for a little bit more courage. This was… probably something I should not ask as a tactician, but as myself… "I have a request. I had thought about it before, but there were so few of us, so I discarded it. But now, please…" I opened my eyes and looked right at Roy. "I make this request not as the army's tactician. I make this request as Irene, Princess of the Kutolah. Please, let the Sacaeans take point in this battle. Let the bards sing of how we led the charge to take back our city. Bulgar has always been a free city, bound to no one but Father Sky and Mother Earth. It is built around one of our oldest temples. It is Sacae, so let us lead this."

"…I want to," Roy replied. His eyes were conflicted. "But can it be done? Can we…?"

"Roy, you literally have someone who lived there right here." I pointed to Rutger, who nodded. "Sue, Sin, and I have been visiting there our entire lives. The Djute only visited for festivals, but the Kutolah visited frequently for trade and the like. We know the layout."

"Yes, but…"

"There are four gates to Bulgar." I leaned over the map again and tapped the points. "Plus, there are ways up on the wal, and bells that we can use to signall."

"...Did you say on the wall?"

"Yes?" I smiled at how confused most of the Council looked. "Bulgar has no lord, but it was built by Sacaeans. We can get the horses up there and set up archers."

"Horses?!" Now Roy's eyes were wide. "B-but the walls! The size…!"

"Oh, we do this all the time. The Earth Festival has many tricks involving riding the wall. I doubt Bern destroyed all of it, considering that Bulgar's defenses are rather dependent on the walls."

"...All I'm learning right now is that Sacaeans are subtle show offs." Roy's deadpan caused a ripple of laughter. "But all right, you have the walls, which are likely guarded, and the gates, which are also likely guarded."

"There are also hidden paths," Rutger whispered. He looked a bit hesitant, but resolve filled his face as all eyes turned to him. "I know of a few, and one in particular. It's… the one I used to escape." Rutger looked right at Roy. "General, as a survivor of Bulgar, I second Irene's request. While… this is not a battle to be fought alone, it is also not one that we can just stand back."

"...You worry that Etruria would try to lay claim," Elphin murmured. He crossed his arms and shook his head. "We have the leaders of all the nations here, though. We can sign an-"
"Shattered oaths led to the massacre in the first place." Now Rutger's eyes were cold. "Etruria, Ilia, Lycia, and Bern have all tried to lay claim to Bulgar in the past. The attack Bern launched was not the first attack Bulgar weathered. It was just the only successful one, because it was the strength of the Plains that rose up to guard it. Bulgar is our city."

"But…"

"This is not a matter of pride, if that is what you're thinking," I added. I noticed a couple of winces, but ignored them. "This… is our duty, in a sense. These invaders attacked our people during the Sky Festival, a tribute to Father Sky himself, a holiday devoted to peace. Fighting and weapons are not allowed, save for the ceremonial blade and bow dances. They tainted the festival with the blood of civilians, of innocent people. Moreover, these people died because of traitors, kinslayers, the highest criminals. The Bulgar Massacre is…" I trailed off, unable to think of the word I wanted.

But Sue came to my rescue. "Mother Earth and Father Sky have been insulted and betrayed by it," she whispered. She clasped her hands in front of her as all eyes turned her way. "Think of how you would feel, if someone had desecrated the Tower of the Saint, on one of the holiest of days. Would you… just stay back, when confronted with the chance to fix things? Or would you, just as we are, ask to be on the front lines?"

"This is our duty to Mother Earth and Father Sky. Bulgar must be retaken, and we are not so cowardly or weak that we wish to pass the burden onto another. We do not want to insult our dead."

"We are not asking to do this alone, Roy. We're asking to be at the front. We're asking…"

"This is important to them," Zealot suddenly said. He looked calm, but there was an earnestness to him as he looked to Roy. "Just as it was important to us Ilians that we were in the vanguard when fighting Sigune."

"Also just as it was important to us Ilians to be among the ones who snuck in to free the hostages," Tate added. She flashed me a smile, likely amused by how startled I was that the two of them were weighing in. "Even though my unit could've been better placed elsewhere, I was still allowed to head in. So, please, General Roy…"

"You all are arguing, and Lilina's giving me puppy-dog eyes," Roy groaned. "I'm being battered on all sides!"

"It's not all sides, my lord, but I'm certain Lady Lilina's pout is far more devastating to your resolve than our arguments."

"I-it is not!" Roy went red, and the room instantly started laughing. "I… oh…" He sighed, facepalming. "Fine, it's not on all sides, but it is three of my childhood friends-"

"Two childhood friends that you consider sisters, someone who has been in the army since Lycia, and your girlfriend."

"Let me finish!" He went redder for a brief moment before taking a deep breath and looked at me. "Give me a plan. I can't agree without a plan. But if you can make one…"

"Who do you think you're talking to?" I half-joked, smirking. I felt simultaneously nervous and elated, scared and relieved. "I can make a plan for anything."

"Well, now's the time to prove that boast," Elphin sighed. The look on his face implied he still didn't quite agree, but he could at least understand that this was important to us. "Let's start with
the scouting reports again."

"That's this pile right over here, and we do have wyverns, and cavalry, but…"

I was nervous. I was nervous, going into this battle. It would be a bit different from before. While nominally, I was still the tactician, I was also leading one of the squads. Sue, Sin, Rutger, and Grandpa were leading the others. It made me a little antsy. It had been a while since I'd been more of a fighter than tactician. I felt like the last real time had been when we were fighting Zephiel, way back in Misur, or maybe the desert to Arcadia.

Shaking my head, I looked to the distance, over to Bulgar in the distance. It looks so… sad from here. Bulgar was always a place of laughter and colors, of cheer and charm. But now, it looked dead. It looked scared. It looked… sad. Not even during a funeral was it quite so somber. It bothered me. It bothered me almost as much as the flags laying claim to the city.

A dull 'clack' drew my attention to my hands, and I looked to the hair ties I held, passed to me by Grandpa. Some were colored brown with green beads with gold etchings of leaves at the end. Others were white, with blue beads with silver etchings of feathers on the end. I had seen these designs before, but they were always kept locked in a box.

After the Scouring, it was said that Hanon had designed these hair ties, and gave strict orders as to when they could be worn. They were worn only to war, outright war. They were shiny and smooth, a sign that these had not ever been worn before. Either Grandpa had underestimated the threat, or had not had the time to grab and pass them out when racing to Bulgar's aid.

Now, though, they were to be worn. This was the Kutolah, visibly accepting the war against Bern. This was Sacae, declaring that they would answer Bern's call to war.

My hand shook slightly, making the beads clack more, and I cursed myself for being so silly. I had been to war for… months now. I had fought and killed. I had given orders that cost people their lives. I had vowed, many times, that I would fight in this war, that I would win this war. I would win it, for myself, for my 'king', for my 'queens', for… everyone. Yet the sight of these simple ties was enough to make me tremble.

I closed my fist around them, and closed my eyes, willing myself to keep calm. Multiple times, I had been compared to Dad, and now, I did all I could to mimic him. I loved Mom, truly, but what I needed was calm, and she had never quite been calm. Dad had been the master, and he had been the one to teach me how to calm my thoughts. I pretended I was shooting arrows, with these sudden fears as my targets. Anything that threatened to weaken my resolve weaken, I 'shot' with those mental arrows.

When I felt steady again, I opened my eyes and looked around. Rutger wasn't far from me, staring in the distance to Bulgar. I hesitated interrupting him, since I knew this was a horrible scar, or still healing wound, but then I nodded and called, "Rutger?" I waited as he stiffened and slowly turned to face me. "Come here?" I held up one of the beaded hair ties, letting them ask my question for me.

He looked at it for a moment and then nodded. He walked over slowly and when he reached me, he turned so that the left side of his face faced me. Silently, I began to braid the hair by his face, thinking of my lessons, things I hadn't even bothered to think of since all of this began. Braids were worn on the left in tribute to Mother Earth, especially during war or during festivals dedicated to Her. In this battle, this braid would prove he fought primarily for her, perhaps in thanks and hope that she had all of his family and friends safe in Her meadows.
When I finished the braid, I held out my hand for him to pick which of the ties he wanted. I was unsurprised when he picked one of the brown ones, and I carefully tied it off, triple checking that it was secured. Then, noticing how long his hair had gotten, I pulled a 'normal' hair tie from my pack, leftover from when I had long hair, and pulled his hair back in a ponytail.

He smiled slightly, before tilting his head in silent question when I stepped away. I nodded and passed him one of the white hair ties, turning so that the right side of my face faced him. I held still as he hesitantly began braiding the hair by my face, just as I had him, and I thought of my lessons again. Braids were worn on the right in tribute to Father Sky, especially during war or during festivals dedicated to Him. During the Sky Festival, many would've had braids worn on their right sides, though I doubted outsiders would notice any real difference, dazzled by the bright colors we wore for the Sky Festival. I closed my eyes and thought of all the Sky Festivals I had attended in the past. I thought of the cheer, and racing through the streets as a little kid, chasing after the birds with ribbons trailing behind me. I thought of haggling for presents, and giggling as I got extra candy. I thought of the dances, the intricate ones that made everyone hold their breath, even if we all knew how the dance went. I thought of the bonfire we'd burn afterwards, to laugh and dance under the stars.

"Last Sky Festival, you performed one of the dances," Rutger suddenly whispered. He patted my shoulder to quietly let me know that he'd finished braiding my hair, and I opened my eyes to see he had turned his gaze back to Bulgar. "It was a solo one, detailing the Tale of the Huntress."

"Yes, I did." It's been nervous. It had only been my second time performing, and the first time I had performed on my own. "...When we free Bulgar, I'll perform it again."

"Yeah. We never got to it, during the Sky Festival." He looked at me. "We're going to free them."

"Yes, we are." I clasped his shoulders. "We'll free the dead from the lingering chain that is this massacre. We'll free Mother Earth and Father Sky from this taint."

"Yeah." He looked up then. "It seems Father Sky is ready to give us his blessings." He pointed to the sky, and I saw the clouds rolling in. "Will that…?"

"I'm a Sacaean Huntress. The rain might make things harder, but we're trained to fight in the rain." I squeezed his shoulder. "Besides, if we can fight through a blizzard, how hard will it be to fight through the rain?"

"True." He returned his gaze to me, and finally managed a smile. It was small, and a little broken, but it was there. "I'm going to go reassure Clarine. She was fretting."

"Of course she was." I nudged him away. "Go on."

He laughed a little, walking off. As he did, I looked around, and saw that some of the other Sacaean were braiding their hair. Those with hair too short to add really any sort of braid tied the hair ties around their wrists instead. Sin was one of them, wearing one for Mother Earth as he braided Sue's hair for her. Though her braid was on the right, it was tied with a brown hair tie, and I knew that was a conscious choice. I smiled slightly as I saw her braid Lilina's hair too, in a mirror to her own: left braid, white hair tie.

Thunder rumbled overhead, and I looked up to the sky, eyes narrowed as I studied the clouds. I thought it would be a strong storm, but not one that heralded Father Sky's anger. It was a rain to hide the thunder of our charge, and shield us from scouts.
This was Father Sky granting us His blessing to the coming battle and, while it would make some things more difficult, I knew that I would rather have it than not. I could make changes to the plan to take advantage of it. I was pretty confident in that.

"This rain will make it more difficult to see your signal, so if you can, try an auditory one, but I'll be watching closely. If you need assistance, don't hesitate." With those reassuring words, Tate went into the air to join Zeiss and their squadrons. Roy's main insistence to the plan was having some fliers ready to assist, and I had agreed, knowing how things could get very bizarre, very quickly. It was us, after all.

I watched her fly for a bit before mounting up and taking my place in front of the rest of my squad. They smiled at me, and I smiled back slightly, unable to do more because of just how nervous I was. I shouldn't be, and I knew I shouldn't be, but I felt like we had... to pull this off. After I had begged Roy to let us do this, in our way...

I closed my eyes and 'shot' my nervous thoughts. The entire War Council had gone through the plan. They had agreed. Unexpected thing could, and would, happen, but everything that we could think of was secured. I knew this. I just had to have faith, both in myself, and in my friends and allies.

A lilting song drifted on the wind, and I opened my eyes as soon as I'd heard it. I glanced around and saw no one else had seemed to heard it, and I realized it had simply been the dead, prompting me to get out of my head, and into the battle. I smiled slightly, and sang the song. The words felt heavy on my tongue, and I knew why. I only knew this song through stories and lessons; it was a song of war. The people with me straightened at the song, and joined in. It ended up being a little clunky, since it was not a song sung often, but there was resolve in everyone smiles, determination in their eyes.

As the last note echoed in the air, and thunder rumbled over our heads, we charged the front gates.

I had insisted on being with this group. It was the group that would be in the most danger. This was the plains, and there was nowhere to hide, meaning that the sentries on the wall would see us. There was no way to avoid that.

Still, I grimaced as I heard them yell warning cries. Not long after that, the front gates creaked open, revealing on foot archers who marched out in front of the gates and took aim. Up on the wall itself, a person in fancy chest armor appeared, and brought his hand up. Automatically, I dropped my reins and brought up Rienfleche, drawing an arrow from my quiver. After a brief second of aiming, I fired, and grinned as I hit the man in the gut, and saw him topple off the wall.

Of course, the archers fired anyway, but we were... mostly good at dodging. I saw two of mine fall beside me, thrown off their horses and snapping their necks. I winced and tried not to focus on it, even as I mouthed a prayer to Mother Earth. More arrows flew, and I ducked down, flinching as one clipped my cheek.

However, I kept on charging, and I bent over my mare's neck as she leaped over the archers. We didn't quite clear them, but they ended up the worst of it, since they served as landing cushions for her, while my mare and I managed to not fall and break our necks or legs.

I rode a little farther in, and clicked my tongue to tell my mare to rear up and turn, allowing me to shoot the archers in the back as the rest of my group charged through and trampled. That was when the rain began to fall.
"Well, this is going to be dramatic," I whispered as the rain just pounded all of us. I worried for Sue and Sin, since it would be much, much harder to pull out the platforms from the outer walls to help the horses get up on the walls, but I also knew it would not be impossible. I worried for Grandpa's group, since they would be sneaking through the northern gate, and there was a lot of mud there. I worried about Rutger and his group, since they were using the secret passage inside and I knew little about it, except Rutger had checked and confirmed it was cleared. "Father Sky, please let this be a blessing." But I had to believe they would be fine. There was no time at all for me to worry.

After all, I was in the middle of enemy territory, and the enemy was charging straight for me and mine.

I shot the enemies closest to me and rode down one of the side paths between some broken buildings to make them slide and crash into each other as they fought. I popped out into the main road again via another side path, making sure that I still had enemies following me, and charged for some of the approaching enemies, some cavalry. I waited until I was certain they couldn't stop in time and pulled down another side path. Both sides of enemies crashed into each other, but I didn't look back to see just how many were caught. Instead, I continued with such tactics, drawing enemies into little traps to save on arrows. I did wish Dad had warned me about how Rienfleche literally burned arrows, but perhaps he'd never thought it would be a problem for me. I always used to take so much time to aim. Now, though, I didn't have the luxury of time, and I had to simply aim and pray.

I rode into the main square of Bulgar, flinching as I realized the stage was still set up. Some part of me was glad the Bernese didn't use it for firewood, but the stage was a stark reminder of just when the Massacre took place. The stage was only set up for the ceremonial dungeons, and some of the pieces that made it up were slightly misaligned, hinting that it has just been set up when the attack began.

"Irene!" Rutger raced up them, hair plastered to his neck thanks to the rain. He gave me a smile that was a touch vicious, but I couldn't blame him. "Two things," he whispered, walking up. "One… one of the leaders of the Massacre is here. The one who ordered the burning of the houses. He's… the reason why most of my siblings didn't make it."

"If you can keep your head, please get him," I instantly replied. His smile warmed slightly. "But don't forget that you have promises to both me and Clarine to live."

"I won't." He brought up his killing edge, and tilted it slightly so that the charms were easily visible. "When did you make these, by the way?"

"...I was like five."

"I'd been thinking they reminded me of what my younger sister made. She would've turned five." He shook his head. "But no, I remember. Lord Rath gave me his sword so that I can live, and I will. But I want that man's head."

"Then, take it." I glanced around, making sure we were still secure. "What's the second thing?"

"There's no way a visible signal can be seen in this rain."

"You're right." I looked up to the sky, noticing that I barely could see Tate and Zeiss's people circling around. "...Sound the bells."

"Huh?"
"The bells. Sound the bells." Even if a rainstorm like this, they would carry. "Gather the people and sound them." My eyes narrowed as movement caught my eye and I smiled when I realized what I'd seen: Sue and Sin were on the walls. "We have the walls."

"I'll get the bells if you're heading for the temple."

"Stay safe." I rode off, heading towards the temple, while Rutger slid off, using the water to actually let him make faster turns around corners.

It wasn't long at all before the deep, loud 'bong' of the bells rang out through the thunder. I smiled as I heard them echo through the battlefield. The enemy looked about in confusion, probably wondering why the hell would we would be ringing a bell. One even opened their mouth to probably shout, but a very convenient bolt of lightning killed him before it could. At least, I thought it was convenient until I looked up and realized it was actually Zeiss wielding a thunder tome.

He swooped down near me, smiling slightly even as he shook the rain out of his hair and face. "We assumed that the bells were the modified signal," he explained. "Is it?"

"Yes, it is," I confirmed. "Has Tate gone to get Roy?"

"No, she sent me down to confirm. She was worried it was the Bernese who were sounding the bells."

"Of course. You two be careful with all this rain."

"We will. It's not the first storm I fought in." His smile turned bitter. "The days after the… well, after what happened here? The wind knocked us straight out of the sky. This is much better."

"...I'm sure." I couldn't deny the little bit of pleasure I felt, hearing that again. But, at the same time, I did feel a little conflicted, since those storms could've easily killed Zeiss, who had known nothing of how horrific the attack was. "You okay?"

"I'm fine. This is a chance to help my country atone for this. I know Miredy feels the same." He made no mention of how he likely knew some of the people we fought and killed today, just as he made no mention of how, after this, we would march into Bern and kill more people he knew. Instead, he smiled, bitter and pained, but resolute. "I'm going to reassure Tate that we're good."

"Keep an eye on her. She's been fretting over Allen as well. He's reckless at the best of times."

"I will." He took off then, kicking up a bunch of water from the nearby puddles.

I watched him fly off, and then looked around, checking for enemies. Finding none, I rode for the temple again, smiling as I heard rallying cries echo outside the city. Roy and Elphin had our reinforcements here, and the second part of the plan was well underway.

So, I let myself relax a little as I rode up to the temple's steps and dismounted, securing my quiver to my back before entering the temple slowly. As my shoes squeaked against the stone floor, I glanced around and tried to remember just when I had last been here. I thought it was when I was little, tagging along with Dad as he had been tasked with singing a song to signal the main event of the festival, something he always tried to avoid, but couldn't get out of one year. Mom had been near, while Sue… hadn't been born yet. I was fairly certain of that. It was a vague memory, filled with wonder and excitement as I bounced on my toes by Mom, doing my best to not make a sound because I'd known even then that it would echo.
With that memory in mind, I made my way to the center of the temple's main room, once a place where Sacaeans of the past would come to pray to Mother Earth and Father Sky. Now, it was dusty, and there was an odd blood stain here and there, showing that Bern had showed this sacred place no respect. But I turned slowly, taking in how solid it looked, especially when compared to the Ice Dragon Temple, and smiled. Then, I closed my eyes, and thought about what to sing. At first, I thought I might sing 'Whispers on the Wind', but that wasn't quite… appropriate. That was a song of peace, and this was not peaceful. This was a declaration. So, instead, I sung the song of war again, letting the sound echo on and on.

"What a pretty song." The voice made me stop singing and duck to the side, behind one of the pillars as a fireball roared past me. "What sort of song is it?" the voice continued. I peeked around the pillar and mentally cursed as I realized it was Brunja. I hadn't thought she'd wait here. I'd thought she'd be wherever Roartz was, or out dealing with Roy. "I've never heard it."

"Keep your voice down; the place is designed to be heard throughout the city," I instantly retorted. The pillar cracked and I held very, very still as fire roared past me. "It's a song of war. I don't know the name off the top of my head."

"Sacaeans have war songs?"

"Why not? We have funeral songs. We might as well get a jump on all the deaths." I spun, shooting off an arrow before sliding behind another pillar. I barely avoided the thunderbolt that came after me, and grimaced when I realized my shot went wide. "Contrary to popular belief, Sacaeans have a rather rich culture."

"I know." Lightning flashed, and the pillar cracked behind me, victim of a thunder spell. "Galle… would often sing the songs he remembered. Including courting songs to Miredy, once they started dating."

"Surprised he knows those songs, considering how old he had to be when the Lorca were slaughtered." I shot around the pillar, catching her cheek this time and ducking behind yet another pillar.

"I think he learned some from visits here." She threw another spell and cracked the pillar yet again. I mouthed a thank you prayer to Father Sky that she was weakened. At least, I didn't think she had fully recovered yet, since she was only throwing fire and thunder spells. "Are we going to play cat and mouse? You're going to run out of hiding places."

"No, we're playing cat and wolf." I peered around and gauged the distance between us. "Wolves are hunters. They watch their prey, and wait for weakness before striking."

"You will find none with me."

"I think I'll call that bluff!" I spun around the pillar and lunged, ducking under another thunder spell and tackling her clear off her feet, and out of the temple entirely. Both of us slid across the wet tiles, the rain pounding my back as I scrambled up.

Sadly, though, Brunja wasn't far behind me, though she definitely had more precarious footing than me, likely because heels and slippery stone really didn't mix well. "Well, you… are very bold," she hissed, pushing some of her wet hair out of her face. Thunder magic crackled around her fingertips. "Very few would even think of calling the bluff of a Wyvern General."

"I'm special," I deadpanned. I studied her now, and compared her to the last time I'd seen her, way back in Araphan. While the rain might've had something to do with it, compared to then, she
looked much thinner, and very, very haggard. "Wow, you look like hell."

"It's been a trying war." She crossed her arms, and gave me a studying look. "Now, who are you?"

"I suppose I must look really different. This isn't our first meeting." I shook my head, and reached down for my quiver. I had only four arrows left. "But anyway, calling your bluff didn't really require any boldness. Considering that Narcian was a Wyvern General, that title really doesn't have any weight to it."

"Narcian was a fool." Her eyes were dark. "A fool, and a horrific man."

"And how are you any better?"

"I..." Her eyes went wide; that was something she hadn't expected. Thunder rumbled and lightning streaked across the sky above us. "I beg your pardon?"

"You led the attack on the Sky Festival. You slaughtered unarmed civilians, and laid claim to their home before their corpses had even cooled. So, I ask, how are you better?" I shook my head, rain streaming down my face. "I thought you were a gentle sort before, but really, you're worse than Narcian. He was at least honest about being a monster."

"You...!" Now she snarled. "How dare you?!"

"I dare, because if you are faced with a choice between morals and orders, and you pick orders, then I'm going to consider you a damn monster. It's simple logic."

"It's for a better world!"

"What better world can be had when the first action to make it involves such atrocities?" I glared back at her, and thunder boomed, rattling my ears. But I held onto my calm. "We're definitely two for two for Wyvern Generals being fools."

"And who do you think you are, to talk to me that way?" There was definitely a lot of magic sparking around her now. But, perhaps more importantly, I could see slow bits of scarlet seeping into her dress. Her wounds were reopening. "Well?"

I was silent for a long moment and then I smiled slowly as I remembered what Galle had told me of Dad's last words. "I am the light born from the dark."

"You're what." She gave me the drollest look before her eyes widened. "Wait, Lord Rath, then you're-!"

I pulled an arrow from my quiver, and drew and fired it in one smooth motion, catching her in the arm and making her drop her tome. The magic around her dissipated instantly. "The Etrurian Army has chosen to assist the Kutolah and Lorca Tribes is liberating Bulgar." I made my voice light, as if I was saying there was a lot of rain right now. "I am Irene of the Kutolah and House Hanover, Tactician for..." It felt wrong, to call this the 'Etrurian' Army now. "The Alliance's Army." I drew another arrow, this time taking the time to aim at her head as she continued to stare at me. "...I do thank you, though, for your consideration of me, back at Araphan. Farewell." I let the arrow fly.

"LADY BRUNJA!" However, a soldier I had not noticed instantly, without the slightest bit of hesitation, threw themselves in front of Brunja, taking the arrow straight through the eye, blasting out the back of their head. They fell with a heavy thud, tumbling down the steps, and I could only really stare, startled. I hadn't seen them, and I never expected...
"...All forces retreat!" Brunja took advantage of my shock to snap out orders. "We have lost Bulgar!" she shouted, her voice cracking through the air like the thunder overhead. "Retreat to Bern to warn his majesty that the enemy is on our borders!" Magic flickered around her as she wrapped her arm around herself, in a broken little hug. "I… I trust King Zephiel. I do. That's why I… that's why I've done…"

I drew my third arrow and fired, but too late. She had warped herself away, so my arrow just splintered on the ground, and I cursed myself for talking. I should've just shot, but I supposed no small part of me had been curious is trying to learn why someone with a gentle smile could've done something like this to Bulgar. It was… pointless, though. All I had learned was that she was just as much of a blind fool as Narcian was. But I did have to acknowledge that she did treat some people with kindness. Soldiers didn't use themselves as living shields for no reason at all. She had earned that one's loyalty, and likely had earned the rest of her soldiers.

But she still followed Zephiel, and ultimately participated willingly in his atrocities, citing the dead children here as 'acceptable' sacrifices for this supposed new world that I doubted Zephiel was actually going to create. For that, I could never forgive her.

I glanced around, checking on my mare who danced in place, but was otherwise fine, and walked back into the temple, both to check that the pillars would hold and to make sure no other Bernese soldiers were here. I had made the mistake once, and I refused to do so again.

However, the temple was empty, and I turned to leave. When I did, though, I thought I caught a shadow moving and whirled towards it, reaching for my last arrow. I saw no one, though, and I walked over towards the area, double checking that it had just been my imagination. Thankfully, I had been, but I found something else, a staircase. I had… never heard of anyone mentioning a staircase in the temple before.

"Go ahead." The voice made me yelp and whirl, and I almost went for my arrow again, but stopped as I found myself looking at… honestly, for a brief, brief second, I thought I was looking at an older Sue, and that was enough to make me hesitate. But then I noticed the face was wrong. There were scars on her cheek and neck, for one, and her face was rounder. Her build was a lot frailer than Sue's, almost as if one gust of wind could shatter her. But there was a strength in her eyes that screamed she was a lot stronger than she appeared. "You look like you've seen a ghost," the woman teased. Though she looked 'solid', her voice had the same strange echoing feeling that Barigan and Elimine's ghosts had. "Your grandfather already retrieved Murgleis from its temple, to protect it from Bern and the Djute. Tell him to give it to you lot after this."

"You're… Hanon?" I whispered, a little startled. Thunder rumbled, but it sounded so distant.

"I am. I'll probably spook that adorable Roy later." There was a mischief in her eye that I'd never heard the legends speak of. "Just for fun. I won't bore you with everything. There's really not much more I can say that Elimine and Barigan hadn't already said. Not that is my place to say, at least." She shook her head. "Ask Fiona and Wuotan about Murgleis's price, though it'll make sense once you remember it's a bow of wind. No matter how mad I got about Martin for the prices, no small part of me is touched that he delved into my culture to help make the price make sense. Of course, I couldn't stay mad for long. He always watched over us carefully."

"...You're very…"

"This is how I was, before the Scouring, and how I acted afterwards, partially in tribute to my twin, Amir. He always wanted me to smile. I tried to make the most of everything." The smile she gave me then was tinged with sadness and pain. "Head up the stairs. It's safe; I promise. I just really wanted to meet you. After all, you are my descendant." Her smile suddenly warmed."
Mother Earth watch your path, and Father Sky guide you to your victory, my child. It's been glorious watching you all, because even when you are falling apart from pain, you pick yourself up, and we couldn't be prouder."

She disappeared then, leaving me a little startled, and more than a little hopeful that she'd scare the living hell out of Roy just like she did me, just to be a little spiteful. I even made plans to come up with a reason why he should come to the temple as I climbed up the staircase like she'd suggested. I soon came upon a door of rotting wood, one that fell apart at my touch as I pushed it open. As I stepped out, I realized I was on the roof of the temple, high above everyone save the fliers. From here, even with the rain pounding down on me again, I could see just about everything. From here, I could see what areas needed a bit more reinforcement, and what areas were secured, but still swarmed with allies who didn't realize that thanks to the rain.

From here, I could see Roartz trying to run from Douglas, who must've found him somewhere among the mess on Elphin's orders. I walked to the edge of the roof to get a better look, frowning as I weighed my options. But then I decided to just... go with my impulse for the first time in a while and pulled my last arrow from my quiver, aiming carefully. Then, I fired the arrow, and grinned in triumph as it slammed into Roartz's skull, knocking him down from the force.

Execution was always the punishment of foolish individuals who thought they could rule Bulgar. I would argue that position when Elphin no doubt brought up whatever trial plans he'd had. Roartz fled to the Sacae; I thought it fair to judge him by our laws.

So, smiling even though I knew I'd be doing a lot of arguing later, I waved to Douglas as he looked up and then waved to Tate when I noticed she was near.

She swooped down and pulled me up in the saddle behind her. "Is everything alright?" she asked, glancing back at me. She had a warm smile. "Why were you on the roof?"

"Setting myself up for a lecture later," I deadpanned. She laughed. "Okay, I want to head near Allen's group. He's holding well, but he's about to ride straight into a trap."

"Of course he is." She sighed a bit, and a little conflicted look crossed her face. "He's... so very strange. And worrisome."

"Well, his heart is in the right place."

"That is true." She shook her head. "I'll get you to him." We took off then, arcing towards Allen so that I could help direct the battle.

Bulgar... was ours. The first city to fall to Bern was finally, finally liberated.

The rain continued to fall. Slowly but surely, the blood from the battle washed away. Though the idea had still made my stomach turn, when Miredy asked, Roy had allowed her and Guinevere to 'bury' the dead Bernese in a manner acceptable to them. I wondered why they had bit their tongues for so long, but decided it didn't quite matter. They did now, and so, we had to show respects. Roy just asked that it be outside the city boundaries, since we were still moving the wounded about, and they had agreed.

That had been completed a short while ago, and Guinevere headed back into the infirmary, chasing me out as I'd been in there helping for 'too long'. I'd been told to go rest, but instead, I walked the streets of Bulgar, looking for any other wounded and just... looking at the destruction.

It looked a bit like Bern had tidied up after destroying everything. Huge sections of the town were...
just… bare. My memory supplied houses where there was only burnt chips of wood, market stands where only little shreds of scarfs dangled from splintered frames. I thought I heard the echoes of laughter on the wind, but the sound of the rain drowned them out. No matter how much I strained, the rain just overwhelmed everything.

I wondered, as I meandered through, if this was not necessarily Father Sky's blessings. I wondered if these were perhaps His tears, crying at last for Bulgar, now that it was free.

A small sound caught my ear, and I headed towards it, wondering if there was someone we missed. However, as I turned a corner, I realized that… well, it was Rutger. He was staring at one house in particular, a burnt out husk that chipped and cracked under the rain. He glanced over when I purposely stepped into a puddle nearby to make a bit of noise.

"This was my house," he whispered. I could barely hear him over the rain. "I'd been outside, buying presents for everyone. It was a tradition in my family. We'd take turns leaving the house to buy presents during festivals. It was my turn. So, I'd been out, and 'Whispers on the Wind' just started… that's when they attacked. I raced back here, only to see Bernese soldiers rounding up who they could and pushing them into the buildings before setting them on fire. They didn't grab me. They thought I was Bernese. They thought I was one of them."

"...Did all of your family die there?"

"No." He laughed a little, and it sounded watery, like he was holding back tears. "No, my older sister had left the house after me, to ask if I could sneakily buy something for her fiance for her. She had been running around looking for me, and I, stupidly, tried to attack the soldiers to try and get to my family. At one point..." His voice cracked. "At one point, I was in danger. I didn't even realize. I just picked up a sword and swung wildly, too angry to even think about using it properly. She had found me and moved to shield me from the blow, just as I turned…"

I thought of Durandel's price. This... was why. "At least... she did not have to deal with Bernese..." I couldn't even complete the sentence.

"No, that's a good thing. There was plenty of that going on as well. Bastards." His voice cracked again and he bowed his head. "I..."

"...Why don't you head back in and find Clarine?" I walked over and rested my hand on his back. "Bring her when the rain has passed, but go cry, Rutger. I think you're overdue for a good cry."

"Maybe..." He laughed a little, covering his face with his hand. "Yeah, I'll... head in. What are you...?"

"I'm checking that there are no wounded left out here, and avoiding a lecture from Elphin about me killing Roartz and messing up whatever plans he'd had." I smiled as that got him to laugh again. "Go on. I won't be long."

He nodded and slowly walked away, each step sounding heavy, like he was only a second away from collapsing. I watched him leave, mostly to make sure he didn't actually fall, before I turned away and went back to my hunt.

I walked aimlessly, checking any place that looked like it might hide a person. As I headed down a certain path, though, the wind suddenly shifted. Frowning, I closed my eyes and slowly tuned out the cold rain as I focused only on the wind. On it, I thought I heard Mom and Dad. Dad was trying to get me to go another way, while Mom encouraged me to walk forward. That... gave me a good indication of just... where this path led, so, after hesitating, I opened my eyes and continued
walking the path. The wind was jumbled up as I walked, both pushing me forward and trying to push me back. It was easy to imagine Mom and Dad having one of their 'discussions', and I almost smiled at how easily I pictured it.

The wind swirled and calmed slightly as I stepped out in an open area, not far from one of the gates. Even in the rain, I could see where the stone had been scorched. I thought I could even make out a faint outline of a body, right by the gate, but when I got closer, I found no real outline at all. It had just been me realizing, fully, just where I was standing. I was standing… where Dad had died. I was standing where Dad had fought Brunja and died, hurting but defiant, laughing in the faces of his killers and telling them how they would lose this war. I… was standing…

My legs gave out and I collapsed to my knees as I felt completely overwhelmed. I thought of where Mom had died, in Aquelia's town square, and how lost I'd felt after seeing it. Now, I realized why. It hadn't felt real. It truly, truly hadn't felt real, even after I'd accepted it.

But now that Bulgar was freed, now that I was able to see where Dad had died, it all became very, very real. While I had accepted both, it had been a distant acceptance, like how you'd accept the ending of a story, and I'd never paid it mind because there was always, always something to do, something to work on. There was too much to be done during a war.

Now, though, there wasn't really anything. We were just… I was just… in the rain, wandering and checking on people, and I…

I wasn't quite certain when exactly I started crying, but it wasn't long before I was wailing, the warm tears sharply contrasting the cold rain as I leaned bawled, half screaming at the sky as I finally let myself break down over everything, and admit to myself how much I hated all of this. How much I hated having to deal with people's lives and giving orders that sealed their deaths. How much I hated having to fight and plan to fight every day. How much I hated seeing too young of children forced to 'grow up'. How much I hated that I had been forced to grow up. How much I hated that I couldn't see my parents one more time, that I couldn't get a reassuring hug one more time.

I let it all out at last, screaming and bawling, and let all the pieces fall wherever they went. I'd pick them up later, when I was done. I knew I would. But, for now, I'd let myself fall apart, because I needed it. I knew I needed this.

I'd be fine, after one more good cry. I knew this, even if it hurt so, so much.

Notes on Dayan:

My Grandpa, the Chieftain of the Kutolah, or at least those that remain.

Growing up, he always seemed invincible, with only Dad surpassing him, but after reuniting… either he is feeling his age, or I am much stronger than I had thought.

Though, that doesn't mean he's not bad in a fight. He's still skilled, especially considering his age, and he leads the people well. That's really all he needs to do. …I still can't believe he's alive.

His affinity is Anima.

Chapter End Notes
Author's notes: So, this combines elements of Sacae Chapter 19 and Sacae Chapter 20, combined into one for… momentum sake, and because Roartz doesn't deserve a whole chapter to himself in the grand scheme of things. Brunja does not appear in either of these chapters in game; I brought her in for fun. Hanon's ghost makes an appearance here because I am not doing Sacae Chapter 20x, for… pacing/story/this-chapter-is-tedious purposes. (For a similar reason, I will not be writing Game Chapter 21x, instead letting it happen off-screen during the events of Game Chapter 21.)

Gwendolyn is Wendy's new localized name, and I decided to have a little fun with it. I decided to bring in 'surviving Lorca' for fun. Amalda and Maia are both minor OCs who appeared in A Tactician's Testimony.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Bulgar
"And that's the new number of potential fighters that we have going into Bern," I summarized, flipping through my reports. Elphin and I were leaving a meeting and heading to another one with Merlinus about supplies, and both of us were walking quickly as we shared information since we were a little late. "How many meetings are there?"

"At my last count, you and I are at about… twenty right now, and we have at least twenty more today," Elphin answered, skimming his own reports. "That being said, you can skip out on meeting with Merlinus. Supplies falls more under my domain as strategist."

"I still need to know, though."

"I can just tell you and you get half an hour to breathe."

"What is this 'breathing' you speak of? I only know how to yell, groan, and pant." I paused as I realized how that could be taken. "Not a word, Elphin. Not one word."

"What are you…?" He burst into laughter, even as he turned red. "Well, Irene, I'm not sure that's something I need to know, though I'll happily let Klein-"

"Finish that sentence, and I'm tripping you." I shook my head and flipped through to another report to find something to change the subject with. The notes from the infirmary caught my attention. "I'm surprised we didn't have more trouble with illnesses once we left the Isles."

"I think that's simply a sign of how poorly Etruria took care of the people. Little food, high stress, and contaminated water…" He shook his head. "Though, we were also more alert at illnesses once we left, and had more access to medicines."

"True." We had a bad bout of flu in Ilia, but that was the worst of it. "Mother Earth gives us Her blessings."

"Let's hope it continues." He grimaced as he pulled another paper from his stack and frowned at it. "Our numbers are a bit… well…"

"We match the estimated numbers of Bern's army." But it was only just. "We… might get reinforcements, though."

"The forces that stayed behind to reconstruct Etruria are on their way, and Commander Fiora has
pledged to join us as well, but…” He sighed. "I'm not certain on if they can make it or not, and even then…"

"Yes, I suppose." Still, I knew Uncle Legault could get messages off quickly, and I quietly decided to see if he could contact them. It might be an off chance, but we were facing Bern, land of the strongest military, in their home territory, when they were on the defensive and they had plenty of time to prepare for us. As the tactician, I had to take all the chances we had. "Well, let's plan for what we have, and…" As we turned a corner, I caught sight of Deke heading up the staircase to the roof. I debated a bit before looking at Elphin. "Actually, I'm going to take up your offer to skip out on Merlinus."

"You… huh?" Elphin looked very confused, and yelped as I walked off in a different direction. "Wait, are you sure? You were just-"

"Yeah, I just realized I have the opportunity to handle a personal matter." I waved at him as I started up the staircase too. "I'll see you at the meeting with Roy in… I suppose an hour?"

"Yes?" He looked confused still, but shrugged. "Careful."

"I'm fine. Bulgar is a second home." I smiled and headed up the rest of the stairs, stepping out onto the roof. I blinked rapidly as the sun assaulted my eyes, reminding me that I'd been inside one of the greater merchant buildings we'd appropriated since before the dawn. Victory had only meant more work for us as we took stock of everything, from the dead to the critically injured to the broken weapons to what we could be resupplied with and what warriors would join us. That resulted in a lot of business.

As my sight cleared, I found Deke not far away, standing by the edge of the roof. I hesitated a moment before walking over to him, deliberately making as much noise as I could so that I didn't startle him. He glanced over at me, and then looked back at the city. It was quiet, by my standards, but there was some normalcy in the little bits of noise that filtered up to us. I caught sight of some children playing, some teens flirting as they mended and cleaned up the square, adults gossiped as they went about their duties. All of them wore red, though, red for mourning. It would take a long time for Bulgar to heal. But at least it was free. At least it could heal.

"I thought you were in meetings from now until dawn tomorrow, Little Lady Irene," Deke finally whispered. He looked to me, smiling wryly. "What brings you up here?"

"Oh, I have a small break, actually, since it's a meeting I don't necessarily have to attend," I answered airily. I glanced at my papers, though, and sighed a bit, since it did mean yet another report to review at the end of the day. "So, I thought I could collect on that promise."

"You… what?" He gave me a strange look before laughing. "So much going on, and you remember?"

"It's a promise," I sulked. "You can't run forever."

"No, clearly not." He continued laughing for a bit before calming down. He looked out over the city again, and I wondered what he was thinking. But I didn't dare interrupt his thoughts. I knew he was gathering them. "...I left because they were kind."

"...Because they were calm?"

"Yes." He nodded. "Or, rather, I left because they were too kind. They looked after me like I was their own child. Even Lord Erk looked to me like I was a little brother, when he had the time to pop
in thanks to all his teacher duties. Little Master Klein looked up to me… all of you just accepted me. It didn't matter that I'd been essentially a slave before then. It didn't matter that I had no past, no real name until they gave me one. I was just a person to them. No matter how much time past, the idea unnerved me. I thought I'd been dreaming. I thought I'd died, even, and that I was in the paradise all the priests talked about."

"Deke…" I never considered that. I never thought kindness could be… I knew the concept of 'cruel mercy', of course, but I never thought that kindness, given out of genuine love, could've been so hurtful to him.

"I also worried about my anger. I was furious that those people would look down on Lord Pent and Lady Louise, for being kind. I wanted to throttle them when they sneered at you and Little Master Klein." He sighed and looked off to the horizon, like he was seeing those old memories play out there. "I worried for Reglay's reputation. They might be one of the Great Houses, but the political climate in Etruria had been growing rougher. I worried for Little Master Klein's future prospects. I worried a bit for yours as well, though I knew you had a good escape in the Plains." He shrugged. "So, I left. I bought my freedom and left, so that no one would look down on those kind people. So that my presence didn't harm anything."

"I… see…" It was an explanation I hadn't quite expected. I'd expected something like 'got tired of babysitting' or… something. But, at the same time… "Deke, might I tell you a story?"

"Sure?" He looked a little confused. "What story?"

"...Fifteen years ago, two little kids escaped their babysitter and went to the arena." I spoke the words slowly, and closed my eyes as I remembered. "They were curious, wondering why their parents always winced when they had to attend. But, as they were looking about, the crowd got rowdy, and pushed one of the two into the ring, just as the lions had been released for the opening act." I remembered that day way. I remembered that confused fear, where I didn't know what was going on, but I knew enough to be afraid. "But just as the lions attacked and the crowd began to scream, a young pitfighter pushed past the guards and saved that child. Though he was a skilled warrior who had won countless times, he did not know how to fight while protecting someone, and so suffered many deep injuries. But still, he got the child up to his friend, and fended off the lion from them both."

"Little Lady Irene, I think I know this story."

"Of course you do." I opened my eyes and looked at him. "After all, you bear the scars, even now." I pointed to his chest, where I knew the most prominent ones were. "But I remember that day clearly. I remember how you looked after Klein and me, like a brother. You… I know you were trying to protect us, and yourself, but…"

"It was a bit selfish. I'm not afraid to admit that. Probably should've left a letter or something for you two. Never thought that you two would take it so hard." He sighed and rolled his shoulders. "But that's it. That's why. Nothing that you or Little Master Klein did. Just me, unable to deal with everyone looking down on them for being kind, confused by all the kindness, and worried about your future reputations and desperately trying to do what I could to protect you, even if it was selfishly done."

"I see." I fell silent, not quite sure how to reply. "Klein said that you would see them again?"

"Yeah." He smiled slightly. "If Lord Pent had been conscious, I would've seen them when we were in Etruria. But it didn't seem fair, for one to see me and not the other. So, I'll show my face over there, when the war is over, and we'll… figure it out from there. I am a mercenary, after all."
"The Etrurian Army hires mercenaries, you know." I grinned as he rolled his eyes. "The pay is good too. Why else would Ilia deal with Etruria?"

"That's for later. Focus on winning first, Little Lady Irene."

"Peace is going to be hell to reconstruct, though, so why shouldn't we plan now?" I gave him my best smile. "We'll win. It might take a few times, all depending, but we'll win."

"...Yeah, I think we will." He reached up and ruffled my hair. "Still, hard to imagine that the little girl who played in the mud being in charge of everything."

"I only played in it one time!"

"Three times." He laughed and started listing off other things I'd done as a child, making me yelp and desperately attempt to correct him. I didn't stop him, though. It was his way of reminding me that I hadn't always been the tactician, and that was a good thing, when so much of my time was eaten up by that duty.

...But at the same time, I wished he didn't have a good memory. I didn't even remember half of the things he brought up!

"You know; this is my first time visiting Bulgar," Tate commented as we walked down the hall. We'd just gotten out of yet another meeting with the rest of the Council, and were the only ones who had a bit of free time. "For some reason, I always imagined it being a city of tents, based on what the merchants said."

"Well, during festivals, you would see gers stretched out like the rays of a sun, with Bulgar at the center," I explained. I smiled as I remembered that mental image. "That's when most merchants show up, even the adventurous sorts that venture into Ilia."

"Less adventurous and more smart. Ilians like shinies." She grinned and I laughed. "Still, I suppose that makes sense." She flipped through her papers, and suddenly smiled slightly. "Oh."

"Hmm?" I glanced over her shoulder, and noticed she had a handwritten note among her stack. "Oh, now what is this~?"

"It's... just Allen, thanking me for some advice, and giving some in return." Her smile widened slightly. "Along with some silly stories. He worries that I 'frown too much' or something."

"Is that so?" I studied her face. "Mind if I ask?"

"I..." She fell silent, frowning. "Might I answer that a bit later? My thoughts on him are a bit confused."

"Sure." I had to admit that I was horribly curious, but there was no way I was going to press her. But my curiosity reminded me of something. "Oh, right, you tried to ask me about something before the meeting started?"

"Ah, that's right!" She tuckered her papers against her chest and gave me a curious look. "It's the braids. I was wondering about the whole... set up before the battle."

"The braids?" I reached up to touch the one I wore still. "It's a Sacaean tradition?" I really didn't know how else to explain it. "During festivals and war, we wear braids for Father Sky and Mother Earth."
"Braiding each other's hair, though?"

"Oh, that's just... mmm..." I thought a bit, trying to figure out how best to word it. "It's like saying 'we are family', I suppose is the best way to describe it." I'd never really had to think about it before. It was just... part of my life. "You can braid your own hair, of course, but for festivals, funerals, or... anything important, we rarely do. It's just a 'you are not alone', sort of thing?" I sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm not explaining this well."

"No, I think I get it. Mostly." She studied my braid for a moment. "Lady Lilina and Lady Sue both wore opposite braids?"

"Oh, they were showing their respect to both Mother Earth and Father Sky through their braids and hair tie. Most Sacaeans would during something like this, I think. I imagine that she and Lilina talked and decided to mirror each other on purpose. That's probably why Sue braided Lilina's hair for her."

"But... yours do not?"

"I wear my braid on the right, and tie it with the colors of Father Sky. So, visually, I fight for Father Sky."

"Why just him?"

"I... well..." I shrugged. "I swear by Him the most. It just felt right." I supposed I'd also unconsciously decided that someone needed to balance out Rutger, though I doubted Father Sky would be offended. "That's really how most of these things work. You do what feels right."

"Is that why we just spent three hours planning an impromptu festival? It felt right?"

"No, that was to have something fun to do since I'd been stuck in negotiations with the Djute for two hours prior to that." As Zahra had implied, the Djute that remained were lending their support to us. Surprisingly, they had been here the very next day, making me think they'd had far more faith in our victory than she'd stated. Though, the arrogant part of me thought I had something to do with that change of heart, but thankfully, the more sensible parts pointing out how unlikely that was. "It's like the Ice Festival in Edessa. Though, this one is far more impromptu."

"I thought I heard mentions of 'redoing the Sky Festival'?"

"It was during the Sky Festival that Bern attacked, so a lot of the performances and the like tonight will be from there. We... thought it would be better than a traditional 'funeral'." After all, there were no signs of their bodies. "It'll start more somber than a typical Sky Festival, though. We still will have our mourning songs. That is our way." I might've continued, but a song, of all things, started drifting down the halls. "Huh?"

"It sounds like someone is starting early." She paused and closed her eyes to listen. "Pretty."

"It is." But as I stopped walking, I realized something. "But it's not a Sacaean. This is 'Sun's Fire', an old Etrurian song."

"You can recognize it?"

"I've good hearing." I smiled slightly. "And I know the song. It's popular in Hanover. Supposedly, it was a favorite of the Lady Hildegarde herself."

"Oh, fancy." She shook her head. "Still, a strange time to sing it?"
"Maybe." I had to admit to being curious, though. "You're in my next meeting, right? How long do we have?"

"An hour, but I was planning on checking in on Juno and Zealot."

"Then I think I'll indulge my curiosity." I grinned and she laughed. "See you later, Tate."

"Yell if you get in trouble." We shared another laugh and waved before parting ways, and I listened closely to the song, doing my best to try and track down where it was coming from. To my surprise, my journey led me out to a small little garden set up in an inner courtyard, a place where merchants who sold herbs could grow their wares safely. It was rarely visited, and few knew of it even about the tribes; I only did because Dad had impressed a merchant one time and led him back here to have his pick of some fresh herbs and I'd tagged along.

However, that surprise faded when I realized who was singing: Wuotan. He was sitting by some flowers, eyes closed as he finished the song, but when he opened them, he didn't seem surprised to see me there. Some part of me wondered if he'd sung the song purposely, to draw me out, but the rest of me thought he'd just sensed me approach.

"I believe I owe you some answers," he whispered, waving me over. I hesitated briefly before going to sit next to him, in front of the flowers. "I must admit, though, that I am not quite certain of where to start."

"Is that so?" I replied. I studied his face, and found no signs of him trying to get out of his promise. He genuinely didn't know where to start. "Then, how about I ask a question?"

"That sounds fair."

"Are you... half-dragon?"

"...Ah, now, that does give me an interesting way to answer." He laughed a bit, smiling slightly. "But no, I promised answers, and so, full answers. I am not only 'half' dragon, Irene. I am a 'full' dragon."

"You are?" I stared, a little startled. I'd suspected half at most! "But I thought... I mean, there is Arcadia, but..."

"Not all dragons made it to the Gate. The Ending Winter disrupted it, made it unstable. It took many years for me to fix the stabilization, long after the Scouring's end."

"Unstable?"

"The full explanation would require a lot of arcane technicalities, and some of which I don't think even Pent or Nimue would recognize since it involves magic that does not exist anymore, but the short version is that the Ending Winter drained the world of its magic, the Gate destabilized, and I had to work to fix it."

"Why?"

"Well, I happen to like the southern half of Lycia." He laughed a little as my jaw dropped. "Yes, if the Gate destabilized, the entire southern half of Lycia would be nothing, as well as parts of Nabata. Well, water, and there would be no Valor Isle."

"And you fixed it."
"It wasn't hard. Aenir was the one who built it, and I knew her tricks."

"You knew her."

"We were the same age, and best friends. Lovers, even, at one point, though no children were born from it, which both of us were ultimately grateful for." He laughed as I made a face. "Yes, yes, your friend's grandparent had love lives."

"So weird." I stuck my tongue out and he laughed. "So, you're... really old."

"This is the fourth great war that I have witnessed here in Elibe." He sounded very nonchalant, so much so that I couldn't bring myself to really to ask about what the first two were. I guessed the third was the Scouring. "And I'd been alive longer, and lived on a different continent, before that. So, that's..." His expression blanked a bit. "Huh. I've long lost track, and it's even harder since different continents use slightly different calendars."

"And Aenir was the same age."

"Yes, and Helios was a bit younger. A century, perhaps?" He shrugged. "Something like that, at least. It stopped being important when I hit 3000."

"You're older than most of the temples."

"I helped build most of the temples, actually. I have a fondness for architecture and magical smithing. Which brings me to the next point." He looked very serious suddenly. "I, along with Helios, made the Sword of Seals."

"You... you did?" My jaw might've dropped if I wasn't too shocked to do even that. "So, you..."

"Made the Sword of Seals, and the Shrine of Seals. When we reach it, I will lead you and Roy to where the Sword rests. And that is where you will learn the truth of Idenn, the demon dragon."

"Why there?" I gave him a skeptical look. "Why not now?"

"Well, partially? It's hard to talk about. I helped Phoebe raise Idenn, since her father died far too young, and..." He hesitated, and a look of very deep pain flickered in his eyes. "Demon dragons... are not born, Irene. Not in Elibe. Not anymore. They are made, and it is very, very rare that they are made willingly."

"...Is that so?" My own voice was soft, as my mind whirled from the implications. "The legends all say that the Demon Dragon was the leader of the dragons."

"Nothing could be further from the truth. The leader of the dragons during the Scouring was a divine dragon named Hydra, and Jahn, who you saw in Aquelia, was his right hand."

Slowly, he told me about the Scouring. He avoided talking about Idenn, and I could tell he avoiding talking about other things, but from the way he hesitated, I could tell he avoided it either from pain, or promises that he would not break. So, instead, I listened closely, and asked questions, learning a bit more about the people behind the legends and the details legends and time had worn away. I had a feeling that this was the real reason why he'd wanted to tell me about his past, this and what we would learn in the Shrine of Seals. These details... would determine just what we would do with the dragons once the war was over, and that was what he was waiting to see.

I could only hope the answer we found... would match his unspoken hopes.
Wuotan escorted me to my next meeting, and I quickly jotted down all that I had learned to share with Roy in between debates and reports. At some point, the sun set, and Miredy came to remind me that food was a thing that my body actually needed, not an optional thing, and that Guinevere had invited Roy and me for dinner, and talks. I took the opportunity, having an idea of what the 'talks' would focus on.

Still, we kept dinner as light and carefree as possible. It mostly consisted of teasing, mainly Guinevere and me against Roy, since he was such an easy target, especially when we brought up Lilina, but those two managed to tease me about Klein quite a few times, too. However, as the plates were carried away, the mood of the room became serious. Roy had anticipated the coming conversation as well, but he waited, just as I did, for Guinevere to broach the subject.

"We head to Bern," she whispered softly. The three of us had gotten up from the table and clustered around the window, mostly out of restlessness. "So, there is… a story you must hear. About Zephiel. About my family."

"If you are ready, then yes," Roy agreed. He gave her a sympathetic look, but jumped right into everything, likely knowing that Guinevere might lose her courage to talk about such a sensitive subject. "I heard that Zephiel killed his father for the throne, but Irene mentioned it might not have been so simple."

"It… wasn't." Guinevere sighed, and clasped her hands together, as if in prayer. But what she was praying for, I had no clue. "Our father… tried to kill Zephiel first, and Zephiel… retaliated…"

"Why?"

"...You know this very well by this point, but Zephiel and I have different mothers. Originally, Lady Mother was arranged to marry my uncle. Father was the second son, and so encouraged to do what he wanted, pursue who he wanted, and so, he courted my mom. But when consumption carried off most of the capital, my uncle with them, the burden of the throne, and the arranged marriage, fell to him. Father… hated that. He hated Lady Mother. He hated… everything."

"I can understand that." Roy looked a little conflicted. "Still, I… would think that he'd try to just…"

"Well, he was never raised to rule," I pointed out reluctantly. I didn't like defending this guy, but I couldn't help but see the other point of view. "You were, Roy. What you think and what he thought… couldn't have been the same."

"Yes, Father never did accept the change fate forced on him," Guinevere whispered. Her hands shook slightly. "But, even so, Zephiel worked hard to try and earn his praise. He studied and trained, excelling in his studies and battle. Many called him a 'genius', the perfect heir, more than living up to his namesake, Zephiel the Great, Bern's second king. But, really, he just… worked hard."

"But he never got that praise." I crossed my arms, and grimaced slightly. I had always gotten praise when I worked hard. Mom and Dad had made sure of it. "He worked hard and never got what he wanted."

"In fact, it proved… detrimental." Guinevere grimaced. "Father was… a man of ordinary intellect and prowess. He excelled in research, in history, but… nothing else. So, he became jealous of Zephiel, and hated him more."
"...Okay, now that is just childish." I thought of my parents, of Uncle Eliwood, of Aunt Lyn, who were positively thrilled that I, that Sue, that Roy, that Lilina, would surpass them. "I have no defense for that."

"Things grew worse as time went on." Guinevere looked down. "One day, Father declared that the next king of Bern would be my husband." Her eyes flicked to mine, and I remembered what she had said about how 'no one' had offered her the crown herself. "Of course, Zephiel didn't care. He didn't want the throne. He was content in researching ancient histories in the library. He said that he would support whoever I chose as my husband, and would continue work to bringing peace to Bern. But the people…"

"They didn't like that, did they?"

"No, they were furious." She shuddered. "It even got to the point that people were calling for Zephiel and I to be wed, citing some very old traditions, predating even the Scouring."

"...I'm sorry, what." I couldn't help the interruption, and I glanced at Roy to make sure I heard correctly. His wide eyes told me 'yes'. "Did… wait… what?"

"Apparently, in the time before the Scouring, some siblings would be 'symbolically married', or… something. I don't know." She sighed. "I thought the whole thing bizarre and Zephiel swore he'd kill the next person to suggest such a notion."

"They wanted Zephiel to be king so badly that they'd research that far back as a justification for something both of you found unnerving?"

"Yes. Which… did not help matters." She closed her eyes. "My father… as I got older, I realized more and more how possessive my father was of me. While I… do not think his interests were ever romantic, he often would act as if he was the only one allowed to love me, platonically or otherwise. That Zephiel was 'stealing' me from him."

"...Does madness run in your family?"

"I don't know. Many of the older retainers say that Father used to be a rather quiet man, but that something made him snap and go mad, around the same time Lady Mother was almost killed by a group of assassins infiltrating the manse." She shook her head. "Not that I know much about that incident either, except that it is how Murdock rose into prominence. He protected her, all on his own, a difficult task considering his young age and that Lady Mother was pregnant at the time."

"I see." I crossed my arms. "Still, for your people to suggest that… how fanatical are they?"

"Extremely. Zephiel is their hope, their savior. That's why he could so easily rally them to war, and why even those with moral issues follow him. They believe in him far too strongly. Zephiel… had always known that too." She closed her eyes. "He has felt that burden for a long, long time."

"That's…" I thought a bit of it, and remembered how hard Roy, Elphin, and I worked to make sure people didn't put us on a pedestal. Clearly, no one had done that for Zephiel. "Huh."

"What happened next?" Roy whispered. His eyes were sad, but he held himself perfectly still, even as the sun filtered through window to hit his face. "Is that when…?"

"Hit from all sides, angry and perhaps a little scared, my father decided to kill Zephiel," Guinevere whispered. Her expression crumpled, like she was about to cry, but no tears came. It was like she was too tired to cry over this anymore. "He decided to give Zephiel a poisoned goblet, probably because the last time worked so well."
"Last time?"

"Based on notes we found after his death, he'd slowly poisoned Lady Mother with arsenic, though he never recorded how he hid it. He used a different one for Zephiel. I don't know what." She shuddered, and switched to hugging herself. "It was the first, and last, cup he ever gave Zephiel. He made a show of accepting Zephiel, and Zephiel had smiled so warmly, so brightly..."

"That's..." Now Roy looked ready to cry. "Why? Why use that affection?"

"Because my father chose to become a very vile person." She spat out the words, and anger seeped into the sorrow. "The only thing I will ever thank him for is making is so that I am related to Zephiel, even..." The anger fled for more sorrow. "Even if things have come to this..."

"Guinevere..."

"Zephiel became ill immediately, and he was sick for ten days and ten nights. Doctors were provided, but they weren't true doctors. They were assassins my father hired to make sure Zephiel didn't make it through. He even went ahead and announced Zephiel's death." Guinevere began to shake. "The people despaired and, in that despair, turned to anger and violence. There were even attacks on the castle as the coffin was prepared. My mother... was actually killed during those attacks, as a 'witch' who cursed Zephiel. If not for Murdock, I likely would've been killed as well. That's when I learned Zephiel still clung to life, despite my father's best efforts."

"Where did you hide?"

"The manse. Murdock moved Zephiel there, and then moved me there so that he could guard and care for both of us." She reached up and clasped her pendant, the one Mom had given her. "I remember hold onto this as I sat at his bedside, whispering that it was a protection charm, that it would keep him safe." She laughed a little, but it was watery, and a little broken. "When he woke up, I was so relieved that I burst into tears. He smiled and reassured me, but even then, his smile was different. He was different. He knew what had happened, what Father had done, and..." Her voice cracked, but she coughed to clear it. "Afterwards, he and Murdock plotted and they pretended Zephiel really had died. Zephiel hid in the coffin, and waited for Father to come and gloat over the 'corpse'. And, when he inevitably did..."

"Zephiel killed him."

"Yes." She nodded and she drooped. For a split second, I thought I saw the girl she'd been, not the woman she was now, lost and confused. "The people knew. It was dressed up as an assassination attempt, but they knew. It was too sudden. But they didn't care. They didn't care, because Zephiel was king now."

"So, that's when he changed?"

"Yes. After that day, Zephiel no longer smiled as he used to. He was always the stern, but loving, older brother, and while that continued, every year, his smile faded more and more. So I... when this began, I believed, to the bottom of my heart, that I could persuade him to change this course. I just needed to buy a little time, and then we could go back to the manse and talk as we used to. A few days away, to simply be brother and sister, and we could talk it out." She laughed again, and this time, it sounded even more broken. "But now I know. He's in a place where my words can no longer reach him. Father's betrayal broke him too much."

"...I have to wonder if that's the only thing," I whispered, mostly because I knew if silence fell, it would be far too weighty. I bit my lip as I thought rapidly, thinking of my lessons. "I'd have to
research to be certain, but I think there are certain poisons that harm the spirit, changing the personality of the person." So, perhaps, it was not *exactly* him losing his 'faith' in people. Perhaps it was a combination of that and this poison that damaged his spirit and warped his personality.

"The poison itself?" Guinevere repeated. She looked a little startled. "I… never thought…"

"If that is the case, though, then you are right. Your words cannot reach him. He might have broken when your father betrayed him, but if the poison had worn the edges of those shards, then there was no chance of him piecing himself back together." I gave her a sympathetic look. "In that case… in that case, this will end in battle."

"...I've known that since Missur." She smiled slightly, small and pained. "But it does… make me feel better to even think that maybe… it wasn't all my fault he couldn't get better."

"No, of course not."

"We head to the Shrine of Seals, at Fiona and Wuotan's recommendation," Roy declared softly, changing the subject slightly. "From there, we will do battle. And… we'll win. I promise you that."

"Thank you, both," she whispered. She bowed her head. "In this way, we can save him, and all of Elibe."

"...This does remind me…” I began. I gave her a look and she stiffened. "That… thing Wuotan brought up. Have you given more thought about it or would you like me forget about it or…?"

"I… don't have an answer."

"Okay." I smiled as Roy looked between us, adorably confused. "Let's just say 'girl talk' for now."

"But Wuotan isn't a girl?" Roy replied. He then looked alarmed. "Or, wait, is he? Er… she… er…"

"Roy, no, Wuotan identifies as male," I laughed. He really was adorable. "But we'll say this conversation between Guinevere and me is 'girl talk', as the full explanation…” I gestured to Guinevere, who smiled slightly. "Adds more emotional strain."

"Oh. Okay." His alarm faded, but only for confusion. "Just a question, though."

"Yes?"

"Why didn't King Desmond just… divorce Queen Hellene?" Roy crossed his arms. "I mean… that wouldn't solve much of anything… maybe… but…"

"The Church of Saint Elimine changes their stance on divorce and annulment every generation," Guinevere whispered. She sighed heavily, shaking her head. "In Father's generation, the Church looked down upon it, at least in Bern. I think they even looked down on widows and widowers remarrying during that time?"

"Yeah, they did," I confirmed. I grimaced as I remembered hearing about that. "My great-grandfather's first wife died shortly after giving birth to Grandfather, illness or something, and he remarried. Only for both of them to die. The Church used that as a 'divine retribution' bit of nonsense to push that agenda of theirs, and while it's still technically been legal for this whole time, it's only recently that it eased up."

"Yes, so he really couldn't." She sighed. "Of course, I'm not sure it would've helped, but maybe it would've. We'll never know."
I tried to reply, but I wasn't sure how, so I was thankful when someone knocked on the door and startled the three of us out of our musings. "Come in?" I called, a little curious. Few likely even knew we were here.

"Oh, good, I do have the right room." The door opened to reveal Rutger, and I knew I wasn't the only one startled to see him there. "Miredy told me you three were here," he explained. "The festival is starting."

"Oh, right, we decided it was going to be a night festival." In light of everything, I'd forgotten all about that. "Why are you the one coming after us, though?"

"It was more that I was coming to ask if you were still willing to dance the Song of the Huntress, and then I got recruited to actually find you three."

"That… makes more sense." I smiled, laughing a little. "Yeah, I'm still willing. But I hope no one minds my stiffness! I didn't really get a chance to practice!"

"I'm sure no one will mind." He smiled back, and it was small, but startlingly warm. "And then you can curl up with Klein."

"Like you plan on doing with Clarine?"

"Not… exactly…" His smile turned sheepish and I laughed. "I've been dragged to perform as well, but otherwise…"

"Let's see if we can sneak in some quick practice, then!" I snagged Rutger by the arm and waved to Roy and Guinevere. "I'll go ahead! See you guys at the festival!"

The two of them smiled back, and nodded as they waved me off, and I hoped they really would attend, especially after so serious, and so draining, of a conversation. Tonight, after all, was a night to have fun. Things would become far more serious in the coming days. We needed all the fun we could get.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Deke's explanation for leaving comes up in his A support with Klein, as does how he ended up employed by Pent in the first place. The assassination attempt on Hellene mentioned here features in A Thief's Testimony.

There really are poisons that can alter brain chemistry and the like, and lead to some changes in personality due to increased aggression, lack of impulse control, etc, etc. I believe mercury poisoning is one of them, actually. Regardless, it gives a bit of a different slant to Zephiel's actions, imo, instead of simply him 'breaking'. Arsenic poisoning was particularly popular during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, especially since the symptoms are rather similar to cholera, which ran rampant at the time, meaning cases often went undetected.

(Hey, this is Fire Emblem; have to slide in that brother-sister incest mention somewhere!) More seriously, I chose to put that in to give a little more depth to Desmond's ultimate decision besides just 'he was jealous' (which he was, but it's more fun to add a bit of depth even to villains you despise), and to help emphasize how
much the people longed Zephiel to rule, hinted in FE7, to add more explanations for why it was so easy for him to rally them for war despite the nominal peace.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Lull
**Interlude - Lull**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for **notes**

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**Interlude - Lull**

*With Bulgar freed, both physically and spiritually, we make our way south, into Bern. We head for the Shrine of Seals first, to retrieve the Sword of Seals, a weapon to match Eckesachs, and to fight the Demon Dragon, Idenn. Of course, we're all very aware that Bern knows we're heading there first. Zephiel is intelligent, after all. Perhaps it would've been smarter to go straight for the capital, but that would require us fighting our way through numerous villages who would not appreciate us.*

*To them, we are the invaders. To them, we are not the heroes, but the villains. To them, we are the bloodthirsty attackers, come to destroy their home, and their hope. It's just easier on everyone if we avoid them.*

"We're very lucky to have Bernese with us," I whispered, looking through the reports. An unexpected bit of flooding had robbed us of some important food supplies, but thanks to our Bernese soldiers, we were able to replace much of it. "We are very, very lucky."

"It's hard, hearing the rumors," Klein added. He was sprawled out on his bedding, checking how many arrows we had on hand. "They're already swearing revenge on us."

"Yes, they are." I couldn't help but feel angered, and saddened, by it. The soldier who'd told me about it had broken down in tears, apologizing for what her fellows were saying. "We've killed their soldiers, after all. They've lost family to us."

"Morale of the camp has been shaken." He glanced up at me. "You'll have to perform tonight again. I swear that and the stories Wuotan and Fiona tell are the only things keeping them sane."

"I'll let Elphin and Lalum know." Marching into Bern... it really reminded me how the soldiers we'd fought had been simple humans like us. "...I'll make sure we sing some Bernese folk songs. They likely need the morale boost the most." They knew what they were doing was 'right'. They knew how far their king had fallen. But they were still fighting against their own home, in the hopes of saving it. They were still having to deal with the fact that they were killing people they had known, had trained with. They were still... listening to their own people, the people they swore to serve and protect, throw venomous words at them. "I wish we had more poisons. It would help us out a lot."

"I'm... ambivalent." Klein grimaced. "I can understand using them, but I'm also glad that I don't have to make that call."

"I just want as many of our people getting out of this as possible." As it stood, though, only our scouts and spies would be wielding poisonous weapons. "Well, it'll be enough. I'll make it enough."

"I'm surprised Roy agreed."

"It took him a bit, but after Elphin and I explained how we were just adding it to weapons, and
"not...well..." I sighed. "The pragmatic, ruthless part of me wanted to send someone in to poison food supplies. But that felt too much."

"Good. I would've been very cross." He and I both knew he would've been much more than that. "That's a reason why I love you."

"...You love me because I can be ruthless?"

"Because you could be ruthless, and yet choose to not go that far. I think that's much more impressive than not having the thought at all." He smiled charmingly as I started turning red. "Among other things."

"Stop flirting. I'm trying to work."

"But it's fun making you blush."

"Watch it. I'll retaliate."

"Now I'm extra curious."

"Lady Irene!" Fir slid inside my room, and beamed. "Bishop Yodel is here, along with some extra healers," she informed me brightly. Clearly, she was playing messenger duty again, likely to train up her stamina and speed. "You're requested!"

"More healers are always welcome," I laughed, setting my reports to the side. I stood and stretched, before going to kiss Klein's cheek in farewell. Fir, adorably, squeaked and covered her reddening face. "You know; I never did ask how things were going with Noah."

"Th-they're fine!" Her voice was very squeaky now. "Mostly. Dad wasn't too happy?"

"Your...?" It took me a second to remember that her father was enlisted here. "Problems?"

"Nothing big. I threatened to not talk to him, and he got mopey, but things are fine now. I think." She paused. "I'll double check. But first, I have other messages!"

"Then I'd best go meet with Yodel." I stepped out of my tent, waving as I went, and made my way towards the edge of camp, following people's murmurs to figure out which way to go.

I found him easily, along with some more people in bishop robes, our new healers. Yodel himself was talking with Roy as I approached, and he broke off conversation to smile gently at me. "I am glad to see you are in good health, Lady Irene," Yodel greeted. He nodded to me, and then returned his attention to Roy. "Regardless, that is why we are here. We must ensure that the Sword of Seals, the Binding Blade, is reclaimed if we are to have any chance of truly ending this war."

"I understand," Roy whispered. He closed his eyes briefly and nodded. "That is our intended goal. But we've learned much about the Scouring that was not ever listed in the stories. I imagine there is much with the Demon Dragon as well. Why, we even learned that despite all records, the Demon Dragon was not the leader of the dragons."

"It has been a thousand years. History bleeds into legend, and much is lost. I am curious as to how you learned so much, though."

"I am afraid I have a duty to protect the secrecy of my sources, but I shall ask if they are willing to let you know." Roy shook his head. "You said you had something from the Church?"
"Ah, yes." Yodel reached back and one of the other bishops presented him with a strangely ornamental staff. "This… is the Saint's Staff." He presented it to Roy with a strangely somber expression. "I believe in these coming battles, we might have need of its power."

"...I understand." Roy took the staff, and for a brief second, I saw him slump, the weight of everything crashing on him again. But he straightened before I could even nudge him, and smiled politely. "Thank you for this trust."

"You have long since earned it, General Roy." Yodel bowed, and then moved away, talking to Saul as they likely went to get things situated among the infirmary teams.

Roy and I lingered at the edge of the camp. He stared at the horizon, eyes unfocused and a little lost, and I simply stood with him in silent support, waiting for him to voice the thoughts that had him feeling so tired suddenly.

"We're missing only two Divine Weapons now," Roy whispered at last. He looked up at me gravely. "We should…"

"We should find Elphin, and then the three of us head to Wuotan and Fiona to ask about Apocalypse," I finished. I crossed my arms and looked to the skies as the weight of what we would have to ask hit me too. "Based on the reports we got from Uncle Legault and Uncle Jaffar, it might be time to figure out just what, exactly, we're going to do with those things."

"Yeah… to Elphin first, and then to them." He gripped the staff tightly. "This is… going to be very…" He shook his head. "Anyone else?"

"Rutger." Durandel, after all, had already accepted him as a wielder. "That'll be it, at least for the initial meetings. I'll get Fir to snag him for me."

"Then… let's go."

"Brave soldiers, I'm sure you are wondering why I have called you all to a meeting." Roy's voice carried easily over the crowded soldiers, thanks in no small part to the impromptu stage that Merlinus and Marcus had cobbled together from empty boxes and fancy clothes to drape over the edges to make it look whole. It put him above the very, very large group of people, and it was incredibly obvious now, just how many soldiers we really commended, and it was humbling. "Honestly, no small part of it is me wishing to thank you, all of you," Roy continued. He held himself calmly, and only someone who knew him well, like myself, could've noticed how nervous he really was. "This has been a very long campaign. Some of you here have been with us since the Slaughter at Araphan and the Coup at Ostia and helped us keep Lycia free. Some of you joined us in the Western Isles, and helped us end the horrors that occurred there. Some of you joined us in the Nabata Desert, brought in to look at this war with new eyes. Some of you joined us in Etruria, choosing to repay those who helped liberate your country. Some of you joined us in Iliia, to prove that the strength of your knights are no mere myth. And some of you joined us in the Sacae, to prove that the skill of the plainsmen are as true as any rumor." Roy bowed to the gathered crowd. "Thank you, truly. I know that these battles have been hard. I know the coming ones will be even harder. Yet here you all stand, proud and determined to end Zephiel's terrible war once and for all. Here you stand, ready to do what is right. You are all the bravest people I have ever had the honor of meeting, and it has been my greatest honor to be your general." As Roy straightened, a near deafening cheer rung out from the gathered soldiers, clear support for 'their' general. "Thank you for your support. I swear, here and now, that I will lead you to victory. But that is only part of the reason why we have called you here."
I waited until Roy nodded to me before I stepped onto the stage. I had to pause to actually speak, though, as the soldiers… actually cheered for me as well, and that scattered my thoughts from the 'script'. "I was not expecting such an enthusiastic response," I noted lightly to cover my surprise, earning a few laughs as I moved to Roy's side. "I hope that mood continues when Elphin and I post the next bit of camp chores and training schedules." That got me a few more laughs, and I smiled slightly. "Father Sky truly has blessed us, for there to be so many kind soldiers willing to fight for us. Please, allow me to thank you as well." I bowed to them, and got another cheer. So, I glanced at Roy, and he nodded, gesturing for Elphin to step out now. This was likely… something we just needed to do.

Elphin thankfully was more than willing, and he smiled gently as the crowd greeted him enthusiastically as well. "Considering everything, I am absolute touched that you all would support us," he continued. "Thank you, truly, for as Roy said, these battles will only get harder and more grueling. Though Irene and I will do our best, there is no small chance that some of you… will not make the journey home."

"Yet here you are, standing with pride and courage, willing to risk it all for the sake of others." I straightened in time to see Elphin bow briefly. "It has been my honor to be your tactician."

"As it has been mine, to be your strategist. It will only be a few battles more, but they will be our hardest. Hold fast to your faith. We will see you through."

"But now we must turn to other, more serious, matters." I waited for both Roy and Elphin to step back to gather and set out the weapons. It was decided between the three of us that I broach the subject first, as the tactician. "The scouts have confirmed. The next battle will have dragons." The whole crowd gasped, but I saw many simply nod, recovering quickly. Those ones, I vaguely recognized as being from the Isles. They'd already seen us win, and they trusted us to do so again. "But, as you all well know, we have been granted permission, from the Heroes themselves, to wield the Divine Weapons of old." This time, the resulting cheer really was deafening. "However, let it be known that they are not needed." I put all the force I could in those last words, without raising my volume, and the cheering cut off abruptly. "I can, will, and have come up with tactics to defeat the dragons without them. These weapons are not needed. It will be your choice to wield them." I paused, waiting for the crowd's reaction. They stared at me, many confused, but no one that I could see looked like they doubted me. None looked like they thought my words an empty boast. They believed, truly, that I really could. But they wondered why I put that emphasis.

"We say this because there is something the legends did not mention," Roy 'whispered' after making sure all but Durandel were set on little 'pedestals', more boxes covered in black cloth.. It could still be heard by the crowd because of how still they'd gone. "These weapons, all of them, have prices. They are weapons that demand you prove yourself worthy of wielding them, and they accept nothing less." Roy gestured and I helped Rutger up onto the stage. Durandel was already strapped to his waist, right behind Dad's… his killing edge. "Those of you who were with us in the Isles remember the dragon we fought there. You remember that Rutger, with Durandel, landed the final blow. Durandel allowed Rutger to do this, because Rutger had paid its price. I will not state what it was." After careful considering, and Rutger's own plea, we decided against actually voicing the price. "That is because Durandel's price is paid once, and it unlocks after trauma. If you wonder if Rutger has suffered enough to prove worthy of Durandel's choice, then remember that he is a survivor of the Bulgar Massacre, which we just avenged, and yet, he has fought with us since shortly after Araphan's fall."

"Mother Earth and Father Sky, this is dramatic," Rutger mumbled to me as the crowd roared it's approval. I nudged his side and smiled when I noticed he was blushing. "Why so dramatic again?"
"People like a show," I whispered. I patted him on the back. "You can step back and brood now, though. Your part is done."

"Thank everything. You owe me."

"I know." I gave him another smile and then let my expression go back to a calm one, looking out over the crowd as Roy waited for quiet.

When he had it, he spoke up again. "But that is only one of the weapons, and only one of the prices," he explained, gesturing to all the weapons now, lined up side by side. "We are missing only two of the Divine Weapons. Apocalypse, hidden below the Shrine of Seals, and Eckesachs, wielded by Zephiel himself. Eckesachs has no price, and Apocalypse's price is well-documented. All know the ultimate fate of Bramimond of the Dark."

"But now, we will tell you all the prices of the others," Elphin continued. He kept his voice soft, but still, it carried. "We start with the one we received today. The Saint's Staff." He kept his voice soft, but still, it carried. "We start with the one we received today. The Saint's Staff." He moved to hover his hand over it. "It is physically taxing on the healer to use, and it requires utmost proficiency to even call upon its might. It cannot be used often during a battle, for the safety of the healer. This staff will kill its wielder with exhaustion if pushed too much."

"According to our research, even Saint Elimine had difficulties calling upon it, only able to use it thrice within a battle's time," I added as Rutger stepped back behind the weapon-pedestals. "It is highly doubtful that anyone today can outdo her. So, that must be kept in mind for the healer as well. It must be timed perfectly, and likely will only be allowed at orders."

"The next one is the second Divine Weapon we found, in the caves of the Western Isles." Elphin moved to stand behind Armads. "Armads… carries a curse. Those who wield it are doomed to die in battle." There was some murmuring on that one. "However, based on the previous wielders, we know it to be true." I paused and waited for everyone in the crowd to realize I'd used a 'plural' there. "Yes, Armads had a second wielder after Durban." I paused again, but this time, it was for my own sake. Roy and I debated on whether we should talk about this and, if so, who. We decided I should, because… because of Mom. "Twenty years ago, a group of unlikely, and unsung, heroes saved Elibe from a madman who sought to bring the dragons back through the Dragon's Gate, and take advantage of their weakness to bind them to himself, and twist their minds so that they would be his little dolls, much like the War Dragons we have seen and fought. These heroes stopped him, and their trials became known as the Campaign of Fire." Whispers broke out again, this time of surprise. After all, we were shedding light on something that had been rumor alone for a long time. "My mother, Katarina of Hanover and the Kutolah, was the tactician for that Campaign, and she led that army alongside Lord Hector of Ostia, Lord Eliwood of Pherae, and Lady Lyndis of Caelin and the Lorea." It felt so odd to use their titles, but I had to keep this formal. "In order to defeat this madman, they had to seek power. Lady Lyndis wielded the Sol Katti, twin to the Mani Katti, one of the sacred treasures of the Sacae, predating even the Scouring. Lord Eliwood, however, took up Durandel, and paid its price." Though, it got a bit… nullified. But Uncle Eliwood hadn't known that would happen. "Lord Hector… took up Armads, even knowing its price. As I am certain most of you are aware, he later became one of the first casualties of this war, falling with Araphan." My throat closed as I remembered that, and I had to pause and wait for it to clear. I missed him. I missed him so much. "Armads took its price from him, twenty years later. Records show that Durban himself only lived seven years after the Scouring, before falling in a battle with bandits. Do not believe its price is mere superstition. Take it as fact."

In the silence that followed, Elphin moved to the next Divine Weapon: Forblaze. "Forblaze was
the third weapon we obtained, hidden in Arcadia, Oasis of Nabata, beloved home of Athos the Archsage. "We had debated heavily whether we should mention the dragons, and ultimately asked Igrene about it. She had requested that we not remind them shortly before a battle with dragons, which was… such an obvious thing that we'd been embarrassed by it. She'd laughed. "Forblaze's price is different from Armads and Durandel's. It is a continuous, conditional effect. In this case… it reveals the 'truth' of your enemies. That is, you will hear their last thoughts, see their dreams. You will know the people your flames devour, should you take up Forblaze."

"Our research indicates that it will not simply be things from their last day. You might even get names and faces of their family. It will be near impossible to distance yourself, and you must prepare yourself for bearing that burden." Everyone remained quiet, and Elphin and I glanced at each other. We had a feeling they'd remain quiet for the rest of this.

So, he moved to the next one, Aureola. "Aureola is the mirror of Apocalypse. As Apocalypse destroys the mind, Aureola destroys the body."

"The stories state Saint Elimine always wore gloves after the Scouring. This was to hide how her arms had been split by the spell, with the blood hardening to be like dragon scales. She bore it, and the pain of it, for the rest of her life. The wielder of Aureola now will have to be prepared for the same thing."

"Just as the wielder of Maltet must be prepared." Elphin moved to it and hovered his hand over it as well. "Maltet curses its wielders to see briefly into the future."

"However, as records show, just because one can see the future does not mean one can change the future. From what we understand, you will see, at most, thirty seconds into the future. You must be prepared to see nothing but hell, twice."

"Which brings us to the final weapon, gifted to us by Chieftain Dayan of the Kutolah as thanks for liberating Bulgar." Elphin moved to Murgleis. "Murgleis is the twin to Forblaze. What it does with enemies, Murgleis does with allies who fall alongside. You will hear their last thoughts. You will see the faces of their family."

"You will bear their deaths, and know the people who do not make it home. That is a burden you will bear, and very, very few can share."

"Thus, these are the Divine Weapons, and their prices," Roy declared. He took center stage again, while Elphin and I stepped back. "These are what the Heroes of the Scouring wielded, and these are the scars they bore. So now, I ask you. Is there any of you willing to take up these weapons as well?" He paused, waiting for a reaction, and the crowd stirred, whispering. "There is no fault in refusing. We have testimonies indicating that the Heroes themselves hesitated at taking up the weapons, and that was before they knew of the prices. As Irene said, we can, have, and will win, with or without the Divine Weapons. But I did not wish to make this decision without your knowledge. I wanted you all to know the prices of these weapons, and to make the decision among yourselves if any of you are willing to bear that sacrifice." He paused again, and this time, I knew it was because he was steeling himself. He was asking if there were any among the crowd willing to risk their lives and, worse, their emotional well-being, to make things easier on us. "So, I ask again. Are there any willing to take up the weapons?"

Silence fell. As it continued to fall, I began mentally counting up to fifty. That was our agreed upon 'time'. If we hit fifty, and no one stepped up, we would store the weapons left unclaimed and never use them.

When I hit forty, a figure pushed through the crowd. Clarine stood in front of everyone, and looked
up at Roy. "If no one minds, then I will take up the Saint's Staff," she declared firmly. I glanced at Elphin, who closed his eyes. He had wanted no Etrurian to take up the weapons, even ordering Perceval, Cecilia, Klein, and Douglas to not volunteer; he wanted Etruria to be the support of the army, right until the end. However, he nodded subtly, and I nodded as well, knowing why. Clarine was of the Great Houses, but she was no soldier, and she would not be returning to Etruria after this war. She would be living in Bulgar, with Rutger, likely. It would not hurt his hopes.

So, I stepped forward, and gave her my hand to help her up onto the stage. "I love you so much," I whispered to her, squeezing her hand. "Listen to my order for it please."

"I will." Her smile was relieved, and I could read it easily. With this Staff, she could keep up with the healing again. The Saint's Staff healed all wounds, regardless of the user's magical power. She only needed to survive using it. "I love you too."

I led her to the Staff and she took it reverently. Then, holding it aloft briefly, she moved to stand by Rutger. I smiled as he reached down to take her hand, before turning back to the crowd and beginning the count again. That was the other part of the agreed 'time'. We would reset, just in case. We did not want anyone to rush this decision.

When I hit thirty-five, Deke stepped forward, rolling his shoulders. "I talked with Ekhidna, and she's given her blessing," he explained. I felt a little nauseous as I put the pieces together. "I'll take up Armads. I'm a mercenary, after all. Its curse will add no new danger for me."

Elphin was the one to step up, and he helped Deke onto the stage. "You're wonderfully brave, and I thank you for it," he murmured before stepping to the side, allowing Deke to claim Armads. Deke did so without a single bit of hesitation, and he spared a smile at me before joining Rutger and Clarine. I closed my eyes briefly, nodding, and began the count again.

At twenty-five, Lilina hopped out of the crowd, and her eyes blazed with determination. "I asked those of Arcadia," she whispered. "They have given me their permission to wield Forblaze." She held her hands out, not even letting us pretend to consider otherwise, and Roy took them quickly, helping her onto the stage. He actually lifted her hands to kiss them, to the catcalling and cheers of the crowds, before standing aside and letting her claim Forblaze. She hesitated briefly, glancing over at me, and only when I smiled did she take up it up, and she joined the others, clutching the tome to her chest. I gave her another smile and then, began the count again.

At twenty, Tate stepped forward, and she looked right at Elphin. "King Mildain, there are not many choices to wield the light tome," she began softly. She held herself tall and proud. "Most of those who wield magic are our healers. However, I have trained in light magic, and so, I ask, might you allow me to wield Aureola, despite being an Ilian Knight?"

The crowd actually held its breath as it waited, but I knew the pause was only because Elphin was startled that Tate would even want to. "I am honored you are willing to take up the tome," Elphin answered, tone as regal as possible. He actually knelt before holding out his hand. "I can think of few more willing."

"Thank you." She took his hand and let him pull her up. She flashed me a nervous smile as she passed by me to Aureola, but she picked it up without hesitation and took her place next to Lilina. The two of them shared a smile, and I sent a small prayer to Father Sky before begining the count once more.

This time, I only made it to ten. Miredy stepped out of the crowd, with Zealot at her side. "We apologize for making you wait," Zealot explained. He smiled softly and bowed a little. "Dame Miredy was uncertain she should wield any of them, because of her heritage, but I can think of a
"Before it is asked, I am more than willing," Miredy added. She smiled slightly. "I just was not certain a Bernese should wield any, but Zealot reminded me that it is because I am Bernese that I should ask. It is my country, and it is my duty as a knight to help right its path."

"Those are words I hope all knights take to heart," I murmured. I held out my hand to her and, after an encouraging nod from Zealot, she took it and let me pull her up. "He's right, you know. You're the best knight we have, and everyone knows Barigan was a knight in shining armor. Even Fiona said so." I smiled and squeezed her hand reassuringly, and she smiled back before going to Maltet and picking it up. She twirled it once, to check the weight, and then went to stand with the others, who welcomed her with smiles. Once she was settled, I began to count one more time.

But I might as well not bothered, as I only made it to five before Sue made her way out of the crowd. "I will not run," she whispered, and held out her hand. After glancing at me, Roy took it and helped Sue up. She glanced at me a little worriedly, but I smiled and let that smile tell her why I did not help her up. 'You are walking your own path, out of my shadow, and I will see you off with a smile.' She smiled back, and in that smile I saw her thanks, and her reassurance that she loved me dearly. Then, she walked to Murgleis and picked it up almost absently as she headed to the others.

As soon as Sue joined them, Elphin and I moved to the sides, out of the way, and Roy gestured grandly at them. "Soldiers, these are the brave souls who have chosen to bear these burdens!" he declared, voice echoing through the camp. "But they will not fight alone! We will be with them, every step of the way! We will this war together, and we will show Zephiel the resolve and might of the unified continent!"

The crowd's resulting cheer was beyond deafening. It made the ground tremble and the clouds shake. Father Sky and Mother Earth had heard our resolve, and now, they waited in anticipation to see us carry out our words and promises. I only hoped... that none of us would regret this. But, it was too late for such things. The choices were made and now, it was our job to make the best of it, all the way to the end of this.

After cheering the new Divine Weapon holders, the soldiers decided that was as good of an excuse to party as any. Morale was at the highest it had been in a long while, perhaps because of the 'reminder' that we had the weapons of old, and the blessings of the Heroes, to continue forward on this path. Perhaps it was because they were celebrating the birth of a new generation of 'heroes'. Perhaps they realized how serious everything was and they just wanted to get drunk. I had no idea, but they certainly were being very enthusiastic about the partying!

I had attempted to duck out, feeling very tired and drained from everything together, but I'd been stopped along the way by numerous soldiers, all needing to hear my reassuring confidence, and needing to tell me how much they were honored to fight for us and how much they believed in me. While touching, and needed, it did leave me even more tired, and I nearly whispered a prayer in relief once I got out of the main part of the crowd.

I didn't, however, because Igrene was leaning against some barrels along the path, and based on how she straightened when she saw me, she'd clearly been waiting for me. "Did you get tired of the loudness?" I asked lightly, joking a little.

She smiled slightly in return. "A little, yes," she murmured, crossing her arms. "There are many more people here than in Arcadia. But it is not the only reason. I wished to thank you for listening to my request about not mentioning the dragons." She hesitated briefly before pulling something
from her pocket. "I also… wanted to ask if you recognized the design on this and, if not, if you knew someone who might."

"Is that so?" I took the small emblem from her and peered at it. It took me only a second to recognize it. "Where did you get this?"

"I did not steal it, nor loot it from a corpse, I assure you."

"I didn't mean to imply either…" I hesitated, studying her. I noticed how hesitant she was, how she found it hard to keep eye contact, and I decided that it didn't matter 'how'. The 'how' would involve her talking of things she did not wish to share with me, and I could not blame her for that. "Never mind. I was simply startled." I passed her back the emblem. "It's a spy's token, specifically for those of Ostia. I was instructed to memorize it as a child, because anyone who showed me that needed to get to someone important fast."

"So, only an Ostian spy would have it?"

"Ostian spies are instructed to guard those tokens with their lives, and there's supposed to be a special way to ensure it shatters if they get into a situation where they risk it." I shook my head. "I will not call it impossible that another had it, but they would've have had to earn it."

"What is it that a spy does exactly? They are used as scouts here."

"Yes…" I hesitated again before nodding. "Spies are scouts used during peace and war. Scouts inspect path in front for dangers, but spies infiltrate behind enemy lines. They carry dangerous information, and if they're caught, then they risk not only their lives, but the lives of all those around them, and all those they love." I thought of Uncle Matthew, of Uncle Legault, and of Uncle Jaffar. "Some even double as assassins, which exacerbates the danger."

"...So, it would not be uncommon for a spy to leave a loved one behind?"

"No. Uncle Matthew has agents who had to even fake their deaths to try and protect friends and family." I noticed her wince slightly, but chose to not comment on it. "Their other choice is to leave the job. It's the classic love versus duty, but with a great deal of danger if you try to go for the third option of both. Most pick one, and hate themselves. It's pretty rare for them to regret the choice."

"I see." Her eyes closed, and she nodded. "Thank you. I…"

"I won't ask why you have it, and I won't ask why you wanted to know." I gave her my best serious-curious look. "I will ask, though, why you thought I might know the emblem."

"...There is… something I have been suspecting for a while." She picked her words slowly, with care, and I knew she was talking around the thing she didn't want to share. "If I was right, then I knew you would know it."

"Is that so?" It was a vaguer answer than I would've liked, but I could not begrudge her too much. She owed me nothing, after all.

"Yes." She smiled slightly. "Every time you say that phrase, I think of my father."

"What phrase?"

"'Is that so?' was a favorite of his, while he lived." Her smile softened. "I used to mock him for it, and Fae would tease him silly. As I got older, though, especially after he died, I found myself appreciating it. 'Is that so?' was his way of saying 'Ah, okay, how do I need to adapt?'. It was a sign
of how calm he was. I think it's the same for you." Her smile fell for a serious look. "You and Roy… you've earned my trust, and it is not something freely given. Hold your heads high. You have this, and all of us are here with you."

"...Thank you." I smiled at her, touched. "Really, thank you."

"I simply speak the truth." She smiled again. "But now, I'd best find Fae before she gets into trouble, or thinks that turning into a dragon is an acceptable way to respond to teasing."

"That… might be bad." Though, the mental image was rather amusing. "Good luck!"

"Thank you." Her smile warmed, and she walked off, casually tossing a wave over her shoulder.

I watched her leave, a little worried, before shaking my head and heading to my tent. I could not solve everyone's problems, and I doubted anyone would want me to. This was something she ultimately had to solve herself, and I simply had to trust that it would not interfere with the coming battles.

Still, I continued to fret, and wondered if I should track her down and confirm she was all right. However, at around that point, I had made it to my tent, and found I had visitors: Ray and Sofia. "Well, this is a duo I didn't expect," I noted, placing a hand on my hip. Both of them jumped and whirled to face me. "I am certainly quite popular today." I waited for them to say something, but when they remained quiet, I decided to prompt them. "What is it?"

"...We were wondering what the plan was for Apocalypse," Ray finally said. He spoke slowly, and perhaps a little humbly. Apocalypse was enough to cow him. "Are we getting it?"

"Fiona says that we should retrieve it, to make sure Zephiel doesn't have it, but she's uncertain as to whether we can, or should, use it." I narrowed my eyes. "Are you thinking of wielding it?"

"No." He paused. "Well, yes, but..." He glowered at Sofia and nudged her. "You go. This was your idea."

"But..." Sofia began. She sighed, and nodded. "Sorry... you are better at speaking... than me..." She hesitated before clasping her hands in front of her and looking at me. "We were thinking... of splitting the tome?"

"Is that so?" I asked, mostly to hide my surprise. I had no idea what she meant. "How?"

"We will... wield it together... and the price is then... split between us..."

"You can do that?"

"I can... and I showed Ray..." She smiled slightly. "So... we will... wield it together... if Fiona deems it safe to use... for the world..."

"I see." That last part confused me a little, and I wasn't sure if it was because I didn't know, or if I'd forgotten something in the wake of everything. But I closed my eyes and nodded. "Very well. If it is deemed safe, then I will convince the others to let you both wield it. Together. But you will work extensive with Fiona and anyone else she deems necessary before it is put into battle. It's not something to make a mistake with, and I'd rather not use it than risk you two."

"We know..." Her smile widened, and turned sweet. "Because you... are the sun after a storm."

"She speaks in metaphors sometimes because of her visions," Ray explained. He sounded
nonchalant about it, and I wondered how much time they'd spent together. "She's saying that in a vision, she saw you, or someone she thinks is you, and the impression was like the sun after a heavy storm."

"I'll take it as a compliment then," I decided to reply. I smiled slightly. "Well, go on and join the festivities. I'll be returning after resting a bit. I got less sleep than usual."

"I know. I was walking from my lessons from Nimue and saw you racing through the camp with Elphin." He shrugged and took Sofia's arm. "Come on. Let's not bother her."

"You got nicer… ever since Nimue scolded you…" Sofia gently teased. Ray went red, and muttered something. "Oh, Irene… Do not… stay up too late…"

"I'll try." I waved them goodbye, and turned to actually enter my tent. To my surprise, though, there was a little bird on my desk, hopping about and stealing some of water that I'd apparently left. For a second, I wondered if it was a messenger from Father Sky, before I noticed a little note was tied around its leg, showing that it was a messenger from someone else.

Carefully, I untied the note from the bird's leg, and unfurled it. I recognized the writing within seconds: 'I should have taught you a code to make this easier.' At that point, I left my tent in a hurry, blowing right past everyone as I hunted down Roy and Elphin. Whatever was written on this, it was something all three of us had to discuss. Now.

This next battle… would decide the whole war, and with it, the future of Elibe. I could not make these sorts of decisions alone.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: So, one reason why I added the additional classes was so that Aureola could be used by someone I actually planned to keep in combat (Guinevere, Elen, and Saul all primarily help at the infirmary, with Guinevere acting also as a guard for said infirmary). As a reminder, Apocalypse isn't gained until after the next chapter. In game, Yodel joins the party at the start of the next game chapter.

Ray's supports with Nimue involve him asking her to teach him. The trinket Igrene shows Irene is mentioned in Igrene's A support with Astore, and their conversation is also based on something referenced in that A support. If you have Hawkeye (Igrene's father) visit the house Fae is in during his recruitment chapter, she'll make fun of his tendency to say 'is that so?', and this is what Igrene references with her teasing.

Next Chapter - Promises (Game Chapter 21, with name changed to better suit the story)
Chapter 25) Promises

Our trip through Bern is slow and cautious. Guinevere shows up secret trails commonly used by the Bernese army to move unnoticed through the countryside and mountains. Apparently, Zephiel had taught her this, among other things, as a means of spending time with her. Now, she used it to help us defeat his army, and kill him. Everyone can tell this bothers her, and thankfully, the army understands. I see many, both those I know and those I don't, talk and hug her as they pass by, and it's easy to tell that she is so grateful for the support.

But now, we have made our way through the mountains, to a beautiful valley. Likely, it would normally be serene, except it's filled with soldiers. This next battle is nigh.

"When this is over, we should come back here to see how this place looks when it's not about to become a battlefield," Roy whispered. He got down from my horse and stepped out to the edge of the cliff we'd ridden to, looking out over everything. "It's really beautiful."

"Roy, come back a little," I urged. I glanced up and noticed wyverns flying nearby. "It'll be bad if we're caught here."

"They already know we're here." Still, he did listen to me and walked back to where I was standing in the shadows of the mountains. "That's why they're setting up."

"Yes, but you and I are alone, away from the army, looking over at the enemy." I sighed heavily giving him a look. "How did you convince me of this again?"

"I have no idea. I took a lesson from you and rambled until things made sense." He grinned and I rolled my eyes. "But I had to see. These are the people I'll be fighting, that I'll be leading people against. I had to see them before it all went to hell. Again."

"Right…" I looked out over the Bernese camp. From here, I couldn't see much. It was just a little bit of a milling camp, so much like ours. Honestly, the main difference was that it wasn't quite as lively as our camps, and there were more wyverns. You still had large and small soldiers racing about, getting ready for the fight. Young and old trained side-by-side. Pages and messengers carried plates of food for the soldiers, buckets of water for the horses and wyverns. People gathered over their morning meals, laughing and joking over things. There was a seriousness about them, and you got the sense that they were aware this could be their last day alive, but they would enjoy this final morning.

"They're so much like us…" Roy breathed. His hands shook slightly as he clenched his fists. "Why do they believe in him so much? Why do they believe in Zephiel?"

"I actually talked a bit with Guinevere, Zeiss, Miredy, and Elen about that," I replied. It had been over a surprisingly nice dinner, given the topic, but that was the only real 'free' time all of us had. "From what I understand, Desmond really ran this country into the ground. The economy was shot, people were starving because of the ludicrously high taxes, nobles ran amok and did whatever they wanted. There is a reason why the Black Fang, after all, was born here."

"Chapter Notes"

See the end of the chapter for notes
"And there is a reason, I suppose, why so many put their faith and hopes in Zephiel. It might have been how they clung to life."

"Precisely." I sighed, thinking of what Guinevere had told me. "He lived up to their hopes too, when he took the throne. Hell, he even exceeded them. He managed to fix the economy, though they're still recovering. He arranged for less taxes, so that people could actually buy food and medicine. He cracked down on corrupt nobles. Only after all of that did he lead them into war. Only after he fixed their broken country, in a handful of years, did he…" It was incredible just how competent he was. Zephiel, honestly, was a person who could have done so much good, except Desmond ruined him. Desmond might've had it hard, and might've had a bad fate thrust on him, but he still chose to not adapt, and in doing so, cost Elibe one of its greatest minds.

"When you think about it, the war might've been a way to help 'bring back' their wealth. Depending on how he worded it…" Roy glanced at me. "Bern is famous for being isolationist, right?"

"Yes, it is, but a clever leader can make people forget logic and build fervor. Guinevere told us that these people were so damn glad Desmond was dead that they ignored how obvious it was that Zephiel had killed him."

"Then, likely, he turned blame on the other countries for not assisting, and he played up the stigma against Sacaeans." He closed his eyes. "Then when you factor in that we've only very recently started gaining real victories directly over Bern, and only faced the 'best and brightest' at Bulgar…"

"You must also factor in that if we win, they believe their only options are subjugation, and Guinevere." Truly, though, their only option, singular, was Guinevere. We were not subjugating anyone. "According to her, and the other Bernese soldiers, they know next to nothing about her. They only really know that Zephiel loves her and that Desmond favored her over him."

"Which would not make her high in the people's favor." He opened his eyes then, resolute and determined. "This will be the our hardest fights. The scouts told us that we face two very skilled leaders here, Murdock and Galle." Roy looked out over the horizon, the wind whipping his cape about. I thought I heard Aunt Ninian's reassurance on the air. I thought I heard Uncle Hector cheering us on. I thought I heard Mom and Dad urging us to have faith. I thought I even heard Oswin, wordless words glowing with pride. "They and their soldiers fight in the name of Bern, and for Zephiel. They will not falter easily."

"But neither will we. We fight for Elibe, and for the people who live here, even Bern." I smiled at him. "They might have the might of Bern behind them, but we have it too, along with everyone else's. We have the strength of everyone pushing us forward."

"Yes, we do." He smiled back. "We'll win this. For everyone's sake."

"Yes." I reached out and tugged him into a one-armed hug, and he leaned into me. "Besides, we have our own little secret weapon." I looked to the southeast, as if I could see it. Of course, I couldn't. They weren't here yet.

"If they make it. If it works." Still, he laughed a bit. "The others are going to kill us."

"We'll live. Eventually." We shared a look and just burst into laughter, unable to help it.

Here we were, at the dawn of our greatest battle, laughing like we were in Pherae, prepping for a formal dinner. We were the strangest of kids. But that was perfectly fine by me. Our strangeness is
what kept things fun.

Fiona and Wuotan told me, before this began, that the bloodiest battle of the Scouring was fought in front of the Shrine of Seals. Marcus and Merlinus told me, before this began, that the bloodiest battle of the Campaign of Fire was also fought in front of the Shrine of Seals. It seemed fitting that the bloodiest battle thus far of our own campaign was fought here, in front of the Shrine of Seals.

The bulk of the Bernese army was here. That much was obvious, and it was quickly obvious just what it meant to fight the country with the largest, and strongest, army. The rivers ran reds and pinks before overflowing because of the bodies damming them up. The grass was muddy and bloody, oozing with each step, treacherous from all the fallen armor and weapons. The sandy browns and yellows of the nearby mountains was splattered scarlet from the blood and corpses raining down from the aerial battles.

The one saving grace was that they hadn't fielded any War Dragons yet. It seemed like Murdock and Galle wanted to try and win without their help, and that gave us a breath.

"Lady Irene!" The voice made me jerk up from what I was doing, but as a fireball roared my way, a soldier I did not know, didn't even recognize, slid in front of me and intercepted the spell. They screamed in pain and collapsed in a heap of charred skin and smoking armor. I pushed myself over, reaching under them to try and at least get them to face the sky. Their eyes, already cloudy, lit up when they saw me, bleeding but still well, and they smiled. Then Mother Earth took them to Her meadows, and they saw nothing at all.

"...Thank you..." I whispered to them, leaning down to hug the corpse. Then I laid them down and returned to what I was doing: administering some field medicine to a barely conscious, badly wounded soldier. "Their name..."

"His name was Grant," one of the soldiers nearby replied. They smiled sadly. "One of the ones you pulled out of the water in Nabata. You got his little brother out soon after."

"I remember that." At least, I remembered pulling someone out who begged me to go back for his little brother instead. "Is his brother still with us?"

"Yeah."

"I'll talk to him later." That was my own promise, just a selfish way to... deal with the guilt. Grant was not the first person today to give up their life to save mine. He was not even the tenth. "The Bernese are certainly after me this time around."

"That's because they know they can't beat you, King Mildain, and General Roy." The soldier's smile grew and they helped their friend up. "I'll get them to the tent, my lady."

"Stay safe." I returned my medicines to my saddlebags and mounted up again. "It looks like the path I created is still there."

"Thank you." They limped off, carrying their friend on their back, and I rode off, shouting orders as we tried to push through Bern's defensive line.

As I rode, I called out encouragement to those I saw were flagging. We'd been fighting for over two hours at this point, and we were all horribly exhausted. But the Bernese had time to rest longer than we had, and had time to set up a perfect defense. They knew the area. We were in trouble.

Screams caught my attention, and I had to pull into a sudden stop as a pegasus hit the ground right
in front of me, bloody feathers scattering as it and its rider went 'splat'. I looked up and saw other fliers falling as some Wyvern Knights, led directly by Galle, tore through the air and threw javelins down. I had to pull out of the way of two, and duck under a third before turning to face the field. I almost called for them to fall back, but then my mare nearly threw me off because a wyvern hit the field. I saw the red hair and for one heartstopping second, I thought it was Miredy or Zeiss. Then I realized that their hair was actually blonde; the red was simply blood. I felt horribly relieved over that, but a barrage of arrows didn't let me linger in the feeling. I was back to riding, shouting orders and clearing out paths for the wounded to take back to the main camp, and the infirmary. A couple of times, my mare stumbled over fallen corpses, but she righted herself fairly quickly. I didn't fall. I couldn't fall. In this battle, more than any other, I couldn't fall.

But, still, others fell. Pegasi and wyvern hit the ground hard and smashed fighters. Soldiers were cut down. Horses were shot out, throwing their riders to their deaths. This was... a bad situation. We were just too evenly matched, and all we were doing was grinding our troops into nothing. So, gritting my teeth, I brought up my hand, ready to give the order I knew I'd have to give eventually, but really didn't want to. We had hoped to save the Divine Weapons for when we fought more dragons, but our current situation was bad. We had to tip the tides or otherwise, both sides would be reduced to nothing.

But just as I opened my mouth, a little bird, of all things, flew through the battlefield and landed on the tips of my fingers. When I brought my hand down, I found a small little note tied to its legs. I slowly, shakily, untied it and grinned when I read the words.

"Roy!" I yelled, lofting the bird up into the sky. I worried briefly that something would shoot it down, but no one paid attention to the tiny little bird, and it flew to the southeast, in an area right behind Galle's forces. "Roy!" I grinned, unable to help it as I realized this last minute plan, this part that Roy, Elphin, and I had kept to ourselves, too afraid to build up everyone's hopes. "Roy!" I finally caught sight of him, cutting down a soldier that was trying to land a fatal blow on a nearby soldier, and he turned, confused by my shouting. "Roy!"

But then he saw my grin, and, after a moment of incredulous staring, he grinned too. "Fall back to Formation C," Roy yelled. The soldiers nearby jerked their heads, startled. "Fall back, fall back!" Roy stabbed the ground and ice erupted from his swordpoint, generating a line of ice spikes to mark where the soldiers needed to fall behind.

I rode around, helping people fall behind the line, gesturing for the fliers to do the same, praying that this near-impossible thing would work. Then, as soon as we had most of the army behind the lines, I glanced up at the air to make sure the fliers weren't in my line of fire, and loosed three arrows straight into the sky. Then, I held my breath, watching as the Bernese soldiers hesitated, not knowing what was going on. Galle, above, frowned, because he knew us. He knew we must have a plan, but he couldn't figure out what it was. Then, as the wind picked up, he jerked his head towards the southeast, but by then, it was too late.

"Ex... Calibur!" Excalibur, the oldest wind tome in Elibe, ripped through the skies with divine blades of wind, tearing through the Bernese Wyvern riders.

"Luce!" Luce, a light tome that boasted even more magic that Aureola, burned across the ground, searing through the Bernese knights and soldiers.

"My friends!" Then there, at the crest of a nearby mountain path, looking down at us, a single horseman on a white horse rode up. The noonday sun made his blue and silver armor sparkle, and his red hair almost seemed to glint. "My soldiers!" He was joined by a woman, on foot, with long green hair tied in a ponytail, and a blue and gold dress with little armor. "The Alliance Army faces
its greatest battle, on this soil many of us know well!" Two more figures appeared, a woman in blue robes with short green hair, and a man where a bishop's robes, with long blonde hair. Both held tomes that crackled with power. "But this battle is not theirs alone!" More appeared behind them and, gloriously, some appeared in the skies, pegasi with snow white wings, and a lone wyvern flying proudly beside them. "To the General! To the Alliance!"

They charged. An entire legion charged over the mountain and slammed into the Bernese from a side they did not expect, a side they did not guard, and the noonday sun shining behind them made it difficult for them to see and prepare for the force coming for their heads.

"Soldiers of the Alliance!" Roy jumped atop a fallen Bernese body to make sure he could be seen. I knew he'd be ill over it later, but for right now, the symbolism was everything. "Do not fear the Bernese Army!" he called, bringing his sword high over head to catch the light, and everyone's attention. "They are but one nation, filled with one nation's strength! But we are an army of many! We have the strength of many! Be as brave as I know you are! Be as fierce! Remember that no matter who you fight, where you fight, you fight with the force of thousands!" He turned and pointed his sword to the army. "Charge, Alliance! Charge, and crush the Bernese Soldiers between us and our reinforcements!"

The soldiers did just that, bellowing war cries. I wove my way through them, shouting encouragement and giving tactical orders as I headed for Roy. As I did, I could only watch. I could only watch and realize just what this was. It was more than our second wind. It was… fighting on the same battlefield as my childhood heroes, something I never thought I'd be skilled enough to do. No, it was more than that. I was commanding them. They were following my orders. After all, it had been Elphin and I who set up, and timed, this. Their skill let us pull it off so perfectly, but it was my orders they followed for it.

I watched Uncle Eliwood crash through the Bernese forces, carving a clear path all the way to a general. He pulled to the side at the last second, to make room for Aunt Lyn as she appeared from behind, Mani Katti shining in her hands, to cut down the enemy general. When she landed, she turned to laugh with Uncle Eliwood, and my heart hurt when I noticed there was a noticeable space next to them, like they had made room for Uncle Hector automatically.

Nearby, I saw something flash. Uncle Matthew flitted from soldier to soldier with a strange circular blade in his hands, cutting enemies down with ease. He paused as two more shadows moved to guard his back: Uncle Legault and Uncle Jaffar. The three of them shared almost cocky smiles, before going off again, using the chaos to assassinate soldiers.

"Triangle Attack!" Up above, Ilian knights formed into the most secret, and powerful, technique of the pegasus knights, the 'Triangle Attack', which needed the utmost trust in everyone to pull off. I smiled as I saw Aunt Fiora, Aunt Farina, Aunt Florina, and Uncle Heath all coordinate together to pull off two in quick succession. Below them, Uncle Kent and Uncle Sain rallied the cavalry into the fray. Uncle Sain took point in a second charge, with Uncle Kent to guard his weaker flank, while Lowen and Isadora took up a third in a different position, cleaving more paths through the army for foot soldiers to utilize. Aunt Priscilla rode with a third group of valkyries and troubadours, their ages hinting they were mostly final year students at her academy, healing the army.

Arrows flew, and I looked up to see, to my greatest relief, the reinforcing archers had been set up just where I wanted, led by Rebecca, Wil, and Aunt Louise. They coordinated the arrows perfectly, and so, the charging foot soldiers had perfect cover. The more physically oriented ones, like Uncle Raven and Harken, were in front, knocking through guards so that mages, being instructed by Aunt Nino, Uncle Pent, and Uncle Erk, could more easily kill them with quick bursts of magic.
"This worked out better than I ever thought," I whispered as I finally made it to Roy. He looked a little dazed, but grinned up at me when he realized what I'd said. "Holy Father Sky and Mother Earth."

"And if they're here, then it means the on-foot healers likely made it to the infirmary," Roy whispered. I grinned, since he was right. If this group made it, then Aunt Serra's group definitely made it behind us. "Gods, this is…"

"We're so awesome." I laughed, unable to help it. "We are ridiculously awesome."

"Yes, we are, but we have to hold onto it."

"Right." I glanced up and noticed that Galle… was still alive. He was rallying his forces, coordinating them again after the surprise reinforcements. As a tactician… as a friend… I… "Two things."

"Hmm?"

"One, we should send that small strike force into the Shrine to recover Apocalypse, the one Fiona and Wuotan will lead." I took a deep breath and looked down at him. "And I… request to step out of the tactician's role, briefly, to tend to a… personal matter that I think will help."

"…What?" He stared, startled, and I didn't blame him. I hadn't told him about this prior. I should have, but I'd been avoiding having to think on this. "Irene…"

"Please." That was all I said. If he refused, I knew I'd back down. I might have sworn to try, but Father Sky had to know that I had other duties. Any second now, something far outside my control could happen. But, I had to ask.

He stared back at me for a long, long moment before nodding. "With our momentum and morale, it shouldn't be hard to at least secure the area here, and given how long this battle has been going, I wouldn't be surprised if retreats are called to regroup on their side. So, I think I can handle things until you get back. Just… tell me later?"

"I promise." I smiled, though I wasn't sure how relieved I actually was. This was very much a damned if I didn't, damned if I did thing. But I… it was just like with the storm in Nabata and saving those Bernese soldiers from drowning. I had to.

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So, I rode. I rode towards the edge of the battlefield and up a little mountain path to get higher. I found a spot by some trees and dismounted to get to some treacherous ground, one that would allow me quick access to the forest. I paused and went back to get my saddlebags, cursing myself for forgetting them. Then, I set my feet, checked my footing, and brought up my bow. My hands shook slightly as I hunted the skies for Galle, and I took deep breaths to calm myself down, since it would be hard to 'shoot' the nervous thoughts right now.

When I found him, I waited. I waited, and waited, and waited, until he got exactly where I wanted him. I took careful aim, and, just before I loosed the arrow, I whispered, "Father Sky, guide my arrow to his fate."

The arrow flew, strangely beautifully, over the trees, igniting from the magic of Rienfleche as it reached the end of its arc. The arrow of light flew true and gracefully, catching Galle in the side right as he had begun a fast turn on his wyvern. The sudden hit, and pain, prevented him from shifting with his wyvern, and so, he fell. He fell down and down, into the trees.

I'd snagged the saddlebags and slid down into the forest as soon as I'd seen the arrow hit, and I ran
for the most likely place he'd land. Branches whipped me across the face as the wind surged at my back, urging me forward. Mother Earth and Father Sky were arguing. They were arguing over Galle, and I felt that argument with every root that tripped me, every thorn that snagged my clothes and bit into my skin, but also with every change in the wind guiding me to where I needed to run.

I found him in a slowly growing puddle of blood, surrounded by various bits of leaves, twigs, and splintered branches. He was perfectly silent as I approached and knelt down. He still remained silent as I rolled him over and unbuckled his chest armor to listen for a pulse and breath. As I pressed my ear against his chest, despair filled me as I heard nothing at first. But then... but then I did. I heard a faint, faint breath, and a fainter heartbeat.

I sat back on my heels, and rummaged through my bags for all my vulneraries, elixirs, medicinal herbs and bandages. My hands shook as I desperately tended to the injuries, my pulse thundering in my ears. My breathing was erratic and I thought the stress might actually make me faint, especially as he just lied there, unmoving and silent.

But then he suddenly coughed, groaned a little, and his eyes fluttered open. "What the...?" he rasped. He blinked slowly, barely focusing on me. "What are you...? There's no way... you're in Mother Earth's meadows... or even that I'd..."

"You're right; I'm not," I whispered back. Tears rolled down my face as I realized I... I had actually done it. "You're not dead. You're captured. You're my prisoner. This is non-negotiable."

"But..."

"Your debt is to Bern. Zephiel will destroy it. Now shut up and let me finish." It actually became easier to tend to him as I continued to sob.

"But..."

"Father Sky wanted you to live. He even fought Mother Earth for you. So, by all that is holy and good, shut up."

He looked a little skeptical, but he didn't move as I tended to him. Then again, he couldn't really do much. A quick examination proved that one of his arms was broken, and if the other wasn't at least cracked, I'd eat my quiver. His legs might've gotten off better, but they were still injured, and without his arms, he couldn't hold me off long enough to actually escape. He was at my mercy, and knew it. So, he just closed his eyes, and let me work, not saying another word.

Just as I was finishing up, the sound of wings caught my ear, and I twisted to see a silently crying Zeiss had actually landed nearby, bringing along Galle's wyvern. He looked around slowly and froze when he saw me hovering over Galle, with my hands covered in patches of medicinal poultices and blood.

"Oh, good timing," I murmured. I smiled at him, aware that I was still crying. "I finished bandaging him, and was about to try and figure out how the hell I was going to get him back to camp."

Father Sky, thank you. Thank you.

By the time Zeiss and I got Galle and his wyvern out of the forest, retrieved my mare, and carried Galle back to camp, night had fallen. Apparently, after Galle fell, Murdock had ordered a retreat and set up a formidable defensive line to the southwest. Roy and Elphin chose against pursuing them, and so, we set up our own camp, and heavy watch.
"You did it!" Guinevere had burst into tears when I'd brought back Galle, and it had taken her several minutes to calm down enough to both heal and talk to Galle. "I still can't believe you did it!" she sobbed, crying again. I didn't blame her. "Oh, the look on Miredy's face… I'm so, so…"

"I promised," I reminded her. I was actually fighting to stand, truth be told, from exhaustion and from relief. "I keep promises."

"You promised to try." She pulled away and smiled through her tears. "That's all. You managed to pull it off. I'm so… so…" She hugged me again. "Thank you! Thank you!"

"Well, you have to earn his loyalty at this point." I hugged her back, slowly. "That's your job."

"I'll do it. Even if it takes me forever." She pulled away again, still smiling and still crying, but with a light of determination in her eyes. "I'm going to go check on him again. He took some bad internal damage, which can be touch and go even with healing magic."

I didn't bother pointing out that she'd already told me about this, or that, as someone who had treated him in the field, I already had known about it before then. "Make sure he drinks those concoctions I whipped up."

"He mentions they're bitter."

"Of course they are. Medicines are bitter, and I'm punishing him for being willing to die instead of living with Miredy. Slightly." I grinned and she laughed. "They're the worst tasting ones I've got, but they're also very effective."

"I love you." She rubbed roughly at her eyes. "I'll talk to you in the morning, okay?"

"All right." I waved her goodbye, and stretched slowly, wincing at how my back and arms protested the movement. I didn't much like the idea of having to fight again tomorrow, but we had no choice. We were taking enough of a risk letting them retreat and regroup, especially since we knew they had dragons. With Galle captured, Murdock would likely field them. Tomorrow's battle would be even more brutal.

"Lady Irene." A voice made me pause, and I stiffened when I saw it was Miredy. "No, Galle is fine," she whispered. She smiled softly as I relaxed. "Elen and Zeiss are tending to him, and I thought it would be a good opportunity to come and thank you."

"...I just didn't think it was fair to you," I whispered. I shook my head and smiled back. "Really, Miredy, the best 'thanks' will be seeing you two live and be happy. But I'm sure you'll have to work for it. Galle… he has a life-debt…" I trailed off, realizing with horrific awkwardness that I was attempting to explain Galle's motivations to his fiance. "Uh…"

"It's almost amusing how you switch between calm tactician and awkward young adult." She laughed a little before coming over and giving me a hug. "Thank you. I have the chance. I did not think I would."

"Yeah…" I leaned into her briefly, as the weight of what I managed to pull off really hit me. "Just be happy. All of you."

"We will. That is my promise to you." She pulled away and wiped my cheek. It was only then that I realized I was actually crying again. "I'll return to Galle now, but rest assured, I'll be in the fight tomorrow, with Maltet. I will not hesitate."

"Thank you." I smiled at her. "Go on."
She gave me another quick hug and walked on, with a little skip in her step that I didn't quite associate with her. I laughed a little and rubbed my eyes before heading to Roy's tent. I didn't really want to. I'd wanted to talk more with Uncle Eliwood, Aunt Lyn, and... well, everyone. But thanks to duties, I'd barely had time to get hellos and hugs. Though, Aunt Lyn and Uncle Eliwood had wrangled a promise to have breakfast with Roy, Lilina, Sue, and me. So, that was something cool.

At the moment, though, we had two things to deal with, and one was... unexpected.

"So, what's the official word?" I asked Roy as I stepped into the tent. There, laid across Roy's desk, was a very, very strange sword, one that seemed to absorb the light around it. "I can't believe this thing just sat in Ostia's vault."

"Along with the Chakram, apparently once used by Matthew's predecessor," Roy murmured. He sat warily in his chair, staring at the blade. "How did he find them again?"

"He was looking into some extra information, decided to go through Spymaster Amanda's things at long last, and he learned about the Chakram and this Darkness Blade from there. He also mentioned something about winning a forty-year-long bet, but I think he was just distracting me from the whole 'there were two weapons we could've been using already that we did not know because you were too lazy to go through her stuff'." I paused and sighed. "Okay, that's a little mean. It's not like I didn't avoid looking at things in Mom's book that were useful."

"And, also to be fair, it's not like he really expected anything." Roy sighed and looked up at me. "At your request, and with Wuotan and Fiona's tentative approval, Ray and Sofia will both wield Apocalypse."

"We'll see how that works out." I had hoped that Apocalypse wouldn't have been found below the Shrine of Seals, but it was, easily, and so, we had it. "Please tell me that they'll watch those two closely."

"That was part of their approval, and Ray and Sofia both agreed." His eyes narrowed as he returned his attention to the blade. "This one is a new one to them. It's apparently something from a distant legend, but they didn't think it existed. Yet, it does."

"How dangerous is it?"

"They think, think, that it's actually mostly safe, though it is possible that it had... pull to it. One that will urge the wielder to be very violent." He glanced back up at me. "What do you think?"

Honestly, I wanted to just throw it in some fire. But I was the tactician, and this was... "What's it's strength?"

"Two strikes for every one swing, and it's a very well made blade."

"Of course." I closed my eyes, cursing myself. "What do you think?"

"As much as I hate it, I think this is something we need to use." He sighed, bowing his head. "But I don't know who. I don't want this thing near a horse or anything. We don't know how they'll react to it."

"In that case, I do have an idea." I waited for a response, but when Roy gave none, I stepped out of the tent briefly, hailed a messenger, and asked them to fetch Fir for me.

She poked her head in before long, and took a very serious expression when she saw it was just Roy and me, and how serious we were. "I take it this isn't for pleasantries," she noted lightly. Her
eyes immediately fell on the sword. "What's this?"

"It's a weapon that was hiding in Ostia's vault," I explained slowly. I glanced at Roy, and he nodded, resting his elbows on the desk, and his forehead against his clasped hands. "It's... unusual. For every one slice, you'll get two strikes, essentially."

"That sounds interesting, but I'm guessing there's a price to it."

"The price is a big 'we have no freaking clue'. This is something that even Fiona has no idea about." I sighed, running a hand through my hair before fussing with my braid and earrings. "It is possible it has a corrupting effect."

"Oh, there's a blade like that in my family. A cursed Wo Dao or something, not the one I wield."

Fir smiled slightly. "My uncle holds it, and though it took him a while, he shook off the effects. So long as I hold onto my heart and my spirit, I'll be fine."

"What if you cannot?"

"Then I'll throw it to the side, tell you, and we'll figure out a way to destroy it or something." Her smile widened, and I got the sense that she was thrilled to even be considered. She was thrilled that Roy and I trusted her enough. "I can do it. With everyone here, and with what I've learned, I know I can."

"...You promise?"

"I swear it." She held out her hand and, after a moment more of hesitating, I nodded to Roy. He stood up slowly, and carefully passed the blade to her. "Thank you. I'll be careful. I promise."

"Give it a few practice swings, Fir. Let us know if something is wrong the instance you even think there might be."

"I will!" She flashed a grin and was off, skipping a little.

Roy and I exchanged a look as she disappeared and both of us sagged, just not liking any of this, really. "This just feels wrong," Roy whispered. He leaned heavily on his desk. "Asking people to take on these burdens without taking them ourselves..."

"But you will take up the Sword of Seals, likely, and I can't have such a weapon and be tactician too," I pointed out reluctantly. It bothered me too, though. "Elphin doesn't even fight like you and I. We simply... can't."

"I know." He sighed. "I know."

I stared at him a moment, reading all too easily how horribly tired he was, and then walked over to nudge his leg. "Roy, are you going to have a long talk with your dad now about your mom, or you going to wait?"

"...No, I think I'll ask him now." He straightened, looking confused. "Why?"

"Just thinking of who I was going to ambush and beg spoiling from before bed. I think we all deserve it." I grinned, making myself cheerful. Fir... would be fine. I had to believe that. "Well, Aunt Nino's first, I suppose. I haven't seen her in forever, and I want to see if she knows Ray and Lugh are here."

"Have fun." Roy smiled suddenly, the exhaustion leaving as he remembered who we now had with
"We did it. We really did it. I still can't believe it."

"We did. We're awesome." I laughed, feeling myself become a little giddy again. "It's so weird, giving them orders, though."

"Yeah…" His smile warmed. "But, we can. We're just as strong. If not stronger."

"Though they still have experience on us." I laughed again. "Okay, see you later, Roy. Sleep well."

"And you."

Notes of Yodel:

A high ranked bishop of the Elimine Church, who pushes heavily for reforms. A good friend of Grandfather, among other nobles.

Skilled mostly with a staff, though his ability with light magic isn't something to be ignored. He prefers staying back, though, and because of his older age, that's likely a good thing.

He's been a helpful ally long before he actually joined up with us, and from my understanding, he's been helping my family in particular for years. I'll need to remember to thank him.

His affinity is light, appropriately enough.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: So, Game-Chapter 21 is split into two chapters for pacing purposes. Murdock will be next chapter. In game, there are many who consider this the hardest chapter in the game because of the sheer numbers that you face. The dynamics, and even location, of this map were later reused for Cog of Destiny in FE7, just in the 'northern' part of the map unseen in that game. I also took a page from the game's AI's book and had surprise reinforcements appear and attack same turn.

There is this famous Archetype in the Fire Emblem series that pops up in most games called the 'Camus Archetype'. Basically enemy generals who put their country above all else, even if they have loved ones of the opposing sides, and even if they're aware that their country is doing wrong. This… tends to be a hit and miss Archetype for me, and I often dislike it on principle. Sometimes I think it's written damn well (Selena of FE8) and sometimes… not so much (Camus himself). In FE6, Murdock, Brunja, and Galle all sorta fill this Archetype, but Galle fits it the best, imo (having loved ones on the opposing side). And, truthfully, probably because of the sparse writing, Galle's is written mostly well (you don't get much in why he's so loyal in-game, but you get to have some very well-written conversations between him, Miredy, and Zeiss). Buut, as mentioned, I dislike it on principle, and there's actually some game data that hints Galle was supposed to be recruitable, and was only unrecruitable at the last second. So, Irene saves him, through a mix of skill and luck. And, for those curious, yes, Galle was planned to be saved from the beginning, and Irene is skilled with medicines and doctoring because I wanted to make his surviving as plausible as possible.

'In the Name of Bern' is the name of the battle theme for the Wyvern Generals. The
'Darkness Blade' features briefly at the end of *A Thief's Testimony* (and is based off of a weapon from FE5), and the Chakram features in *A Thief's Testimony* and *A Thief's Legacy*.

Next Chapter - Dignity
Chapter 26) Dignity

I 'captured' Galle. It's not the most popular of decisions. He was an enemy general, after all, and one who had led a pretty devastating assault on us. However, the Bernese soldiers stood up for him, and for me, citing how they were also technically captured soldiers who had attacked in the past. Roy also weighed in, citing that we are fighting for Bernese as well. I did still spend most of my night dealing with complaining soldiers. Most seemed to calm down after I listened to them, and calmly explained that I removed an enemy threat, and then chose to capture him for Guinevere. It was a bit difficult to explain it without revealing the personal reasons, but I seem to manage it by focusing on explaining how we are 'liberating Bern too'.

Dawn chases away the rest of the dissent as we focus on another day of the battle, the first time we'd had a battle stretch over two days. We're in for another bad day.

"Father Sky is covering the sun," I murmured as I paused in brushing down my mare from a quick morning ride and looked up at the sky. Dark thunder clouds were rolling in quickly. "Does He wish to avert His eyes from the coming bloodbath?"

"You sound like Rath." Aunt Lyn walked up, blades clacking together on her waist as she approached. "Though, most of the group wouldn't know that part," she continued with a teasing smile. "He kept those comments to himself, most of the time."

"I've been hearing that phrase more." I smiled at her, glad to see her not looking quite as sad or thin. She still looked... not quite like my memory said she should. She definitely looked sadder, more tired, and thinner still. But it wasn't as much, and that was enough for me. "All I think is 'Dad must have had a lot of thoughts screaming through his head too' in that case."

"Oh, he did." She laughed a little, coming up to pet my horse on the nose. "We talked, often outside of Katri's hearing. I'd keep encouraging him to confess, and he'd keep telling me it was impossible." She grinned. "I was so glad to tell him 'I told you so'. It was the best."

"Is that so?" My smile grew, even as I felt a bit like crying. I wished I could talk to him about these things, but Dad was gone. "Is it as good as reuniting with friends?"

"Oh, it's been a madhouse of all of us oldsters embarrassing and impressing the youngsters with our rapid recollections of our previous mad adventures." She snickered. "Sain hasn't changed. Neither has Kent. It makes me happy, really. Those that are still here of my little 'Legion' are still the same, bouncing off each other as if no years have passed."

"I've heard quite a few be startled at how you lot are acting like you're in your teens." I grinned teasingly and she laughed. "Some of the Lorca survivors are here too. Did you see them?"

"Yes, Lilina brought me to them first thing. I remember Aderyn as a little girl I helped babysit. I even remember Galle, though he wasn't called that, back among the Lorca." Her eyes were sad. "We talked about that day. He was so young, and the devastation traumatized him so completely that he couldn't speak. So, the people who found and raised him, named him 'Galle', because he
liked the wind so much. Now, it is his name, though he remembers the old."

"Let me guess. Miredy's the only person he's told."

"Oh, of course. I teased her about it. She said I reminded her of Katri." Her eyes became sadder. "Ah, sister of my heart… I wished I had a better goodbye. But, I suspected I wouldn't."

"You did?" That… confused me. "Why?"

"I didn't with Hector, and the two of them were always so similar." She closed her eyes and a tear escaped. She didn't try to wipe it away, though, and I chose to not mention it. "Loyal to a fault, stubborn to self-destruction, but unbelievably kind. Clever. Protectors." She opened her eyes again, and shook her head. "I suppose I expected no goodbye from Rath too. He did that after we freed Caelin, just left. He probably would've done the same after the Campaign of Fire if he hadn't left with Katri."

"My parents suck with goodbyes, apparently." I smiled slightly and the poor joke made her laugh weakly. "The letters… did I remember to…?"

"You did. Or, rather, you gave them all to me to pass out because you had too much to do." She laughed as I whimpered. "It's fine, Irene. We came here to help. There will be plenty of time to catch up after everything."

"With… most…" I sighed, drooping. "I'm sorry. I'm being melancholic."

"Why wouldn't you? You're fighting with your aunts and uncles, and are now all too aware that your parents are gone. That's not a pain that goes away easily. Trust me; I know it. I still miss my parents, even now." She stroked my hair. "Do not feel bad for missing them."

"Okay, I won't. But I should cheer up a little. I mean; they'd want to see me smiling, right?"

"That is true." She smiled slightly. "After all, the thing they were proudest of, the 'title' they loved the most… was being your parents, Irene. Yours and Sue's." She looked up at the sky, as if she could see them in the rumbling clouds. "Rath had the family he'd always wanted, and Katri had the peace she decided she wanted. They were happy, until the end."

"Yeah…" I noticed the camp was stirring. We'd be preparing for battle soon. "It's starting again."

"Let me finish up caring for your horse." She took the brush from me with a smile. "You're going to be rushing about soon. I remember that part, even though our group was much smaller."

"True." I sighed and smiled at her, actually noticing that she was smaller than me. She always had seemed so much larger. "It's time to prove you right in believing in us."

"Oh, Irene, you've done that already." Aunt Lyn smiled back and reached up to clasp my hand. "But I look forward to you proving it more."

"We will." I squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I promise."

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The rain still hadn't broken by the time the battle began. The clouds just hung overhead, like a blanket intending to suffocate all of us. Occasionally, little rumbles of thunder could be heard through the screeches of pain, the war bellows, the clang of metal, and the splat of things falling. Once or twice, lightning arced through the clouds, adding a sharp bit of light against the twisted mountains of corpses we created. There had been no time, really, to clear the dead, after all,
meaning we were fighting on top of yesterday's dead, and adding more to it.

I did not blame Father Sky for averting His eyes. I could only hope we did not make Mother Earth tired and sick from all the people She had to greet.

"Damn, he's playing super defensive this time round," I muttered, eyes narrowing. We'd pushed the line past the Shrine of Seals, but we were deadlocked still, with bodies piling on top of bodies.

"Trust the man who has been protecting Zephiel since before he was born to take his job as a shield seriously."

"I doubt checked with Elphin, and the reinforcements, and the supplies they brought, have bolsters ours," Roy murmured. He and I were positioned on a little hill just above the frontlines, watching it all with eyes that were probably far too calm considering all the crimson. "But since we'll be laying siege to the capital soon after this…"

"We're going to need to take command of the field soon." My eyes narrowed and I sighed. "All right. Let's go with the scare tactic we devised."

"You sure?"

"No, but I'm pretty certain that we need to change tactics now if we're to have enough to take on Zephiel. I'm sure he's counting on wearing us down here. That's why the bulk of his army is here."

"Right…" Roy sighed and signaled for a messenger to come to us. "Tell Igrene it's time for our Divine Dragon to show." The messenger saluted and, without the slightest bit hesitation, raced off to deliver the message. "I was hoping Fae could just continue playing with Aunt Serra in the infirmary."

"I did as well, but war waits for no one."

We fell silent as we waited and, soon, Fae's dragon form flashed behind the lines, towering over everything. The enemy froze at the sight, and Fae shot off a harmless breath attack to the sky, a sparkle of blue-white mist that shone sharply against the stormy skies. As it faded, there was some sort of shout from behind enemy lines, and they quickly fell back, revealing only a group of hooded people, much like the War Dragons we saw on the Isles, and in the Nabata Desert. We were soon proven right as they transformed and became the shield of the frontline.

As Fae de-transformed, Roy and I glanced at each other and nodded. I gave him a quick hug before riding down to the front. When I got close, Roy brought up his hand, closed his eyes briefly, and called, "Divine Weapon Holders! Take point!"

"Do this in the exact order we discussed!" I ordered, riding down the line, almost daring the dragons to strike me. I was safer than I appeared, though; War Dragons had limited range. "Listen to me for any deviations!" The soldiers nodded and fell back, doing just as we'd instructed this morning, and not a single one hesitated. They had total trust in all of us, and it touched me deeply. I renewed my silent vow to do my very best and get as many of them home alive as I could. "Now! Show them that we will not falter, that we will not fall, and that we will seize victory with everything we have!" The soldiers actually cheered, and with those cheers, everyone fell into place, and I rode to the center of the line, and Roy soon joined me. We would watch this with our soldiers. We could do no less.

Ray and Sofia were first in our little 'script', as their part was potentially the most dangerous. I held my breath as the two of them held Apocalypse and the magic whipped about them. Both of them winced, and leaned into each other as black light crawled up their arms and faces. But their eyes
blazed with determination as they sighted a specific point and purple runes etched themselves into the air before a black gaping abyss opened up in the middle of the Bernese forces. It pulses once and then it began to pull things within. Rocks, trees, soldiers, wyverns, and dragons were pulled into the gaping maw and I wondered if it was the Void itself, where those who Mother Earth denied rest would wander.

I glanced at Ray and Sofia, noticed they were faltering, and gestured sharply. "Ray, Sofia, let it go!" I yelled. For a split second, I wondered if they heard, but then Sofia nodded and wrapped her free arm around Ray. The magic pulsed, and it was clear Apocalypse didn't want to let them go. But they broke free and collapsed. I smiled with I noticed Aunt Nino and Uncle Jaffar were instantly at Ray's side, while Fiona and Igrene hovered over Sofia worriedly. I wanted to head over too, just to check, but I couldn't, not right now. I had to keep watch on all of this…

Though, seeing the giant hole in the Bernese lines, and seeing where trees had fallen over and hearing the landslides triggered… I had to say that Apocalypse was not a tome I was willing to see used again. I preferred seeing the bodies left behind; at least you had proof they had existed in the first place. But I had no time to give my opinions, or be ill over what I'd ordered. This was only the first step in plan, and there were still more to go.

Lilina stood alone in the field as the magic pulsed around her. She had requested that in particular; she was a powerful magic user and Forblaze was the strongest Anima tome. White light swirled around her, joined with gold as she whispered, holding Forblaze to her chest with her eyes closed. She held out her hand slowly, and opened her eyes. As she did, the air surged and ignited, fire whipping around the disarrayed frontlines of the Bernese soldiers. She brought her hand up and the fire froze for a split second. But then she brought her hand down sharply and the fires of Forblaze washed over the field, leaving molten metal, ash, and charred remains behind.

The enemy screamed and actually began to fall back, preparing to run in terror. But they had no real chance, as Lilina had not been the only one prepping her spell. High in the sky, Tate had been preparing Aureola, and as soon as Forblaze hit the enemy, she released the spell, causing rays of burning light to rain down. The enemy’s fliers were hit particularly hard by it, and I saw quite a few wyverns fall, their wings burnt clear off by the light magic. They hit the ground hard with their riders, adding to the deadly little ‘rain’.

The soldiers cheered, but my stomach churned. If there was one thing I realized now… our heroes had won through fear. They had won through fear and desperation, and these weapons were the pinnacle of it. These were weapons meant to instill terror in the hearts of enemies, and these were weapons not meant to be considered lightly.

I glanced back and saw Lilina on her hands and knees, sobbing even as Guinevere gathered her up in her arms. I looked up and saw Tate bleeding from her arms, leaning against Zeiss as she struggled to not fall off her pegasus from the sheer pain. No, these were not weapons meant to be considered lightly, by any means. But this was also not a war to be considered lightly. Zephiel had brought this war on the continent, and Zephiel had dragged dragons into a war that they had no part in. The dragons, after the Scouring, had left, or gone into hiding. They had chosen to hide and wait, to not bring more conflict. Zephiel violated their wishes, and dragged out the Demon Dragon, Idenn, out of her slumber to spark a second Scouring.

It could not be allowed. This was a war no one but Zephiel had wanted, and we had to show him, truly show him, that he had no right to force his broken view on everyone.

"Do not falter, soldiers!" I called, twisting to face them. I smiled as I noticed quite a few of the soldiers had stopped cheering to peer worriedly at the casters. They were thinking past the morale
boosting rush. "The Divine Weapons bear the combined might of humans and dragons! A human wielding it alone has difficulties, yes, but it can be endured with support!" I gestured to Ray and Sofia for emphasis, and noted with a small sigh of relief that, at least physically, they actually seemed fine. "That is what I call on you to do now! Do not let them fight this war alone! That is not how any of us fight!"

"The casters will fall back to the infirmary for watch," Roy added. This hadn't been originally planned, but it was clear that it was needed. "The rest of you, though, will charge! Charge, and show everyone that we are stronger than even the legendary heroes!" Roy brandished his rapier and the soldiers cheered. "We end this now!"

The soldiers surged past us, parting to let Ray, Sofia, Lilina, Tate, and their helpers easily make it to the back. As they did, a bright light shone in the backlines and a wave of sparkling mist washed through us, easing even my exhaustion. This had been planned, of course; Clarine had been instructed to use the Saint's Staff as soon as the army charged, to give us the extra edge and make sure the enemy had little chance to regroup.

Roy and I watched as our soldiers fell into the battle with renewed vigor. I focused on Rutger, fighting easily with Durandel, and supported by Fir wielding the Darkness Blade that whipped about. A couple of times, she almost hit allies, but I saw the determination in her eyes and how watchful Rutger was being, so I made no comment. Instead, my eyes flicked above, to where Miredy led the fliers, shouting out orders based on what Maltet let her see. Then my eyes focused back below, where Deke was carving a path through the enemies with Armads. Sue, I noticed, edged along the sides of the battle, firing arrows with a speed that seemed almost unnatural; Murgleis was truly a bow of 'winds'.

"Throwing in that the weapons were draconic and human might combined was a nice touch, I think," Roy murmured. He looked up at me. "Thanks for sharing what Wuotan told you, in Bulgar."

"His story really made me think about what our responsibilities would be, as the victors of this war," I whispered. The wind whipped about, and on it, I thought I heard Dad's praise. "When I thought about that, I realized why the heroes gambled on the future. Ultimately, in terms of dragons and humans, we'll have to do the same."

"Yes, and we will have to build the foundations. That's what they did. That's what we'll do." He grinned. "Though, first, we need to kind of win this. We don't want to be counting our chickens before they hatch." He closed his eyes and nodded to himself. "Which means, I am going to remind them that their leader has dragon blood in his veins, and is quite proud of his mother."

"I'm going to head to the edge of the field and make sure nothing too unexpected happens." I reached down to ruffle his hair, and I laughed as he made a face. "You're still fifteen, Roy. General or not, you can't escape my teasing."

"Meanie." He smiled, though. "I'm off."

"Stay safe." I watched him jump into the fray with a very dramatic bit of ice magic, involving ice-slides, and spikes to get right into the middle of things. But the little bit of showmanship rallied our troops, and that was more than enough. I had my own job now.

I rode on the edges of the battlefield, firing arrows as I coordinated the varying groups. I relied on Perceval, Cecilia, Klein, Lance, and Allen, among others, to keep everyone in groups as they followed the Divine Weapon holders. It was a bit more chaotic than our normal plans, but for something we came up with this morning, it was working nicely.
There was a bit of movement, and some cheering from the enemy. To my surprise, Murdock had actually taken the field, moving from wherever he'd been hidden. I hadn't expected him to make a move so quickly. I looked up in the air, looking for someone who was very fast and maybe more than a little lucky, and found someone who fit the description very quickly.

"Shanna!" I yelled. She looked at me, a little startled. "I need you to distract Murdock!" She stared a moment longer before nodding, and swooping down. I looked then for someone that I thought might be able to make it before Shanna got killed, especially since I only noticed then that Murdock actually wielded a damn axe. "Sue!" I saw her not far from me, and she glanced at me. She smiled slightly and nodded, heading towards Murdock without my saying, and I followed, shouting orders to the rest of the army as I watched Shanna reach Murdock, alone and separated from his soldiers still. We had only one chance to take him out quickly, and if we lost this…!

Shanna flew close, taking a bad injury to her abdomen, but she used her lance to cut the buckles of Murdock's chestplate to weaken Murdock's guard and she used the wings of her pegasus to blind him as Sue rode up and drew back her arrow. As Sue released the arrow, Shanna flew high, escaping Murdock's second strike with ease, swiping at his face as she retreated.

As he automatically reached up to block, Sue's first arrow slammed into his chest. He stumbled back, startled, and Sue brought up and fired a second arrow, catching him in the neck. He made to lift up his axe, but Shanna, safely out of reach, threw a javelin and scored a direct hit to his shoulder, piercing it and making him drop it. He looked around, wide eyed with surprise, before he slowly closed his eyes as Sue aimed and fired a third arrow. He mouthed something and, instinctively, I knew he was apologizing to Zephiel for no longer being able to protect him.

Sue's third arrow hit Murdock straight in the face, knocking his head back, and down he fell, the oldest and strongest of the Wyvern Generals, Zephiel's most stalwart protector. The threatened rain began pouring as soon as he hit the ground, and the bloodiest battle of the whole war ended in rain and mud, and heartbreaking tears as the Bernese soldiers gave up, and our soldiers mourned those who had passed.

What a horrible waste of life.

The rain was still falling by the time I got done with tending to those in the infirmary, checking on the Bernese soldiers who'd surrendered and became our prisoners, and tending to those who'd gotten sick to their stomachs at all the bodies and blood, and the absolutely horrible stench of burnt corpses and septic wounds that no amount of rain could wash away. Ginger concoctions and teas were the popular drink for supper this night, especially for those who decided to risk putting something in their stomach.

While the camp sagged from the exhaustion of winning a long battle, Roy and I followed Wuotan into the Shrine of Seals. We'd both worried about leaving the camp so quickly, but Elphin had pointed out that returning with the Sword of Seals would be a big morale booster for the troops. Uncle Eliwood and Aunt Lyn had promised to watch over the army for us, and keep track of things, so Roy and I left.

"It's seems so strange to think of you as a dragon," Roy commented as we walked down the halls. Wuotan led us through easily and quickly, his eyes almost nostalgic. "I mean; it makes sense, but…"

"First impressions are important for shaping a person's opinion," Wuotan replied lightly. He smiled at us over his shoulder. "If I introduce myself as a simple scholar, which I am, then you have that association first and foremost."
"I fail to see how a millennia old dragon is anything simple, much less a simple scholar."

"That's how you see it. I find myself quite a simple dragon."

"No one who is actually simple says that."

"So you think." He stopped at the end of a doorway and turned, his smile falling. "This is the room. Once inside, insert the Fire Emblem into the hilt. That will awaken the Sword again, and you may grab it. Irene, it is imperative that you do not touch it. It will kill you if you try."

"That's... so..." Roy pulled the Fire Emblem out of his pocket, looking down at it. "It all feels so... strange. I mean... what are the chances that when... all of this happens, I just happen to have enough dragon blood in me to safely wield it?" He gripped it tightly. "Am I just... a piece on a board?"

"...No." Wuotan knelt so that he could look Roy in the face, cupping his chin to make sure Roy didn't hide. "No, you're here because of your choices. There are those in Arcadia who could wield the Sword of Seals. You even chatted with one; Alberich is trained in swords. There are other villages of dragons and humans, with mixed children who could have wielded it. Your mother's blood simply gives you the choice to take it up. If you want to stop, if you'd rather another take it, Fiona and I can easily go to Arcadia, or go to another draconic settlement, and ask for a volunteer. You and your journey are the sum of many, many people's choices, but the one person who matters most with both is yourself."

"But..."

"But nothing. This is your choice, Roy. If you do not wish to take it up, there is no shame in it. No one can force this on you." Wuotan smiled slightly. "Aenir would literally come back from the dead and kill me if I let anyone even try."

"She was that protective?"

"Aenir died protecting my daughter. Of course she was that protective." Wuotan let his hand fall and rest on his knee. "So, Roy, what is your choice? What does your heart tell you?"

Roy was silent for a long while, staring at the Fire Emblem in his hand. Then he sighed heavily, and smiled sadly. "It says to take it up. Because how can I ask people to take up dangerous weapons, and then refuse to take up one myself?"

"Well, it's more dangerous for other people. Once you take it up, no other may wield it until your death." Wuotan's eyes were serious. "Still certain?"

"...Yes." Roy's eyes hardened with resolve. "Yes, I will take it up."

"Very well." Wuotan's smile was both proud, and sad, as he straightened and gestured to the room. "Then, both of you, head inside. I'll wait here."

Roy nodded and glanced at me. I smiled at him, and pointed to the door, indicating he should go first. He took a deep breath, hesitated a bit longer, and then walked inside. I followed closely behind him, and glanced back, noticing Wuotan wasn't even turning to look. He just leaned against the outer wall and closed his eyes, just waiting.

"It's... stuck in the stone." Roy's voice drew me back to the sword literally stuck inside the stone. "So, the Fire Emblem will... wake it up..." he murmured. I hung back as he walked closer and he set the stone inside the hilt with shaking hands. "There..." There was a flash of light, and heat, and
the sword began to glow. "Then… I take it…" Roy's hands shook badly as he reached out, but just before he grabbed the hilt, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then pulled the sword out in one swift movement. He brought it over his head, holding it up and… nothing. He held still, his eyes unfocused slightly, but from my perspective, there was nothing. There was absolutely nothing.

"I don't know why, but I expected something way more dramatic," I deadpanned. I walked over and snagged Roy's cape, rippling it for extra effect. He squeaked and batted at my hand. "You know something like this, maybe something fiery or bright or… you know…"

"Well, you lot didn't take it up while in the middle of a dragon attack." The sudden voice made Roy and I yelp, and whirl. Roy brought the sword down into an attack position, while I brought Rienfleche up, with an arrow out of my quiver and on the string. Then a snicker made both of us pause, and then a couple blinks made us realize there was another 'person' here, with amber eyes like mine and longish blonde hair. "Wuotan being the trickster like always," the man laughed, face lighting up with a kind smile. "How do you do? My name is Hartmut."

"You're Hartmut?" Roy asked. His eyes were wide. "But… wait… what?"

"You've seen some of the other heroes. I don't see why I'm such a surprise."

"Hanon scared the living hell out of me." Roy pouted when I snickered. "You didn't warn me!"

"No, I didn't," I confirmed, having no shame in it. My cheer faded as I looked at Hartmut. "But why be here?"

"Instead of, say, Eckesachs?" Hartmut asked. He walked slowly towards us, and I noticed with amusement that I was the same height as him. "Perhaps things might have been better if I had, and talked to Zephiel. My poor broken descendant. But then again, I do not think my words could reach him. He only took up Eckesachs after declaring war." He shrugged, leaning against stone altar. "But I chose to be here. I knew one day, the seal on Idenn would be undone, and when that happened, the Sword of Seals would be needed. I wanted to be here to explain what the next wielder would see."

"See?"

"Yeah, I had a vision or… something," Roy murmured. He frowned. "I vaguely recognized her from Missur, though I was half-dead at the time. But a girl with silver hair and two colored eyes….

"You were mostly dead," I retorted. I shuddered as I remembered that day. "Only your dragon heritage saved you when you protected me."

"Worth it. But I did promise to try not to do it again."

"Yes, but…"

"Huh, it must run in the family, being a shield." Hartmut smiled wryly, like he was laughing at a joke only he knew. "But yes, the girl you saw was Idenn. The demon dragon, and my half-sister."

"...Your what?" Roy asked after a moment of staring. I didn't blame him. I was trying to make the connection myself, mostly because since I knew Hartmut was also my ancestor. "Your sister?"

"Yes, my sister, though we never met. Life wasn't that kind." His smile became more rueful. "I couldn't kill her. She was Fiona's best friend, she was my sister, and, more importantly, she is someone who never had a choice in this."
"Choice?"

"Wuotan explained to me that few Demon Dragons willingly become it," I began slowly. My eyes narrowed. "But you're talking a bit more, aren't you?" I closed my eyes, and thought about what bits of Idenn I had seen, specifically on how… she always moved on orders. "She's a doll."

"Her soul was broken, yes," Hartmut whispered. His smile fell. "Hydra, the leader of the dragons, broke her into a Demon Dragon, and then broke her spirit when she still refused to yield and help."

"Was it because of the divine weapons?"

"No. "He laughed bitterly. "No, Idenn was lost long before then. It was simply in response to Martin making healing staves, and Martin making things like the wyrmslayer. Normal dragonslaying weapons that gave us a tiny little edge. That scared them. We scared them." He shook his head. "So, I sealed Idenn. I sealed her, in the hopes that the future would be kinder." He sighed, smiling wryly at us. "And so, I damned your generation, because I could not bear to kill her. I'm sorry for that."

"...It seems stupid to apologize for it." I crossed my arms and glowered at him. "I mean; do you regret giving her that chance?"

"...Well, no..."

"Then keep your head up, right? That's what you're supposed to do." I frowned as Hartmut burst into laughter. "What?"

"Nothing, just Hilda said the same thing to me for nearly four hundred years, and I find it amusing you're saying it too." He smiled, but it faded when I gave him a confused look. "Did you not know Hilda was half-dragon too?"

"...If I did, I forgot about it." I glanced at Roy, who threw up his hands. "Well, that is certainly a thing. It's not as big of a thing as learning Aunt Ninian was half-dragon, but it was certainly a thing."

"I still find it so strange that the two children I personally helped escape Elibe through the Gate actually came back," Hartmut laughed. He shook his head, though, and smiled at us. "Regardless, I wanted to tell you the truth about Idenn. You should make an informed choice about what you want. And, if you want to kill her, that's fine. Perhaps that's the kinder option. I just wanted to give her another chance, in a future that might not be as scary. But this is your world. You make its future." He started fading away. "Give my regards to snickering Wuotan hiding behind the door there, and to Fiona. "He looked right at me, and gave me a very slow, very soft smile. "And it was good to see... one of House Hanover. Hilda and I were always close."

"...Yeah, I know." I smiled back slightly, and took note, again, at how we had the same colored eyes. It had to be a magic thing, maybe even a draconic thing that lingered. It was the only thing I could really think of. "Rest well."

"Oh, no, I intend on watching with anticipation as you all save the country I founded, and free Zephiel from his own madness." He grinned. "No pressure, though."

"That's reassuring," Roy deadpanned. He smiled, though, and he looked a touch relieved. "And we'll... figure out something for Idenn. I promise."

Hartmut's only response was to smile, and then he disappeared, leaving us standing there in silence.
"Well, that was a thing," I finally said. I really couldn't think of anything else. "I still say there should've been more flashes of light or something."

"That only happens in the stories," Roy instantly retorted. He relaxed slightly and looked at the Sword of Seals, now his personal weapon. "This… is mine. A sword associated often with fire, wielded by the child of an ice dragon."

"Well, let it never be said life doesn't have a sense of humor."

"True." He smiled wryly at me. "So, we both have dragons in our ancestry."

"Actually, if you think about it logically, having a dragon in the family line isn't unusual." But, it was still a bit of a shock to hear that the Lady Hildegarde had been half-dragon. Then again, it was also easy to see why no one wrote that down. "I wonder how long they lived. I mean; Fiona is still alive and all, and she's supposed to be only half-dragon, so..." It also made me wonder about the Lady Hildegarde's son. Logically, he'd also be a half-dragon, and there was a chance he would still be...

A little piece clicked in my head, and I yelped as soon as it did. Then, while Roy looked at me like I was a crazy, I left the room and the shrine itself, past a startled Wuotan, to find Fiona and rant-ramble at her about how Alberich of Arcadia was my distant ancestor, and I'd had a casual conversation with him about tactics and holy shit, that was so weird!

I felt I was allowed to freak out a little over that, dignity be damned!

By the time I finished rambling at Fiona, and she finished laughing her ass off, the rain had let up, leaving only puddles and mud in its wake. Roy and Wuotan had also made their triumphant return with the Sword of Seals in hand, and so, the mood of the camp was pretty cheerful as I went to check on all the Divine Weapon wielders. Deke was actually out and about, and told me that while there was a thunder in his veins, it was more than controllable for now. Clarine was curled up in the corner of her tent, with Rutger asleep in her lap, so I just draped a blanket over them and moved on to the next. Lilina was curled up with Aunt Lyn, Uncle Lucius, and Aunt Fiora, so I just had a quick chat with all of them and then popped over to the neighboring tent, where Sue and Shanna were chatting, bonding over their shared kill of Murdock. Both reassured me they were just fine, though they were both quick to ask for hugs from me. Ray and Sofia were sleeping with Fae, where Fiona and Igrene watched over them, so I just did a quick confirmation that they were fine before having a lovely conversation with Fir before she cuddled up with Noah by the fire.

After all of that, I hesitated before going to visit Galle, since I knew that's where I'd find Miredy. I knocked on the tent-flap and waited for a quiet 'come in' before stepping inside. To my surprise, Galle was actually sitting up. Miredy was asleep in her chair by his bed, clinging to his hand and smiling as she slumbered.

"I was coming to check up on her," I explained, smiling slightly as I peered at her a little more closely. She was a bit paler than normal, but still, she looked so peaceful. "How is she? How are you?"

"Fine," he answered. His voice was a bit raspy, and a closer look at his eyes hinted he was on some pain medication. "We're both fine. Surprisingly."

"Uh-huh." I sat on the edge of the bed, smirking. "So, for the record, you owe me absolutely nothing. I was simply keeping a promise, and you happened to benefit." I held up his hand as he opened his mouth. "If that does not satisfy you, though, then I shall remind you that I saved your
life, meaning you would have a life-debt to me, and that would mean your two life-debts might come into conflict, so you should really just accept that you owe me nothing."

"...You thought this out very clearly."

"I had some time to think about it while you were being healed, and then screamed at by Miredy." I grinned. "Oh, can I attend the wedding? I think it would be a lovely thing to see."

"Things like this make it really clear who your mother is." He smiled slightly and sighed. "Oh, very well. I accept that I owe you nothing, then. I benefited from a promise you kept to… Miredy?"

"I made it to Guinevere, actually. She was heartbroken that her decision cost Miredy so much." I shrugged. "I decided it wasn't fair and swore to both Father Sky and Mother Earth that I would try to save you. I succeed and, thus, you owe me nothing. Guinevere does."

"Ah, yes, have the Queen of Bern owe you."

"So, you accept her as your next royal?"

"I accept that killing Zephiel is needed to save Bern, and I am willing to see what she does." His smile grew. "She's always been a kind girl. Bern will need a kind, yet strong queen."

"She's become quite strong through all of this. I think so, at least." I shrugged. "Regardless, Guinevere will pay me back by doing what she plans on anyway: ending this stupid war."

"You both talk so much." Miredy lifted her head slowly and yawned, rubbing her eyes sleepily. "I was dozing so nicely," she complained. Still she smiled. "I'm okay. We're okay. Go get some sleep yourself, silly."

"Fine, fine, I'll leave you lovebirds," I teased. I stood up, hugged her, patted Galle on the shoulder, and headed out of the tent. "Rest well."

They murmured some sort of 'goodbye/good night' as I walked away, and I went towards my tent, hoping I'd find someone who could tell me where Tate was on the way. Sadly, I didn't, and I walked inside my tent to drop off my stuff. I glanced longingly at my cot before sitting at my desk and checking a few things. It was mostly congratulations notes from a lot of the soldiers, and from my various aunts and uncles. I smiled at them, and laughed when I saw a love poem, and a flower, from Klein.

Some noise outside my tent caught my attention, and I set the notes aside to peek out of my tent to figure out who it was. To my surprise, it was Allen and Tate, and they were having a strangely… well, the atmosphere around them was quite cozy, if I did say so myself.

"After so much time, you still keep the same fighting style," she sighed, frowning up at him. She looked paler than normal, and her arms were bandaged, but otherwise, she did seem fine. "If you die, it's all over, you know."

"I know, I know," he replied, smiling sheepishly. "But I am a knight, and these are the final battles. So…"

"...Then, might I stay by you?" Tate looked up at him entreatingly. "I worry and can't concentrate! And… I can help…" She ducked her head as he continued staring. "Of course, I'm probably not good enough…"

"N-no, you're amazing!" Allen looked almost frantic, tripping over his words. "You're strong, and
can easily keep up, and you're like an ange… a guardian angel or… um…"

"Oh." Tate went a little red and smiled slightly. "Then, I'll stay at your side."

"Yes, please." He grinned and, to my amusement, also went a little red. "With you near, I have nothing to fear!"

"Did… you mean to rhyme?" Tate started giggling as he went redder. "You're so weird."

"Y-yes, well…" Allen coughed, laughed a little. "Oh, shoot, I have to… meet up with Lance actually. Talk to you in the morning?"

"Yes, morning, that sounds good." She smiled. "I'll see you then."

"Yeah, good… good…" He smiled goofily and ran off, waving goodbye on his shoulder, and comically almost tripping over some people as he did. Tate laughed, shaking her head, but smiling warmly.

Then she turned and her eyes widened when she realized I was right there, watching everything with a smirk. "Not a word," she mumbled, huffing. I laughed and she sulked more. "I don't even know what that was."

"Well, obviously, it's a beautiful friendship," I replied. I grinned. "And if it blossoms into something romantic, I'll squee and demand all the details~"

"You're horrible." Still, she smiled back and gave me a big hug. "I'm okay, by the way. I was coming by here to tell you, since I knew you wouldn't rest until you'd checked on everyone. There are some… interesting scars on my arms, but nothing that will stop me."

"Might I see?" I pulled away and she carefully unwound her bandages to show me the long, thin red lines marring them. When I tapped them, I found that they were smooth and hard, nothing like how a scab should be. "Aureola breaks the body."

"Yes, indeed." She smiled wryly. "You'll forgive me if I hope I do not have to pull that off a second time."

"I am praying to Father Sky and Mother Earth that I never have to give the order again." I took her bandages and began bandaging her arm back up. "But I'm scared I'll have to."

"Well, if you do, don't hesitate. I'd rather a couple more scars than a bunch more deaths." Her smiled warmed to something encouraging. "You gave us the warnings. We know to be careful."

"Yes." I tied off her bandage and managed to return her smile. "I know you're right. I can't hesitate or overthink at this point. Our goal is clear. We end this war so that we can rebuild the peace. But this time, we rebuild it so that…"

"We build it so that, one day, little Fae gets to see a world where humans and dragons live together, right?" She laughed a little. "It sounds like a legend to me. But, well, we still give our thanks to the Ice Dragon in Ilia. I think we can do it." She reached out and hugged me again. "Might be difficult to have the time to say this during the coming battles, so I just wanted to say I'm so glad we're friends."

"Same." I hugged her back tightly. "We'll get through this, and then I'll bug you with frequent visits and letters."
"Oh, I'll beat you to that." She pulled away and we both laughed. "See you in the morning War Council."

"See you then!" I waved her goodbye and sat back at my desk, ready to read through more of the little notes to motivate me to get back to work.

However, before long, there was a quiet tap on my tent flap, and it opened to reveal a cloaked and hooded Guinevere, who looked strangely somber. "Um… I… was planning on having a proper, if quiet, funeral for Murdock," she murmured. She kept her head down. "By our ways."

"Yeah, that's not a problem," I answered, standing. "But something tells me you're here for more than just that."

"I was wondering if you would like to accompany me, this time?" She looked up at me then, and I saw the real question she was asking. She wanted a friend with her. More importantly, she wanted the friend who had encouraged her to take the throne, because this was the first step for her. Holding a funeral for the general who had protected her as a child… was her first step.

So, I nodded and grabbed my cloak. "Yeah, I will." I slung it on and brought up the hood. She had hers up, after all. I'd follow her lead. "My mother said he was a man of honor. That's why she made the bargain, and he did keep it." No matter how much I hated him for capturing Mom, I had to acknowledge that his honoring the bargain kept many of the Kutolah alive. I had to also acknowledge how he had taken care of the civilians in Ilia, including the babies. "I should see him off too."

As we stepped outside, I glanced up at the sky and noticed the clouds had parted, revealing the stars. I hesitated a moment, and then decided, for the first time since I'd heard of Dad's death, to actually look at the stars and read them. It was hard, because it still hurt. It still hurt, because it had always been a 'family' thing to look at the stars. So, I only could make myself look at one, but that one made me smile.

The Huntress had her arrow notched, aimed right for the enemy, the first time I had ever seen such a sight. The next funeral I would attend was Zephiel's. It was time for him to answer for bringing calamity to Elibe, once and for all.

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Notes on the Sword of Seals (courtesy of Wuotan):

Forged from the fang of Helios, king of the Divine Dragons, and quenched in the blood of a Fire Dragon Chieftain (Wuotan himself), giving it its incredible power.

It used damage, and even kill, the wielder if overused, but the Fire Emblem in the hilt helps bleed off the stress on the body

It's a stupidly overpowered sword, and it was purposely designed that way because it was apparently done just to see if they could. I nearly died of laughter when he told me.

It's the only weapon in the world designed to pierce a Demon Dragon's scales, and it is designed to be as lethal as the wielder wishes it to be.

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: 'Dignity ~ Wyvern Generals' Theme' is Murdock's theme in game. In game, Murdock is typically someone you want to just send Rutger or Fir with an armorslayer and support bonuses to deal with, since he's someone with high defenses and massive strength in a game where the throne advantages are pretty damn ridiculous. He's easy to defeat, but only if you use simple strategy (you can also use magic, but he'll easily one shot most of the mages). The conversation between Allen and Tate is based off of their A support (and yes, it is, in fact, shippy. I didn't add too much there, other than removing some of Allen's obliviousness).

For a bit of fun: a friend of mine recommends you listen to Two Steps From Hell's Stallion while reading the battle part of the story, specifically the point where the Divine Weapons come into play.

Next Chapter - The Neverending Dream (Game Chapter 22)
Chapter 27) The Neverending Dream

General Murdock is dead, and the bulk of the Bernese army has been defeated. Now, we lead the army right to Castle Bern, and Zephiel. This is Bern's last stand, and they know it, holing up in the castle, a veritable fortress thanks to the strong castle walls and the mountains that prevent passage through anything but the front gates, and directly above.

That's fine. We had ways to destroy gates, after all. This would be the final battle of Zephiel's war. Today... would be a day that changed Elibe, forever.

The Castle City of Bern was quiet. It had been completely evacuated, it seemed, with its citizens scattered to nearby villages. Every once in a while, you could catch a glimpse of a soldier wandering the dusty streets, but most had retreated into the castle itself. Zephiel knew we were here, after all, and he had prepared his fortress well.

I wandered those empty streets, tightening my cloak around me and making sure my hood was up. I hadn't really planned on coming here. Honestly, it was rather stupid to do so, even if I did have Rienfleche on me and the camp wasn't far away. But we were in that eerie calm between the storms, after the chaos of planning, but before the battle. In other words, the only time I had nothing to do, and I didn't even have busy work anymore to keep myself occupied; the additional soldiers Uncle Eliwood, Aunt Lyn, and the others had brought took over most of those details, and Uncle Lucius practically threw a fit when he saw how much I'd been working. So, I'd gone for a ride to ease my nerves and have something to do and... ended up here.

I walked slowly, my steps unnaturally loud even as I set my feet with care. Dust clung to my boots and the bottom of my cloak, since no one had bothered cleaning the streets since everyone had left. Some doors were left open, and the insides of the houses showed signs of haste. Things were knocked over. Piles of things labeled 'not quite as important' were left by the door.

My foot hit something and I stopped and watched it roll to a slow stop in front of me. It was a tiny boot, something a baby would wear. I bent down and picked it up, noticing it was beautifully crocheted, and clearly something someone had spent quite a bit of time making. But now it was here, in the dust, abandoned in the chaos of evacuations. It had either fallen off the baby in the rush, or had fallen out of a badly packed bag, unnoticed.

I looked around and then set the little boot on a nearby window ledge, so that it wouldn't get trampled by our army. I peered inside, and reached through to right a knocked over vase on a table. I then wandered down the street, and stopped when I found a discarded doll, tiny and well worn, with little stitch marks showcasing where tears had once been, and little stains hinting that this doll had gone most everywhere with its owner. But, like the little boot, it had been lost, and I set it on a barrel in an alley, hoping that maybe, just maybe, the owner could find it when everything calmed.

I continued wandering down the road, and I found more and more discarded and lost things. I painstakingly set them out of the way, knowing that when the battle began, this entire area would be swarmed by soldiers who wouldn't even notice these little things. They'd be focused on the
battle ahead, and little things like someone's doll or boot or embroidered handkerchief would be trampled into the dirt, and destroyed.

Little things like this were lost, when everyone had to focus on the 'big picture'. Little things like this were things we'd have to focus on again, when things became peaceful. When we rebuilt, we had to remember these 'little things' that would never be repaired, and work to ensure that their replacements would not be lost again. I didn't want... I wanted the world we'd build to be one where little kids didn't lose their little boots and no one noticed. I wanted it to be a world where little kids could hold onto their dolls and go on imaginary adventures with no worry of the dolls just... disappearing.

In that rather gloomy mindset, I returned to the edge of the city, where my horse grazed. I petted her nose and studied her closely, noticing the little scars and scratches she had. Injuries I didn't really notice, because while I still made sure to groom and feed her, I simply did not have the time to tend to whatever wounds she picked up while barrelling through enemies to let me do my job. We had people in the army who specialized in it, but I still felt horrible that I had never noticed.

"When this war is over, I'm going to give you to the herd," I whispered, reaching up to hug her, burying my face in her neck. 'Giving her to the herd' would mean she would no longer be 'mine', in the sense that I could not ride her into battle or on a hunt or anything but simply recreation, at her choosing. I would have to train a new horse for battle and hunts, but that was fine. She had seen me through so, so much. I wanted her to rest. 'Hang on just a bit longer for me, sweetie.' I smiled as she reached around and licked my hair, as if to say 'I am okay. Keep going.' "We're almost done. I love you so much. Thank you for all of this." She licked me again, this time a little harder. "Okay, yes, I'm done with self pity." I squeezed her a little tighter before pulling away and mounting up.

We rode back to camp slowly, mostly because I let her pick her path back. So, when I arrived, the camp was in motion, making the last bits of preparations for the coming battle. Soon, I'd be working again. But I took the time to brush my pretty mare down, and give her some treats. While I did that, someone else reached around to give her treats too. I jerked and whirled, only relaxing when I realized it was Uncle Eliwood.

"You were gone quite some time," he chided, leading me away from our 'stables' area, towards the main part of the camp. "Did you go sneaking into the castle?"

"I'm not _that_ reckless anymore," I huffed, sulking a little. I waved at the soldiers as we passed, noticing Roy chatting with Marcus and Merlinus. "I just rode."

"Towards the city? I saw which direction you came from."

"Well, I wasn't _planning_ on that. I'm not you, Uncle Eliwood." I pouted. "I don't see why any of you lot have any right to complain about me being reckless, considering _you_ snuck into the castle when you were trying to be secretive!"

"It got us the answers we needed." Uncle Eliwood laughed a bit, crossing his arms. "How do you know about that, though?"

"I finally read Mom's logbook."

"She really did record everything there, huh?" He sighed, smiling ruefully as he glanced up at the sky. "It's just like her to do that. She was always writing in that thing."

"...Well, she ripped out the part of Aunt Ninian being a dragon." I smiled slightly at Uncle Eliwood's startled look. "I guess... she wanted to keep her wishes, even..."
"I guess so." He laughed softly, and looked like he was about to cry. I wondered just how much stress he'd gone through. He lost his wife, he lost two of his best friends, he lost friends, he had to stay behind as his son led an army to war... and yet, here Uncle Eliwood was, still standing, and still fighting. "I never did quite agree with that. That moment might haunt my dreams forever, but I didn't like that Ninian felt ashamed of herself. I didn't like how she felt the need to hide. But, it was her choice, and so, I listened." He looked over to where Roy was directing some of the soldiers and smiled. "I wished she could've seen him, though. Proudly wielding her power."

"How do non-Sacaeans get by without listening to the wind and hearing the dead give their reassurances?" I grinned teasingly, and laughed as the wind kicked up right then, and I heard Aunt Ninian's giggle. "She's laughing at you, by the way."

"Is she?" His smile grew. "Well, I always did like her laugh."

"Is that why you always tried to tickle her?"

"Partially."

"Soldiers!" Roy called out then, sadly cutting the conversation off. He jumped onto a box to be a little above everyone, so that they could see him. "I'm sure all of you are bored to tears of my long winded speeches of valor and honor and whatnot!" The soldiers laughed, and I snickered, unable to help it. He had thought about giving another one, but Elphin and I thought that a bit of humor might work better here. It seemed we were right. "So, I'll skip that part this time. You know what it is anyway." Roy smiled and gestured to Castle Bern. I glanced up and saw Uncle Eliwood beam proudly at Roy, though there was a trace of sadness there. He didn't quite like how we'd been forced to grow up, even if he was proud of who we became. "There is our destination. Within lies King Zephiel. So, for those we must protect, onward, my friends! This war ends today!"

The resulting cheer scared the birds from the trees, but they quickly danced above head, and I knew they were carrying our resolve to Father Sky. Roy was right, after all. We ended this today!

The castle gates opened easily, so we knew there would be traps. We scattered the army down different paths to make sure we weren't all taken down at once. I still grit my teeth when the word came of the traps, and casualties started flooding the infirmary. Once hit by the traps, Zephiel's guards ambushed the wounded. The only advantage they didn't have was numbers, and the number of dead and wounded proved very well that Zephiel was a scarily competent tactician.

"Why did Mom have to teach him some tricks?" I hissed, ducking behind a corner to avoid an arrow through the throat. I'd stuck with Roy, trying to actually get into the damn castle, but we had a minor problem. "Father Sky above, Mom..."

"How do you know this isn't a trick he came up with on his own?" Roy asked. He yelped as an arrow shattered right next to him. "Why is there such a skilled sniper here? Why?"

"I'm pretty certain because this is a battle scenario Mom used to teach me."

"How did you make it through that lesson?"

"I was like 'oh, I will just send the fliers to close the distance' and got half of my theoretical forces killed, which is why I gave orders for them to stay back until we can make a pause."

"What was the answer?"

"Mom said 'assassin', but we sent our assassins with the other groups." I barely resisted the urge to
punch the wall as another arrow managed to take out another of our soldiers. "What's the terrain like? I didn't have a chance to see?"

"We're basically 'in' the castle, but more of an inner courtyard sort of deal, and there are archers set up on the roof, but the one who has nearly gotten us twice is a really skilled sniper." Roy glanced at me. "If we get him, they'll hopefully be shocked enough that we can burst through, but..."

"I'll send for one of our assassins..." However, as I brought up my hand to hail a soldier, I noticed Klein pushing his way through the soldiers and could only stare a moment. "Klein, what are you doing here?"

"Ogle your boyfriend later."

"Shut up, Roy, he's literally right here." I waved as Klein walked up, and saw something odd. He wasn't wielding his normal silver bow, but a longbow instead. "Klein?"

"I got worried when Tate and her group weren't in position for the next strike," Klein explained. He kissed my cheek in greeting, ignoring the blood and sweat, and casually peered around the corner. He jerked back as an arrow landed in the dirt right in front of his feet. "She mentioned a sniper causing troubles."

"Yes, and we were just about to send for Uncle Jaffar, Uncle Matthew, or..." I began. I trailed off as he shook his head. "Are they busy?"

"You don't need to send for them. There's a reason I came myself when I heard there was a sniper." He stepped out from behind the corner again and brought up his longbow. Another arrow thudded into the ground, and I realized that Klein was just outside of that sniper's range. "Don't worry, and get ready to run." Klein's eyes narrowed as he brought up an arrow and aimed. "At this range, I won't miss."

It felt like even Father Sky held His breath as Klein loosed the arrow, and I knew I wasn't the only one who cheered as he caught the sniper clean through the throat. They fell, scrabbling at the arrow until they hit the ground hard, and Tate and Zeiss took advantage of the shock of the kill to close the distance and fall on the archers.

I gave Klein a quick kiss for thanks and luck before racing forward alongside Roy, ducking down the hallways. Guinevere had given us a map of the castle so that we weren't completely lost. The problem was, of course, the usual problem for this battle; we were fighting people who knew the terrain far better than us, with a lot of time to set up. This was quickly proven when we walked right into yet another ambush.

"This is going to sound more accusatory than I mean, and I'm sorry," Roy groaned as we ducked into an alcove. I sent a soldier for reinforcements immediately and sighed heavily. "But why do we keep running into ambushes when you have excellent hearing and sight?"

"This is going to sound more patronizing than I mean, and I'm sorry." I instantly retorted, defaulting to sarcasm. His little smile told me he saw and accept it. "But we're in the middle of a fight where there's screaming and metal all over the place. Keen hearing means you hear everything, and I'm hearing people die from three hallways down. As for sight..." I pointed to where an arrow was literally fired through a wall, taking advantage of a hole that I could only barely see. "Give me a break on sight, okay? They're using hidden passages."

"Right, right, sorry."
"Besides, we're only rushing through because someone insisted on meeting Zephiel directly." I sighed, remembering that little argument in the War Council. Roy had prevailed, though Guinevere had insisted on coming with us. We'd compromised by having her with Lilina's group, which… had been near us and hopefully was just a hallway or two down. Things got a little too hectic. "Thus, we are pushing through, hoping to lop off the head of the snake, and getting all the traps along the way."

"Well, we're stuck again, so…" He smiled suddenly. "Oh, Cecilia. Her group must've been near."

"Are you two alright?" Cecilia asked, walking up. She smiled slightly as she noticed my concerned look, guessing what it was instantly. "There were a couple of dragons where Perceval was. Clarine went with Rutger and Deke to reinforce him."

"Of course," I sighed. Truthfully, there were far fewer dragons than we'd originally anticipated and I had a bad feeling about why that was. But we had a clear goal, and we had to see it through. "Well, we're stuck, as you can see."

"Considering the numbers, I think I can only make it so that you two get through." She looked worried. "We're close to the throne room, and likely where Zephiel is. So, if it's you two…"

"I'm sure others aren't far away. Where is Guinevere and Lilina?"

"They might make it shortly after you, actually. Last I saw, Guinevere was leading some through a secret path to get behind the lines."

"Well, then we'll be fine," Roy stated firmly. He sheathed the Sword of Seals, and I tucked my arrow back in my quiver. "Please, let us get through."

Cecilia gave us one more worried look before nodding. She stepped out into the middle of the hallway and brought out her Aircalibur tome. "Hold there," she ordered to enemy soldiers. Magic wrapped around her, and, for the first time in what felt like ages, the power around her… felt 'normal'. It felt like her normal strength, her normal power, instead of the weakened form she'd been using since Missur. The tiles under her cracked under the pressure. "Keep your distance or perish."

I gave her a smile, even if she wasn't looking at me, and, as soon as the lines faltered, broke through with Roy and raced down the hall. I knew not a single soul was getting past her. She was using her full strength, after all, and she had our soldiers. I trusted them highly.

We continued running, tense and expecting someone else to jump out of the walls or from the ceiling or something. But there was nothing, just our unnaturally loud footsteps as we ran all the way towards some gold and white ornate doors, carved with the crest of Bern's Royal Family. We both hesitated at the door, expecting some sort of trap or ambush. But Roy nodded and set his jaw before pushing at the door. They didn't open, and a quick look at the hinges showed that these doors opened out, and not in.

"After running through all those traps, a door is going to be what stops us?" Roy asked, incredulous. He ran his hands over the door, looking for some sort of handle. But there was none. "Really?"

"There's not even a keyhole for us to call a thief to pick," I grumbled. This was ridiculous. This was thoroughly ridiculous. "Well, what do you want to do, Roy? I'm willing to bet anything Zephiel is in there."
"Same. More to the point, Guinevere thought he'd wait here, as a show of trust to his soldiers." Roy sighed. "Well, he knows we're here anyway…" Roy reached up and, before I could stop him, knocked on the door. He waited a moment, and then banged on it, to make sure that the noise could be heard. I actually had to cover my ears as the sound echoed harshly.

To my surprise, though, the doors actually opened with a quiet little creak, hinting they were well oiled. They opened slowly, giving Roy and I plenty of time to step back and not get hit. They stopped with a 'thud, and held still, and Roy and I hesitated only briefly before walking inside. It was an incredibly large room, as if designed to fit a lot of people or to make someone feel very small and insignificant. It had a second floor, where archers likely normally stood on guard, but were empty. The stone floor was unmarked even by rugs, and the walls held only simple tapestries.

And there sitting on the throne up on a dais, clearly waiting for us, was Zephiel.

"You're a bit earlier than I expected," he noted lightly, standing slowly. He grabbed Eckesachs from beside the throne, in scepter form, and walked deliberately off the dais and towards us.

"Though, I see it is only you two, so I'm assuming you left them to fight and die while you came to cut off the head."

"We left because we trusted them," Roy corrected softly. He held himself tall, and I remembered that this was the first time Roy had seen Zephiel since Missur, since Zephiel had almost killed him. Yet he showed no fear or hesitation. "I have no illusions that some will die, but I hold faith in their ability to defeat yours. So, we came to you."

"You try to distinguish them, but it's the same thing, really." Zephiel shook his head, sighing as if exasperated. "Such foolish naivety is unbefitting of a general. It is too human. Once one becomes a leader, such as a king or general, they are no longer human."

"I'm sorry you let yourself believe that lie." Roy rested a hand on the Sword of Seals, a clear indication that he was ready to fight, but would hold, much like how Zephiel kept Eckesachs in scepter form. "I worked to make sure my soldiers were aware that I am as mortal as they are, even if I am half-dragon. They've heard more baby stories than I care to admit, but they follow me anyway." He smiled slightly. "It is easy to win a person's awe and confuse it for respect. I earned their loyalty, though, and did not let them put me on a pedestal."

"I am amazed you have held such an army together with such foolishness."

"Well, maybe it's an army of fools, but it's an army that has defeated you and yours many, many times." Roy's smile fell. "Though perhaps you never had a choice. Princess Guinevere has told us a great deal about life here."

"I figured she would. It always weighed heavily on her, but she had few friends to share her own burdens with." There was a glimmer, _glimmer_, of worry there in his eyes. The older brother in him had fretted over Guinevere's loneliness, and the older brother fretted even now. "But there's no need for me to ramble, then. You know why I do this. The Scouring's end was a mistake. Humanity should not have won, and only did so with weapons that bent reality to its will."

"Bent… reality?"

"Oh, did you not learn that part? The records in our Archives made it clear. The Ending Winter was not caused by the dragons as the stories tell, but by the Divine Weapons themselves." Zephiel scoffed. "So obsessed the heroes were with victory that they sacrificed even reality. Ridiculous, and selfish."

"You say that as if the legendary heroes knew what they were doing," I pointed out. I couldn't help
it. After talking to them, after hearing Fiona and Wuotan talk about them, I couldn't help it. "They didn't, you know. They were normal, regular people, thrown into the role of heroes."

"And failed, miserably, yet are praised for their failure," he retorted, a little bit of anger bleeding into his words. "The Scouring should have gone to the dragons. Elibe would not be such a puss-filled, maggot infested corpse if not."

"That… is a description," Roy murmured, a little stunned. The worst part was how he said it, with just the barest trace of anger. Zephiel might as well had been talking about the weather. "You think humanity as maggots?"

"I think of them as an infection to Elibe, and infection must be purged for a wound to heal."

"...Humanity does have many bad parts. I won't deny that. I've been hurt by it, as have my friends." Roy looked him straight in the eye. "However, no matter what, I have faith in the goodness of humanity. I've seen it, and we'll prove it today."

"How naive." He scoffed, again, but there was a touch of respect in his eyes. There was also a trace of pain. "I see myself in you, in the days when I was… younger. A naive fool who used his last wish as a child for a future that could never come to pass." He brandished Eckesachs, switching it to sword form, lightning crackling around the blade. "Come, then. Let's see your resolve."

"..." Roy sighed and closed his eyes. "If we must. It's a shame." He opened his eyes again, and made sure to look him in the face without hesitation. "Aunt Katri always praised you. She always talked about how hard you worked, and how she hoped you'd be happy."

"I don't need you to tell me that." Zephiel smiled then, and it was broken. "She used her last breaths to tell me so, along with telling me of the mistakes I'd made."

"That does sound like her." Roy drew blade. "But let's begin."

"Yes."

I stepped back then, to better show that this was Roy's fight. However, as I did, someone tugged my sleeve. I turned back, and nearly yelped when I saw it was Guinevere. She'd caught up with us at last. "Irene…" she began. Her hand shook, but her eyes were resolute. "Irene, I…" Her voice cracked, and she coughed to clear it. As she did, she brought up her other hand, and I saw she had a tome, and not just any tome. She wielded Forblaze. "I asked Lilina if I could borrow it. Please."

I continued to stare, realizing what she was saying, what she was requesting. It was almost too hard to process, but when I did, it just… fit. It fit so perfectly. This was more than just a way to end it all in one final battle, with no more deaths on either side. This was more than just a way to buy time for our wounded to heal. Zephiel was the 'king' opposite me. Roy was my 'king', the leader of 'my' army. One of the most basic of rules in chess was that a king piece couldn't threaten, or take, another king piece.

But Guinevere was one of my 'queens', and a queen… a queen could checkmate a king. A queen could conquer a king, easily and without pause.

So, as Roy stepped forward, I reached out and snagged his arm. As he turned to me, startled, I nodded to Guinevere and stepped out of her way. She gave me a bitter, yet grateful, smile, and she stepped forward with her head held high, looking right at Zephiel. "It's been a bit, dear brother," she whispered. By now, soldiers on both sides started crowding around, behind us and on the little
balconies above, but no one moved to interfere. No one even breathed. "I'm pleased to see you are well."

"Guinevere, what are you doing here?" Zephiel asked. His voice was flat, but I caught a trace of worry in his eyes. Somewhere in his fractured, poisoned heart, he did still care about her. "This is a battle between army leaders. Get back."

"No, Zephiel, it's not. Not anymore." She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, visibly steeled herself, and then opened her eyes to glare at Zephiel. "I am Guinevere, Princess of Bern, second child and only daughter of King Desmond, younger sister and only heir to King Zephiel. I call upon my right as inheritor and descendant of the Champion-King Hartmut to challenge you for the throne, Zephiel." Her words cracked through the sudden silence, her voice firm and determined. "If you refuse, I win by forfeit."

"...Where did you even learn…?" For the very first time, Zephiel was visibly startled, wide-eyed and everything. "You never looked at…"

"I've grown. It's something little sisters do." Guinevere brought up her tome, and showed the cover. "And I meet you as an equal, Divine Weapon to Divine Weapon, Forblaze to Eckesachs."

"An interesting choice." Slowly, Zephiel recovered. "Don't you prefer light magic?"

"I prefer healing, actually, but I've accepted that the only way I can heal you is through fire." Her other reason went unspoken. Aureola was associated with Etruria. Forblaze, though, was associated with no country. If anything, it was associated with the dragons, the very ones that Zephiel forced into his selfish war. "Your answer, dear brother?"

"I have only one. I've no intention of having my dream end here, after all." Zephiel met her glare with one of his own, but Guinevere didn't flinch. "You will not get in my way, Guinevere."

"Yes, I will." Guinevere showed no hesitations. "The law dictates that there is a witness, who also stands as judge."

"Yes, and if any interfere in the duel, her life is forfeit." Zephiel's voice was soft and he glanced up at his soldiers. It didn't escape me, though, that he'd already assigned a pronoun to this 'witness'. "None of you will move. This is an old law, from before the Scouring. You will not sully the pride of Bern by breaking it." The soldiers instantly straightened. The 'pride of Bern' was a serious thing to them. "I believe, as the challenged, I get to choose the witness, yes?"

"...You do, yes." A little trace of worry crept into Guinevere's eyes. "But if any try to tarnish this…"

"They won't." He said the words firmly, so it was easy even for me to believe him. "Besides, I'm sure yours will have their weapons ready. As such, I choose someone they would not dare risk." He looked right at me, and his eyes showed respect. "Irene of the Kutolah, and House Hanover. You'll stand as witness."

"How original," I instantly deadpanned, despite everyone's shock. I'd been expecting it every since he used 'her', after all. "That's fine, though. I was going to volunteer." I walked forward, even though I felt stared boring into my back. "After all, I'm the one who allowed Guinevere to come forward."

"Are you now?" Zephiel asked. He smirked now. "And just why is that?"

"As tactician, I hold the authority to overrule even my general's orders in an emergency." I walked
past Guinevere, heading to a point equidistant between her and Zephiel. "Contrary to what you've told your people, Zephiel, we're not in this war to conquer Bern. We simply wish to end the war. When Guinevere wins, she'll end it, and while you're dueling, the healers can catch up on the number of injuries. Tactically speaking, this is the most favorable option."

"When' she wins?" Zephiel laughed softly. "So cocky."

"Why would I not hold the utmost confidence in my 'queen'?"

"Oh, are you going to 'sacrifice' her for the victory, as you did during our chess game?"

"Why bother? My previous queen sacrificed herself, after all, and I already promoted my queens." I smiled sweetly as I stopped walking. "I beat my mother with that strategy, by the way. You used one of her favorite tricks, and I developed a counter to it." Of course, at the time, I'd just thought I'd been lucky, or she'd been going easy. But she hadn't. "It's rather like how this war has been going, actually." I shrugged, feeling perfectly relaxed. This just seemed right. It seemed right that Guinevere duel, and it seemed right that I serve as the witness. Guinevere was the heir, and I... I was as much of a descendant of Hartmut as these two. It felt right. "So, do I have to say anything fancy before you two start? I think you and I have chatted enough."

"Yes, I suppose we have." He nodded, and actually saluted me. There was some mockery in it, but at the same time, there was very real respect. If nothing else, he respected me now, and not just because I was my mother's daughter. "Pick a god to pray to."

I rolled my eyes, and glanced at Guinevere. She nodded, ready and determined. I glanced around the area, noticing all the soldiers waiting. I saw Klein, looking deathly worried. I saw Sue, clinging to Sin, and Grandpa behind them, holding their shoulders. I saw Lilina with her hands clasped in prayer. I saw Tate, who gave me a smile when she caught my eye, and I saw Zealot mouthing what might have been some sort of prayer as well. I saw Clarine and Rutger side by side, Clarine worried but Rutger calm, confident in me. I saw Miredy trembling, but holding still to let us determine our fate, right now. I saw Perceval and a tired Cecilia, both looking ready to assist at a moment's notice. I saw Fiona, looking startled, and I saw Wuotan, looking proud.

I glanced at Roy, and saw his surprise had faded for confidence and reassurance. He caught my eye and purposely sheathed the Sword of Seals, as a visual confirmation that he would not intervene, that he supported this. Though, the look in his eyes also told me he was going to at least pout at me later, for not warning him in advance. Of course, I hadn't expected Guinevere to actually agree to this. It fit, though. I loved it.

Only after all of this, only after smiling at everyone I saw, the picture of a confident and in-control tactician, did I speak. "Father Sky, watch over these two as they make their fate," I prayed, closing my eyes. The wind danced around me, and a quick glance up showed that there were windows above, large enough for wyverns to fly through. It was a clever bit of defensiveness to the castle. "Mother Earth, give peace to the one who falls, and reassurance to the one who lives." The ground beneath me almost seemed to tremble in anticipation. A couple of gasps told me that I had not been the only one to feel it. "And, Saint Elimine, give us all the strength and courage to rebuild the continent once this duel, and war, ends." I opened my eyes and noticed that everything... did seem brighter. The heroes were watching over us. "So mote it be." I took a step back, mostly to make sure I was out of the way. Both Zephiel and Guinevere tensed. "Begin."

It was difficult to say who moved first, Guinevere or Zephiel. But the force of Eckesachs's thunder and Forblaze's fire meeting one another was nearly enough to knock me clear off my feet.

The two battled fiercely, with entire parts of the room falling apart. Guinevere's attacks cracked the
stone floor from the intensity of the heat. Zephiel's strikes destroyed the pillars lining the walls, and some parts of the second floor had to actually be evacuated as it destabilized. The tapestries along the wall fluttered and disintegrated into ash. One particularly powerful attack from Guinevere, that Zephiel dodged, actually caught and destroyed the throne. I thought it almost fitting that these two destroyed it, and the tapestries. Their lives, ultimately, had been ruined by the burdens of Bern's crown, and their father's refusal to accept it. I felt horribly gleeful that they'd rip it apart, to let something new take its place.

But the glee soon faded as I continued watching the battle, ignoring people's gasps and cheers. I was the 'witness' to this, the 'judge', and I chose to take that job seriously. And, perhaps because I focused so closely on the fighting, I began to notice something strange. Guinevere's fire and determination never faded. With each casting of her spell, hit or miss, she held her ground, and worked that much harder. Zephiel, by contrast... he seemed to waver. His strikes slowed, allowing Guinevere to dodge them easily. They weakened, and did not bite as deeply into Guinevere when they landed. Guinevere's eyes shone with fierceness, but Zephiel's almost seemed to cloud, even if his eyes remained just as determined. The longer they fought, the more it became apparent. I thought it might be exhaustion, but then remembered this was Zephiel. He had far more experience fighting than Guinevere, and had simply been waiting here. He should've been in better shape, and had far more stamina, yet it seemed as if Guinevere was actually outlasting him.

At some point, he almost seemed to snarl, but even I could figure out 'who' he was snarling at, and he twisted suddenly, sending a wave of lightning right at Guinevere. It caught her in the leg and she buckled from the pain. I tensed, worried, but held my ground as Zephiel lunged, bringing Eckesachs back, preparing for a final blow.

As he did, though, Guinevere used the last bit of strength her legs had to lurch forward, but instead of attacking, she simply... wrapped her arms around him in a hug. He stiffened, startled, and Guinevere whispered something. I had to strain to hear it, but I thought it was, "I love you, big brother. Rest now. I'm strong enough to take up your burden." It seemed like something she'd say. Besides, it didn't matter because, not even a second later, flames wrapped around them both. Guinevere still held Forblaze, and she'd cast it at close range to make sure it hit.

I held my breath as the flames flickered and burned, drying out my mouth and making my eyes sting. Guinevere and Zephiel were both unmoving, and I wondered why. Theoretically speaking, Zephiel was strong enough to break free. Eckesachs was right there. He could attack. He could break free. But he... stayed in place, as Guinevere burned them both alive.

Time seemed to slow as I saw Eckesachs move, and then I realized it was falling. Eckesachs fell from Zephiel's hands and, from here, it was clear he'd let go. As it clanged against the floor, Guinevere let go of him and stepped back, the flames leaving her with blotchy patches of burnt skin, ragged hair, and charred holes in her clothes. She gestured and they focused solely on Zephiel, who closed his eyes as they cracked his armor and turned parts of his skin black.

Despite the horrid pain he had to be in, the sickening smell of someone burning, he remained perfectly calm. "You've won," he said. His voice was raspy and cracking, from pain and from the flames drying everything out. "But my dream will not die. So long as humanity exist, so will madness."

"So will hope, Zephiel," Guinevere whispered. She brought her hands in front of her. "So will hope." The was a pulse of power, and fire rained down, hitting Zephiel with the full force of Forblaze, the fire of the dragons. When the spell cleared, Zephiel was dead. His corpse hit the ground with a clang, molten and cracked armor splintering from the force. Barely any of him was recognizable now; even his face was nothing more than a patch of blacks, reds, and pinks.
A long silence fell as Guinevere walked over to the corpse and knelt down to touch the body. Her hands brushed over his circlet, and her fingers tried to hook around it, to pull it off. But it was melted into the flesh, and as she tried to tug, the skin itself began ripping. So, she stopped and smiled bitterly. It truly felt... fitting that Zephiel's crown was melded to him. It had been a burden forced on him and it had broken him, as surely as his father had.

She stood slowly, and closed her eyes. When she opened them, I saw the tears she wanted to cry, but held back. She glanced at me, and I nodded, sensing what I needed to do.

"It seems the gods have chosen," I declared, making my voice as formal and serious as possible. "Princess Guinevere, you are the victor of this duel, and the throne is yours, by the law of these lands, and by the right of your strength."

"I am indeed," Guinevere whispered. Her bitter smile grew, but then she shook her head and turned, looking everyone in the eye before settling her gaze on Roy. "General Roy on the Alliance Army, the leadership in Bern has changed. I wish to stop this pointless war and surrender on the condition that Bern keeps its sovereignty."

"I accept that condition," Roy instantly answered. He smiled slowly and bowed. "We are tired of the fighting as well, Queen Guinevere."

The place erupted in noise. Tears, screams, and the sound of weapons and armor hitting the ground all blended together. I let it all hit me as I closed my eyes, and tilted my head back to the sunshine streaming through the windows, letting the wind hit me. I heard lots of praises on the wind. I felt lots of reassurances.

But to my surprise, right before I opened my eyes and went to work calming the mess, I thought I heard Zephiel, and I thought I heard him whisper 'thank you'. But it was gone in an instance, and I had my work, so I put it out of my mind for now. I had too much to do.

You'd think that everything ended with 'we surrender', but of course, reality wasn't nearly as kind. Many vowed to keep on fighting, despite Guinevere's order. Many refused to call her 'queen', calling her 'kingslayer' instead. Many wanted revenge for fallen friends and family. So, even after the surrender, we had to exert a lot of effort calming the Bernese soldiers down. Galle ended up playing a huge part in that, as he was one of the very few in our army that they trusted. Surprisingly, I was another, but it quickly became clear just why that was: Zephiel had picked me as the judge, and they trusted him even now. So, I was stuck playing mediator until long past sunset. Only then did I get a chance to do what I really wanted to do: check on Guinevere.

Miredy happily led me to Guinevere's room and left me to enter as she went to go help calm more soldiers. I watched her leave, noticing how tired yet upbeat she was, and smiled slightly. The Bernese who had fought alongside us were particularly happy at being home, even if there was still a lot of work to be done.

Shaking my head, I knocked on the door and headed inside, finding Guinevere sitting by the window, looking out over some gardens. She looked up when she heard me, though, and stood, forcing a smile. I studied her closely, noticing she had changed. Bern, like most countries of the Church, wore black to mourn, and Guinevere wore a simple black dress with equally dark lace on the hems. She wore no jewelry, save for her circlet, and very, very little makeup. Her hair was cut short, just a bit longer than mine, and she held her hair oddly, not quite used to having all that weight gone.

"Hey, I just wanted to come check in on you," I murmured, trying to think of what to say. I smiled
slightly, thinking of what she said when I cut my own hair. "It suits you."

"Does it?" she asked with a bit of a hollow laugh. Everything was definitely catching up to her. "Does it suit me more than long hair?"

"I think it's an equal thing, actually. Short hair might suit you more while rebuilding, but as things fix up, you can grow it out to fit the princess classic look." I studied her closely, and saw how tired she was. "I heard there was no sign of Brunja, Idenn, or that Jahn during the battle."

"No, according to the staff, they left before, on Zephiel's orders." Guinevere sighed. "We'll have more battles to fight. The war is over, but the campaign…"

"The campaign isn't. It isn't until we stop Idenn, since I've little doubts Zephiel made backup plans if he died." I frowned slightly as she winced. Everything was definitely catching up. "How are you?"

"...It's…" She sighed and sat down heavily, looking out the window. "I feel like my heart has been torn to ribbons, and those ribbons have been shredded to tatters. Yet, at the same time, I feel relieved." She glanced at my reflection in the window. "I chose… I chose Forblaze for a specific reason. It wasn't just for a 'matching weapon'. I wanted Forblaze's ability. I wanted to know what his last thoughts were. I felt like it was the only way I could even try to understand."

"Did you?"

"...I think so." She smiled, but it was broken. "But, more importantly, I know he did love me, even at the end. That never changed. It's one of two things that never changed."

"...How far back did you see, if I might be curious?" I leaned against the wall, hoping it wasn't too forward. It wasn't a very comfortable topic, but I really did not want to leave her alone. "Lilina said it was all jumbled for her, but she killed more than one person."

"I saw quite a bit, actually." She turned to face me again. "Most of it was little flashes, like… it was like the phrase 'their life flashed before their eyes', except I was watching Zephiel's and not my own." She paused, and her eyes filled with tears. But she didn't let them fall. She wasn't going to cry, yet. "I saw our first meeting from his perspective, and felt the sheer joy he experienced. I saw the day Murdock swore loyalty to him, and the shock he felt that someone would actually think him worthy of protection. I saw the day we met Katri, and how much he adored and admired her."

She smiled slightly, automatically. It was a dear memory for her too. "I saw… when Lord Hector, Lord Eliwood, and Lady Lyndis saved him, during the Campaign of Fire."

"He never regretted it, even when he was dying." But the pain was still there. It ached, horribly, even now.

"Yeah… I still have the…” She hesitated and shook her head. "Regardless, I saw a lot. I saw him kill Lord Hector, unaware until the very last moment that he just killed one of the people who saved and reassured him, long ago. I saw him execute Katri…” She paused and sat a little straighter. "He wasn't lying, by the way. About her last words."

"I figured." As much as I did hate Zephiel, I could readily admit… that he had never lied to me. He had always respected me that much, to never lie. "As Roy said, it's something she'd do. She was always too kind, and too willing to sacrifice herself."

"That reminds me." Guinevere now looked confused. "Chess game? Sacrifice?"

"...We played a game on accident, in Aquelia. I beat him with a strategy that sacrificed my queen,
and then moved a pawn to promote into a queen. Mom determined the best tactic forward was to 'sacrifice' the queen, in this case… her." I smiled bitterly. "Basically, it's a bunch of chess nonsense. It's nothing to worry about."

"...I was your queen?"

"You're… one of them, yes. You have been for… most of this." I tilted my head as she suddenly smiled sweetly. "What?"

"I just… no wonder you could advise me to take the throne so easily. You already thought of me as a queen." She shook her head. "That's all. I'm honored."

"I found it overly logical, really, but we can debate that later." I laughed a little too now, relaxing slightly. "Do you mind if I ask one more thing?"

"About the duel." Her smile actually grew. "You want to know if he threw it."

"Yes."

"Well, if you mean the physical fight… then yes. Yes, he did. There were too many strikes where his blows had weakened, and that last bit… he could have broken free. He could have attacked. He let me win that fight, but he only did it because I won the real battle. The battle between our resolves, and our beliefs." She closed her eyes. "He believed still in the darkness of humanity. That did not falter. But…" She paused, clearly trying to gather her thoughts. "My resolve made his shake. My strength, my determination to keep going despite everything I had experienced…"

"The thought was 'she went through hell, how can she keep going?'. There were flashes of you too, so I think… you caused a similar reaction?"

"I might have yelled a bit at him, in Aquelia."

"Yes." She smiled slightly. "So did Roy. He saw us three, and he wondered. He wondered how we could watch our worlds fall apart, watch ourselves be shattered, and simply… pick up the pieces. It distracted him, and the more I fought, the more his spirit shook."

"And then you hugged him."

"I took a chance, yes, because I noticed his resolve weakening. I hugged him, and told him I could take up his burden." She sighed. "He never wanted to be king. He was content in… everything as it had been. But, he also didn't want me to buckle under all the expectations. The weight of the people pressing on his shoulders, their hopes simply a chain around his neck slowly strangling him… he didn't want me to suffer that."

"But, you told him you could take it from him."

"Yes, I did. Those words formed the final crack in his resolve. He accepted defeat then, because he knew that even if he 'killed' me, he had lost. He lost the battle between our wills, and he was ready to die." She leaned back against the window now, and sighed. "His last thoughts, the very last thoughts… reflected that."

"May I ask?"

"..." She closed her eyes. "I think you are horribly foolish and naive, little sister, but perhaps your resolve can actually fix this broken mess of a continent. Humanity is disgusting, yet you still believe in them, despite all the things our father did, all the things I have done. If my life is the last spark you need, if my life is all that's required now for you to repair the continent, then I freely
give it. I have that much dignity left." She opened her eyes again. "Well, more or less. The words were harsher, but… you do get a bit of tone. I got it, at least. Even if he thought me an idiot, he did… he was proud." She sighed again. "So, now I wish I'd let him live so that I could've shown him the world we make. But, at the same time, I want him to rest at last, and…"

"...I am certain Mother Earth will let him in Her meadows, in time." I smiled softly at her. "She takes intents and background into consideration. But he will have to atone, nonetheless, for his choices." I laughed then. "Of course, watching us end his little 'dream' and rebuild the continent might count as a suitable punishment. I'm sure he'll see it. I hope, anyway. I want to rub it in his ghostly visage!"

She stared at me for a long moment before bursting into laughter. "You're ridiculous!" Still, she smiled warmly. "Thanks. I needed to talk."

"I figured." I held out my hand to her. "Come on. Let's go get some tea, and maybe some sweets."

"I haven't baked in a while." She stood up and took my hand. "I'll teach you how to make cookies!"

"If you don't mind the risk of everything turning black, then sure, you can try?" I shrugged, smiling awkwardly. "I'm bad at baking."

"Really? But you're good at making medicines."

"Medicine making and baking are not the same thing."

"They look similar enough, but whatever. I'll salvage it." She grinned and tugged me out of the room. "Come on! Let's go!"

We… ended up having to explain to some very frantic servants why smoke billowed out of the kitchen, and why the Tactician of the Alliance Army and the new, not-yet-coronated Queen of Bern were covered in flower and bits of dough. But we had a lot of fun, so we didn't mind. Much.

Notes on Bern's Duel for the Throne:

A tradition brought over from the old kingdom of Malkaia, which took forever to get out of Wuotan because he just plain forgot the name of it. The Scouring stole the names of the countries as it devoured people's lives.

It is set in place again by Hartmut as a means of ensuring that tyrants did not rule Bern. Sadly, though, people forgot about the tradition. Zephiel apparently only knew about it through studying the Archives.

Because it's such an ancient thing, there are many who think Guinevere simply made it up. Only the fact that Zephiel also knew it keeps people from outright calling her a liar. Things will be very difficult in the days to come. But no one can say that Guinevere didn't follow the law.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: In game, you have to go deal with two triggers and holding the 'fire emblem' (aka, move Roy) to a certain point to 'unlock' the throne room, and Zephiel.
From there, you get all of Zephiel's motivations and the like, because FE6 likes giving you information dumps towards the very end. After which point, you fight and kill Zephiel, huzzah. Obviously, I've switched this up a bit. No triggers, for one, and a 'shortened' version of Zephiel's motive rant. And I had Guinevere duel Zephiel for the throne. The ending of it is partially inspired by the Archer vs Shirou duel from Fate Stay Night's Unlimited Blade Works route. Zephiel's comment about 'last wish as a foolish child' comes from FE7.

In game, you don't learn about the connection between the Ending Winter and the Divine Weapons until Chapter 24 (and never learn about it, in fact, if you get the 'bad ending', since the game stops after this chapter). As a slight reminder, I've justified Cecilia's really bad game-stats by her being wounded and at about half strength because of those wounds, so that's what Irene means by 'normal' (basically, take Cecilia's in-game stats and double her magic, skill, and speed to get what I think her 'normal' is). Some lines character say are based off their FE Heroes quotes (Klein's "At this range, I won't miss" combines two, for instance, while Cecilia's "Keep your distance or perish" is a direct line). I thought they'd be a little fun to throw in.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Castle Bern (final interlude)
Interlude - Castle Bern

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude - Castle Bern

Zephiel is dead. It's so strange to write that. He's actually dead, deader than dead, and the war is over. The Campaign is not, but we're looking for clues to where Brunja, Idenn, and Jahn are. So, for now, we simply rest, and we let ourselves relax for the first time in what feels like forever.

This is a taste of peace. It's so… strange.

"Wow, you got tall. You're taller than Raven!" Aunt Nino happily brushed my hair as she chatted, and I was reminded of when I was young. "I think you're as tall as Rath," she continued, giggling. "Oh, wow, I missed a lot!"

"Children get older," I murmured, not really sure what else to say. She was just… there were some scars on her neck and arms I didn't recognize. Her face was thinner. But she was just as cheerful as always, and I was just so damn amazed considering what I knew about her past now, and what all she had to go through. "Wait, you only 'think'?"

"Well, unfortunately, it's been a long time since I saw Rath. But you seem to tower over me about as much as I remember he did." She reached around to hug me. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm… okay." I leaned back into her, closing my eyes. We were in some parlor room in Castle Bern, but with my eyes closed, I could easily imagine us back in Castle Ostia, with the sun shining through the window and Uncle Hector's laughter echoing down the halls, likely because of something Mom had said. I felt like I was back at that time, when everyone was alive, when no one had disappeared. "It hurts, but it's like…"

"It's a dull ache, losing family. It never goes away." She tightened her hug on me. I thought of Mom's logbook, and how Aunt Nino had lost her entire family, because of Nergal and his manipulations. Then she'd been captured, and separated from her 'new' family, and when she escaped, many were dead. "But, that's why it's extra important to smile." She leaned back and resumed brushing my hair. "Because they'd want you to be happy, and in time, the ache is buried by all the good memories. It doesn't hurt as much."

"I hope so." I missed everyone dearly. With my eyes closed, I really just… thought more of 'back then'. Oswin would've been near; he'd always been near, ready to protect us or babysit. Uncle Jaffar would've also been close, far more silent but just as protective, perhaps talking quietly with Uncle Matthew or Uncle Legault. Aunt Lyn might've been outside, sparring with Uncle Eliwood; they'd done that a lot. Aunt Ninian and Dad might've been nearby, talking quietly as Sue, Roy, and Lilina napped in their laps; the two were always the quietest and talked often together. Uncle Raven would've been patrolling the halls, just in case, and Uncle Lucius might've been with him, or helping Aunt Serra in the infirmary. Everything would've been warm, and filled with laughter. It always was, back then. It had always been happy.

"It hurts less when you're having a good time, eventually." Aunt Nino laughed a little. "Though, maybe that's just me being distracted. I'm learning the boys Ray and Lugh grew into, after all."
"How is that going?"

"Oh, it's awkward." She sounded cheerful enough, though. "But I'm going to keep on going. I always wanted my own family, you see. I wanted to be a good mom, especially since my own was so horrible. I was so envious of Katri when you were born, because she looked so happy. So did Rath. You were the light of their lives. I wanted that happiness. And I had it, before getting caught. So, I'm going to work hard and see if I can reach it again, if they'll let me. Same with Chad and Cath." She hummed a bit, and I was jolted out of my little bits of reminiscing to wonder if she'd adopted Chad and Cath. It seemed like something she'd do. "And there." She set the brush down with a clack and hugged me again. "All done! You look nice with short hair."

"Thank you." I opened my eyes and twisted to face her, smiling. "I'm glad you're back."

"I'm glad you're still here." She smiled gently, and I noticed her smile was sadder than I remembered. But it was still there, and still bright. "Ah, I think someone's about to steal you away, though!"

"My apologies." Klein knocked on the doorframe and smiled sheepishly. "I'm more here to tell you that Lilina, Lady Lyndis, and Lord Eliwood wanted to see you, Lady Nino," he explained. "I did volunteer because I was looking for Irene."

"Huh, I wonder what they want to talk about," Nino replied. She shrugged and stood up slowly, stretching. "Well, I'll go do that. Irene, let's read together later, okay?" She waved goodbye as she skipped off, and I laughed as I remembered how she had actually helped me learn to read by reading me stories. She hadn't learned to read until after the Campaign of Fire, and adored it.

"I hope I didn't interrupt…" Klein turned his attention to me, still smiling sheepishly. "I mean…"

"We were just spending some time together," I reassured. I got up with a little hop and headed over to kiss his cheek. "What is it?"

"Well, that's why I'm apologizing," he explained, taking my hand and leading me down the hall. "There's a reason, but I also just wanted to spend time with you, since we have the rest."

"I can't say I dislike that." I leaned into his side, smiling without even thinking about it. "Though, I do have a question."

"Yes?"

"What do you plan on doing, after the war? You and I have never really talked about that."

"That's… true." He paused, and looked a little disgruntled. "Oh, hell, we really haven't. Or if we did, it wasn't…"

"See? There's always a reason." I laughed as he just grimaced. "Well, I'll need to tend to some things, and I'm still working out what, exactly, I plan on doing. But I imagine that I'll… live in Reglay with you, even if I end up traveling a lot."

"Oh, good, that was… something I was hoping for." He smiled shyly and I grinned. "After that… well, I'll be working on reconstructing Etruria alongside Mildain. I hope to work with Tate and Zealot to better our working relationship with Ilia in particular. It's been needed for years."

"Yes, it does." My grin widened. "Besides, this way, I get wonderful excuses to see Tate more!"

"Always good." His smile faded slightly. "I'm thinking of leaving the army, though."
"Is that so?"

"Yes, I'm tired of fighting, and…" He shrugged. "I became the Archer General at Mildain's insistence, hoping that I could help reform Etruria. But it's very clear that while reformation needs to happen with the army, there's many, many parts of Etruria that need fixing. Mildain will need help on the political side of things, especially since Douglas as already made it clear that he'll take responsibility for the Western Isles and stand down, promoting Perceval to Great General."

"It'll be harder for Perceval to throw his weight as Caliburn's leader in that case. He'd have his hands full just taking care of Caliburn, even with his steward and Cecilia helping him."

"Precisely. I think I can best serve by becoming an administrator. I'm meeting Mildain later about it, actually."

"It might also be good, since you served in the Isles directly."

"Exactly." He smiled sadly. "It's better to step down after that. I want to use my experience there to help them too. I can do that far better as Reglay's heir."

"Mmm, it suits you. You were always very peaceful as a child."

"I suppose so." He laughed suddenly. "Well, here I am rambling on and on."

"If I had any ideas on what exactly I'm going to do, then I'd be rambling too." I shrugged. "But I'm still figuring that out. I'll tell you when I have an idea."

"I'm certain it'll involve traveling. You have too diverse of a background and too much responsibility to not use it."

"I can't refute that." I shrugged again and he snickered. "Anyway, you mentioned there was a 'little' reason or something for you coming to find me?"

"Ah, yes." He suddenly stopped walking, and gave me a strangely serious look. "...My parents are here."

"Yes, they are?" I gave him a confused look. "We know this? I saw them?"

"Well, yes, but…” He squirmed and, for some reason, start to blush. "But… um…” He took a deep breath and, suddenly, kissed me, hard, hard enough to make me breathless when he pulled away. "I'd… like to tell them about us."

"Oh…" I was in a bit of a daze, but the words quickly processed. "That's what you're getting at. This is an Etrurian thing."

"Yes." He smiled slightly. "So?"

"Yeah, let's go…” I paused, though, thinking a bit. The war was over, though we did still have problems. But perhaps… "Well, there's one thing first."

"Really?"

"Yes." I snagged him by the collar and pulled him into a little alcove not far away. "I want a few more kisses."

"Oh?" He smirked, even as his blush darkened. "Well, I don't mind that."
"I thought not." I grinned, feeling a little giddy and, for the first time in months, I felt my age. I felt like I was just eighteen, almost nineteen, flirting with my boyfriend without the war looming over my shoulder. "So? I think you take lead."

"You led me to the alcove." But he leaned down to kiss me, hard and breathless, and… well, we ended up just meeting Aunt Louise and Uncle Pent for afternoon tea, instead of morning.

During afternoon tea, which we also had with Uncle Erk and Aunt Priscilla, Aunt Louise let slip, somewhere among all her happy squeals and giggles about Klein and I dating, that Clarine and Rutger had actually had morning tea with them. I got little more than that, but the happy smiles gave me a good hint, and so, when I managed to escape the hugs, I looked for Rutger, wanting to check in on him. Aunt Louise's motherly nature could be overwhelming at times, and… giving what Deke had told me about how unnerving the kindness had been, I wanted to make sure he was okay.

It didn't take me long to find him, though. He was on the roof, looking out over everything with the wind ruffling his hair. I lingered back a bit, watching him. He looked tired from here, but less haunted. His eyes were closed, and I wondered what he heard on the wind. Perhaps he heard his family and friends, at last.

"I know you're there." Rutger opened his eyes and glanced over his shoulder to look at me. "Need something?" he asked, turning slightly. I shook my head, though, and walked over to him, looking out over the horizon. The Castle Town had a little more life to it, but most still kept away, in protest to Guinevere's ascension. "Then what is it?"

"Aunt Louise let slip that you and Clarine had morning tea with her, and I wanted to make sure you were alright," I explained. I brushed some hair behind my ear, focusing on the distance horizon. Somewhere out there, Brunja, Idenn, and Jahn were still preparing to fight. I had little doubts about that, especially since many of the Bernese soldiers had 'escaped'. We hunted for them, but had come up with nothing. Fiona and Wuotan seemed to know where they'd gone, but they remained quiet. I thought it was because they wanted us to have a little break, since we were exhausted. "So?"

"...They're weirdos." He said the words so dryly that I just had to laugh. "I nearly had a panic attack when Clarine just told them that she loved me, and was going to help me rebuild Bulgar."

"Have you two even really confessed?"

"I… have no idea." He sighed. "It just… was something we both knew? So, maybe?"

"Regardless, though, I'm bettin' she did that without warning you." I laughed again when he groaned. "Yeah, I figured. She's still as headstrong as ever." I glanced at him, and saw him facepalm. "What happened then?"

"They were just like 'oh, how wonderful!' and her mom hugged me." He gave me a look. "Every single Etrurian I've met is either a weirdo or a monster. Do normal people exist there?"

"Well, most of the Etrurians you're dealing with are the ones with enough political power to do what they want and get away with it. This is especially true with Reglay and Hanover." I shrugged, smiling slightly. "So, there are normal ones, but you never met them, and likely won't for quite some time."

"Of course." He sighed heavily and I giggled. "That's basically how it went. I spent the rest of it
trying not to be smothered while talking to her dad about our plans for rebuilding Bulgar. I mentioned that the bulk of it will be done by the Kutolah, Lorca, and Djute. Those who are still alive."

"It's good to emphasize that. Bulgar is of Sacae, and Sacae is an ally to the other countries, not a protectorate or colony."

"Etruria doesn't take good care of its colonies anyway. We've seen the Isles." He shuddered and I grimaced. I had some nightmares still about that. "Anyway, you wear your braid still."

"I do, yes." I reached up to fiddle with the hair tie before pointing to his. "You are as well."

"Yes." He fell silent, clearly thinking. I knew why he'd brought it up, though. Most of the other Sacaeans had removed their braids, since the War with Bern was over. Only Rutger and I wore ours still. "Why?"

"This campaign isn't over. We still have the War Dragons. So, since I am still at war with Zephiel, or at least his legacy, I wear it." I shrugged. "That's all. Why do you?"

"General Brunja is still out there, and she is the one who led the massacre at Bulgar. She was the one who ruled the bloodsoaked remains." He shook his head. "I feel like my fight, my war, isn't over until I've seen her… well, I suppose deposed." He laughed hollowly. "It's strange. I no longer really wish to see her dead. I just want her to… not be out there."

"Well, we've already got the best revenge on her. We made everything she's done meaningless." She had 'sacrificed' Bulgar and all of its citizens for Zephiel's 'new world', but that world would never come to be. We had killed Zephiel. She'd killed them for nothing. "Maybe that's why."

"Maybe. Though, I won't complain if she ends up dying." He sighed, though, and smiled slightly. "Well, I have to go meet with Sue. Dayan, for some reason, has decided she and I will head up Bulgar's reconstruction, with Sin helping us."

"I know. Sue told me during our morning ride." I smiled, feeling incredibly proud of them both. "She went through some ideas with me. I think you'll like most of them."

"Well, that's good. I've no clue what I'm doing." He shrugged and I laughed. "Later, Irene."

He walked off, and I returned my attention to the horizon, watching the light glimmer off the snowy peaks and glint over the stone buildings. When you looked at a land from up high like this, it all looked… similar. While there was no confusing the view for the plains, for obvious reasons, I had to note that it was similar enough to the view from Castle Ostia, or Castle Pherae. Though, the latter made sense; Pherae was the closest Lycian territory to Bern, after all.

As I admired the view, I heard footsteps signaling someone's approach. I glanced back to see who it was and smiled when I realized it was Guinevere. She looked like she could use a smile. It hadn't been long since the war ended, but she already looked exhausted, even haggard, and she seemed thinner, though that could be the black dress. Black looked horrible on her.

"I see I'm not the only one who comes up here to think," she murmured. She walked to my side and looked out, smiling sadly. "Zephiel and I used to come up here a lot."

"I know. Sue told me during our morning ride." I smiled, feeling incredibly proud of them both. "She went through some ideas with me. I think you'll like most of them."

"Well, that's good. I've no clue what I'm doing." He shrugged and I laughed. "Later, Irene."

"I can see why," I replied. I studied her face and decided she was probably even worse than she looked. I saw traces of makeup on her face. "It's beautiful up here."

"Yes…” She breathed in deeply and then sighed, slumping. "I'm tired…”
"I bet." I looked around the roof, but didn't really find a good place to sit. "What's got you up here, though?"

"Well, a few things, but there was one that tipped me up to here."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, I was thinking, a bit, on the duel again." She smiled ruefully. "Mainly, a question that someone brought up and made me curious, because of what I did know. How did I last long enough to make him change his mind? Zephiel was always faster than me, even with the heavy armor. He was much slower than he should've been, and him taking it easy didn't make sense." Her smile became bitter. "But then I remembered something, and I checked in with Galle. Do you know what it was?"

"No?" I gave her a confused look. "What?"

"Lord Hector." She laughed softly at my look. "The wound Lord Hector gave him permanently crippled him."

"I…" I started laughing too, but mine hovered on the edge of tears as all the pieces clicked together. Uncle Hector's last attack… crippled Zephiel, and gave Guinevere the little edge she needed to hold out long enough. He had, indirectly, protected her and helped us end the war. That was just so… him. That was just so him, because he and Mom had always been so, so similar. "That's so ridiculous. I love him."

"I thought you might. I was thinking about telling you." Her laughter faded for another sigh, though, and my own died because I knew that if I laughed anymore, I'd tip over into tears. "There's other things. I don't know what to do with the third Wyvern General title."

"What are the other two?"

"Well, Galle will retain his. Everyone and their dead grandmother knows he should've had it long ago. He's going to be the 'leader', taking over Murdock's position. Miredy will be the second." She smiled slightly. "She's not entirely happy about the post, but she took it because she thinks it'll reassure the Bernese soldiers who fought alongside us that they will not be forgotten. Their sacrifice will be acknowledged."

"But you do not know who will be third?" I tilted my head, already having a candidate in mind. "What about Zeiss?"

"He refused." She sighed again. "He wants to focus on helping rebuild Bern more directly than he could as a Wyvern General. He and Elen had apparently been making plans for getting resources to distant villages. Though, he reassured me that he would remain with the army, and do what he could. He just…"

"He wants to be able to work on the 'little picture'."

"Exactly. And I already know that even if Brunja, by some miracle, surrenders, I won't have her keep the title. For one thing, I'm certain I'll have enough trouble with keeping Galle, and for another, she… led such a brutal massacre…" She sighed once again. "So, I need to think of a third."

"One of the soldiers who stayed with us?" I paused, though, and grimaced. "No, that's represented by Miredy. You'll want someone more neutral in this conflict, except there really isn't one." I frowned, trying to think. "Well, you could do a tournament?"
"A… tournament?"

"Yeah, you can do one in a year, or however long official mourning in Bern lasts. Bern respects strength, so it can be a tournament for…" I paused, thinking. "No, have it be a tournament with something else as a prize. Then you can watch and look into the winners at your leisure. I think Narcian proves that strength isn't everything."

"But that can help us find someone, and after a year, things will be neutral." Guinevere nodded, smiling again. "Yes, we'll do that. I think I can spin it as a reassurance to our allies that we are not going to return to full military might."

"That will be good for those who don't know you. Luckily, you're personal friends with all the new rulers."

"That's true." She laughed now, and she finally looked cheerful. "Bern will have to do its part in rebuilding everything. If nothing else, we owe the other countries war reparations." She paused and groaned. "Oh, hell, I'm not sure we can afford that."

"Why not go with trade? Bulgar will need materials more than money, for instance."

"I'll have to. Otherwise, I'll starve everyone." She whimpered, and then made a face as I reached up to pat her head. "I feel like a child. I wonder if this is how Zephiel felt. Then again, he was already messed up." She got a thoughtful look, though, and twisted to look me in the eye. "I've actually got a bit of a request for you."

"Is that so?" I kept my expression even, but let my voice hint to my curiosity. "What is it?"

"Well, request isn't the right word. 'Ask' is better." She shrugged. "There's another old law that no one has used really, also something from the 'old' kingdom and left intact by King Hartmut. It's something he refused for himself, since he still needed to pretend to be the big good hero and all, but the option was there. His son had an unofficial version, so to speak, being close friends with Alberich of Hanover, but no one else took it up."

"What is it?"

"It's a title called 'Monarch's Own', or in my case, 'Queen's Own'. I'm not sure what it's short for. My father's translation notes mentioned the words could have over five meanings, but they all more or less translated to about the same. Right hand of the Monarch, but an official title."

"So, you heard about this from your father?"

"Nope, he never told me a darn thing." She made a face and I snickered. "But he was a scholar at heart. He translated most of the older books in the Archives here. Zephiel would often go to research things. He left a note on it. I think he'd planned on helping me be queen by bringing that up, or maybe just… hoped to help me by showing me it existed." She brushed her hair behind her ear as the wind picked up. "I almost thought I heard Zephiel on it, but did not try to hear more. Those words were not for me, even if he was talking. "The job often requires travel. It's to be my eyes where I cannot go, my ears to listen to people's woes. It's to be an advisor, and a bit of a scout."

"It sounds both simple and complicated."

"I suppose." She smiled slightly. "Apparently, in the old kingdom, it was tradition for the post to be filled by a sibling, or dear friend. First Princess Josephine trained to be Crown Prince Rainard's, before the kingdom fell." She paused briefly, and gave me a look. "I read a couple of other things,
while in the Archives. There was… something about House Hanover."

"Yeah, it seems like the Lady Hildegarde's lover, father of her child, was King Hartmut, so technically, I'm his descendant as well." I made a face. "Culturally speaking, though… I am Sacaean, and Etrurian. I'm of his blood, but…"

"Oh, yes, that's all true." She laughed a bit. "I was more thinking that, quietly, I'd keep that tradition too. Family, and a dear friend. If you're willing."

"Can I do some of it from Etruria? That's where I plan on living." I smiled wryly. "Though, I've resigned myself to lots of traveling. I'm a nomad, after all, and I honestly spent a lot of time traveling, growing up."

"Yes, like I said. Quite a bit of the job does involve traveling, getting the lay of the land, and giving me advice both on my country and of others." Guinevere laughed. "It's basically… a most trusted advisor."

"I see." I closed my eyes and thought. I'd thought of rebuilding many countries, but I had to admit Bern hadn't been one of them, or at least, it had not come as often. I had been angry at Bern. But that wasn't fair. The people of Bern would be hurt and confused, unable to comprehend just how horrific Zephiel had become. The country of Bern had to rebuild both itself and the trust between other nations.

Besides, I had also played my part in its destruction. I had helped lead the army that killed two of their Wyvern Generals, their king, and countless soldiers. I had encouraged Guinevere to take the throne, and I had been the one to allow Guinevere to challenge Zephiel. I had been the official judge for that duel, and had declared Guinevere Bern's Queen. So, it followed that I had a responsibility to see it through this time. It followed that I had to help it get back on its feet.

I opened my eyes slowly, and saw her watching me. Her expression was impassive, even if her eyes were a bit hopeful. She knew this was a lot to ask, and she would accept if I refused. But she was trying to be the best queen she could be, and felt that she needed my assistance for that. That was why she had asked. I couldn't just leave her hanging, even if she'd accept it with a smile.

"Well, all right, Guinevere," I replied. I held out my hand and she took it gladly. "I accept the post. But your court is going to pitch a fit."

"My court already hates me," she reminded me cheerfully. "I might as well go ahead and set myself up for the best amount of success." She smiled. "Thank you, Irene."

"No need for it. I can't say I dislike the idea of watching how you build the country, and helping you shape it." I grinned. "So, shall we look into more old things? Let's really see what we can do to shake things up!"

"I actually have a few ideas." She tugged my hand and dragged me after her, laughing. "Zephiel left a lot of notes, as did my father, and I've been sifting through…"

"Ugh, ruling requires too many meetings," Lilina complained. She flopped down on my bed, sprawling out while I read through some notes left on my desk, mostly just things from family and friends reminding me to rest. "Too many! I can see why Father complained so much."

"Uncle Hector never did have tact," I replied, smiling slightly. I'd found her and Aunt Lyn shortly after gathering some materials to look through with Guinevere, and had told them what Guinevere thought. Aunt Lyn had laughed until she cried, while Lilina just looked startled, and happy.
"Thankfully, you have a bit more."

"Uncle Eliwood's lessons!" She snickered, and sighed again, this time a bit more happily. We'd invited Aunt Lyn to rest with us in my room, but she'd gone to see Uncle Lucius and Aunt Serra instead, and maybe others of the original 'Legion'. "There's so much to do…"

"What were you talking about?" I set my notes down, and twisted in my chair to look at her. "What are you working on?"

"Mostly, I'm focusing on repairing Lycia. I'm leaving Roy to handle all the foreign relations things. He's the one who is personal friends with most of the royals, after all, and he's the most visible part of the army who saved us all."

"I'm sure he's thrilled."

"He's been barraged ever since it ended!" She giggled and rolled over onto her side so that she could face me. "So, yeah, I'm working on internal things primarily."

"What have you come up with?"

"Honestly? I'm… likely going to do what Clarine suggested, making Lycia a kingdom." She sighed, closing her eyes. "It'll be a lot more work for me, but it might lessen the chances of civil war. Lycia is a mess at the moment, thanks to all the betrayals, and all the deaths. I feel bad, but Mother and Uncle Eliwood told me how we must adapt to a changing world. This war showcased the weaknesses of the Lycian Alliance all too clearly. Roland's beliefs will not falter simply because there is only one ruler."

"Talk to Fiona, and Wuotan, about why he even founded Lycia as he did. For all we know, he did it so that he wouldn't have to work as hard!" I grinned and she gigged. "What will you do with territories beyond Ostia? You'll need them. Most monarchies do."

"Oh, yes, I will. A lot of things will remain the same. Taxes and titles, however, are going to differ." She smiled a bit. "I got Aunt Nino to agree to take over one of the lands, though!"

"So that's what you were meeting with her about."

"Yep!" She giggled, pleased with herself. "Got Uncle Raven to agree to the same. Marcus refused, as did Merlinus, but they gave me names to consider for it."

"Yes, and Lady Florina is flustered you're considering her." The door opened to reveal a smiling Tate, who looked like she was holding back a laugh. "She can't believe you'd consider an Ilian," she continued, easily finding a chair and sitting down. She and I often would talk before dinner, so this was normal. "Even if she's one you've known all your life."

"Well, she's lived in Lycia about as long as she's lived in Ilia, given how many times we've hired her," Lilina pointed out. She made to sit up, but happily remained lying down when Tate shook her head. "I'm also hoping that she can give insight into how best to build a stronger relationship with Ilia. I mean; I have many I call 'uncle' and 'aunt' there."

"Well, Lycia and Ilia do have a good relationship. Of course, there's not much of a 'working' relationship there. Lycians tend to solve their problems internally."

"So, maybe we could hire you more? Or maybe…" Lilina frowned a little, tapping the pillow as she thought. "I remember Zealot mentioning harvests?"
"Yes, actually!" Tate's eyes lit up at the thought. "Funnily enough, we have the Bernese to thank for it. General Murdock ordered them to assist in harvesting, meaning that for the first time in recent memory, we actually might not have to buy food from other countries to get through the winter."

"That's it!" Lilina swung into a sitting position, eyes sparkling. "There's some crops that we grow on the mountains, and we can lend you some soldiers during harvest to help! We can make it like… oh… 'getting training with aerial forces' or snow training or something."

"You can do a trade," I suggested, catching the thought. "You can send forces up to help with harvest and train during the fall, while Ilia could send its graduated knights to Lycia for training in an army, or mercenary group."

"That… would make the year training safer for them," Tate murmured. She smiled shyly. "They'd still be on their own, but it would be more controlled. We'd lose less."

"It also gives a support network for those out on their own for the first time. I mean; that's what Aunt Florina did, actually."

"And she's one of the best pegasus knights Ilia has ever had."

"That's during the spring and summer, right?" Lilina asked. She clapped her hands, giggling. "Oh, I should talk to Zealot and Aunt Fiora about this now! I'll see you later!" She bolted out the door, actually tripping on the threshold before disappearing down the hall.

"That girl is a workaholic," I deadpanned. Tate burst into giggles, and I smiled wryly. "Yeah, I don't have a right to say anything."

"No, you don't!" she agreed, still giggling. It faded, though, as she gave me a curious look. "Word is spreading that you accepted an administrative post here?"

"Wow, gossip is fast." I shrugged. "It's an atypical one, with an emphasis on traveling. Basically, I'll be Guinevere's foreign advisor."

"I see." She gave me a tiny frown. "You'll be living in Etruria, though, yes?"

"Yes, I will. I'm not giving Klein up." I playfully made my voice challenging and she laughed, relaxing. I knew she'd been worried I'd made a 'duty over love' choice. "Though, now that I think about it, I'll probably need an official bodyguard for that." I grinned. "You willing?"

"As if I'd inflict you on anyone else." She grinned as well and we shared a laugh. "We'll talk more about it when things are really over."

"That sounds good to me." Footsteps caught my ear, and I leaned in my seat to see Elphin walking up. "Did you need me for something, Elphin?"

"Ah, yes, but if Dame Tate doesn't mind, I'd love to steal her too," Elphin replied, not surprised I'd seen him coming. "I'm talking with Ekhidna about how best to grant the Western Isles independence, while still giving them much needed aid. I was hoping for some more neutral parties, and someone who will bat me on the head if I start getting snobbish. She trusts me, but I'm sure some prejudice will still bleed through, even knowing what I know."

"It's what you grew up with, after all," I replied. I glanced at Tate and we shared a shrug and a smile. "Well, we're available. Let's get to work again, shall we?"
As the sun set, I put on my cloak and traveled with Guinevere and a handful of others up the nearby mountains for Zephiel's funeral. There had been a 'grand memorial' yesterday for him, a bunch of nonsense that I attended and didn't pay attention to because I knew it wasn't his 'real' funeral. Zephiel had died during battle, during war. Bernese custom insisted on only one kind of funeral, especially for a king, and for one who had always been so chained and trapped as Zephiel.

We had to wait for a clear full moon to safely travel through the mountains, which is why we waited until tonight for it. Guinevere had insisted on the darkness, mostly because Zephiel had always loved the night, and on a small party, because we'd already had the grand memorial. That memorial was the funeral of Zephiel the King. Now, we simply had the funeral of Zephiel, the broken man.

Galle, mostly recovered from his injuries now, carried the body, flying to the site on his wyvern while the rest of us walked. He had brought his just in case. Zephiel's body was badly charred, after all, and after a couple of days on ice, it might not be appetizing. It felt weird to discuss the plan, talking about a corpse like it was nothing more than a sack of meat, but this was their way. I had to learn, and accept, all that I could, especially considering the job I had accepted.

Before long, we made it to a small outcropping, glowing an ethereal white in the moonlight, surrounded by some caves. We all gathered in silence around the outcropping, with all of our hoods still up. I kept close to Guinevere and Miredy, the only people besides Galle that I knew were here. I had no real idea who else had come along, and no one had asked, just like with Murdock's funeral. I gathered that it was just… how this went. There were no questions, and there were no acknowledgements. I thought it horribly strange, and I thought the silence was even worse, but I held my tongue. This was another country and another culture. I had no right to judge.

Still, the silence just made me twitch as Galle flew down and set Zephiel's cloth covered body in the center of the outcropping. He knelt down beside it and pulled back the cloth. I instinctively brought up my hand to try and block out the horrible smell. It had been on ice, but rot still set in, and Zephiel had been burned alive. I also had to look away from his body as it looked almost as bad as it smelled and, horrifyingly, the damn crown was still attached to his head. No one had been able to remove it without tearing the flesh, and that had just felt… wrong.

The silence continued to reign as Galle stepped back, coming to stand next to Miredy. The wind itself stilled, and I closed my eyes, silently praying for Father Sky to lend His aid. While Zephiel would serve his punishment, this silent, small 'ceremony' was needed for Guinevere, and all those who had come. They needed this to move on with their lives. So, I prayed. I prayed He would assist.

A little gasp made my eyes fly open, and I looked up to see a large wyvern looming over all of us, sitting atop of one of the peaks. Heavily scarred and missing an eye, it watched us closely and as a few other wyverns began walking closer, I realized that this must be the… herd leader, if wyverns had even had 'herd leaders'. It had to be. The other wyverns were showing too much respect for it to be anything else.

The scarred wyvern continued watching us closely, and for a long while, no one breathed. No one made a single noise. But then, it swooped down and landed right next to Zephiel's body with a dull 'thump' that kicked up dust and actually made the ground tremble slightly. It nudged the corpse, tilting its head curiously. Then it lunged forward.

I closed my eyes then, unable to help it, as I realized why it had lunged. It was eating Zephiel's body, and I couldn't stomach that. I couldn't stomach seeing it. I couldn't with Murdock, and I really couldn't now.
The sound of other wings told me that the other wyverns were joining in, and I just focused on thanking Father Sky, because even if this made me ill, it was important to Guinevere, Miredy, and Galle. This was their way, and I was glad He had helped. Still, because no one spoke a word, I could hear them so clearly, and so, I began to sing, softly, some of the mourning songs. I even sang 'Whispers on the Wind', since it was a song for peace times. I wasn't sure if Zephiel 'deserved' the songs. I hated him, and likely would never forgive him for all that he had done, but the dead were dead, and Mother Earth would judge him by his actions, his past, and his intentions. Since there were no earthquakes, or landslides, I hoped Mother Earth did not mind the songs. Perhaps, if the spirit was trapped as the Bernese believed, the songs would help Mother Earth guide Zephiel to her judgement.

At one point when I stopped for breath, I realized everything had quieted. Hesitantly, I opened my eyes, and tried not to wince when I saw the patches of blood, bits that had remained in the body, on the outcropping, and the wyverns casually licking their mouths and claws clean. The scarred wyvern looked at us closely again, and almost absently tossed something at our feet before taking off. The other wyverns followed closely, returning to wherever they had been, and there was just a strange… stillness to the air. No one had any idea what, exactly, to do next.

But then Guinevere moved from beside me and bent down to pick up what the wyvern had tossed. The moonlight glinted off it, revealing it to be Zephiel's crown, picked clean. There were some bits of tarnishing, some bite marks, but there wasn't really any blood or skin on it that I could see. I actually found myself smiling a bit at it, because there was… no trace of Zephiel on it. It was no longer bound to him. He was free, just… as the Bernese believed he would be, after this.

"Let us return," Guinevere whispered. She straightened and clutched the crown to her chest. "His spirit is free, so let us return."

No one said a word as we all turned our backs to the outcropping and began the trek back. I paused briefly, though, and looked back to it. As I did, I noticed the moonlight actually glinting off something else. Morbidly curious, I walked over, noticing that they had ripped the cloth to shreds in their frenzied eating, and was glad I had not watched. I might have been ill if I had.

Still, I knelt among the bits of blood and cloth that remained and picked up the tiny little thing that had caught my eye. I recognized it instantly, even if it was cracked, bloody, and charred. It was the pendant Mom had given Zephiel. He had worn it, even as he had died. Perhaps that was why Father Sky had urged the wyverns to come. He still wore their protection.

I closed my fingers around it, afraid of breaking it entirely, and looked up to the shining moon and stars. I looked for no constellations, or their meanings. I simply looked up, and let the light wash over me as the wind danced around.

Only when a cloud started covering the moon did I start back down the path and rejoin the others. I would give Guinevere the pendant along the way. She had its match, after all. It was only right.

The group scattered when we returned to Castle Bern. Most went into the town, and I had a feeling they were going to the few taverns that had started back up. Tonight definitely seemed like a 'drinking' night. I simply walked around, trying to get the sound out of my head. It hadn't been as bad with Murdock, but that was likely because there had been a lot more sounds and bodies. There had been more noise, and a lot more distractions. This time, though, there had really been nothing but that to deal with. There had also been so few people, and so much solemnity.

I sighed and shook my head, bringing down my cloak as I looked around. In my wanderings, I had ended up near the castle, and debated going inside. However, the sound of sniffing caught my
attention and I headed for it instead. To my surprise, though, I found Geese sitting on a nearby bench, bent over a piece of paper.

"...Geese?" I called. He jerked his head up, and I noticed I was right. He was crying. "Is everything alright?" I hadn't spoken much with him since the Isles, but that didn't mean I wanted him to be sad.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he replied. He straightened his posture, like he was going to try and hide his tears, but he then slumped, likely deciding to not bother. "Just... got a letter from my brother."

"You got a letter?" It took a second for it to click. "They lived?!"

"Most of them, yeah. They said something about hitting Badon later in the year, as normal." He smiled slightly, and I just started laughing, unable to even believe it. "I just got startled. I'd been trying not to think about how we last saw them."

"I understand." In the mess of everything, I'd done the same. But it was just so nice to hear the good news. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Yeah..." His smiled softened, but then faded as he pointed to the castle proper. "Bit of an uproar in there not long ago. You'd better go."

"I will. Thank you, Geese, for all of your service." 

"Yeah, yeah, go on before you get super mushy." He waved me away and I laughed before dashing inside the castle, wondering what was going on.

Inside the entrance hall, there was a mess of people. I knew most of them by sight, except for one person, a young man with very old green eyes and long black hair, dressed in very simple clothes. Merlinus was yelling at him, but he ignored him with an ease that I found both entertaining and baffling. The young man continued looking around before he caught sight of me awkwardly standing on the edge of the chaos, and then, to my surprise, he actually bolted for me.

"Ah, hello there," he greeted politely, with a smile. His voice lilted with an accent I didn't recognize. "My name is Cinead. You are Lady Irene, yes?"

"I am," I confirmed, crossing my arms. I eyed him warily. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I've been getting yelled at by the stuffy man over there about protocols or some nonsense. I stopped listening after a second." Cinead flashed a grin but let it fade. "As for what brings me here? There are Bernese soldiers and War Dragons outside my village, to the south. I believe one is General Brunja? She looked like the pictures, at least."

"...Is that so?" I frowned, something bothering me. It was on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't figure it out. "Well, that means I'll need to fetch my things for a War Meeting. If you can give the details to Roy?" I looked around and found him just arriving to the mess too. "He's right over there. Tell him anything you can, and I'll be by shortly to deal with tactics."

"Very good." Cinead smiled again, and bowed, before going over to Roy, easily ignoring everyone's odd looks.

I shrugged when people glanced at me, and headed for the hallway, already trying to think of tactics we'd need. However, just as I reached the hallway, I realized what had bothered me. He'd used the term 'War Dragon'. That was a term that no simple villager would know. So, I paused to turn, and ended up catching Fiona's eye by accident.
She nodded and danced over, bending down to whisper in my ear, "he's a dragon. He was a child during the Scouring. He uses illusions to hide his pointed ears, like Wuotan."

"I see," I murmured, not even bothering to be surprised by 'pointed ears'. I'd just never noticed people's ears when there were far too many other weird things going on. "That explains that." I glanced back at him, chatting with Roy with incredible ease. Yes, he was no simple villager. "So, why come to me instead of letting himself be directed wherever Merlinus was trying to make him go?"

"Because you are the descendant of his favorite people: Hilda and Hanon. They saved his life during the Scouring. So, if he was going to trust a stranger, he was going to gamble on you." She shrugged. "I'm not surprised, though. His home is right outside the Dragon's Sanctuary, an old temple. Wuotan and I suspected Jahn might've taken Idenn there."

"How much trouble are we in?"

"I don't know." Her eyes were dark. "It all depends... it all ultimately depends on whether Zephiel and Jahn fell for the trap or not."

"What trap?"

"A trap the heroes set, because they knew that, one day, the seal would be broken." She shrugged again. "We'll see. Wuotan and I are here, though, and we will head in with you. We'll do what we can."

"..." I gave her a worried look. "Please don't sacrifice yourselves."

"I can't make that promise." She looked at me sadly. "I'm near death anyway, and have outlived not only my friends, but even my 'niece'. I love you dearly. I cannot take your deaths."

"I..." I hesitated, wanting to protest. But it wasn't my choice. It was her life. "Do not do it... easily. Fight hard first."

"Of course." She smiled sweetly. "Hey, maybe I should ask for Alberich!"

"You're going to lord how long it took me to figure it out over my head for a while, aren't you? That didn't even make sense!" I groaned as she snickered. "Well, find someone else to tease. I have work to do!"

It was time to end this Campaign, and free Idenn, once and for all.

This is where I normally do notes, but I'm afraid I've really too much work to do tonight. We march in the morning, after all, and there's so much to do that I doubt Roy, Elphin, and I will sleep tonight....

Maybe I should do notes on tea. ...No, I'll just end it here instead.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Monarch's Own is based off of a thing from the Valdemar series by
Mercedes Lackey, mostly because I thought it would ultimately fit Irene best to work on reconstructing both Etruria and Bern, among the other countries. Plans for the future, little talks… Cinead is a character that appears in two chapters of *A Thief's Legacy*, though his name is only revealed in the second appearance. Josephine is a character in *A Thief's Legacy*, and Rainard is a posthumous character from the same story.

In both normal and hard mode, Zephiel has some *bad* speed for a boss (a measly 14 in both). I'm explaining that away by the injury Hector gave him *way* towards the beginning of the story.

Next Chapter - Final Chapter, Answer (In Game Chapters 23, 24, and 25/Final)
Final Chapter) Answer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Final Chapter - Answer

We ride south, for the Dragon Sanctuary. Uncle Eliwood, Aunt Lyn, and their half of our forces remain behind in Bern to defend it, and to tend to the injured. Since we deal with Bernese stragglers, Guinevere comes with us, riding with Miredy. Galle had actually wanted to come, but his injuries are still too great, and so, he remains behind to reassure the people that all will be well.

Everything ends today, and it starts with the destruction of the last pieces of Zephiel's Bern.

"So, this is the Dragon Sanctuary," I murmured, looking over everything from our perch on the hill. We already had everything set up, and Cinead had already returned to his village to let them know we were here. I wasn't interested in the Bernese set up here. I was more interested in… "The last battles of our Campaign are being fought in the same place as the last battles of the Scouring…"

"They are," Fiona confirmed. She stood next to me as I let my horse graze on the grass a short distance away. "The village wasn't here, though. That came later. And there were dragons. Not a human in sight."

"Whereas this might be the last battle this campaign even has against humans." My eyes fell on the nearby cliffs, noticing how they almost looked speckled with crimson, with blood. "Why are the rocks red?"

"I don't know why they're still red after a thousand years." Her eyes glinted, and I had a feeling she wasn't seeing 'our' battlefield, but the one she fought on, long ago. "They were pretty blood covered when the battle ended, thanks to all the dragons we killed." She pointed to a spot covered in bright red poppies, the only patch in the whole field. "That's where Hydra died. Sacae… Amir… ran him through, there."

"...Is that so?" Now that I looked at the patch, I saw that it was, eerily enough, about the same size an adult humanoid might've been. "Ah, Elphin's waving." I saw him a short distance ahead, gold hair glinting in the sun. "Our messenger must've returned."

"Then I shall return to my post." She gave me a smile. "I... look forward to your answer. Whatever it may be. I'm glad there will finally be one."

"We'll figure it out, once we're there." I smiled back. "But I promise. We'll give one." I left her behind then, clicking my tongue to get my horse to follow without me tugging on her reins.

Elphin smiled when I approached, before turning his attention to Roy and Guinevere. "So, as I was saying, to my not-surprise, they have refused to stand down," he explained. I closed my eyes, sighing heavily. It was expected, but still aggravating. "They say that our terms were appreciated."

"I suppose I should be grateful that this one didn't return as only a head, like the one at the Western Isles," Roy groaned. He looked exasperated. "Why will they not surrender?"
"Some are likely because they do not believe in Guinevere, or... well..."

"You can just say it, Mildain," Guinevere replied. She smiled wryly. "It's because they're prideful. Bern was the strongest military might on the continent. They refuse to surrender because of that."

"So now, they're forcing us into a battle that will only weaken us for the coming trial of fighting Idenn," I grumbled. Why couldn't these people be as reasonable as they were stupidly loyal? "Well, we've already set up our strategy. Defend the village, route, spar anyone smart enough to surrender, and gather up any who don't die instantly for healing. It's not like Merlinus doesn't have healing staves coming out of his ears."

"Lady Serra was very insistent that we take all that we could carry," Guinevere giggled softly before her expression turned grim again. "Oh. They're moving, aren't they?"

"So they are, and so are we. See you guys later." We scattered, each heading to our positions for the battle. We had so many damn advantages in this battle that it was almost ridiculous. We had numbers, we had power, and we had morale. I could not understand this suicidal charge.

But it was important to them, and so, we'd give them their 'honors' with a fight to their deaths.

I'd feel bad, or even sympathetic, but there was just something so... maddening about how, after everything, they still refused to give up. I wondered if this was what Zephiel had felt about us. Of course, the difference was, we'd win. It was that simple.

The battle started almost as soon as I mounted up, but there was honestly very little for me to do then except switch a few things around to account for things not quite expected, like Brunja throwing long ranged Boltings, or the ballistae they'd set up. Those ones did actually kill quite a few of us, to my frustration. We did predict the status stave assholes, though. They were just a freaking constant thing, so much so that half of our healings staves were restore staves, just in case.

After watching the battle for a moment, and redirecting forces to account for the long-range tome and the ballistae, I decided to ride into the village itself to make sure things were going well there. However, as I rode in, I noticed something odd. Fir was in the village, instead of fighting like I'd expected, and chatted happily with an older man who... slightly resembled her.

"Oh, Irene!" Fir called when she saw me. She waved enthusiastically, Darkness Blade glinting darkly in the sunlight at her side, and so I dismounted. "Over here! Don't worry; I made sure things were secured before popping in! I wanted to check on people!"

"Since that's what I did, I certainly can't fault you," I replied, smiling slightly as I walked over. I glanced at the man, noticing the resemblance between them was only stronger at such a short distance. "Fir, you know him?"

"Yep! This is my uncle, Karel." She smiled sweetly, beaming. "He's crazy strong!"

"Is that so?" I smiled at Karel, thinking I knew the name from somewhere, and held out my hand. He took it after a moment, studying my face closely. "Is something wrong?"

"My apologies. You remind me of someone I fought alongside with long ago, in my... demon years," he explained. He still studied my face closely. "Well, two perhaps. A Sacean Hunter with a face of stone and the eyes of a hawk, who shot brilliantly, and a tactician who was on the edge of death, and used her mind as her sword, keener than any I've ever seen."

"...Were their names 'Rath' and 'Katri'?" I asked softly. He nodded and my smile became a little sad, and a little bitter. I knew the name now. I remembered it from Mom's logbook. "They were my
parents. They died. I've a letter for you in my pack from her. She wrote letters to everyone in the Campaign, that survived her at least."

"I see." He nodded, and there was a strange resignation in his face. "My own path to the sword robbed me of much. My sister, seeing her family, and it seems, my chance to meet again two people who had caught my eye, years ago." He smiled slightly. "Still, I'm pleased Fir's had led her to friends, and a new family."

"We love her dearly, and trust her even more." I grinned as I noticed Fir's face going super red. "We are working to defend the village, and to head inside the Sanctuary"

"I guessed as such when Cinead returned." His hand fell on the sword at his waist. It looked like the Wo Dao Fir used to wield, but there was something different about it. It felt almost alive, and the wind almost bent around it from sheer fear. But it was also very muted, as if it had been tamed. "Please, allow me to assist. I want to see where everyone's path has taken them."

"I won't say 'no' to another fighter." Though, I had to admit that I didn't expect any more recruits at this point. "Thank you." I waved as the two of them ran off, noticing how the two of them held themselves so similarly, and smiled slightly. Fir clearly had two role models: her mother and her uncle. It showed.

"Well, looks like things are picking up." A laughing, lilting voice signalled someone's approach, and I whirled, unnerved that I hadn't heard her walk up. "Sorry for startling you," she said, smiling. My eyes fell to the numerous scars on her, including what looked to be a messy burn scar on her neck, and her bright blue eyes. "You're the tactician, right?"

"I am, yes," I replied slowly. I gave her a curious look, thinking she looked rather familiar, like I'd seen her, or someone who looked like her before. I tried to focus a bit more on her looks, but other than the dark brown hair, a fairly common color, I just couldn't quite place it. "Why?"

"Well, that Brunja lady is nearby." She shrugged, pointing towards where Brunja 'apparently' was. I saw nothing but buildings. "Sorta."

"How is one 'sort of' nearby?"

"It's more that she's heading this way." She smiled. "I thought you might want to get a jump on that. She's all fire and determination, but blood and damnation, she's got a thick skull."

"Ah, yes?" I felt my thoughts trip up a little at the very strange curse. "I'll... go check on that then."

"Sure. I'll go reassure Cinead." Her smile widened, and she walked off, moving with total silence. It was a bit unnerving, but I didn't have time to muse on that, or try to figure out the missing piece on why she looked familiar.

I returned to my horse and mounted up, heading in the direction she had pointed. I felt almost a little silly for it, but something on the wind told me to take it seriously. I ended up glad for it, since she was right. Brunja was right there, and she had clearly not been expecting anyone to come for her.

However, that surprise didn't last long. "Bern will not fall!" Brunja cried, dropping her Bolting tome for another, reaching out towards me. Her eyes were almost wild with how stubborn and determined they were. "Even if I die, Bern will-"

"The only one talking about Bern falling is you, idiot," I retorted. I had an arrow in my hand, but I paused, something just... telling me to wait. "The war is over. You lost. You killed them all, and
yet you still lost."

"You…!" She fired the spell, but I tilted my head to the side, and the blue-white burst of cold just whizzed past my ear. "You…!"

"Apologize to the dead for what your fanaticism and loyalty did." I twirled the arrow about my fingers once, aimed, and fired in one smooth motion. The arrow thudded straight into her chest and she stumbled back, gasping for air. She reached up towards the arrow, but it had already burst into light, driving straight through her back and letting the blood pour down. "You really should've worn some armor to protect your heart."

"I…" She coughed wetly, blood speckling her lips. The little bit of whistling I heard hinted I'd gotten her lung too. She wasn't long for the world. "You…" She smiled. She actually smiled. "Finally… I can go… to his side…"

"...Yeah, go ahead." I sighed, shaking my head. "You have the worst taste in men, and rulers."

"I suppose… so…" Her eyes clouded over and she collapsed, blood puddling under her. She was dead before she even hit the ground. I dismounted to check, though. If she hadn't been, I would've mercy killed her. I'd never forgive her, but that didn't mean I had to have her suffer on the way to her judgement.

It felt hollow killing her, though. It didn't feel like anything. Perhaps it was because I'd already ruined her life. Killing her felt more like a kindness, and one I wasn't quite sure I wanted to give her, even if I didn't want to kill her. Emotions sucked.

"Oh, you killed her." Roy walked up then, looking a little ruffled, but otherwise, untouched. The Sword of Seals all-but-shimmered in his hands, clearly loving being used. "I was wondering why the bolts disappeared," he murmured. He peered at me worriedly. "You all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I replied, shrugging. It was just another kill, at this point. "Regardless, though…" A terrifying roar suddenly pierced the air, and I gasped as I saw at least ten dragons suddenly just appear on the horizon, right behind our forces. "That's… uh…"

"...Damn it." Roy grit his teeth. "They must be here to defend Idenn…" He glanced at me. "I need a plan, and I need one-"

"Small group inside. You, me, Wuotan, Fiona, and the Divine Weapon holders. Clarine will stay out here with the Saint's Staff, because they'll need it more." My mind was already spinning, rapidly trying to think of what to do. "Everyone gets the strongest things Merlinus has, no holding back for anything. Elphin can keep things under control out here while we head in…"

"Ah, there you two are." Cinead walked up, looking incredibly calm despite everything. Then again, Fiona had said he was a child during the Scouring. "I've been talking with my fellows," he explained with a small smile. Roy and I exchanged a look, a bit weirded out. "We'd like to assist."

"That's… appreciated?" Roy replied. He looked skeptical. "But, forgive me, how do you intend to…?"

"Why, with this." Cinead produced a brilliant red-orange gem, scarily similar to the Fire Emblem, and it pulsed with power. "Little Fae is not the only dragon with a dragonstone around here."

"Oh, okay." Roy paused briefly, and then yelped. "Wait, you're a dragon?!"

"A full blooded one at that. We planned to move anyway once the demon dragon was dealt with.
There's no real risk in revealing ourselves now, and perhaps it might help our hopes if your people saw dragons fighting alongside true dragons." He smiled warmly and casually walked off. "So, we'll go do that. You mentioned an Elphin, so I'll go talk to him. You need to head in."

"Y-yeah, sure?" Roy's voice was distinctly squeaky and he turned to me with wide yes. "He's a dragon? He's a freaking dragon?!"

"You didn't freak out this much when Wuotan revealed he was a dragon, you know," I pointed out.

"Wuotan didn't casually say 'oh, hey, I'm a dragon' and then walk off!" Roy protested. He glowered and then sighed. "Oh, whatever. It's a good reminder that I can be thrown off balanced by things. Let's head-

"Roy! Irene!" Fae's cheerful voice made us both yelp as she flew over and casually landed right next to us. "Can I come to?" she asked, eyes pleading. Roy and I shared a startled look, and protests bubbled to my lip. "I can hear someone crying." Her simple declaration made the protests die. "Someone is crying and screaming. It's really faint, but I can hear her." She pointed to the Sanctuary. "Somewhere there, deep in the darkness. I want to give her a hug." Roy and I exchanged another look, and I could see the question in his eyes: 'is it Idenn?' "Please?"

"...All right," Roy whispered. I hesitated before nodding. We'd keep her safe, but maybe she could… help us figure out our 'answer'. "Stay close to me, Fae. Irene?"

"I'll handle recruiting everyone," I reassured. Flashes of light erupted behind us, and I turned to see dragons, of various colors, appear to shield our soldiers from the War Dragon's ambush. "You work on calming the freaked out soldiers."

"I'll give them a speech, like always." He grinned and I laughed. "See you soon."

"Yes, I'll see you soon." Then it was into the Sanctuary, the final battle for us.

This all felt a bit unreal, but I knew that was just my shock kicking in, since this was far more of a whirlwind than expected. I'd move past it before long.

Inside, it was just a single, long path. At first, I'd thought nothing of it, since temples in the Sacae often had 'one path', but at some point during our mad run, Wuotan whispered that the 'other paths' were blocked and Fiona murmured that it hadn't been that way a few months ago. At that point, it became quickly obvious just what we were running into, but we had no choice. We didn't have the time to find ones Jahn missed.

Still, I hadn't expected to run into three War Dragons, bellowing in fury as we entered a room. We all had to hit the ground in order to avoid their surprise attack, and we all paused, trying to think of just what to do. We had to get by, but we couldn't leave these guys at our back.

'Go,' Rutger had said. 'We can catch up later,' Deke had added. Then the two of them fell on the War Dragons, and got them out of the way of the door in the back. With no choice, we let them stay behind, and continued on.

Sofia and Ray stayed behind at the next room. 'One use, and then our normal spells to clean up!' Ray had laughed. 'Go on, and be the sun and fire, you two,' Sofia had whispered with a smile. That she only addressed two of us hinted what was likely to happen, but I chose to not acknowledge it.

I felt I had to though, when in the next room, Lilina and Sue stayed behind. 'Wind to your back,
everyone,' Sue had prayed. 'We have this!' Lilina had boasted. I paused long enough to give them hugs before racing to catch up to the others, who hadn't hesitated.

To no one's surprise, the next room had even more dragons, and Miredy and Tate stayed behind. 'Fear not. I won't die,' Miredy had reassured. Tate had said nothing, simply gave me a warm smile that promised more than anything she could have said. I gave them my best, confident smile, and raced on, not even getting a chance to think about hugging them. The dragons had attacked, and I just barely avoided losing my damn arm to their flames.

I was legitimately surprised when Jahn was in the next room, sitting casually on a stone throne embedded with bright red rubies, with Idenn simply curled up in the shadows of the corner. I'd expected much more of a runaround.

"Well, it looks like you used the same tactic with me that you did with Zephiel," Jahn noted lightly. I studied him, recognizing him as the man who had given me the creeps in Aquelia. "How arrogant, thinking you can make me submit with so few."

"Perhaps it is your arrogance to think you can take us," Roy replied instantly, voice as cold as ice. I was reminded of Aunt Ninian when someone actually managed to make her lose her temper. "Then again, perhaps this can resolve this peacefully?"

"Peace has no meaning between humans and dragons." Jahn stood slowly, each movement seeming like it took eternity. It was like he had all the time in the world, and moved accordingly. "Still, I find it interesting that once again at the end of things, I face down a half-dragon." He smiled, and it was just as slow. "The last was the little sun child. She and her friend made a mistake, just letting me fall."

"Hilda and Elimine did always regret not making sure he had a fatal wound before pushing him off," Fiona muttered. She glared, tenser than I'd ever seen her, and poor Fae looked frightened of the look, actually ducking behind me. "Gods, damn you."

"There is no reason to damn me for another's mistake," Jahn scolded, smiling distinctly mocking now. "One thousand years… I have waited and healed. I waited for someone to break the seal…"

"I don't suppose it occurred to you to get a life?" I asked dryly. I couldn't help it, and it was worth his eyes narrowing. "Is this where you go on about the truth of the Scouring or some droning nonsense? Because we know enough."

"No, I have no interest in monologuing to corpses." He gestured towards Idenn, and she stepped out of the corner. As she did, she brought up a strange gem of muted purple, shimmering with some sort of dull light. "Idenn, finish them."

"Yes…" Idenn whispered. She held the stone high above her head, and it pulsed with power, purple-black light slinking around her slowly. Wuotan instantly moved to stand in front of Roy, Fae, and me, while Fiona brought up her hands. I thought at first she was going to attack or dance, but she simply clasped them in prayer. I wondered why.

Then, there was another pulse of power, one that nearly sent me to my knees, and a flash of bright light. But it was soon followed by a horrible screech of pain, one that sent chills down my spine. Idenn flung the stone away, and it clattered to the ground, a brilliant sky-blue instead of the muted purple of before. It looked like Fae's dragonstone.

Utter silence followed, born from pure shock. But then, Fiona began to laugh. She began to laugh and laugh and laugh, the sound bouncing off the walls, and it sounded almost mad, but there was
such triumph in it that it was hard to call it anything else.

"You fell for it!" she cackled, smile wide and bright. Her eyes sparkled and for a brief moment, I thought this might have been what she looked like before the Scouring, all energy and life. "You fell for the trick! Ah, I love those guys so damn much!"

"Trick…?" Jahn repeated, his eyes wide. All traces of confidence fled for confusion. Idenn just flat out fled into the darkness, through a door in the back I hadn't seen until then. "But… Zephiel… the Archives…"

"Hilda stole it. Elimine and Hartmut hid it. And they hid it by putting a fake in Aquelia, and making sure the Archives Hartmut left behind purposely said it was there! He even made absolute certainty to be perfectly honest about everything else in the Archives, just so that the ruse wouldn't be discovered!" She kept on laughing, actually clutching her stomach like it hurt. Maybe it did. I wondered how long it had been since she'd laughed this much. "It caused a mess of trouble, thanks to Desmond finding it and Nicholas refusing, but it did its job. You fell for the trap!" Tears streaming down her face, and I wondered how long it had been since she'd laughed this much. "Worse, you didn't even check! So now, Idenn's weakened because a Demon Dragon can't utilize a divine dragonstone! My dragonstone! You sealed your own loss because you didn't think!"

"You…!" Jahn hissed, eyes flashing in pure rage, and without even another word, fire whipped about, and disappeared to reveal his dragon form, the one from Aquelia. "You'll regret making a fool of-!

"Am I?" Wuotan asked softly, his voice carrying easily as Fiona's laughter died for snickers. His smile was calm as he walked up, but there was a distinct aura of sheer authority, of sheer power. It was just like way back at the Western Isles, before we fought that first dragon, and like then, all my attention was on him. "Jahn, it's so easy to make a fool of you because you go through such great lengths to be one. This is the Dragon's Sanctuary. While here, I have no need of the Fire Emblem to transform, and that means I do not need to use that weakened form to fight you."

"...Weak…?"

"I made that dragonstone over a thousand years ago. It's power has diminished, and it is no longer attuned to me. But now, I can fight you to my fullest strength." Wuotan's smile grew vicious. "How about a proper duel this time? Your full strength against mine, for once in your long life."

"I'll…!"

"Die, of course. But I'm hoping you can last long enough to make it worth the exercise. There's a reason why I was the leader of the strongest Fire Tribe in Elibe, and you always knew that!" Fire wrapped around Wuotan, the heat enough to make my eyes water and my skin prickled. But it cleared quickly and instead of Wuotan, I saw a dragon with scales that flickered like flames in the night, with golden claws digging into the stone and matching teeth bared in a snarl. I saw a dragon with bright blue eyes, and realized I knew those eyes, and I knew this dragon. It was the one who had saved us in Aquelia, and I wondered why I hadn't put the pieces together sooner. He had known the plan, and his eyes were the same. But, I supposed it didn't matter. It didn't matter since Wuotan was already lunging for Jahn.

"Don't worry about Wuotan," Fiona reassured, having calmed down during the exchange. She smiled slightly, despite the tears stubbornly clinging to her face. Her eyes still sparkled. "He's got a lot of issues with Jahn, and they're bubbling over. He's got as fierce a temper as all his descendants." She shrugged and turned towards the door we came in from. "Well, that's a bit of trouble." She pointed when she realized Roy and I were confused, and I turned to see War Dragons
forcing their way through, cracking the foundations in their blind push. "You'll be fine without us. Fae can lead you the rest of the way. She can 'hear' Idenn." She flashed us a smile. "Leave this to us. Jahn… is someone we should've dealt with a long, long time ago." Llight wrapped around her and flooded the air. When it dissipated, Fiona was a dragon, and her form looked like a smoother, older, version of Fae's. She was just as blue and gold, but lither and more proportionate, with the 'feathers' looking more like extensions of her scales. Even in the darkness, she shimmered, glowing from an inner light. "Go! Finish this!"

I took Fae's hand and bolted for the door, Roy just two steps behind me. There was nothing we could do but get in the way, at this point. The best way we could help… was to get to Idenn.

I hoped everyone would still be alive when we did.

We ran. We ran, hard and fast. We said nothing, as all our breath was taken up by simply running as fast as we could, faster than we could. At least, that was what I thought.

"Roy? Irene?" Fae suddenly called. Both of us slowed to a stop as we noticed she was behind us, wings flapping as she hovered. "Is Fae also an enemy?"

"What?" I replied, startled. I walked over and bent down to hug her. "No, of course not. Why would you think that?"

"That man… the Scouring…" Her expression crumpled. "Will Fae become a bad dragon when she grows up? Will she have to leave everyone?"

"No, sweetie, of course not."

"Jahn is a narrowminded idiot, trapped in the old world, never realizing how the world has already adapted and changed," Roy stated firmly. He moved next to Fae and hugged her too. "You lived with humans in Nabata, right? You love Igrene."

"I do," Fae whispered. Her expression didn't change. "I love everyone. I love you two, and I love Igrene, and I loved Athos and I love Sofia and I love Alberich, and I extra-love Fiona…" Her voice cracked. "But the demon dragon… she's like me! So, when I'm older, will I…?"

"You'll always be Fae, no matter what." Roy smiled at her. "And we're going to help Idenn."

"You are?"

"Yep. And you are too. You're the one who can hear her screaming, yes?"

"...Right!" Fae's eyes lit up, and she became determined. "So… so, I'll take you to her, and then you and Irene can save her!"

"Yes." She flew ahead. "This way! We're close!" Roy and I shared a smile and a shrug before following her, actually having difficulty keeping up.

But, thankfully, Fae stopped right in front of an open doorway, and the three of us entered the large room together. There was nothing really unique about it. It was just a large, empty room, with a silverish throne in the back, and a shivering Idenn in the center.

"Idenn?" Roy called. He walked forward, towards her, while Fae and I hung back. "Idenn, might we speak?"
"Why?" she whispered. Her hood was down, and so, we could see her face fully. Her eyes were dull. "Why do you hinder my path?" Her voice was just as soft as before, and just as monotone. But this time, I knew why, and my heart broke for her. "I will lead the world to a new era. Why do you stop me?"

"No, please…" Roy shook his head. "The one who ordered you is already dead. You have no reason to fight anymore!" Roy held out his hand to her. "Please, enough. I want to help you."

"Help…? No reason to fight…?" She tilted her side, almost in confusion, but her expression remained blank. "A long time ago… I heard words like that. Soft words, like a warm breeze… strong voice, like the bright sun… clear eyes, like burning hope… so bright, so much light…" She shook her head. "But that was long ago. I fell asleep in the darkness, dreaming endlessly of nothing. Empty dreams, pitch white, colorless. Nothing. But then I woke up, and saw eyes burning like the sun again, though there was nothing warm about them. His Majesty woke me up, and willed me to save the world."

"But…"

"I will do this. I must. He woke me up. He took me from the nothingness. Without his call, his will, I am nothing." Power pulsed around her, less staggering than before, but someone more painful to look at. "I must… I must!…" It wrapped around her like a blanket, or a lover, and scattered apart, revealing her dragon form. I winced when I saw it, noticing the similarities to Fiona's, but seeing where the wings were withered, crimson lines etched through almost like wounds. I wondered how she was broken. I dreaded ever learning. "I must!"

The room trembled as she screamed, and poor Fae winced, tearing up. I pulled her towards me, and looked at Roy. His eyes were confused and his expression was pained. He'd been hoping he wouldn't have to think. But that was just how things were.

"Roy," I whispered. He glanced at me. "You have as much time as I have arrows." I brought up Rienfleche and pulled an arrow out of my quiver for emphasis. "That's all I can buy."

His smile was all the thanks I needed, and I spun, aiming and firing at random. It splintered off her side, and she lashed out with her claws. I managed to roll out of the way, and Fae just flew out of reach. As soon as I got to my feet, I pulled out another arrow and fired. This one caught the edge of her eye, and for a split second, I worried I'd hit her in the eye, and maybe even kill her, depending on how deep Rienfleche made the arrow of light go.

Then she nearly bit off my head and I stopped worrying. I didn't have much of a choice. She might be 'weakened', but she was still a damn dragon, and I fought her only with Rienfleche, a weapon never designed specifically to fight dragons, and she was a demon dragon, even stronger.

I focused on her eyes, mostly to keep holding her attention. Even a doll didn't like things hitting her eyes.

One by one, my arrow supply dwindled, the remaining clattering and rolling about in my emptying quiver. Roy stood to the side, holding the Sword of Seals, still sheathed, in his hands, trying to decide just what to do. I didn't begrudge him. It was overwhelming, coming up with an 'answer' to a question that was asking a thousand years ago.

One of my arrows went wide as Idenn swung her tail at me, the wind sending me skidding backwards. Before I could catch my bearings, Idenn's eyes flashed and she breathed out a black mist that seemed to devour the very light. Fae, however, transformed in an instance and countered the breath with her own. The two attacks met in the middle, with a dull thunderous sound and
another blast of wind that actually took me right off my damn feet. I hit the ground hard, all the breath leaving me in an instance, and it took me a few rolls to get my feet under me. I winced as I noticed most of my arrows actually broke from the impact, leaving me with only two usable ones left.

So, as the two dragons stopped their attacks and broke apart, I fired my second to last arrow and yelled, "Roy!" It took me a moment to find him. He'd been pushed to the other side of the room, and there was blood dripping down the side of his face from where he'd hit a pillar hard. "Sorry, but I've got only one left!"

"It's fine," he yelled back. He unsheathed the Sword of Seals and fire wrapped around it. The Fire Emblem pulsed and glowed in the hilt, shining like the sun. "I've… I think I've got it. I just need…!"

"Fae, you and I need to open her guard for Roy!" I pulled out my very last arrow, and took careful aim. Fae glanced at us worriedly, but nodded. She said nothing, but her eyes held total faith in us. "Now!"

Fae roared and loosed another mist-breath attack. Idenn shifted to dodge it, all of her weight going on her left two legs. I took that opportunity to shoot, striking the side of her right eye, and forcing her to jerk her head back, tilting her even further off balance, exposing her belly and her chest.

Roy was already moving, small sparks trailing after him almost like little stars. He bellowed a war cry, and swung, the flames of the Sword of Seals erupting from the blade and screeching forth, dancing around like dragons desperately clawing at each other.

The flames hit Idenn square in the chest, and she screeched. I actually had to duck and cover my ears as it echoed on and on, sincerely wondering if my ears were going to bleed from how loud and high it was. But I kept my eyes open, and I watched as the flames wrapped around and around her, binding her legs and pinning her wings. I watched as the flames clawed up her scales and into her face. I watched as the flames enveloped her like a hungry beast and grew brighter and brighter, as intense as the sun. I eventually had to close my eyes, for fear of going blind from the light, and it grew so bright that I swore I saw it clearly through my eyelids anyway.

But, all at once, everything went dark, and I slowly opened my eyes, blinking slowly as I tried to adjust to the sudden silence. Fae was back in her humanoid form, curled up in a little ball with her wings tucked tight, and Roy was near her, kneeling with the sword still clutched in his hands, eyes still closed.

So, I was the first to see Idenn sprawled on the floor, in her humanoid form. I was the first to push myself to my feet, and stumble over to her. I was the first to kneel next to her and check her vitals. Her breath was even and her pulse was strong. She was unconscious, but alive.

"Did it work?" Roy's voice was barely more than a croak. I glanced back and saw him limping towards me, smiling slightly. "Is she alive?" he asked. "I mean…"

"Yeah, she is," I replied. His smile grew. "What did you do?"

"It's the Sword of Seals. So, I willed it to 'seal' her draconic power. I mean; I don't know if that'll actually work or heal her, but…" He shrugged. "If it doesn't, then we can mercy kill her. But maybe without the power, her soul can… well…"

"There's no more screaming." Fae floated over and landed on the other side of Idenn, taking her hand with a smile. "There's still crying, but there's no more screaming," she explained. She beamed
at us. "You did it!"

"It's a little soon to call that, Fae," I chided. Still, it was an answer. Our answer… was to bring Idenn out of this hell, one step at a time. We might never see her recover. She might never recover fully. But, one step at a time, we'd at least keep her out of the darkness she hated. "So…" A loud rumble cut me off, followed by a huge amount of trembling. Little pieces of stone fell by my face, and it wasn't until I looked up that I put all the pieces together. "So, any explanation for just why the temple is suddenly collapsing now?"

"Well, maybe it's because of the Divine Weapons being used?" Roy suggested. He looked a little two curious. "I mean; if they once managed to warp reality, bringing down a building doesn't seem that absurd? Or maybe Jahn triggered something? Or maybe-?"

"Roy. Theorize later. Run first." At that moment, a large piece of the ceiling crashed down, right on the throne. "I'll carry her."

"I'll help her on your back." The seconds crawled by as he did that, and the pillars by us crumpled, sending jagged shards in our path to the door. "...Damn."

"Running now!"

Roy led the way, with Fae in the middle, and me trailing because I was carrying Idenn. She was slight, and probably weighed less than she should, but considering she was still a grown person, that was still a lot of extra weight on my back that my tired legs had to carry. I was a lot slower than I would've liked, and sadly, so was Roy. The blow to the head clearly addled him, and the constant shaking of the ground and falling pieces of rubble did not make for an easy journey.

At one point, he yelped and fell, sliding to a stop just in front of where the path had completely collapsed, leaving only a gaping hole. His foot actually dangled over that abyss, and I had to pause to process just how damn close that was.

Fae, of course, continued on, flying over the hole easily. "Wait, you two can't fly," Fae yelped. Her eyes were wide as she turned back to look at us. Rubble still fell, some particularly jagged bits dangerously close to her wings. "How are you two…?"

"We'll… look for another way," I called. I made myself smile as Roy slowly pushed himself up. "You go on ahead, Fae."

"But…!" Her eyes filled with tears. "But…!"

"Go on, Fae! It's okay!" Honestly, all I could think at the moment was getting her at least back on solid ground before something fell on her wings and sent her falling. It would be all the better if she met up with the others. I hoped they were okay and weren't trapped too. "We'll…" I couldn't say anything else. I just couldn't. I couldn't because…

"We'll catch up," Roy finished for me. He knew why I couldn't. Little 'white lies' weren't quite a sin, not to make children feel safe, but it still felt wrong, especially right now. "So, go on. We'll be there soon."

"...Okay!" Fae called. She started flying down the path again, but paused and turned back to look at us. "I'll be waiting! So don't be long!" She gave us a tearful, fearful smile, and flew off.

I could only pray she didn't realize just why I couldn't tell her those same words.

"There must be a path we missed," Roy whispered. His voice shook, and fear clawed at my own
heart. We certainly had no way forward this way, and we were fast running out of time. "Let's head back?"

"We can try," I replied. My own voice was steady, and I hated it. I hated it, because I could still think, but there was no 'thinking' our way out of this. "You want to keep leading?"

"I might as well lead until the end of this." He tried to smile, but it looked small and fragile. "This way!" He ran back down the path, and I followed as best as I could. Idenn remained sleeping on my back, breaths steady against my neck, no matter how many times I teetered and tripped. The path was becoming more and more littered with bits of rubble, and parts cracked and broke off as we raced past. A few even crumbled under our feet, though we managed to push off before falling.

Two loud crashes in front of us made us slide to stops, and we could only stare as we realized what it was. Two large chunks of the ceiling collapsed, and blocked the path in front of us. A glance back confirmed that the path behind of us was too precarious for us to even attempt to run back. There had been no signs of another path.

"...Seriously, after all of this, a damn building is going to be what does us in?" I asked softly, laughing a little. It just felt ridiculous. "We went through everything, even found an answer…"

"Yet, it seems we're trapped, and will be buried alive," Roy mumbled. His smile was broken, rueful, and resigned. "Everyone is going to kill us."

"Yes, they are." I sighed, and looked up at the ceiling. The piece above us was cracking bit by bit. It would likely fall on us before long. "Do you want to try and put up an ice shield? It might protect us."

"It could." He shrugged. "I could also try to ice the path, but honestly, I'm rather drained. I think the Sword of Seals took some of my own power for the sealing."

"Neither of us would be able to do anything but slide on the ice." I looked down and around, still trying to think. It was my job as a tactician to think, and I supposed I would think until the end of everything. "If this was a story, we'd get a mysterious rescue now."

"There's enough ghosts," Roy barked out a laugh. A loud 'crack' above us hinted the slab was about to fall and crush us. "Maybe one will appear, like in Iilia."

"That would be convenient." I laughed as well, and it sounded hollow to my ears. Another crack, and a slight creak, hit my ears. "Do we give up, or cling to hope?"

"We hope." He managed a smile. "I will not give up hope just because it burns, Irene."

"You said that to Oswin, when we learned about Araphan."

"I believe it still."

"I suppose belief is catching." I looked around one more time as a third crack and a louder creak told me how little time we had left. "What would…?" I trailed off as I noticed something. My earrings… my earrings, the ones I inherited from Dad, the ones he had worn during the Campaign of Fire, were moving, slightly, and not from my own breathing. The movement was off. "What is…?" It didn't take me long to figure it out from there. There was a faint, faint breeze and it was nudging my earrings, trying to catch my attention. "Hold on…" I followed it. I had to strain to feel it, hear it, but I followed it, caught the whisper on the wind, and that's when I found it. There was a small hole in the wall, just large enough for someone to squeeze through, and there was a path beyond. "Roy!"
"Are you serious?!" Roy appeared at my side and started laughing. "Holy hell! How…?"

"Father Sky sent his wind." I nudged him at the hole. "Go! I'll pass her to you and then I'll go through last! Quickly!"

"Right!" Roy pushed his way through, his clothes and cape catching on the edges. Idenn, still unconscious, went through a little more easily, thanks to being so thin. I really had to squeeze, mostly because I was too tall for the damn hole and had to lean awkwardly. But I stumbled through just as the ceiling behind us collapsed fully with a loud, cascading thunder of a crash. Roy and I stared at the plugged up hole for all of half-a-second. Then Idenn was hoisted back on my back and we ran. We ran as hard and fast as we could, harder and faster even. The walls creaked and cracked as we raced past. The floor underneath gave way at parts and we had to stumble past. The ceiling fractured and fell and we had to twist away and try not to fall.

But as we ran, the wind got stronger and stronger, urging us forward. Before long, a light shone at the end of the hall, and it grew brighter and brighter. As the hall completely collapsed behind us, we burst out into the open air, and our feet thudded onto rocks and packed dirt. We stumbled to a stop, desperately gasping for air, and a loud crack made us jump. We whirled and we saw the Dragon Sanctuary collapse on itself, becoming nothing but rubble in seconds.

We could only stare in total shock, keenly aware that we had been less than seconds away from dying. If not for the pain screaming down my legs, the sweat pouring down my face, and the burning pain in my chest from everything, I might've thought it was a last dream, a final hallucination before the life escaped me after being crushed.

Father Sky and Mother Earth, that was too damn close!

"Oh, good, you made it out." The sudden voice made both of us jerk our heads up and whirl. There, casually sitting in the branches of a tree just above our heads, was that strange woman with brown hair and blue eyes I'd seen in the village. "I was worried for a moment," she continued lightly, smiling sweetly. "Thought you two might be too slow. Sadly, though, I couldn't figure out a way in to help. But, it seems you two didn't need it."

"I had Irene, and she had her intuition," Roy replied. His eyes narrowed. "Who are you, exactly? You look familiar."

"You might've seen a portrait of me at the Hanover Estate, or maybe you met my son in Arcadia. He took after me in looks mostly, though he got his father's eyes." She grinned, eyes dancing. My jaw dropped as I put the pieces together. "Is that enough of a hint? You've met the others, so I'm sure it's more than enough."

"I'm too tired to think."

"I'm not," I instantly retorted. I just stared. "You're the Lady Hildegarde."

"Hilda, please," she corrected, scowling. "I can't believe that's the name that went on into the history books. I hated it!" She huffed a bit before laughing. "Well, that's a complaint for another day. Yes, it's me. I chose to linger here, at the Sanctuary, so that I might see the 'answer' the future came up with first hand." Her smile was bright, cheerful, and proud. "I was so amazed what I realized what it was. Amazed, proud, and frustrated. Frustrated that we didn't think of that. But that's what children do. They think of what their parents never did, and make the world better.

"I suppose we'll try." I glanced back at Idenn, still unconscious. "Is she okay?"
"Yes, physically. Her body is simply adjusting to the sudden sealing, much like how the body has to adjust to a sudden surge of power. Roy, you know that pain, I'm sure. I hurt, when I 'awakened'." her smile became kind. "There's a path down right over there." She pointed to a spot hidden by some bushes, but when I went on my tiptoes, I could catch a glimpse of the path. "You should go and meet them. They're scared."

"Of course," Roy whispered. He smiled, tired but happy. "I'm glad you liked the answer we came up with."

"I would've liked anything you came up with, so long as you didn't leave her hanging, as we did. All of us would have." Her form suddenly became transparent, fading a little bit with each breath. "And now I get to go rest, and have more happy conversations with my descendants." Her voice began echoing, as if she was calling from far away. "I'm glad. I was having such a lovely conversation with Amanda about assassination tricks." She giggled, and it sounded... young. She sounded young, barely older than me. I wondered how old she had been, during the Scouring. "Go forth. You have a lot of work to do. But you can do it. If we could, so can you."

She disappeared then, in a flurry of tiny little motes of light that scattered on the wind, twirling up into the bright, cloudless sky. Roy and I watched them disappear into the sunlight and shared a smile before walking down the path, one shaking step at a time.

Someone must've seen us descending, as when we hit the bottom of the path, the whole damn army was rushing for us. Lilina, sooty and scraped up, was one of the first ones, and she didn't even bother with a greeting or a scream. She just tackled Roy with a hug, pulled back slightly, and kissed him full on the mouth in front of everyone.

I laughed, unable to help it, especially since quite a few in the army whistled at the public display. A limping Fiona skipped close to me, and took Idenn off my back silently, with a giant smile and tears of happiness. She carried her over to a bleeding, but smiling Wuotan, who gave me a giant, proud grin. I wondered why they were being so silent, but then I was tackled off my feet by a laughing Fae, who babbled something about how she knew we wouldn't keep her waiting long. From there, I was enveloped in hugs from all sorts of people. Sue and Guinevere were among the first, I remembered, followed by Tate, Miredy, and Clarine. I barely caught hugs from Rutger and Cecilia, reassuring shoulder squeezes from Deke and Perceval. Some, like Sofia and Ray and Igrene and Astore, didn't even try to get close, just caught my eye to smile reassuringly. Others forced their way through, like Fir and Lalum and even Cinead surprisingly enough, to grab my hand and babble something out that I just couldn't remember because I was too busy trying to not get buried by all the people cheering.

At some point, though, Elphin snagged my arm and tugged me a little bit out of the crowd, saying nothing but giving me a reassuring smile. I wondered why for a brief moment, but then a hand wrapped around my waist, and I looked up in time for Klein to kiss my cheek and smile softly at me. I smiled back and leaned against him, using him as a crutch as I smiled and praised every single person who came to reassure themselves that I had actually survived.

It was all right. I didn't mind. We did it. It was over. We won.

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**Why did the Sanctuary collapse?** Fiona and Wuotan are only able to speculate as well. Their theory is that the Ending Winter weakened its infrastructure and that it's been slowly deteriorating for the past thousand years. The sudden influxes of power, from everything, might've just weakened it too much. At the same time, though, there didn't seem to be signs of such potential destruction any of the other times the Weapons were used, so perhaps we'll never know. For all we know, it was the ghosts of the dragons who died, angry that we had defeated, and saved, their demon...
dragon. Then again, Wuotan and Fiona released a lot of power too…

Bah, I suppose it doesn’t matter much. It happened, and we survived. That's enough.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: Well, here we are, the final chapter. I combined the last three chapters since they’re rather short, both in length and in plot. Karel is the final potential recruit for the army, and holds the honor of having the highest growths of any character in the series (he is GUARANTEED a perfect level up, guaranteed +2 HP, with a chance of +3, and has a chance to get +2 to in everything but Res, though the catch is that he can only use those awesome growths once. Since his recruitment comes at the very end, I don’t have Irene making notes for him.

I had War Dragons show up mostly to provide an explanation for why you have a small group heading into the Sanctuary in the first place, and to take the place of the dragon reinforcements that appear during the final chapter. Brunja is actually quite the powerhouse, but since she suffers from the low defense most mages have, it's damn easy to one-round her.

Chapter 24 in-game is a loooong exposition dump with multiple mini-bosses (seven in game, I think) and then Jahn, who does not live to the hype, and is plagued by the same weakness that the other dragons are. Now, you can say that it's because the Divine Weapons are so strong, but he still only has one-range. I shortened it considerably since most of the exposition already happened, and changed it for Wuotan and Fiona doing the honors, since… I felt it the most fitting, considering the rest of the series.

The 'trap' mentioned is hinted in the last epilogue of Thief's Legacy, and this is the payoff for that: an explanation for why Idenn is such a weak final boss (although, tbf, Idenn is only weak because the game literally gave you a plot coupon for one-rounding her with base Roy; she has good stats). Fae is a required party member for these last couple of chapters, which is why she's with Roy and Irene during the final bit.

I had the last battle be with so few people because it's less of a 'battle' and more of a 'decision', and as a callback to Thief's Testimony, where the final battle there was fought with only two people. The Amanda Hilda mentions is the POV char for Thief's Testimony.

Did I ever put Irene's growth rates? I don't think so. So, here they are:

HP - 105%, Str - 40%, Mag - 0%, Skl - 65%, Spd - 55%, Lck - 30%, Def - 10%, Res - 25%

Next Chapter - Epilogue 1 (there will be two epilogues)
Epilogue - Closure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Epilogue - Closure

The Campaign is over, at long last. Fiona and Wuotan took Iden back to Arcadia, not wanting to overwhelm her with so many strange people and noises when she wakes up. We see them off with a smile, and then return to Castle Bern where the rest of our army waited.

It doesn't quite seem real. But it is. We won. We actually won.

"You really have pretty hair, Guinevere," I commented as I brushed it. We were in her room, at her vanity in fact, waiting for her coronation to begin, and I was fussing with her hair because of a lack of things to do. "You should grow it out again."

"I think I will," she murmured. She sighed, though, posture drooping. "There is going to be so much to do."

"Yeah, the stories always stop at 'happily ever after', with no mention of the work." But it was easy to see why. While this work would be needed, it was also… boring. It wasn't something to make tales over, at least. "Did you see Roy accidentally talk himself in and out of a hole earlier?"

"With Lilina?" She brightened and laughed, as I knew she would. "Calling me one of the loveliest he had ever seen, and when Lilina asked about herself, he commented that she was even lovelier?"

"Yes, exactly!" I giggled, grinning at the mental image. The two had gone so red. "They're so ridiculous. We'll have to tease them about it."

"Indeed." She laughed a little more, and then smiled at me, via her reflection. "You'll be heading to Hanover after, yes?"

"Yeah, I've got something to return, and I'll stay for Mildain's coronation." I focused on a particularly stubborn knot in her hair. "From there, I'll leave with you. Then we'll figure out from there what to do."

"And Klein's okay with this?"

"Klein's going to be busy anyway. We're both workaholics, if you haven't noticed." I grinned and she laughed again. "So…" A knock on the door made both of us look up. "Come in?"

"I'm sorry to bother." The door opened to reveal Galle, dressed in his ceremonial armor. He had finally been cleared to walk around by the healers. "The coronation is about to start," he explained, smiling reassuringly. "Miredy thought you might want to come ahead, but she's busy with security detail."

"There's no need to explain why you're here, Galle," Guinevere chided. "I'm happy to see you." She stood up slowly, and I hopped to my feet with her. "...Here I go."

"I'm right here," I whispered reassuringly. She smiled at it. "Let's go. You can do this."
"...Right." She nodded, eyes determined. "Gale, escort us there. It's time I live up to my words."

We all knew she would, and before long, all of Bern would too. I had faith.

"I can see why Fiona insisted we come by here," Roy breathed. He and I walked through the beautiful grove near the Shrine of Seals, marveling at its wonder. Aunt Lyn had led us to it, and now, those who wanted to visit could, in pairs of two. He and I were the last pair to come in. "Wow…"

"The graves of the Heroes, including the ones lost to legend," I murmured, crouching by one. 'Genevieve' was on it, and I knew the name as Roland's wife, Hartmut's younger sister. I studied the dates on the grave, and noticed there were two sets of dates on it. One… had to be using the calendar used before the Scouring. I'd never thought of that before. But using that, I could quickly deduce how old they were, during the Scouring. "I can see why they would rest here. This has to be very close to Mother Earth's meadows, to have such beauty."

"They were our age." Roy studied another grave. 'Amir' and 'Sacae' were written on the stone. "I never thought of that. They were only a little older than me. It makes them…"

"I feel like I understand them even more now." Most of the stories were likely based on their older selves, the ones who had gone through war and survived. "They were like us. But they took steps to try and help us."

"As did the generations that followed, directly or indirectly." Roy walked to another grave, and ran his fingers over the lettering, reading.

I hunted for two in particular, and found them easily: Hilda's and Hartmut's. I studied the dates and noticed, surprisingly, that they only died 150 years ago. They'd lived in the peace they created for 850 years. I wondered why they died before Fiona. Was it because they'd been half-dragons who couldn't transform? Was Fiona doing something to extend her life? Was it simply luck? Were the Divine Weapons to blame?

The wind blew slightly at that last thought, and I wondered if that was it. The Divine Weapons which poisoned their creator, which warped reality to trigger the Ending Winter and made Elibe dangerous to dragons… perhaps they had shortened their lifespans too. Then again, perhaps the dead were simply telling me to not fret over it. It happened, and I had enough to worry about already.

I sat down among the flowers and began to sing as many songs as I could think of, happy and cheerful songs. Roy smiled as he listened, and the wind swirled around us, telling me that the heroes liked them too, from the Meadows.

I went my own way after the Shrine of Seals, riding to Bulgar to check the initial stages of reconstructing. I had to solve a few disputes, mostly born from tensions and some culture clashes, before riding on to my next destination. Sin had given me as detailed locations as he could remember, and Christopher had sent me a letter giving directions from Etruria. From there, it didn't take me long to find my parents' graves, once I neared the border by Araphan.

There was a large tree on the border, on the small hills that marked the boundary between the Plains and Lycia, where you had a lovely view of Araphan. I knew the tree well. Mom, Dad, Sue, and I had often stopped here for a picnic lunch, before continuing on through Lycia. Sin had recognized the tree from our stories, and so, he had picked that spot on the border to bury Dad,
since Dad's will had only asked that he be buried near Araphan. Since Mom's will was never discovered, Uncle Mark had decided to do as the Etrurians do, bury her next to her husband.

When I reached the tree, I dismounted, and walked to the graves. There were fresh flowers planted near the markers, and the dirt was moist, freshly packed. The markers themselves were stone, carved with their names, epithets, and the like. I smiled bitterly at how… impersonal they were. Like Uncle Hector's, they told only the barest minimum about them. It only said what they were, not who.

I wondered if I should write it down. I wondered if I should have Mom's logbook published. That way, those who looked could discover 'who' we all were too.

Crunching grass made me jerk up, one hand falling to my quiver, while the other went for Rienfleche, hooked on my back. But I paused when I realized who had come: Wuotan. "I'm sorry," I whispered, slowly relaxing. I felt better seeing how startled he was, and how his hand had fallen to the sword he wore. "I didn't think anyone else would come here today."

"I must say, I thought the same," Wuotan replied, laughing softly. He relaxed as well, smiling. "I would've thought you were still in Bern."

"I've business in Etruria, and there's Mildain's coronation to prepare for."

"You're going to be very busy for the rest of your life."

"Well, some things never change." I shrugged, glancing at the graves. That was why I had wanted to come here. I had no idea when I would have the time again. At first, I had planned to tell them everything that had happened, but that was silly. They already knew, thanks to Mother Earth. So, instead I… I could finally give my goodbyes. At last, I could give them a proper goodbye. "What brings you here?"

"I wanted to pay my respects to the fallen, so I was going on one final trip to do that."

"Is that so?" I frowned at a certain word. "What do you mean by 'final'?"

"Well, I suppose it's 'second to last', but it'll be my final journey through Elibe." His smile became tired, and relieved. "I will go through the Dragon's Gate, soon. I grow very weary, and I have kept my promises. I know the fate of Idenn, and I have seen the answer given. Fiona will not last longer, and Alberich has no need of me. It's time I move on, and leave Elibe to the future."

"...Is that so?" My instinct was to protest, but I bit the impulse down and really looked at him. He had always seemed old and tired, but now, it really did look as if the last of his energy had drained away. "That's a shame. You know so much…"

"Most of my books are really easily to find in the Bernese Archives, and in Arcadia, and I've actually copied quite a few of my notes." His smile grew, slightly. "I gave some to Lugh, and to Nimue when she kept badgering me. What I forgot can be simply looked up. What isn't written down..." He shrugged. "There are some memories I wish to keep to myself. Not many, of course. I wrote a lot, to make sure I did remember. But some are simply… mine."

"I can understand." I thought a bit about those records he mentioned, though. I reminded me of what I'd just thought of. "I'm thinking of writing about the Campaign and this war. It's more work, but maybe if there was more information, people can remember who we were, instead of the legends."

"That's a worthy endeavor." His smile became proud. "I believe… Hilda left some memoirs and
notes from the Scouring, if you'd like to include that. They should be in Arcadia."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, and there might be some testimonies in the Ostian libraries that'll catch your eye, though that pertains more to the Campaign of Fire, I believe." His smile widened. I'll make sure to make copies for you, to make it easier. I'll have to figure out where to leave them, though…"

"You could… bring them to Ostia?" I smiled hesitantly. "You're going through the Gate, right? That's what you just said?"

"Yes, it's easy enough for me to open, and just as easy for me to close it on the other side." He frowned a little in thought. "Why?"

"Well, Uncle Nils went through. I never met him, but that doesn't mean he's not family. I think others, like Aunt Lyn and Uncle Eliwood, would love to write him too." I gave him my best pleading look. "So…?"

"...Well, I'll have to pass through Lycia anyway to reach Valor." He sighed, smiling slightly. "Lilina's coronation. I'll give them to you then, and take whatever letters you all might have for Nils." He shook his head. "But, regardless…"

"You want to pay your respects." I stepped to the side, and fussed over my mare as Wuotan stepped to the graves and knelt down, bowing his head slightly. I thought he whispered something, but I couldn't tell what the words were. I thought it might be an old prayer, a draconic prayer.

When we was done, he straightened, gave me a smile and a nod, and began walking away. As he did, I found myself wondering why he'd take the time to pay respects to my parents. He said he was going to pay his respects to all the dead, but why start here, with my parents? Was it because they were mine? Was there something else? I thought so. It was just a feeling, but I thought so.

...Wuotan was a dragon. The Lady Hildegarde had been...

"...Hey, Wuotan?" I called, before I lost the thought. He paused and turned, looking at me curiously. As he did, I noticed something I hadn't quite caught before. His eyes… were the same color as the Lady Hildegarde's. They were the same vibrant blue. "You're… her father, aren't you?" I didn't clarify who the 'her' was. I didn't have to.

"Yes, I am," he replied. After all, he knew exactly what I was asking anyway. "I spent a long time, spoiling her, spoiling her child, watching over her descendants from a distance. I grew fond of Nicholas, though sadly, I never got to meet your mother." He smiled softly, proudly. "But, I did get to meet you. And if you are the last, I have no regrets. It has been a delight, Irene. I can think of no worthy inheritor of their legacies."

"...Thank you." I smiled back, the best smile I could give. "I appreciate it, everything really, a lot. So thank you. I'll see you again, but I'll just repeat the sentiment then."

"Until then, Irene." He turned and walked off, humming Sun's Fire as he did. The sound echoed through the grass, and the wind danced to the tune.

Mom and Dad liked the song. I wondered if he knew that.

"There's a vault in the crypts?" I asked, still incredulous even after Uncle Mark led me through the twisting path. "Why have I never heard of this before?"
"It's really only something the head of the house knows, because there's nothing really here," Uncle Mark answered. He had a smug smile, though, pleased to startle me. "I don't think even Katri knew of them, despite using these things to cheat at hide and seek when we were little."

"How is this different from the normal vault?"

"We keep house treasures here, things the Lady Hildegarde wanted hidden away." We reached the end of the path, and he unlocked the half-hidden door there, pushing it open with a high-pitched creak that made my skin crawl. "Her armor from the Scouring is here, for one. Supposedly, her main weapon had been here as well, but she took it with her when she left to travel."

"That's the Chakram, right? Uncle Matthew has it."

"Yeah, we'll just let him keep it. I'm sure Aunt Amanda would've liked it to be kept around there, since she considered that her home and she was the one who found it."

"It was found in the desert, for some reason?"

"I suppose the Lady Hildegarde just wanted it gone, after a certain point, or perhaps it was stolen from her grave and lost to the sands." He waved me inside the room, and I looked around skeptically as I noticed… how freaking bare it was. "I warned you. "It's just the things she wanted to hide."

"I'm surprised there's so little." There were only three things in here, three pedestals. One was more of an armor stand, showcasing an odd set of armor, towards the right. Towards the left, there was an open, empty box. The middle had a strange purple gem, strangely dark even accounting for the lack of light. "So…"

"So, I take the necklace from you." Uncle Mark held out his hand and I placed the necklace he'd given me there. "And I officially relieve you of your ceremonial position as Hanover's representative in this war."

"I'm thrilled." I kept my voice as dry as possible, and he laughed, setting the necklace in the empty box and gently closing it. "I'm glad everyone is recovering."

"Yeah, thankfully." Uncle Mark smiled, and it was a bit tired. He wasn't fully recovered yet, and it was starting to show. "Let's head back up."

"Okay." However, my eyes fell again on the strange purple gem, and I crept over to it, far too curious. I watched it swirl with muted purples and blacks, and brought up my hand to touch it. I quickly retracted it, though, feeling the power radiating off of it.

As I studied it, I thought of the stone Idenn had tried to use, and the color it had been before it revealed it's true light. The power that stone held had been weaker than this, but it seemed similar enough. That gave me a guess as to what this really was, and I wondered if this was the real reason behind the vault, and it's secrecy.

This was Idenn's dragonstone. This was the Demon Dragon's dragonstone, which Zephel had tried to steal, and failed because he hadn't realized there was a ruse. This was the dragons' most powerful weapon, tucked away in an underground vault that even the guardians barely remembered.

What a brilliant, if unconventional, trap. It was no wonder the Lady Hildegarde had been the tactician during the Scouring.
"Irene?" Uncle Mark called, dragging me from my musings. He looked at me worriedly from the doorway. "Everything all right?"

"Everything is just fine, Uncle Mark," I replied. I turned from the dragonstone and skipped to his side, smiling. "So, come on!" I hooked my arm around his and dragged him out the door, only letting him pause long enough to lock it behind us. "Aren't you supposed to be throwing me a party or something because I'm with Klein?"

"That is all Maria's planning, and I'm going to be damage control." He laughed, perfectly cheerful. "So, I'll show you what she and Anastasia have plotted, and you can tell me what you don't like…"

"That'll be perfect!" I smiled, and let myself relax. I was no longer the tactician of an army. I had many other duties, but that was fine. I had my path. "Please tell me that there's no red, though? I've told them a hundred times that so much red is for mourning, but they never remember!" I had my life. I'd find my happiness.

I could live with this, easily. I could be proud of this, easily. This was where I made my own legacy, and Father Sky, I was going to make it.

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Fates of… people I actually know the names of... after the War with Bern:

**Roy, Young Lion, and Lilina, Duchess of Light** - After the war, Lilina was officially coronated as the Duchess of Ostia. During her first few months, she worked tirelessly to rebuild and unite the Lycian Alliance, and she took a second coronation, this time as Lycia's queen. Roy stood by her every step of the way, using his influence among the other countries to gather much needed supplies, and building on those friendships to force strong alliances for Lycia. A few months after Lilina became queen, the two were officially betrothed, and the entire country celebrated the union. Aunt Lyn and Uncle Eliwood laughed until they cried at the news, and they both mentioned something about a dream Uncle Hector had. They refuse to tell more, so we write it off as the adults being weird.

**Fae, Dragon Princess** - Fae returned to her home of Arcadia. However, Igrene reassures us that she will visit before long, and we'll work out a thing where she spends half her time in Arcadia, and half with us. Fae, of course, is ecstatic about the idea, almost as enthusiastic about it as she is about helping with Idenn's recovery.

**Marcus, Loyal Paladin** - Marcus finally retired after the war, to the surprised relief of everyone. Harken took up his old role as leader of the knights, and Marcus himself became a tutor to knights in training, helping them firm their resolve and path as they struggled to find their direction in life.

**Allen, Ferocious Knight, and Tate, Blessed Knight** - At first after the war, Allen returned to Pherae to help it rebuild, and Tate became my bodyguard on an 'extended contract' with Ilia. However, within a few months, Allen was at Reglay, assisting there, telling Tate that he felt uneasy when she wasn't around. Tate had promptly turned as red as his hair, and yelled a bit before admitting she had been worried as well. The two hesitantly began dating, and though my duties drag Tate away often, their relationship steadily blooms, much like flowers in spring.

**Bors, Impregnable Knight** - Bors returned to Ostia, where he assisted in helping the city recover. His kind nature helped people regain their trust in the Ostian Knights, and the people always look forward to his patrols through the city.

**Wolt, Dutiful Archer** - Wolt remained a knight at Roy's side, rarely far away, though he spent as much time in the kitchens as he did on the practice range. His cooking had become quite famous
thanks to serving such a large army, and he had many clamoring to be his student. He took it all in stride, smiling and laughing all the while.

**Lance, Tranquil Knight** - Lance returned to Pherae, staying close to Roy in order to help advise. His cool head helps him look at problems logically, and his experience in leadership and in making plans with the War Council allowed him to assist greatly in rebuilding Lycia.

**Elen, Saint of Bern, and Zeiss, Crimson Lightning** - Zeis and Elen work together to help rebuild Bern, focusing on patching up broken buildings and healing injuries. They both suffer criticism at first for 'betraying Bern', but their loyalty, determination, and kindness wins the people over, and news spread quickly of the lovers who tend to even the smallest of scrapes. At first the two were embarrassed by the rumors, but they have since embraced it, even officially dating now.

**Shanna, Cheerful Knight** - After the war, Shanna was officially knighted and became a full-fledged pegasus knight, quickly becoming the captain of her own Wing. Her cheer soothed many a weary soul as she helped Ilia rebuild, and she happily flew all over the continent, just to say 'hi' to old friends.

**Deke, Wounded Tiger** - After the war, Deke broke up his mercenary band to accept a more permanent job: being Klein’s bodyguard. Though he feels the burn of Armads in his blood even now, he retains his cool demeanor, and intimidating presence. He also retains his love of teasing his 'Little Master Klein'.

**Ward, Confident Axefighter** - Ward returned to the Western Isles, working alongside Ekhidna to cultivate the wilds, and slowly restore the ravages lands. He sketches designs for fortified cities, and quite a few builders look forward to attempting to build them.

**Lott, Silent Axefighter** - After the war, Lott actually married his childhood sweetheart, and attempted to lead a quiet life. Ekhidna and Ward, however, wouldn't let him, and so, he split his time between his new wife and his little sister, and restoring the Western Isles.

**Chad, Lycian Lynx** - After the war, Chad stopped his thieving ways, taking up healing as a full time job. He travels the continent, and tends to the orphaned and homeless, directing them to where they might receive help. He also gathers information to give to the leaders he knows, never able to quite break the habit of scouting everywhere.

**Lugh, Child of Anima** - Reunited with his parents, he makes a new life among his parents' new holdings, starting small magic school that caters to the abandoned and orphaned children. He teaches them from Wuotan's old books, learning all the while himself, and frequently asks advice from Uncle Pent, Aunt Priscilla, and Uncle Erk in how to best guide his students. His parents are, unsurprisingly, proud of him.

**Clarine, Rebellious Princess, and Rutger, Lone Swordsman** - Clarine and Rutger settle in Bulgar, where they begin picking up the pieces and slowly work on rebuilding the proud and beautiful town. Life is sometimes difficult, between the stress of rebuilding, Clarine adapting to the new life, and Rutger dealing with his traumas. But the two remain together throughout it, always working things through to come up with compromises, and many look upon their love as an ideal relationship.

**Saul, Priest of Freedom** - After the war, the Church offered to make him a high-ranked bishop. But Saul refused, preferring to keep to his modest lifestyle and travel on his own to tend to the healing people. His flirtations continued as always, but none could deny the peace and care he gave to the people.
**Dorothy, Gentle Archer** - Dorothy continued with her job as Saul's bodyguard, and babysitter, following him everywhere and scolding. Though rumors popped up that they were romantically involved, she always laughed it off.

**Sue, Wolf of the Winds, and Sin, Falcon of the Plains** - The two returned to the Kutolah, working to help the fractured tribe heal. Grandpa quickly cedes leadership to them, and the two work together to bring the Kutolah to their former glory, and work to help Bulgar rebuild. Sin handles the more internal aspects of rebuilding the tribe and plains, while Sue works on the external, using her background to forge formal alliances between the Sacae and the other nations, and strengthen trade and protections throughout.

**Zealot, Knightly Leader, and Juno, Motherly Knight** - After the war, the two returned to Ilia to care for their daughter and reunite the fractured land and knights. Juno focused more on uniting the knights, while Zealot focused on the land. Thanks to the increased trade from the countries, and Lilina's proposed 'swap' among their soldiers, Ilia quickly begins to prosper, to the point that many wonder if it should become an 'official' kingdom, with Zealot as its king. Juno and Zealot are startled by the talks, though, as they simply wish to live together, happily caring for their daughter.

**Treck, Peaceful Knight** - Treck continued as a mercenary, serving in Zealot's group. His habit of sleeping never faded, nor did his skill in battle. His laidback ways even inspired quite a few knights to take things easy, for better or for worse.

**Noah, Vagrant Knight, and Fir, Sword Saint** - Noah left the Ilian knights, and traveled alongside Fir as she continued her path of the sword. Though many offer them high ranked positions in armies, the two are simply content with traveling with each other, and to take on battles they wish to. Fir still carries the Darkness Blade, and writes often to reassure her friends that it has not taken her mind still.

**Astore, Shadow of Ostia, and Igrene, Guardian of Nabata** - The two talked after the final battle, and went their separate ways. No one quite knows what they talked of, but many note how, even as Igrene left, the two gave each other longing looks. Lilina plots to get them to talk again, and I certainly do not mind assisting.

**Gwendolyn (Wendy), Beautiful Knight** - Wendy continued her duties as an armored knight of Ostia, become the captain of Lilina's bodyguards. Many other girls soon follow in her footsteps, inspired to don the armor and strength thanks to her impressive demeanor, and gentle smile.

**Barth, Knight of Justice** - Barth was named the new leader of the Ostia Knights, taking over Oswin's role. Though quiet, and hurting still from the rebellion, he worked tirelessly to lead the knights to surpass their former glory.

**Ogier, Little Hero** - Ogier stayed on as a mercenary for Ostia a while longer before moving on, traveling the continent and taking jobs to help rebuild the lands. He remains humble about his part in the war, always citing that he wouldn't have made it without his comrades.

**Gonzales, Gentle Brigand** - Gonzales returned to his home in the Western Isles, greeted with cheers and praise instead of rocks and stones. He works with Ekhidna to heal the Isles, a job he takes on happily.

**Geese, Ruler of the Seas** - Geese reopened his trading routes, taking advantage of his exclusive access to the royals of the nation, and his profits instantly soared. However, he donated large amounts of his profits away, particularly to the Western Isles, and always cuts a deal with those from the army. He also, however, needs to keep a wary eye out for his brother, as the Davros like
robbing his ships to make sure he doesn't get a big ego.

**Lalum, Cheerful Duchess** - Though Lalum continued to dance, Uncle Douglas abdicated his title of Great General and Duke, leaving Lalum to inherit everything. She devotes herself to helping repair the fractured relationship between the Isles and Etruria, while always keeping the brightest smile on her face.

**Ekhidna, Hero of the West** - As can be expected, Ekhidna devoted herself to rebuilding and repairing the Western Isles as soon as she returned. She works tirelessly alongside the remnants of the former rebel army to bring it to new glories.

**Elphin/Mildan, King of Etruria** - Mildain was officially coronated soon after the war ended, and he immediately began reforming the country. His courts protested all the sudden changes, but he held firm, determined to bring Etruria to greater prosperities, and to once again be the country Saint Elimine was proud to rule. He also has to deal with people insisting he marries, but he's ignored most of the suitors for now.

**Bartre, Ferocious Warrior** - After the war, Bartre returned to his home and, surprisingly, started a tavern. His jolly personality and talent for cooking earns him success, though I believe his stories of the Campaign of Fire and the War with Bern are what ensnare his customers the most.

**Ray, Child of Darkness, and Sofia, Prophet of Nabata** - Sofia stayed with Ray even after he moved in with his parents in their new holdings, and the two of them began studying dark magic together, scouring through Nimue’s old books for secrets, and studying Apocalypse to discover just how they work. Though Sofia does return to Arcadia from time to time, it seems she has chosen to actually live with Ray, something that Ray blushes at, even as he tries to play it off.

**Cath, Master Thief** - Cath joins Ostia as an official spy, continuing to steal from the rich and give to the poor. She works tirelessly in also ferreting out the secrets of greedy nobles to give to Roy, now fully convinced that he keeps his word, and does the right thing for the people, no matter what.

**Miredy, Crimson Knight and Galle, Hawk of Bern** - After the war, the two work together to rebuild the army, and to reconnect with each other given their time apart. The distance, however, made their love even stronger, and they wait only for Bern's official mourning to end to be wed. Life is hard for the two Wyvern Generals, but they rise above it with grace and determination.

**Perceval, Knight of Knights, and Cecilia, Valkyrie of Valkyries** - With Uncle Douglas stepping down, Perceval obtains the title of Great General, among the youngest to ever hold the title, and struggles to balance ruling Caliburn and the army. Thankfully, though, Cecilia is near to remind him to not do everything himself, as she retains her own title as Mage General, and she uses her power to help Perceval, Klein, and Mildain push needed reforms through quickly. To the surprise of no one, within a few months after the war, the two were engaged. Apparently, their soldiers even made bets on when.

**Garret, Veteran Berserker** - Garret settled in a village not far from Castle Ostia and lived a surprisingly normal life. He worked the fields tirelessly, and refuses to pick up a weapon ever again. Lilina visits him often, though I'm still confused on how she recruited two bandits to help us.

**Hugh, Streetwise Mage** - Although he was offered many jobs, Hugh refused them all, preferring to go his own path. He actually stays with Aunt Nino in her new castle, to learn more about Anima magic, and to assist Lugh with his school. Aunt Nino is happy to have 'Uncle Canas's son' with her, and Hugh seems to enjoy being doted on, even if he always squeaks when Uncle Jaffar
accidentally startles him.

**Douglas, Lionhearted General** - Uncle Douglas stepped down as Great General, and Duke, after Mildain's coronation, taking the fall for the Western Isles Campaign. Despite this, though, he is often dragged back to court to give advice, and often jokes how retirement isn't as peaceful as he had hoped. Still, he looks on all of us proudly, and it's clear he loves every second of it.

**Nimue, Hermit of the Mountain** - After obtaining some of Wuotan's records, she retreated back to her home in the mountains to continue studying. Hugh sends letters from time to time, and she sends replies, the only sign we have that she still lives.

**Dayan, Silver Wolf** - Grandpa laid the groundwork for Sue and Sin before stepping down to be an advisor as they rebuilt the Kutolah and the Sacae. He lent his aid and wisdom to any who asked, and never lost his habit of helping anyone who came to him. He tells me how much he looks forward to my eventual wedding, and Sue's. I think he plans on celebrating for Mom and Dad too.

**Yodel, High Bishop** - Yodel was quickly named Archbishop of the Church, likely due to his prominent role during the war. He uses the new position and power to exact reforms throughout the Church of Saint Elimine, bringing it closer to Saint Elimine's actual teachings, and to assist Mildain in turning Etruria into a prosperous nation. He never lets the power go to his head, though, thankfully.

**Karel, Sword Saint** - Karel actually remains with Cinead as they relocate, having no quarrel with living among dragons. He keeps quiet, and tries to live his life peacefully, though he does leave from time to time to check on his brother in law, Bartre, and his niece, Fir.

**Fiona, Divine Dragon** - Fiona returns to Arcadia, where she and Fae work to heal Idenn. Progress is nonexistent, but the chance alone is more than she could've ever dreamed. Her body is slowly failing her, though, and it's possible she doesn't have many years left. Despite this, she continues to do her best, teaching what she can, and helping Cinead relocate the dragons of his village.

**Wuotan, Fire Dragon** - As Wuotan said he would, after Lilina's coronation, he left Elibe all together, traveling through the Dragon's Gate. He carried with him numerous letters to Uncle Nils, telling him of how life had passed during the last twenty years. He told me how he plans on recording the War with Bern among the Dragon Histories, to make sure none forget. I had a feeling it was the greatest honor a dragon could give us, nowadays. His proud smile told me that.

**Guinevere, Queen of Bern** - Guinevere took the throne among whispers, those who couldn't believe she had actually defeated Zephiel for the throne. However, her determination to succeed, and her willingness to listen, gradually wins the people over, and as time passes, they note how Guinevere is nothing like Desmond, as they had feared, and they begin to hesitantly place their hopes in her, as they had with Zephiel. She looks forward to letters from her friends, and my return visits, though she isn't much liking how many suitors she suddenly has.

**Klein, Silver Prince, and Irene, Wolf Princess** - As he said he would, after the war, Klein stepped down as Archery General to become an administrator for the Court, quickly becoming Mildain's right hand. He works tirelessly to reform Etruria from the ground up, reworking laws through diplomacy and compromises. I do what I can to assist, while also doing my duties as Guinevere's Queen's Own, gathering information and giving her advice as I assist the continent in repairing. We're together as often as we are apart, thanks to how much needs to be done, but we still exchange our silly little notes, and fully enjoy the times we are together. We wait to be wedded until things have calmed slightly, but already, Etruria looks forward to it, to my intense
embarrassment.

Finally, the countless soldiers, pages, doctors, and... everyone who fought alongside us... I hope and pray, to Father Sky and Mother Earth, that they live the rest of their lives in peace and happiness. They deserve it, for everything they have given us. If not for their help, there's no way we would have made it. So, I hope they enjoy the peace they fought for. We'll continue our own fights, to make it so.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: FE6 doesn't really have 'shared endings' between couples, with the sole exception of Roy and his chosen wife. Epilogues are based a bit on game, but with modifications based on the story, and what Irene would know at 'this' point in her life. Some titles for the characters are also a bit different, to fit in with what Irene knows and how they were characterized.

I'll also be the first to admit that I couldn't remember what names I used for some of the characters (since, at the time, I'd been playing with a translation patch, long before FE heroes localized all the names), so if some mysteriously changed here, I apologize, but I didn't feel like adding that research on top of what I already had to do for this chapter.

Next Chapter - Epilogue 2 (final epilogue)
Epilogue - Three Years Later

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Epilogue - Three Years Later

"Be careful when dismounting, Irene."

"Father Sky, Tate, I'm pregnant, not crippled."

"Says the girl who was so nauseous earlier that she couldn't even stay on her own mount."

"That was then, and this is now."

"Yes, and now I say, be careful when dismounting."

"Grr…" I sulked at Tate, and she scowled back. We held the expressions for all of half a second before bursting into laughter. "In my defense, the heat is killer."

"That's true." Still, Tate helped me down, and immediately began fussing over me. "We should've prepared a little better, taking everything into account."

"I'm only two months in, you know."

"Yes, but that's still…" She sighed, frowning. "Whatever. I'll continue to fret. I'm surprised you and Klein had enough time for you to get pregnant. I don't think you two have spent more than a night together, if that, since you got married two years ago."

"We had our honeymoon. Besides, you don't need a whole night." I grinned, full of mischief. "His desk is very sturdy."

"Okay?" She gave me a confused look, before it dawned on her and she went bright red. "Irene!"

"You should see your face!" I laughed and laughed, unable to help it. "Well, be happy. I'll be on maternity leave from my duties before long, and you'll get more time for dates with Allen!"

"You will never stop teasing."

"Nope~" I grinned, and she smiled back, both of us giggling. "Oh, damn, we're supposed to have greeted the elder or whatever with Roy, right?"

"I think he's already excused you." She pointed to where Roy was chatting with the elder of Arcadia. She then pointed to the pink and orange blur coming our way. "Brace for Fae?" I did, instinctively, but to my surprise, she skidded to a stop just before she tackled into me for a hug. "Or… not?"

"Hiya!" Fae chirped, giving me a bright smile. "Igrene says I gotta be extra careful because you've got a baby in your belly!" She gave me a gentle hug, peering up at me curiously. "How did a baby get there, though? Did you eat one?"

"No, Fae, the baby is…" I began, trying to think of how to explain. Fae still had the mentality of a child, after all, and things like sex weren't… exactly something to explain. "The baby is in my
womb, which is below my stomach."

"Oooohhh." She smiled again. "How did the baby get there?"

"Let's just go with 'Mother Earth blessed me' for now." I reached down to ruffle her hair. "You ready to stay with Roy and Lilina?"

"Yeah!" Fae giggled, jumping back. "Roy and Lilina are getting married, right?"

"Yes, they are." It was hard to believe, but they were. They had originally planned on waiting a little bit longer, despite literally the entire continent looking forward to the wedding, but... "How's Fiona?"

"She's over there!" Fae pointed to where Fiona hobbled down the streets of Arcadia towards us. I winced at how stiffly she moved. Though she hadn't aged a day since the war ended, it became increasingly clear that Fiona's body was falling apart at last, and she didn't have much longer. Roy and Lilina had decided to hold their wedding a little earlier than intended, so that Fiona could see it. I wondered if she would even make it to see my child be born. "Fiona! They're here!" Fae waved cheerfully, and Fiona waved back, smiling brightly. "I'm gonna help her!" Fae skipped over, and Tate and I exchanged a look. She smiled and nodded, going after Fae, and I moved to where Roy and the elder person talked. She and I had gotten very good over the last few years communicating without words.

"Irene, how are you doing?" Roy asked, peering at me worriedly as the elder person left. He'd gotten one last growth spurt over the past couple of years, but he still remained shorter than me. I teased him silly over it. "Has your nausea passed?"

"For now, it has, but I shall enjoy getting out of the heat," I replied, smiling slightly. I looked over Arcadia, thinking. "I hope one day soon, all of Elibe can be like this."

"We've got it, a little, already." The dragons in Cinead's village hesitantly set up their own villages, mostly in Pherae, since it was widely known that Roy was quarter-dragon. "Bit by bit, Elibe will heal, and once again become a land where dragons and humans live side by side." Roy smiled briefly, but it faded. "There's been little change in Idenn, apparently."

"Is that so?" I looked around, and found Idenn not far away, under a tree with Alberich, where it seemed like the two were reading through a book together. Alberich and Fae took it upon themselves to tend to Idenn and care for her, and Alberich lovingly referred to Idenn as 'aunt'. I wondered if she stopped being confused by the term. "Well, there's no need to give up hope."

"Yes, even if it burns." He smiled again, this time shyly. "Oh, gods, I'm going to be married soon."

"To be fair, Roy, you and Lilina have been acting like a married couple for a while now. Trust the married woman."

"W-we have not!"

"Sue says the same, and she's also a married woman."

"It hasn't even been a year since she and Sin married!" Roy sulked and I laughed. It had been a fun ceremony in Bulgar. Hopefully, Rutger and Clarine would marry soon too. The people of Bulgar would love it. "Are you going to Bern after the wedding? I know Guinevere will be attending."

"Yeah, she wouldn't miss it for the world." I smiled slightly, remembering how excited she'd been. It reminded me of how she'd been before my wedding, and even more like how she'd been when
Miredy and Galle married. "But no, I won't. Guinevere will be heading to Etruria to continue negotiations with Mildain about the new trade agreement. After that, I'll be on maternity leave."

"So, it'll be much easier to visit you." He grinned. "Will you publish some more books? You published Aunt Katri's 'true' logbook, and your own, right?"

"I'm almost done with a couple of other things, and the like. I'll be publishing the Lady Hildegarde's records soon, actually, as well as some testimonies from Great-Aunt Amanda." I had been hesitant, but decided to go for it. They were things that needed to be known. Mildain and Guinevere had agreed with me. "I might look into some other things, though. Klein and I plan on relaxing a lot, though."

"I'm sure. Dad and Aunt Lyn are looking forward to the baby, though."

"I've already been warned that they're going to spoil my child in place of my parents." I smiled and looked up to the sky. "It's been three years..." It had had been three years since the war ended. It had been three years since Uncle Hector died, since Mom and Dad had died.

"I'm not sure if it feels so long or so short." He smiled, but it was bittersweet. "We've worked so hard, but it feels like we haven't really done a lot. Everywhere is still recovering, still healing."

"Yes, I know." I sighed, letting my own smile fall. Many days, it felt like we weren't making any headway. Rebuilding and reforming took so long... "But, we need..."  

A little yelp caught my ear, and Roy and I turned our attention towards the tree. Apparently, a little bit of fruit had fallen on Fae's head, making her sulk. Alberich fussed over Fae as Fae whimpered and sulked, while Fiona and Tate laughed in the distance. I saw Igrene racing over, likely to check if Fae was actually hurt.

But then, there was a very... remarkable sound. It was a laugh, a high, almost bell-like laugh. It might not have really registered with the other bits of laughter, except for one big reason; that laugh was Idenn's. She was laughing, smiling even, at Fae's reaction.

It was the first sign of emotion I'd ever seen out of her.

"...Maybe we'll make it after all," I murmured, staring as Fae and Alberich teased Idenn. She looked confused, but there was still a bit of a smile on her face, a light in her eyes. "What do you think?"

"I think you're right," Roy agreed. He and I shared a look, and a smile. "Idenn!" He waved as she looked over at us, and I held my hand out, inviting her to come over. "Come on! We're going on a trip to Ostia!"

Idenn looked confused at us, the wind tugging at her clothes and hair. But then, that little smile she wore grew, and she came over to take my hand, grasping it tightly. The smile remained, though her eyes showed a bit of confusion, as if she wasn't sure what she felt. She only knew... she liked it, likely because it was warm.

Yes, we'd make it. If Idenn could heal, then so could we. If she could smile, we could make it so that the rest of Elibe smiled too. We could do it. I had faith.
Author's Notes: And thus, A Tactician's Legacy reaches it's end. The scene here is based off the final scene of the True Ending for the game, though it is a little less introspective on the characters' part, and more of the dragons regretting leaving Iden to her fate (that conversation happened off screen here).

Thank you very much for reading. While this is a novelization of FE6, it's also the final part of my Elibe Series, and was the cumulation of it, meaning there were many references to the other three stories in the series. If you'd like to read my take on the Scouring, please read A Thief's Legacy, told through Hilda's eyes. If you're curious about the adventure Amanda, Uther, Elbert, and others of their generation, had, please read A Thief's Testimony. If you want to read my FE7 novelization, read A Tactician's Testimony.

Again, thank you so much for reading. I hope you all enjoyed!

End Notes

Author's Notes: Welcome to A Tactician's Legacy. This is an FE6 novelization, and this is our POV char, Irene. Yes, she fights as well as does tactics, but she will eventually serve more as the 'field tactician', leaving the long-term planning to other characters. (And yes, while Irene has Rienfleche, it's at 'half-strength', basically putting it at around 10 might, or about the might of a Steel Bow). Since FE6 doesn't have a 'prologue' chapter, but instead jumps straight to chapter one, I am using a 'prologue' to introduce Irene, and showcase her relation with her sister, Sue, and her parents.

This is a direct sequel to my FE7 novelization, A Tactician's Testimony, and will be including details also from A Thief's Legacy (mostly when backstory of the Scouring starts popping up) and possibly some from A Thief's Testimony (these will likely be more of brief mentions for characterization purposes).

FE6 is an interesting game in that it was never localized, meaning that I am dependent on fan translations. There are two currently, and I will likely be relying more on the newer one than the older one, if only because that is the version I am replaying to remind myself of plotpoints. Some of the older one's, however, will still be used, if only because I think SF only has the script for the older one. FE6 also has a manga adaptation. While I have some mixed feelings on it (mostly the protagonist), I will be taking some plot points or setups from it as well (I'll do my best to make notes of when this happens).

As always, if you are curious about potential pairings, simply message me, but since
romance isn't the focus, I'm not going to announce it in the author's notes here. But I hope you all enjoy!

Next Chapter – Dawn of Destiny, FE6 proper

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