Memoirs of the Holy War
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Summary

It was a war that spanned across two generations. It was a war that tore Jugdral to pieces. It was a war between those who only did what they thought was right. It was a war manipulated by those who had suffered too much. It was a war filled with tragic mistakes and crippling hope. It was a war immortalized by the survivors, and this is their tale. (FE4 Novelization)

Notes

This was stared prior to FE:Heroes release, which gave official localized names. As such, some fan-translated names do appear in this fic.
Chapter 1) Birth of a Crusader

In the heart of Jugdral lies Grannvale, the kingdom of Saint Heim. Ruled by his descendants, and supported by the descendants of other Crusaders, it is normally a peaceful country, on the surface. In reality, its politics are cutthroat, at best, and it frequently has 'hunts' for descendents of the Loptyrian cults, massacring them to a child.

But such hunts are kept secret, whispers in the dark. No one would dare bring them up, much less King Azmur, or the actual leader of the country, Prince Kurth. Though, considering Prince Kurth's known kindness, it's possible that he'll address it when he becomes king 'proper'. But it is only a possibility, based more on what I know of his two advisors: Lord Byron of House Chalphy, heir to Baldur, and Lord Ring of House Jungby, heir to Ullur. Those two are known for their tolerance, and though other provinces urge them, they have not ordered a hunt in many years.

This, of course, bothers Grannvale's chancellor, Lord Reptor of Freege, and not just because of the threat the three are to his influence. Lord Reptor is known for his stubbornness, and for his devotion to his family and country. Those with Loptyr blood are a 'threat' in his eyes, and threats are to be dealt with as harshly as traitors. At least, that is his opinion. To this end, he allies himself with Lord Langbalt of House Dozel, an avaricious and bitter man, to form a faction opposing Prince Kurth. The political landscape grows thornier by the day as the country just barely avoids civil war.

Technically, though, there is a 'third' faction. Arvis of Velthomer leads the Royal Guard, and stays out of both factions. Many think it's because he's too busy, but in truth, he is simply too cunning and crafty. Far easier to plan when the main players think you're not doing anything, after all. Sometimes, I think that Father Clause of House Edda, who frequently speaks and advises for peace and diplomacy, is the only one who sees the oncoming storm Grannvale's ruthless politics would bring. Certainly, he visits the local chapels to warn of coming trouble.

Though, when trouble came, it came from an unexpected place, from the east. Darna, a city in the Yied desert with deep ties to Grannvale, and most of the Crusaders, was suddenly besieged by Isaach. Reports of how brutal the massacre was reach us even here in Jungby, and it was not long before the people were united behind a single cause: retribution. King Azmur quickly bent to the will of the furious people and officially declared war on Isaach for the atrocity. Prince Kurth leads the army on his father's behalf, and the bulk of Grannvale's military went with him to the east, across the desert. No one thought anything about sending most of the soldiers there. Augustria, to the west, and Verdane, to the south, were allies of Grannvale, bound by treaty. None dared dreamed they'd be threatened.

But, as the wise frequently remind, trouble rarely comes alone. Verdanite soldiers, led by the heir to Verdane, Prince Gandolf, broke through the border and laid siege to Jungby castle. With only Lady Aideen to guard it, it quickly fell and word spread even faster to our neighbors in Chalphy, where Lord Sigurd governed the lands in his father's absence. Many hoped he would come to the rescue. He was a knight many adored, and more importantly, he was a childhood friend of Lady Aideen and known for his fierce, perhaps even reckless, loyalty.
Blood was everywhere. It stained the floor, the beddings, and everyone's clothes. It lingered under my nails, no matter how many times I washed them, and it dried in my hair in crusty patches. It clung to my skin, making it itch. But I tried to ignore it as I worked. This soldier was injured, dying, and we had already lost forty-seven today. No, wait, it was forty-eight now. I could hear the sobs down the way.

"Heal," I whispered, willing my staff to work. It pulsed into life, feeding on my magic and boosting it slightly before letting it flow over the injuries. I willed the bone to piece together, the muscles to knit back, and the blood to scab to hold the skin together. It took a few tries, but my patient was stubborn, determined to live even as he lingered at death's door.

"Lady Aideen," he mumbled, sleeping face contorting in pain. It wasn't just physical, but emotional pain that would not let him rest easily. This was Sir Midir, personal vassal and guard for Lady Aideen. While all accounts said he fought valiantly, a bow user was at a disadvantage at close quarters, and Prince Gandolf had taken advantage of that. "Lady Aideen… I'm… sorry…"

"You need to rest." I sat back on my heels and smiled as I saw the magic had worked. He would need more rest, but he would live. That was better than most of his comrades. "Easy." I used the staff's power to gentle 'nudge' him into a deeper slumber. It was not as certain as a 'sleep' staff, but when a patient was this injured, it was often enough.

Sighing softly, I stood, relying on years of practice to keep my expression calm even as my muscles keened. A glance at the candle nearby showed that I had been working on Sir Midir for three hours. A glance at the floor hinted we needed more straw to soak up the blood. I would have to handle that, and not think on how many were dead, how many died under my fingers.

It was the job of a healer to maintain calm serenity. When a patient spoke to us, we showed concern, but always we were confident, always we were in control. A frowning healer was a bad omen. A worried healer, a healer in pain… anything that suggested anything but stability would make the patients, and their loved ones, fret. So, a healer had to keep up a pleasant expression, even as her face ached from holding it for so long.

Rolling my shoulders, I picked up my staff and walked through the infirmary, checking over the patients and those that tended to them. I nudged healers who were trying too hard in gentle, silent reprimand, added my strength to those who needed just a little boost to finish the healing. A commotion at the entrance held my attention, though, and I moved there, ready to access the situation and chide those responsible. Though, I had not expected Elder Reisin to be the source.

"We are incredibly grateful to you, my lord!" he gushed, smiling warmly at whomever he was speaking to. I couldn't see their face from here. "We feared what those Verdanite barbarians would do. Oh, I remember the old raids, but this was even worse."

"I wish I had made it sooner." The speaker shifted, and while I still couldn't see their face, the shock of blue hair told me who it was anyway. This was Lord Sigurd, our 'savior'. With only a handful of soldiers, he pushed back the horde and reclaimed Jungby castle. "I can see the damages, and I know there are more in the other villages," he continued. His posture was sure, almost proud, but there was genuine sorrow in his eyes. He should mask his feelings more. "How many have perished?"

"Forty-eight," I answered when Elder Reisin hesitated. I tilted my head, however, as I caught the
sound of new sobs. "Ah, no, my apologies. It is forty-nine now. I suspect we'll reach fifty-two or fifty-three before the night is done, though."

"Alicia!" Elder Reisin scolded. He even wagged his finger at me. "Do not be disrespectful!"

"He asked, elder." Still, I made sure to smile at Lord Sigurd. "However, my words came out far blunter than I had intended. My apologies."

"No, no, you are correct in that I did ask," Lord Sigurd reassured. He smiled back at me, a soft and friendly one. "So, you are Miss Alicia?"

"Yes, Lord Sigurd," I replied. I curtsied to him, mostly to have the excuse to duck my head. I was tired; my smile felt stiff. "I am the leader of the healers here at the moment."

"Truly?" He looked startled when I glanced up. Yes, he really did need to learn how to mask his expressions. "You must be very skilled, to have such responsibilities at your age."

"I am only moderately skilled, my lord. The more skilled ones were conscripted into the forces for the war." I shrugged, and looked up again when I felt my smile had 'evened'. "I take it that you found Lady Aideen absent?"

"Yes." Lord Sigurd turned to focus completely on me; Elder Reisin took that as a cue that he was dismissed and quickly disappeared down the way. "I'm told she was kidnapped."

"Prince Gandolf took her because of her great beauty, and plans on making her his wife, according to the testimonies of the wounded soldiers." Patients tended to babble when they were being treated. You heard a great deal about everything. "I imagine he'll force her tonight, but she might get lucky. He might have some standards." I didn't think so, though. Few did when times were peaceful, and historically speaking, war brought out the worst in people. "Ah, but it seems I must apologize again for the bluntness of my words."

"No, it's nothing that I haven't thought, and worried over, myself." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I can only hope I can save her before… that happens."

"What will you do if you're too slow?"

"Hope that I get there before the trauma pushes her too much, so that she can find help and healing." He shook his head. "Ah, I'm off topic. I came here to find a healer and to check on the wounded."

"Well, my lord, you are looking at one." I held up my staff for emphasis. "What do you need of me?"

"Are you certain? I'm sure you're exhausted." He looked so fretful that I couldn't help but laugh a little. It was easy to see how he had charmed so many. "I do not wish to ask too much." No wonder he was well loved.

"Well, so long as you do not expect me to go change my clothes and give myself more than a cursory wash, I believe I can find the energy to assist you." I laughed again at his sheepish smile. "What say you?"

"I say 'thank you kindly', Miss Alicia." He gestured for me to follow him and led me down the path towards the outskirts of the town.

As we walked, I studied him, gauging his mood and physical state. There seemed to be few injuries
on him, superficial at best, but it was clear that his mind was agitated. So, I asked, "do you not have a healer among your own forces?" I didn't really care about the answer. It was more to help him focus.

"Well, we sort of do?" he answered, once again smiling sheepishly. "There were none in Chalphy. We never had many to begin with, and Father took what ones we had to Isaach with him." An army required as many healers as possible. "But Ethlyn, my younger sister, joined up with us, and she knows how to use a staff."

"I had thought she was in Leonster now, married to Lord Quan." There were lovelorn fools even now bemoaning how their 'pink-haired angel' was married. One or two of them had even managed to catch colds because they spent too much time on the hills, moping in the rain.

"Well, she heard what had happened and raced up as soon as she could." That was some impressive speed, then. Lenster was all the way in the Manster District, towards the southeast. "She, Quan, and Quan's squire, Finn."

"That is very few."

"Well, Quan couldn't take the Lanzritter because of the trouble with Thracia." He shook his head and smiled at me. "However, the whole point to all of this is... well, it's Ethlyn that is injured."

"Ah, yes, the eternal philosophical question: who heals the healer?" Typically, the answer was 'no one', but if you were lucky, then the answer became 'another healer'. "How badly is she wounded?"

"She says it's not bad, but I'd rather have someone else check." He sighed mournfully. "And, you know, get her husband to stop fretting my ear off. I like my ears where they are, thank you." He smiled warmly as we came upon a little camp not far from the village. "Here we are!"

"You're not holed up in the castle?"

"Not for tonight, at least. We're not sure if we dealt with all the Verdanites, so I'd rather be where we could more easily assist." That was well intentioned, but I thought it might be better for him to just be in the castle and then maybe bring the village into there. Did he worry about room? "Ethlyn should be in this-"

"Quan, I love you, but if you ask 'are you okay?' one more time, I am going to scream!" someone snapped as we entered a tent noticeably larger than the rest. Inside, there was an exasperated pink-haired girl sitting on a cot while a young man hovered over her anxiously. "This is worse than when I was pregnant," the girl continued sourly. It took me a moment to recognize her as Lady Ethlyn. She was taller and lither than she had been during her wedding, surprisingly so considering she gave birth not long ago, and she held herself with a confidence she had not had while growing up.

"But, dear..." the man began. He had to be Lord Quan. He didn't look much different than from the wedding, but his fretting had thrown me off. He had appeared far more stoic and calm at the wedding. "You are-"

"I come with salvation!" Lord Sigurd cheerfully interrupted, beaming at them both. "I am delighted that I didn't find you two in the middle of making out. Again."

"You're never going to let that die, are you?" Lord Quan groaned, turning to face Lord Sigurd. His anxiety faded as he smiled, and it would've been clear even to a child how much he adored Lord Sigurd. "That was a while ago."
"That's how I found out that you and Ethlyn had confessed while I was out almost drowning!" Lord Sigurd grinned back. "Regardless, as I said, I bring salvation for everyone's sanity." He bowed, gesturing to me. "This is Miss Alicia, a healer from the village who graciously agreed to check on Ethlyn."

"Is that so?" Lord Quan turned his smile my way. "You have my deepest thanks!"

"I am pleased to assist," I replied, keeping my expression and voice even. "But if I might ask you and Lord Sigurd to leave so that I might tend to Lady Ethlyn without interruption or hovering?" Lord Quan looked to protest, but Lord Sigurd quickly seized him by the collar and dragged him out of the tent. "I... take it that is familiar."

"Quan is calm until someone he cares about is harmed," Lady Ethlyn explained. There was a bit of fondness in her exasperation now. "At which point, he turns into something worse than a mother hen. And that is coming from me, a fusspot." She pouted. "Though, that is mostly my brother's fault. He's always been reckless, and then he has the nerve to tease me."

"But you love him dearly." That was something known very well. House Chalphy was famous for its strong family ties.

"Of course I do. It's hard to hate a brother who literally ran into a burning building to save you." She scowled. "But he's still reckless. That's why I'm here."

"I assume this is why you are injured as well." I crouched next to her and lifted her shirt to examine the injury. "This looks to be an arrow wound?"

"It is and, worse, the arrow was ripped out when I dodged an axe." She held her arm up to make it easier for me. "But I did a check, and I'm certain it's not a bad injury, providing I keep a close watch."

"It isn't, but I cannot blame your husband or brother for being worried." I brought my staff up to heal the injury. "A little higher, lower, or deeper, and you might not have made it off the field alive."

"I figured." She shuddered. "You would think that I'd be used to it now, with the fighting in Leonster, but close calls always make me shake."

"From what I understand, even hardened veterans feel the same." Still, it was an easy heal, much easier than what I had been doing in the infirmary. However, as I tended to her, I noticed... something else. "Your pregnancy was hard on you, was it not?"

"Yes." She held still until I leaned back and then brought her arm down. "The birthing was too. Quan and I hadn't planned on having a child so soon into our marriage either, which hadn't helped matters." She sighed. "Grannvale's contraceptives tend to be only one dose, but the ones in Leonster require two. I wasn't told that."

I was tempted to point out that she could have easily forced a miscarriage, but bit my tongue in time. She was the wife of the heir; it would not have surprised me if the people of Leonster had purposely avoided telling her so that she would get pregnant quickly. "Your body is still healing, Lady Ethlyn. That does not help with your injury." I made sure to smile at her. "So, while your injury is completely healed, I would urge you to rest."

"Ah, but I need to do a check on the rest!" Lady Ethlyn immediately protested. Her eyes were sincere. "I'm sure they're healed, but..."
"Lady Ethlyn, if it is a simple check, then I can do that for you," I offered. I stood up and rested my hand on her shoulder. "I am already here, after all."

"But…" She sighed, shaking her head. "No, you're right. I'm sorry. I'm just being stubborn."

"I understand." I urged her to lie down, and even draped the blankets over her. "If you can tell me what injuries they had?"

"Of course!" She gave me a warm smile. "Sigurd said your name was Miss Alicia, right?" She laughed as she nodded. "I hope we can be friends."

Were all those of Chalphy so naïve?

Lady Ethlyn easily rattled off every injury each of the soldiers had, including the very superficial ones. Such attention to detail was admirable, but it also made me wonder if she was suffering from trauma, to be so hyperfocused. But she fell asleep before I could make gentle inquiries, and so, I left her to her rest to check in on the few soldiers Lord Sigurd had.

"Oh, beautiful lady of the sun!" This did not, however, explain why I suddenly had a green armored knight, wearing a turban, spouting nonsense at me. "It warms our hearts to see you!" he continued with a cheeky little grin. He produced a rose out of nowhere and held it out towards me. "Might you honor me with your name?"

"It's Alicia," I replied, utilizing every bit of willpower I had to keep my composure. I was caked in blood to the point that some flakes fluttered off whenever I moved, not to mention all the other things I was stained with. What sort of fool was this? "I am here to check the injured, but I am afraid there is nothing I can do for whatever is wrong with your head. Good day." I stepped around the strange man, barely noticing his little yelp of surprise.

Instead, I focused on the small group of soldiers, masking my surprise when I noticed just how few there were: a single squadron, at most, with a couple of knights and a man wearing heavy armor. I had known he had only a handful, but the numbers were even smaller than I thought. This was what Lord Sigurd had charged Jungby with? This is what he won Jungby with? How had he…?

Even if it was the height of recklessness to push forward with so few, what did it mean that he won?

"Pardon, miss?" someone called. It took me a moment to find him: a young boy, easily the youngest of the group, with longish brown hair and the uniform of a Chalphy squire. "Are you the healer Lord Sigurd brought?" he continued, waving to me.

"I am," I confirmed, moving towards him. It was then that I noticed his companion, a boy not much older with blue hair and a uniform I did not recognize, sitting on a small box. Considering all of that, I thought this might be Sir Finn, Lord Quan's squire. "Do either of you need me?"

"Finn does." The boy gestured to his friend, confirming my suspicion. "He twisted weirdly and it opened up something."

"I'm sorry to be trouble," Sir Finn mumbled. Still, he made sure to give me a polite smile as I crouched by him to look at the injury to his leg. "Lances don't fare well against axes, and… well, I forgot that my legs were not as armored as the rest of me."

"You are lucky you did not lose the leg," I chided, prodding the wound. It had been healed well, but it was clear it had been a quick-fix only. Lady Ethlyn had likely known that, and that was why she had wanted to check again. "I can tend to this easily, though."
"Thank you, miss." He held still and let me work. I was glad for it. It would not have been the first time I had a patient fight me as I tried to keep them from bleeding out. "Sorry to delay things, Oifey."

"It's fine," the other boy reassured. Now that I had a name, I knew him easily: Lord Sigurd's squire. He was a distant cousin, though he bore the mark of Baldur, and was taken in by Lord Sigurd when an illness took his parents and left him orphaned. Most rumors painted the two as close as brothers. "Noish and Arden can handle the chores, once they pick up Alec's broken pride." He gave me a little smile. "He's not used to having his flirtations shut down so quickly."

"I have work to do," I replied, choosing to not voice my thoughts. A healer must be calm. "But there we are." I sat back on my heels as I finished healing the injury. "I recommend you taking it easy on the leg, as much as you are able."

"I shall do my best to obey, miss," Sir Finn replied, voice carefully formal. Still, his smile was sweet. "Thank you very much."

"There is no need for thanks. I would much rather tend to an injury than prepare a body for a funeral." I stood, and smiled for them both. "Do you know of any other injuries?"

"I don't believe so." He stood as well, and gave me a graceful bow. "Oifey and I can check for you, though, so that you don't spend too much time prodding answers from them. They're far too stubborn and insistent on putting on a show."

"I thank you for that." This time I laughed, genuinely amused. Formal and polite he might be, he was still at an age where it did not occur to him that the truth might not be the best thing to say. "I shall wait here for you."

"We'll be back as soon as possible." He and Lord Oifey quickly, but carefully, went to the others and were soon asking them about their health.

I took a moment to sit down on the box Sir Finn vacated, keeping my posture even as I made myself relax. I needed a moment to catch my breath, but I dared not let them know how tired I truly was.

A flash of red caught my eye, and I turned to see a young boy with hair as red as mine running off with something in his hand. My breath caught as I realized just who it had to be. But surely, it couldn't… Arvis wouldn't let him…

"I told Azel that it wasn't that important, but he runs anyway." Lord Quan appeared behind me, forcing me to focus on him in order to be polite. "He certainly is eager," he murmured, smiling fondly. I nodded to keep from reeling. It was Azel. But why was he here? Was it because of his crush on Lady Aideen? "How was Ethlyn?"

"She was well, as she told you, but the injury was close to being fatal, so I cannot say that your worries were unwarranted," I answered. I kept my tone ambivalent. "She is resting now. Her body still recovers."

"And not just from the injury." He sighed, shaking his head. "Well, I wouldn't trade Altenna for anything, but I do wish I had known about the two doses so I could've warned her." I still thought it was a bit of a conspiracy. Leonster was, essentially, at war with Thracia. It only took a stray arrow to kill the heir, but now the heir had an heir. Leonster's succession would be stable. "Might I also ask about Finn? I saw you healing him."
"His leg injury reopened."

"I'll show him some stretches to help that area heal. He hasn't been in many battles yet, though he is skilled. I wouldn't have brought him otherwise." Was he saying the words to reassure himself? There was no need for me to know this. "Thank you for tending to them. I... do not react well to loved ones being hurt."

"Lady Ethlyn informed me." Noting how anxious he looked, I decided it was best to lighten his mood. "I am certain Lord Sigurd-"

"Sigurd and his recklessness have taken years off my life!" Still, even as he groaned, he smiled fondly. He would not give up that friendship for anything. "Eldigan and I both would panic if he was even an hour late for curfew at the academy, because we just knew he had gotten caught up in something."

"I've heard of floods and burning buildings."

"Well, Eldigan also dove into the flames than day. The house where Ethlyn and Lachesis were studying healing went up, and both of them jumped in to save their little sisters." He grumbled something unflattering under his breath. "Didn't even take clothes to help against the smoke, and they were laid up for three days. Eldigan has a scar from it, though I think that's because he protected Sigurd from a falling beam." He paused and then coughed awkwardly. "I'm rambling. I'm sorry."

"It is fine." I wasn't sure how much of that was 'useful' information, but he looked lighter after having said his piece. "Do you or Lord Sigurd need healing?"

He was silent for a moment, closing his eyes to carefully think on his answer. Finally, he nodded. "I do not believe so." His words were soft and slow, and that made me inclined to believe him. "Sigurd and I are far more trained than the rest of the group, and it showed in the battles. We were injured, but nothing too deep."

"Please, send word if that changes."

"I will. Believe me; Ethlyn wouldn't forgive me if I didn't." He smiled again at me. All of these people smiled so much. "Ah, the hour grows late, though. It's nearly dusk." A quick glance to the horizon confirmed his words. It was much later than I thought. "Might I escort you back? I know the distance is not far, but we are not certain the Verdanite dogs ran with their tails between their legs or are just hiding."

"I shall take you up on that offer." Even if the Verdanites were gone, there was still a risk. Unscrupulous people could easily attack a lone girl, and then blame the 'barbarians'. "But only after Sir Finn and Lord Oifey confirm that there are no other injuries."

"Of course." Lord Quan laughed a little. "Shall I tell you a funny story while you wait? Say of the time Arden pretended to be Sigurd while Sigurd dealt with a hostage situation?"

"Which one is Arden?" I barely checked my surprise when he pointed to the heavily armored knight. "Did it work?"

"Yes, that's the funny part." He grinned. "Of course, it involved a wig and Lachesis putting make up on him, but the whole situation was so absurd that Eldigan thought we were drunk when we told it to him." He snickered. "So, it all started because some bandits took some of the Chalphy servants hostage..."
By some miracle, no one else had significant injuries, and so Lord Quan escorted me to my little home at the edge of the village, near the chapel. I almost dropped as soon as I shut the door behind me, but I managed to keep my eyes open long enough to take a bath, and change out of my stained dress before passing out on my bed.

I slept without dreams, and woke when the sun streamed through my window, birds chirping cheerfully at the seed I left out, and when someone knocked on my door.

"Just a minute," I called, biting back a yawn. I twisted up my hair into a messy bun, checked that I had remembered to put on nightclothes, and stumbled over to the door, pausing to rub the sleep from my eyes. If someone was here for me, it was because they needed a healer. "Yes, how can I help you?" I opened the door, and blinked slowly, half-convinced I was still asleep.

After all, I couldn't think of why Lady Ethlyn would be outside my door. "Hello!" she chirped, very bouncy for the hour. "I badgered Quan into telling me where you lived when I found out he took you home yesterday."

"I see." Remembering my manners, I stepped out of the doorway. "Would you like to come in? I can make some tea."

"Really? Yay~" She skipped inside, and I was reminded that she was sixteen years old, though her seventeenth birthday wasn't far from now. Regardless, she was younger than me, barely older than Lord Oifey. "Oh, this is so cozy!" 'Cozy' was certainly a word for a one room house. "What's this section over here?"

"My work area." Deciding it would be best to wait for her to reveal why she was here, I headed over to the stove and used a firestarter to light it before setting the kettle on for tea. "I make medicines there."

"That's so amazing." She stepped behind the 'curtain', really a pinned up blanket, I used to mark the area off and peered at all the vials I had. "So, you make your own medicines too?"

"There are some injuries that will not heal without a combination of medicine and healing magic." There were also things that healing magic was less efficient at healing, and then there were the things that did not require healing magic at all. "So, I was taught them."

"That's what Lachesis heard too, from her mother, but when we tried to get our teachers to show us, they just said something about it not being proper for those of our rank." She made a face. "I highly doubt a title will keep someone from dying because of ignorance on my part, right?" She picked up a vial and peered at it curiously. "What's this?"

"That is ground lemongrass." I fetched two mugs, made sure they were clean, and set about making tea. "It's used for seasoning and for scents, but it can also be used to help with things such as the cold, high blood pressure, stomach aches, rheumatism..." I picked a tea at random to give myself, but carefully selected some chamomile and lavender for her. "But there might be some toxic side effects if you inhale it, and it might be unsafe to take when pregnant or breastfeeding."

"Interesting." She set it down, careful to make sure it was in the exact spot. "Where is it from?"

"I believe a section of Miletos, to the south." The kettle started bubbling, so I took it from the fire and poured it into the mugs.

"Oh, I've been there, once. Quan bought me a pearl tiara. I ended up wearing it for my wedding." She stepped out from my work area and sat down at the table while I set down the mugs. "It's
beautiful. Have you been?"

"No, I've not been much of anywhere, save here." I sat down across from her, and checked her posture. Though she was still cheerful, there was some seriousness in her now. "Are you going to tell me why you are here so early?"

"Well, I was going to wait for the tea to finish steeping, but if you'd rather hear it now, I don't mind." She leaned back a bit in her chair, making sure to keep eye contact. "There are two things, actually. The first was that I would like to visit the infirmary and give what help I can give. Since you run it, I thought it was only polite to ask."

"That is kind of you." Honestly, I was surprised she offered. "I will gladly take whatever help we can get."

"I'll be glad to give it." She smiled briefly before turning serious again. "The second reason is... would you be interested in coming with us?" She paused briefly, to gauge my reaction. I made sure to keep calm. "I hope, dearly, that we make it to Evans and Aideen is still there, but honestly, I'm not hopeful. No matter what he says, I know Sigurd isn't either. Even if she is there, though, she has been in Gandolf's hands for a whole day and..." She shuddered. "Well, I don't need to tell you what might have happened. Sigurd said you told him yourself."

"Yes, I did." I followed her logic. "Sometimes, people are more willing to let a stranger tend to them, especially when suffering from a... trauma."

"And, if by some miracle Gandolf has standards, she still had to deal with her home suddenly being attacked, watching soldiers be cut down in front of her, and be kidnapped." She drooped, eyes wavering as she fought the urge to cry. "I know she has to be hurting. She'd try to hide it, though. Something about it being a healer's job, which I mostly understand."

'Who heals the healer?' No one does, unless another healer happened to be near. "You wish me to come along in the hopes that I can tend to her mental injuries."

"Yes." She gave me a serious look, and I noticed she wasn't pleading. She wasn't going to beg. Part of me thought it was her pride, but another part of me thought she was trying to be professional. Perhaps it was both. "Also, I'm sure you noticed with Finn's injury. I'm trained, but because I go directly onto the field, I'm best suited for 'quick-fixes'. I'm good at field medicine, but it takes extra effort to tend to ensure it's a permanent fix. That is time that I might not have."

"So, you also wish for me to join as a 'dedicated' healer, instead of your... combat medic, shall we call it?"

"Yes." Now she leaned forward a little. "You're skilled. I saw it. You're way more skilled than I am. Honestly, I think you're better at healing than Aideen."

"To be fair to Lady Aideen, she only recently took up the staff." She was also from a house not known for magical prowess. "I have been learning since I was a little girl." I leaned forward as well, to match her. "What makes you think you can trust me with such tasks, Lady Ethlyn?"

"You came to help me and mine, even though you had spent a whole day tending to other injured." She shrugged. "And your magic is warm. Like the fire on a cold night, or the sun on a clear spring day. Between those things, and how carefully you treated Finn and myself, I'm willing to trust you."

"I see." I worried about that naivety. In a world like ours, assuming someone is straightforward and
honest based on how they act was… potentially deadly. "I will think on it."

"Thank you!" She smiled, clearly pleased. "Oh, and don't feel bad about refusing. I know I'm asking a lot."

"I shall keep that in mind." I smiled back and nodded to her mug. "That should be finished steeping, my lady. When you're done, and I've changed, I'll take you to the infirmary."

"That sounds wonderful." Her smile grew and she squeaked in delight when she sipped her tea. "Oh, this is so good. Did you make this? Can you tell me how?"

I had a sneaking suspicion she also wanted me to come along to teach her, but honestly, the thought was a little endearing. I would definitely think carefully on her proposal.

At some point while Lady Ethlyn and I worked in the infirmary, there was another visitor to the village. This one apparently created a huge commotion, so I left to go see what it was. It was entirely possible that it was another batch of wounded, after all.

However, that wasn't the case at all. When I saw the source, I quickly ducked into a nearby alley, startled. Why was Arvis here? Wasn't he supposed to be in the Belhalla?

"We got word of how things were here, but it seems like the truth is even worse than rumors would have led me to believe," Arvis murmured, frowning slightly. He held something cloth covered in one hand, while the other rested on his chin as he thought. "Have there been any demands for Aideen, Sigurd?"

"None," Lord Sigurd answered. He and Arvis were the only ones here, both relaxed even as they talked of serious things. I remembered that the two often got along very well, even if they did not move in the same social circles often. "Worse, it seems Gandork, sorry, Gandorf." He paused as Arvis burst into surprised laughter. "That's Oifey's fault. He forgot the same and we spent too long laughing about it last night." He shook his head. "Regardless, he kidnapped Aideen specifically to force her to be his wife."

"I see." Arvis closed his eyes and nodded. "Regrettably, they could not have chosen a more perfect time. There's barely enough of the Imperial Guard at Belhalla to guard it, and my own Velthomer is also on a skeletal staff. I fear I cannot give you more aid, Sigurd."

"Be at peace, Arvis. I was well aware of that when I chose to save Jungby." Lord Sigurd smiled to reassure him. "I simply could not stand by. Many would call it a fool's notion, but just as there is a price for action, there is a price for inaction. In this case, it would cost a duchy its people, and me, a dear friend."

"I would call it your kindness, Sigurd." Arvis sighed. "I fear that will be taken advantage of, though."

"Well, if I am killed for being too kind, that is just the way of things. I'll still take the risk of being kind." Lord Sigurd laughed a bit. "I suppose I'm still the stubborn sixteen year old."

"Well, there's no reason to grow out of being gentle. The world needs more people like that." Arvis shook his head and held out the cloth-covered item. "Ah, but I digress. This is from His Majesty."

"It is?" Lord Sigurd looked confused as he took it, and he gaped when he pulled the item out from the cloth. "A silver sword…!"
"The strongest of blades that are not divine, gifted only to paladins of the realm." Arvis smiled proudly at Lord Sigurd. "Perhaps you shan't have so much trouble with barbarians with a proper weapon."

"Not all of us can field the flames of the sun, Arvis." Lord Sigurd laughed, easing the sarcasm into simple teasing. "So, His Majesty is giving me his approval."

"Yes, he is. Know that you fight with his blessings, and with my prayers." Arvis crossed his arms, turning serious. "Incidentally, I heard Azel is among your forces. Is this true?"

"Yes, I'm sorry." Lord Sigurd smiled wryly as he buckled the silver sword to his belt. "It sounds like he came behind your back. I thought about turning him away, but his magic was incredibly helpful to us. So, I ask that you let him stay."

"Mmm…" Arvis sighed. "Ah, I would rather he were safe at home, but if he felt that strongly, it is probably better for him here. Clearly, fate wishes for him to learn something." He gave Lord Sigurd a stern look, one that would've made many tremble in their boots. Lord Sigurd, however, didn't even flinch. "But you must promise to keep him safe, Sigurd. He is my precious little brother, and I adore him."

"Of course I shall." Lord Sigurd leaned for a little, to better look Arvis in the eye. "However, if I may be so bold, it might do you both well to make that clearer to him. He feels as if he is a nuisance to you."

"…I feared such." Arvis sighed, relaxing. "Between my various duties, and my 'fatherly instincts', poor as they are, I fear I have neglected and alienated him."

"You simply have difficulties showing your kind heart, Arvis." Lord Sigurd grinned as Arvis scowled. "You don't scare me. I saw through it long ago." He shrugged. "I'll encourage Azel, but I don't think the message will stick until you actually say something." He rocked back on his heels. "If it makes you feel better, though, there was a time Ethlyn was convinced I hated her because I thought it 'unmanly' to show affection."

Arvis laughed softly. "Actually, that does make me feel a little better." Arvis shook his head, and smiled. "I had best return, though."

"Already?" Lord Sigurd looked surprised. "Will you not see Azel?"

"No, I fear I will scold him out of worry, and miss the point of this lecture entirely."

"I do not lecture!" Still, Lord Sigurd laughed and gave Arvis a friendly handshake. "Safe travels, Arvis, and please, give my regards to His Majesty. I shall endeavor to not prove unworthy for the honor he has given me."

"I shall. Farewell, Sigurd. What aid I can send, know that I will without a moment's hesitation." Arvis turned and walked towards the outskirts of the village, where he no doubt had a carriage waiting.

I hesitated, peering out of the alley to see if Lord Sigurd was watching. But he had already turned away, so I darted out, chasing after Arvis.

Thankfully, I caught him before he reached the carriage. "Will you not at least speak with me, Lord Brother?" I called, making my voice gently chiding. Arvis whirled and smiled softly when he saw me. "I am hurt indeed."
"I heard there were many wounded," Arvis protested, walking to stand in front of me. "I figured you would be busy."

"I have told you many times, Arvis, that I am never too busy to say 'hello' to you." I peered at his face, noticing the lines of exhaustion, and the bags under his eyes. "You haven't been sleeping."

"There's a lot going on." He sighed heavily, relaxing completely now. "A lot." A dark look crossed his face, and I knew whatever was going on, it was tied to that secret he would not tell even me. "But enough of that. How is my favorite sister?"

"Arvis, as far as you and I know, I am your only sister." Though, it would not surprise me if we had more half-siblings scattered about the country. Our father had been a notorious womanizer; it amazed me that he had only two 'known' bastards. "Regardless, I have been well, recent events aside. How have you been?"

"I believe I can say the same." He pressed a finger on my cheek, frowning worriedly. "Did you sleep last night?"

"I did, but I fear I might have needed more." I shrugged. "We are at war, though, and I am a healer. Healers have little leisure time during wars."

"Less than even soldiers." He shook his head and smiled. "Still, I cannot help but be proud. Vala's blood is one of fire, but you use the magic of it to mend injuries instead of burning all those in your path."

I could hear the envy in his voice, and shook my head. "Many would argue that being able to burn all the enemies in the path is a greater gift, for you prevent those under your protection from needing a healer in the first place." I smiled at him. "Remember, also, that there are certain plants that can only grow from ash, and that it is fire that prevents the forest from choking itself."

"As always, you scold me for self-pity." He laughed. "I should keep a running list for when I fall into those moods and you are not near."

"I can send some in my next letter." My smile softened as he laughed again. "To change the subject, how is Cyas?"

"He is well, though he has definitely inherited the Vala flame hair." He tugged a lock of my hair, as red as his own, for emphasis. "But while he has strong magic potential, no mark has appeared on him yet. I can only hope that continues."

Both of us knew it would be unlikely. While there were exceptions, typically the child of one with Major Holy Blood would inherit the power of the Holy Blood. Since Cyas was his firstborn as well, there was an increased likelihood of him being Arvis's successor to Valflame.

However, as always, I didn't say any of that to him. He knew it as well as I did. "I am pleased to hear my nephew is doing well," I said instead. "How is Aida?"

"She is also doing well, running Velthomer in my absence." As always, though, guilt crept into his eyes. A moment of passion, meant only to be physical, had resulted in Aida becoming pregnant. Arvis had offered to make things 'right' by marrying her, but she refused. She was content in being his right hand, and wanted nothing more. "I still say you two would get along well."

"You know I have no intention of traveling." I gave him a stern look as he smiled sheepishly before smiling back. It was an old 'game', really. He had long wanted to bring me to Velthomer, as his 'official' sister, but I was content being a healer here. "Speaking of traveling, Azel…"
"He's gotten over his motion sickness, for the most part, so long as he rides on a horse and not in a carriage." Arvis sighed again. "Before the mess with Isaach, I was writing a letter asking if we could both come to visit, so that he could finally meet you instead of simply exchanging letters."

"Well, he's here now." Though, that did explain it. "I… was invited by Lady Ethlyn to join the army, for a time."

"You were?" He looked startled, and a touch of relief came into his eyes. "Will you take it up?"

"I've been debating it, but if you would like me to and keep an eye on Azel, I will."

"I do not wish to force you." He smiled wryly. "Especially since all I seem to do is ask favors of you."

"You have also endured all my childish woes, write faithfully, and give me the reassurance that there is at least one person in this world who loves me." I shook my head. "Besides, Azel is my little brother too. We three might have different mothers, but that does not mean our bonds of family are any less."

"True." He glanced behind him and gave me a quick, but warm hug. "I really do have to be leaving."

"Of course." I hugged him back, and pulled away. I was always the first to pull away. He always felt guilty for leaving me behind. "I love you, Lord Brother. Safe travels."

"I love you too, dear sister. You be careful as well." He lingered a bit, mostly out of worry, before turning away and heading to wherever his carriage was hiding.

I waited until he was out of sight before returning to the village. I needed to tell Lady Ethlyn that I would accept her offer, after all, and I needed to ensure that the village would be fine in my absence.

I had a feeling I wasn't going to get much sleep tonight.

"I am incredibly grateful for your assistance, Miss Alicia," Lord Sigurd told me warmly as he helped me set up a tent and move my things. It seemed like Lady Ethlyn had not informed her brother of her intention of asking me, leading to Lord Sigurd thinking I had volunteered out of the generosity of my own heart. I hadn't the heart to tell him that wasn't entirely the case. "Truly, another healer is… wonderful, though I pray this campaign is short."

"I'm sure many pray for such things when war comes, Lord Sigurd," I replied absently, carefully setting up my vials in the corner of the tent. I didn't want to break any of them or, worse, confuse them for something else. "Healing is not all I can offer, though."

"Oh?"

"Healers hear a lot, especially about rumors." Finishing up with my vials, I turned to face him. "While I cannot guarantee the veracity of such things, it can give you insight into the area."

"And also what to send scouts after." He smiled warmly and then sat back on his heels as he finished setting up my cot for me. "That would be incredibly helpful, actually. Do you have anything now?"

"Other than what I told you of the attack, no, there is nothing." I shrugged. "You, of course, have
general rumors and gossips, like how Lady Aideen watches her bodyguard longingly when she thinks no one is watching."

"I told her she was obvious." Lord Sigurd snickered and stood up slowly, stretching. "Midir requested to join up, by the way. Ethlyn thought his injuries would be fine, but she wanted your opinion before giving permission."

"Sir Midir?" I closed my eyes to think, remembering his injuries. "I believe at this point he would be able to travel, but I would recommend light duty, which will be difficult considering he would be the only archer."

"I can come up with strategies to minimize it, especially with Oifey's help, but I'll tell him that his joining is contingent on listening to the nice healer lady." He smiled warmly. "Anything else I need to know?"

"No, I don't think so." A flicker of a rose in my memory, however, reminded me of an incident. "Oh, I think a knight of yours flirted with me yesterday." 

"Alec." His tone was so deadpanned that it startled a laugh out of me. "I'll tell him to not bother you, unless you like the attention."

"I did not, so I appreciate it." I shook my head. "Truly, I wondered if there was something wrong with his head."

"It's how Alec says 'hello'. Sometimes, I have to remind him that some would take it as harassment." Lord Sigurd shrugged. "I promise that he means well by it, dramas aside. He probably saw you stoic and hoped to make you laugh." A healer didn't need to laugh, especially when she was on duty. "Was there any other trouble?"

"No, I don't believe so." I hesitated as I thought of the village. "I didn't speak to Elder Reisin before leaving, though." Of course, we were barely half a day away. The distance was more so that Lord Sigurd and his group didn't unintentionally draw the Verdanites to the village.

"I did. He was sad to see you leave, but insisted that you would be of greater help to us than to them." He looked thoughtful suddenly. "He mentioned something about you being an orphan given to the church. I'm not sure if that was his business to tell, mind."

"It isn't something I hide, merely something I do not speak of often." I shook my head. "Do not fret. I do not mind that he told. I do ask that you not make a big deal of it, though."

"Of course." He looked around the tent. "Is everything set up to your liking?"

"Yes, I believe so." I smiled. "However, if we are marching for Evans soon, I would like some time to plan out how the infirmary will work here."

"Which will work a lot better without me hovering over you asking questions." He grinned. "When you have those plans, pass them to me and I'll do what I can to set it up. Though, it's likely you'll hear more from Oifey or Finn about it, since they're the squires." That meant they were the 'messengers'.

"Of course. I shall speak with you later." I kept up my smile until he left and let it fall as I slumped. The gravity of what I agreed to do hit me all at once. It was one thing to be a village healer when the area was attacked, but to be a healer for active fighters? This was just going to be a nightmare. But regardless of what Arvis thought, he had rarely asked anything of me, only to listen and be the one person in the world he could tell his secrets to, the same thing I did for my patients. Besides, as
I said, Azel was my little brother too, and I would worry if…

"Um…" A quiet voice drifted through the closed flap of my tent. "May I come in?"

"Yes, you may," I called, automatically bringing up my smile. I assumed it was someone asking about an injury.

However, the person who stepped inside my tent was just the person I had been thinking of: Azel. "Um… hi," he whispered, fiddling with his hands. He smiled shyly at me. "I mean; hello, Lady Sister. It's nice to… finally see you."

"It's nice to finally see you too, Azel." The awkwardness in the air threatened to kill me, but I kept up my smile as I peered at him. "Goodness, you look like Arvis when he was your age."

"He's not that much older than me." Azel immediately pouted, and the awkwardness in the air faded away. "I'm already eighteen."

"You are still a year younger than me, and seven years younger than our older brother." Still, I couldn't help but laugh. "Silly."

"But I'm helpfull!"

"You can be helpful and silly." I laughed again as he scowled. "Silly."

"Mean." His smile softened the 'insult'. "You really do have pretty eyes, though. Arvis told me they were green, not like ours, but it was always hard to imagine."

"Unlike you two, I did inherit some coloring from my mother." Sometimes, I wondered what else I inherited, but then I decided it didn't matter. She had abandoned me, after all. I didn't care about her. "But, did you need something from me, Azel?"

"No, I just wanted to say 'hello'." His smile turned shy. "Lex told me it would be better to get it over with, before I fretted myself into an anxious mess again. I've written to you about Lex, right? He's my best friend." Yes, I knew that. So, I was unsurprised Lex also knew of me, the hidden child of Velthomer because I had the luck of being born before our father's suicide and was given to the church to avoid a scandal. "Um… is there anything I can help you with, though?"

"At the moment, I am simply making plans for the infirmary." Still, I didn't want him to leave just yet. I wanted to spend time with him. "If you can give me some insights on our supplies, though, that would be very helpful."

"Yeah, I can do that! Lex and I handled inventory yesterday!" He happily plopped down next to me at the table, and answered any questions I had as I cautiously drew up a plan for a working infirmary.

His smile told me that he had wanted to spend time with me too, and it made me happy. Perhaps this whole thing wasn't going to be as much of a nightmare as I feared.

**Records on Alica**

- **Cleric, Vala minor, 19 years old**
- **Born from an affair between Duke Victor of Velthomer and an unknown noblewoman. Given to the church after her birth.**
- **Has the mark of Vala on her right arm, hidden by both long sleeves and gloves.**
A talented healer who devotes much of herself to not only healing the body, but also the heart and mind of her patients.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Welcome to Memoirs of the Holy War, a novelization of Fire Emblem 4. This novelization will cover the entirety of the game and will have two POV chars: Alicia for the first generation and her daughter for the second. If you are curious about pairings, feel free to ask (and if you only want to know the pairings for a single generation, please specify). This novelization will also take influences from FE5, the FE4 mangas (most noticeably Oosawa's), and some from a couple of hacks of the game (mainly the Inflation Patch, but this will not show much until the second generation). It will also be using the names from the most recent translation patch (the one by Project Naga) with only one or two exceptions (most notable is Lachesis's name; her localized one is 'Raquesis'). This is because this is the patch I am using for my 'play through the game to remind myself of game events' run. I apologize if you dislike some of the name changes, but it just makes things easier on me.

This chapter is 'part one', so to speak, of the prologue (FE4 has large maps with multiple castles to seize). Victor of Velthomer, the father of both Arvis and Azel, canonically had many mistresses and lovers, but only canonically has one bastard child: Azel. I chose to build on that and introduce Alicia as another one. She is a cleric, like Aideen, mainly to give a healer's perspective of the first generation. Aida is a side character that shows up later in the first generation. Cyas is a character exclusive to FE5. Oifey being an orphan comes from a conversation in Gen2. Ethlyn visiting Miletos, and Quan buying her a pearl tiara, was also revealed in a gen2 conversation.

Because of how 'front-loaded' recruitment is, and because FE4 has a small roster of playable characters, each chapter will have it's own 'record' of characters until we run out of chapters or chars, whichever comes first.

Next Chapter – Evans (finishing up the in-game prologue)
Chapter 2) Cascade

Evans Castle is a particularly 'important' castle in terms of border. It's situated at the corner where Augustria, Verdane, and Grannvale all meet, and serves as the 'border watch' for all three, despite technically being a Verdane fortress. This is where Prince Gandolf took Lady Aideen, and where Lord Sigurd leads his forces. Rumors said the bridge was down, but it seems the Verdanite soldiers repaired it to launch another attack.

None of that matters to me, though. I am simply here as a healer, and to watch over my little brother. I simply wondered how many would die.

In the morning, the camp moved a little further away from the village, to lessen the chances of the Verdanite soldiers of running for my village and taking hostages. We ended up by the old chapel, abandoned and left to the elements, and it was here I decided to set up the infirmary for the 'Evans Campaign'. That meant the first thing to do was clean the place, from top to bottom.

I had originally planned to do it alone, assuming the others would be busy with other things. Lord Sigurd, however, seemed very insistent on not making me do all of my work alone, and actually scheduled 'cleaning the infirmary' as part of the chores for the day. That led to me having a rotating roster of helpers, some more enthusiastic than others.

"Why do we have to scrub so much?" Lord Lex complained. He had somehow managed to get soap suds in his hair, probably from slinging the water from the bucket too much. "This place was clean before I even got here."

"Well, Sir Lex, the healers at Leonster talk of invisible critters that can sneak into a wound and cause it to infect and pus," Sir Finn noted absently. Unlike Lord Lex, Sir Finn applied himself quite thoroughly into cleaning. "A friend of mine, Glade, almost lost his arm because he was injured and treated in an infirmary that seemed clean, but wasn't."

"You're exaggerating."

"You are welcome to take the risk, Sir Lex."

"Bah, you're too serious." Lord Lex grinned and splashed some water at Sir Finn, laughing as he sputtered. "You're fifteen. Act like it."

"I am!" He splashed Lord Lex back. "Perhaps you should act your own age!"

"I'm only eighteen!"

"Boys, please," I finally interrupted. I gave them both a stern look as Sir Finn flinched from guilt and Lord Lex grinned, unrepentant. "I need the place cleaned, not splashed about with soapy water." I leveled a particularly stern look at Lord Lex, whose grin faded. "Regardless of what you feel, you were tasked with helping me clean. If you feel that you cannot do that, you are free to leave and request someone take up the duties."
"I can do it," Lord Lex grumbled. He set about mopping the water he and Sir Finn spilled. "It's just mopping."

"Then see to it, please." I made sure to smile. "I'll make some tea for you two."

"Yeah, yeah." He grumbled a bit more under his breath, but didn't complain anymore. Sir Finn returned to scrubbing his section.

I made some tea and left it to steep on a small table before making up the beds. I had washed all the sheets twice, and left them to dry in the sunshine. As I made them, I counted the number we had. Providing we did not have unexpected recruitments, we would have two extra beds. The extra sheets could be used as extra bandages, then, if we ran out. I'd need to set up a place to boil water later, and have some needles and thread already in there for sterilization.

"Alicia!" Lord Lex called. I turned and saw him standing, saluting almost playfully. "Ready for inspection!"

"Let's see if you pass then," I gently teased, turning away from the beds. There was so much to do, but I had to pretend I was calm. "If so, you'll get some sweets."

"The hell? I'm not ten!"

"So, you do not want anything sweet?"

"Well, I didn't say that." He scowled as Sir Finn started snickering. "That's it!" He started tickling Sir Finn, making him laugh and knock over one of the buckets of water in the process. "Oops."

"Clean that up, and then you may both take a break." At this rate, It would be a miracle if we got everything in ready in time for the battle. It truly would.

I was right; we were not ready by the time Lord Sigurd led the troops into battle. I finished the last bit of it myself. I wasn't alone, of course; Lord Sigurd left Sir Arden to guard the chapel, and Lord Oifeye was not allowed to fight, so he stayed with me as well. But I figured it would be better if I just finished it up on my own.

"Everything okay, Miss Alicia?" Sir Arden asked, poking his head in. Because few Verdanite soldiers actually seemed to make it this far, Sir Arden frequently checked in on Lord Oifeye and I. "Do you need anything?"

"No, we're well, thank you," I replied, smiling at him as I mended a few of the blankets. "How do things go outside?"

"Near as I can see, they've pushed to the bridge." Sir Arden smiled back. "Let me know if you need help."

"I shall." I went back to work, and Sir Arden shut the door behind him.

"So, they're fighting..." Lord Oifeye murmured. He sat on the table, swinging his legs absently. He fidgeted, drumming his fingers on the table and fiddling with his sleeves. "I wish..." He wished he could be out there fighting. He wished he could be doing something.

"It is good to be bored," I gently chided, not looking up from my mending, even when he turned to look at me. "It means that none of ours are injured enough to leave the field. It means none of them are on the edge of death."
"Right…" He flushed from embarrassment. "I'm sorry."

"You're a squire, trained to fight, not to remain behind." Healers were always the ones left behind. "Do you know how to sew?"

"No…?" He jumped down from the table. "Why?"

"Come here. I'll teach you." I beckoned him over, and he reluctantly crouched next to me. "Now, here." I passed him the bit of the blanket I was working on. "You hold the needle like this…"

"Why do I have to learn?"

"Mending blankets and clothes is a way to help without going onto the field, and you can use the basics here for stitching up injuries." I bit back a laugh at how he stared at the needle and thread like it was a worm. "Besides, girls like boys who sew."

"R-really?" He flushed again. "W-well…" He carefully started sewing, accepting my critiques. He was a quick learner. It really wasn't long at all before his stitches were even and tight. "So, like this?"

"Yes, you're doing very well." I smiled softly and patted his shoulder. "But how are your fingers?"

"They… hurt, actually…" He mumbled, awkwardly holding out his hand. There was a bit of blood from where he'd held the needle. "My hand is already cramping. How is that? I can hold reins for long rides."

"Sewing is an art form, with just as much work as swordsmanship or riding." I took his hand and rubbed his palm, focusing on pressure points to help relieve the pain. "If you sew for a long while, you will build up calluses."

"At the beginning, yes, but with practice, you would get better." I shifted the blanket to another tear. "Do you want to try again?"

"Maybe later." He smiled shyly. "I'd like to watch this time."

"Of course." I took the needle from him, and noticed something as he shifted to watch. "So, your mark is on your wrist."

"Yes, my left one." He pushed up his sleeve so that I could see it more clearly. It was blue, the same shade as Lord Sigurd's hair in fact, and the simple design was very angular, like a set of interlocked squares surrounding the Mark of Baldur. "Lady Ethyln's in on her lower right leg, and hers spirals out a bit more, more like a flower than my more 'shield' like design."

"Lord Sigurd's reminds me a lot of a wing, though it's got much sharper edges. It's huge!"

"Well, Lord Sigurd does have Major Blood." The Marks of Major Holy Blooded were much larger and more intricate than their Minor Blood counterparts. "So, it makes sense."

"It does, but I'm always surprised when I see it." He became thoughtful. "I wonder what the other Holy Marks look like."

"Well, you do have quite a few people here with Holy Blood."

injured."

As if on cue, the doors of the chapel opened, and Sir Arden helped Sir Midir and Azel limp inside. Though some part of me wanted to immediately fuss over Azel, I knew I couldn't. Sir Midir was the one who'd been close to death before, and Sir Midir had more blood on him now, so it was Sir Midir that I had to tend to first.

"My apologies, Miss Alicia," Midir managed with a small smile as Arden got him on a bed and I went to work undoing his armor and getting his shirt off to look at the damage. "I seem to have undone your hard work."

"So long as you continue to live, Sir Midir, I believe you shall be forgiven," I replied, frowning over the injuries. "It looks as if you reopened your injuries." I glanced to the side and saw Lord Oifeye standing back by the blanket, staring at the blood. "Lord Oifeye, I need my staff, medicine, and bandages." He didn't move, still staring at the blood. "Oifeye."

"R-right!" he squeaked, racing off. He looked almost frazzled, but I could spare no thought to him. Instead, I had to focus on somewhere else who was freaking out: Azel.

"I'm sorry, Sir Midir! This is my fault!" Azel babbled. He hovered over me as I got Sir Midir to lay down and worked on cleaning the injuries. "If I hadn't moved out of formation, then-!"

"Azel, you need to sit down and be calm," I ordered, gently pushing him back. "I can't work if you are in my light." I turned away as he squeaked and jerked back. "Sir Midir, I trust you will not protesting staying here instead of returning to the battle."

"I know better than to argue with a healer, Miss Alicia," Sir Midir replied, smiling tightly. He glanced up at Azel. "And I chose to save you, Lord Azel, despite knowing that the exertion could reopen my injuries."

"Well, now you are my patient once again, and that means lying down and letting me work." I smiled as Lord Oifeye returned with the things I asked. "Thank you. Please check Azel for injuries while I work."

By this point, other wounded had arrived, and so, I moved quickly. I patched up Sir Midir before checking on Azel and sending him on his way. Sir Alec showed up, and tried to flirt once more, but I mended his arm and sent him out, even though he had to now fight with his off-hand. Sir Noish wasn't far behind, and he was sent out just as quickly, though he could only fight while riding thanks to his leg injury. Lady Ethlyn swung in to get an arm injury treated. Lord Lex managed to get slashed across the abdomen.

Some soldiers appeared more than once. I focused on keeping them healed, and keeping everything running smoothly. Lord Oifeye faithfully followed all of my instructions, and Sir Midir joined in on helping with minor things, such mixing some of the medicines into pastes and passing bandages.

I had no idea how much time had passed before Lord Sigurd appeared at the chapel. My mind said a handful of minutes; my body said days.

"Hold still while I access your injuries," I ordered, wiping some sweat from my brow and smearing blood. I frowned as Lord Sigurd shook his head. "Why are you…?"

"I came here to inform you that we have successfully taken Evans castle," Lord Sigurd explained. He smiled warmly. "And I wanted to ask if you wanted to move your infirmary to there."
"Ah, I see." I glanced around the bloody area, noting that we had some injured still. "Let me check to see if they can be moved safely." I eyed him warily. "I also wish for you to sit down for a check-up."

"Yes, ma'am." His smile softened. "Thank you, for taking care of them."

"It is simply my job." I waved him to a bed. "Sit, and be a good example for your soldiers."

"Yes, Miss Alicia."

Between Lady Ethlyn and myself, no one was seriously injured and no one was dead. Everyone required rest, of course, and frequent checks for infection, but no one had a wound that was immediately fatal or crippling. I almost found it too hard to believe, considering the small numbers, but there was no denying the evidence. We even had bandages and medicine left over.

"We're going to have to clean the chapel again," I whispered as I folded up the extra blankets and stored them. Even with no fatalities, there had been a lot of blood and mud ground into the stone floor there. "We need to also clean this room up." It was better than I had expected, but I could see the dust gathered in the corner. "The whole castle will need it, actually."

There was no reply to any of my words, of course. Sir Midir and Lord Oifeye were both fast asleep. I smiled softly as I tucked Sir Midir into bed, and draped another blanket over Lord Oifeye as he slept in a chair, leaning against the wall. Both mumbled in their sleep, but did not wake. I left them to their slumber and exited the infirmary, walking down the hall.

Earlier, everyone had been hunting desperately through the castle, hunting for Lady Aideen. However, just as many suspected, she didn't seem to be here at all. Still, it would be better to get it confirmed, and I needed to tell Lord Sigurd what needed to be done.

"Damn them!" Of course, Lord Sigurd seemed to be in a temper as I walked into the main room of Evans castle. "If even one hair on her head is harmed…" Lord Sigurd continued to growl, pacing and flailing. "I swear I'll…!"

"The last time I saw you this angry was when some nobles insulted me back at the academy," Lord Quan murmured. He and Lord Sigurd were the only ones in the room, and I had a feeling the two had arranged that on purpose. "Do you feel better?"

"No." Lord Sigurd groaned, all anger vanishing as he slumped. "Damn it. Damn those dastards."

"...Dastards?"

"I have a squire."

"So do I, but you don't hear me using such a strange word." Lord Quan smiled slightly. "It just doesn't have enough anger in it."

"Well…" Lord Sigurd glanced to the side, embarrassed, and yelped when he saw me. "Miss Alicia!" He bowed, looking a bit flustered. "I… uh…"

"I take it Lady Aideen was not found here, then?" I prompted, smiling gently and reassuringly. I was used to emotional outbursts, and I was used to keeping quiet. "Am I wrong?"

"No, you're correct," Lord Sigurd sighed. He gave me a brief smile in thanks before letting it fall. "There's no sign of her at all."
"In fact, it seems more that Prince Gandolf stopped here briefly before continuing on, with Aideen in tow," Lord Quan added. He crossed his arms and shook his head. "In short, he outran us."

"They can run, but until they've freed Aideen, they can't escape me!" 'Reckless loyalty' certainly did fit Lord Sigurd. He looked ready to charge right now.

"You should wait until the injured are not battling pain as well as their enemies," I chided. He winced and drooped, apologetic. "Perhaps let the king know what is going on?"

"She's right, Sigurd," Lord Quan added. He nodded to me and smiled briefly before growing serious. "Any further is an invasion. He might trust you as a paladin, but it would still be respectful. We can use the time between messages to heal and gather and train soldiers."

"You are both correct," Lord Sigurd sighed. He smiled sheepishly at us both. "I apologize. I'm sure my hotheadedness will cause trouble."

"I'm used to it." Lord Quan shrugged and pointed to me. "So, save your apologies for the nice lady."

"The 'nice lady' wishes you would rest instead," I replied, making myself laugh. I didn't want to think of what 'more soldiers' would mean for me. "Ah, but that does remind me. If you feel you must do something to be helpful, I do need someone to sweep the infirmary. We'll also need to clean the chapel again."

"I suppose we did make a big mess of the place," Lord Quan agreed. He smiled slightly. "Given the hour, though, I think that can wait until morning. But sweeping can happen now. We also need to clean enough rooms for us to have nice places to sleep."

"I will stay in the infirmary, as will Sir Midir." I made myself laugh softly. "Considering how deeply Lord Oifeye sleeps, it's likely he will remain there until the morning as well."

"Ah, that reminds me," Lord Sigurd said, snapping his fingers as if to symbolize the thought coming into his head. "How was Oifeye? When we took Jungby, we utilized ambush tactics, so he didn't really see a lot of injuries."

"He froze, briefly, but then went to work," I answered, shrugging slightly. "So long as I gave him orders, he was capable of moving. He might have a queasiness about blood, but I do not think there will be any trouble for now." When we had more wounded and actual deaths, though, I would worry a great deal, and not only of him. "Was there anything else?"

"No, that's all for now." He smiled warmly. "Thank you, truly."

"It is no trouble." I curtseyed to them both. "But now, I must return to my charges. Please, excuse me."

I barely waited for their reply before returning to the infirmary. It would… become much busier soon. My stomach turned at the thought, but I never let it show on my face.

I was a healer, and a healer had her duties.

Records on Sigurd

Paladin, Baldur Major, 22 years old
Heir to Chalphy, a beloved lord with no real enemies. His kindness and loyalty are his most notable traits

Has the mark of Baldur across his right shoulder and right shoulder blade.

A skilled leader who draws people in with a smile and an open hand, but his naivety and recklessness could easily prove his undoing

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Thus ends the 'prologue' of FE4. Sigurd's ACTUAL in-game class is 'Knight Lord', but in Awakening, his spotpass is 'Paladin', so I'm going with that instead. It's a bit… inconsistent about Holy Blood marks, and there's little to describe them, so I'm going with the interpretation that they're a combination of birthmarks and tattoos, that appear as the child gets older. Though not mentioned here, those with multiple holy bloods with have the markings for both bloods on them. Glade is a character from FE5.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Evans
Lord Sigurd's capture of Evans comes too late. Lady Aideen is well within Verdane's borders, kidnapped by Prince Gandolf. I do not have high hopes of her escaping, and even less on her avoiding some of the worst dangers of being a captured woman.

For now, though, we rest and recover. Villagers from all over Chalphy and Jungby flock to Evans castle, eager to lend their aid to the cause. Lord Sigurd and Lord Quan train them diligently and the other knights welcome them with open arms.

I only see many, many fresh faces who were going to be dead or dying in the infirmary before long, but there was nothing I could do. I just had to prepare as best as I could.

Thankfully, Sir Midir was a model patient. Though it was clear he wished to go find his lady immediately, and even clearer that he wanted to train to 'make up' for not being able to protect her before, he listened to my instructions faithfully and was careful to not push his limits. Between that and his being the only 'long term' patient, he was healed before long and the infirmary was empty.

I used the free space to clean and to check that we had enough bandages and changes of clothes for potential injured. When that was done, I mended blankets and wove more bandages, because you could never have 'too many'.

A knock on the door made me pause and I had to count to ten to ensure that I could be calm and serene. I already had an incident where Sir Alec and Sir Noish had gotten too enthusiastic in their training and nearly gave each other concussions.

"Come in," I called once I was certain of my temper and smile. The smile softened into something a little more 'real' when I saw it was Lord Oifeye. "Hello there."

"Hello, Miss Alicia," he replied shyly, holding up a small tray with two mugs and a plate of sliced fresh fruit. "You want some spiced cider?"

"That sounds delightful." I moved my mending to the side and cleared off the table so that he could set it down. "It is very kind of you to get me some."

"Oh, it wasn't just me." His smile warmed as he handed me a mug and sat down. "Lord Azel was the one who wondered if you'd gotten any. I'm just the one who volunteered."

"It is still very kind of you, but I shall make sure to thank him as well." I couldn't deny that I was happy that Azel thought of me, especially since I had told him once in a letter that I loved spiced cider. "Where did the fruits come from?"

"Lord Lex checked in on a nearby village and they gave him some. It seems like most of them are pretty happy about the change in lordship." Lord Oifeye looked a little confused. "I thought they'd be madder."
"I suppose it is a showing of how poorly they have been treated." I didn't doubt, of course, that Lord Sigurd would be judged harsher than a native Verdanite lord would've been, but for now, the people were simply glad that the previous lord was gone. "Do not doubt those instincts. All of us will have to work to earn their trust and goodwill."

"Right!" He beamed, but the smile soon fell as he fidgeted. "Um…" He paused, biting his lip, and I smiled reassuringly, waiting for him. "I wanted to apologize."

"For?"

"For freezing up. At the church, when Sir Midir was injured." He looked almost ashamed. "You needed my help, but I just stared."

"Many do, when they see that much blood. Part of a healer's training is to learn how to react and not freeze." I made sure to warm my smile. "You did what I needed when I prompted you. That was what you needed to do."

"I'll be better next time." He looked so determined that I didn't have the heart to point out that 'next time' would likely be worse. "So, do you need help here?"

"I will likely head into town later to pick up some medicines and herbs, but for the most part, I am mending." I laughed a little. "Rather, I am taking a break from mending. I've been in here all day. Has anything occurred?"

"Um… oh!" He clapped his hands. "A messenger from His Majesty arrived earlier. He's already left, though. But he said that not only is His Majesty giving us full permission to press forward, but we're also getting funds and soldiers!"

"I thought there were none."

"We're getting some of the soldiers left to guard the capital." He beamed again. "Lord Arvis arranged it. He determined that his own forces could cover both Velthomer and Balhalla."

I wondered how, before deciding that he likely was relying on the Meteor tome. His forces specialized in it, and a few strategically placed mages could easily devastate an army with it. "That is good news for the army." It was bad news for me, though. We already had farmers going from sickles to swords. Now we would have actual soldiers who were likely too green to be fielded. The infirmary was going to be filled.

"Ooo, is this a private party~?" Lady Ethlyn's chipper voice interrupted us, and made Lord Oifeye squeak. "Hello!" she chirped, skipping inside. "Sorry, I should've knocked, but the door was open." She still should've knocked. "Oh, fruit!" She promptly sat down in the remaining chair at the table and stole a slice. "Nothing beats fresh fruit, except sweets." She smiled. "So good!"

"As always, Lady Ethlyn, you are a hurricane in human form," Lord Oifeye deadpanned. He sighed. "Thank you for the heart attack."

"You're welcome!" She laughed and I wondered at how easily they interacted. Then again, they were only about two years apart in age. "Ah, but Miss Alicia, I was wondering if I might steal you for a bit?"

"What do you need?" I asked, returning to sipping my cider. It was well made, with just the right amount of spices. "Is someone injured?"

"Not that I know of, but that's the point," she explained. She leaned forward eagerly, but amidst the
cheer was a somber seriousness. It was an odd expression. "I was thinking that you and I could head to the village and check for injuries and illnesses? We did just impose ourselves in the castle, so I thought that would help ease hurt feelings. Plus, helping people is just a good thing to do."

"That is true." I wasn't looking forward to being barraged by people insisting on receiving treatment for simple papercuts, but I couldn't think of a polite way to refuse. "I did need to get medicines."

"I can get them for you," Lord Oifeye immediately volunteered. He was all eagerness, and seemed delighted at the chance to help. "Just give me a list?"

"That will save me some time, so thank you," I replied. I would've prefered to get them myself, but again, there was no way to politely refuse. "Let me get some paper."

The mending was going to have to wait, wasn't it? I could only hope they wouldn't be needed immediately.

When Lady Ethlyn, Lord Oifeye, and I returned from the village, we were instantly drawn into the section of the castle town devoted solely to fighting. It appeared that all of our soldiers were testing their skills at the arena, which meant healers were needed to ensure there were no accidental deaths.

I doubted I would ever understand why soldiers were so determined to treat death as a mistress.

"Go, go, go!" It didn't help that the soldiers seemed to treat it all like a sport, cheering in the stands and making bets. The whole thing made me uncomfortable. But I sat in the stands, staff in my lap, and projected an aura of calm serenity to reassure the spectators and the fighters. Lady Ethlyn had been sitting next to me, but she had gone to treat Sir Alec, and now we were watching Sir Finn try his luck. Lord Quan, from my understanding, was somewhere below, ready to help get Sir Finn out of there.

I was absolutely uncomfortable about all of this.

"Miss Alicia!" Lord Sigurd appeared next to me, taking Lady Ethlyn's seat. "I thought I saw you," he continued, smiling. I simply smiled back, and tried not to grip my staff too tightly when I saw Sir Finn take a wound to his side. "How is the village? I heard you and Ethlyn checked on them."

"They are well, though it is clear that they were not so earlier this year." When we passed the graveyard, I had seen many fresh graves. "My guess is that an illness ravaged them, and they received no aid."

"I cannot understand why the local lord would not protect the people he served." He frowned heavily. "It is our obligation."

"Many lords do not share that mentality. The people serve 'them' in their eyes, and they are free to do whatever they wish." I had to keep my smile from becoming wry as Lord Sigurd squirmed uncomfortably at the mere thought. He truly was a good man, perhaps too good. "You need only to look to Darna."

"Everything about that attack seems strange to me." Lord Sigurd sighed. "Isaach is ruled by those of Holy Blood. I find it hard to believe that fellow descendants would just slaughter innocent people, especially given what little I know of their culture."

"It has been more than one hundred years since the Holy War, Lord Sigurd." I closed my eyes, and
shook my head. "Historical facts are now simply legends. The Crusaders are more myth than human. You hear nothing about how good they were, but no one is perfect." I opened my eyes again and looked at him. "Who is to say that the 'blood' cannot become tainted during that time? Look to Lord Victor of Velthomer. He was a Vala major, yet he was, by all accounts, a horrible man."

"And then the next thing to follow the lecture is that children do not choose their parents, and just as good children can be born to horrible parents, as Lord Arvis and Azel prove, bad children can be born to wonderful parents." He smiled slightly. "I know. I got this lecture before. Yet I still cannot feel as if there is something strange behind all of this."

"You should not look for more conflict." I nodded to the soldiers fighting in the arena. "You have enough to worry about."

"And if I do not, I shall simply give you more work." His smile warmed. "I thank you again, Miss Alicia, for joining us in this."

"I am a healer, Lord Sigurd. I am simply performing my duties."

The crowd suddenly cheered and drew our attention to the fighting. Sir Finn had emerged victorious, though his heavy injuries showed that he'd have to be healed before continuing through the 'ranks'. So, I stood up, and made my way down to where Sir Finn was resting.

The cheering made my stomach turn, but I was good at faking a smile. That would be enough.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: The Arena in FE4 works a bit differently from later incarnations. Your characters cannot die, but there's also only seven levels per chapter. Sigurd and Alicia's conversation is based off a conversation Sigurd and Arvis have in the Oosawa manga. In between chapters, you get gold for each castle you take and do not lose to the enemy.

Next Chapter - Verdane's invasion begins
Chapter 3) Kindness

Verdane's lands are blanketed by dense forests, most famous of which is the 'Spirit Forest' which surrounds its castle. Grannvale's people often looked down on it, though, for both being a kingdom of 'barbarians' and for being the sole country of Jugdral to not be founded by a Crusader. To be fair, though, Verdane used to launch horrific raids on the border, to the point that the elderly still have nightmares of the attacks. King Batur, however, put a stop to such raids when he ascended the throne, and an entire generation has grown up in that tentative, hopeful peace.

But now, it seems King Batur, the so-called Pacifist King, has shattered the peace he spent so long building. I supposed he was just biding his time, waiting to strike when his victims were the most vulnerable, and now showed his true colors since Grannvale was busy with Isaach.

King Batur's three sons are the main threat to the army. Prince Kinbaith, the second son, holds a defensive line at Genoa, while Prince Gandolf returns to his castle in Marpha, where he has dragged Lady Aideen. There is no word on Prince Jamke, the youngest and most beloved of the princes, but I doubt that'll hold for long. The rumors paint him as a fierce archer, as skilled with a bow as those of Jungby, despite not having a drop of Holy Blood to give him a helpful boost.

Lady Aideen's fate... King Batur's belligerence... both unknowns have their fates hidden in the great forests that sprawl before us. But I worry of the Spirit Forest. All lore states the trees lure weary travelers and trap them among the branches for eternity.

Will we find our path or be lost too?

"Thank you very much, Miss Alicia," Sir Finn mumbled as I tended to his injuries. From my understanding, he had asked Lord Quan for a more intense training this morning, keenly aware of how much weaker her was. The result was Finn becoming stronger, at the expense of some more serious bruises. "It's very kind of you to treat me."

"It is my job to heal you, Sir Finn," I gently corrected, checking him over one more time. We were expecting a battle at any moment, so I wanted to be certain he'd be ready. "There is no need to thank me."

"In Leonster, we wouldn't be healed for injuries during training."

"Leonster is actively at war with Thracia. We are simply in the middle of a campaign." I moved away then to mix up some medicine. "Drink this."

"Yes, ma'am." He drank the medicine without hesitation, even though I knew it was bitter and most soldiers would gag. "Thank you."

"You are very welcome." I passed him some water to help him get the taste out of his mouth, and laughed when he downed it even faster. "Should I have added honey?"

"No, Miss Alicia. I'd rather you save the honey." He shook his head. "Your medicines taste better
than what we have in Leonster anyway."

"Well, I do use different herbs." I was learning some of the local remedies as well, bringing in Verdanite treatments as alternatives to what I already knew. Different people often required different medicines. "Try to take it easy for the rest of the day."

"I'll try, Miss Alicia." He stood slowly, carefully stretching his legs, which had taken the brunt of the bruising. He smiled as he straightened, but it faded as he looked to the door. "I think you might have another patient."

"That would not surprise me." I made sure I was smiling as the door to the infirmary opened, but my standard greeting died when I realized it was Lord Oifeye.

"Sorry to bother," he noted, bowing slightly. He was a bit out of breath. "We have some visitors, and Lord Sigurd and Lord Quan requested you both."

"We'll be right there," I replied, fixing Lord Oifeye a glass of water. "Stay here and catch your breath."

"Okay." Lord Oifeye smiled before half-collapsing into Sir Finn's vacated chair. "Thank you."

"It's no trouble." I turned to Sir Finn, who nodded and led the way. I didn't know this castle very well; I mostly only knew the path from my room to the infirmary, from the infirmary to the arena, and from the arena to my room. Others had invited me to socialize, but I spent my time working and ensuring the infirmary would be ready for the inevitable battles to come. There was always something to do.

So, Sir Finn had to show me the way to the throne room, receiving room, area of the castle. There, it soon became clear we had two visitors, with similar enough features and coloring that I guessed they were siblings, and they were good friends with Lord Sigurd, Lord Quan, and Lady Ethlyn. Lady Ethlyn was in the corner gossiping happily with a blonde girl, while Lord Sigurd and Lord Quan warmly hugged and welcomed the blonde man.

"Eldigan!" Lord Sigurd cheered, smiling warmly. "It's been a while. Was it your coronation when we last saw each other?"

"No, it was Quan and Ethlyn's wedding, but that was… two months after my coronation, if I recall correctly."

"That's right. I remember being really confused when they announced the Lord of Nordion had arrived, and I couldn't find your father."

"And then we both remembered and felt horrible," Lord Quan laughed. Clearly, it was a fond memory. "But that's been a year or so. Has it truly been so long? Life just seemed to catch up with all of us."

"Unfortunate, but true," Lord Eldigan agreed. His smile faded. "But speaking of duties, I must ask. Why do I suddenly find you all occupying Evans Castle? Surely you're not declaring war on Verdane?"

"I am, but reluctantly," Lord Sigurd answered easily. He ran a hand through his hair, sighing. "The Verdanites raided the border, assaulted many villages, devastated Jungby, and kidnapped Aideen. I had to save them."

"Of course, because your devotion to chivalry and your personal loyalty would not let you do
anything less."

"I don't need to hear 'devotion to chivalry' from you, Eldigan. You're worse than I am." Lord Sigurd shook his head. "Regardless, that's what's going on."

"I knew there was a reasonable explanation. This is far more like you, and I don't even need to ask why Quan's here." Lord Eldigan sighed. "But a word of caution. Whatever you do, you cannot afford to leave Evans unguarded."

"We weren't planning on it," Lord Quan murmured. He looked concerned. "But I take it that you have a more… serious reason for that."

"Unfortunately, yes," Lord Eldigan replied. "I hate to admit this, but my fellow lords have been a rancorous sort as of late, taking advantage of King Imca's illness to do as they wish."

"Has Lachesis punched Elidiot in the face again?"

"...I try to be serious, and you bring out that stupid nickname again." Lord Eldigan fought to keep a smile off his face, and lost the battle miserably. "Gods damn it, Quan."

"You're too serious. That's why Sigurd pounced on you when we were at the Academy anyway."

"He did the same with you."

"Well, in my case, it was more of a 'hi, we're neighbors, and I just flooded the rooms of the people who bullied you for being a foreigner, but we kind of need to run because it is a little out of control' sort of thing. Yours was a little more controlled."

"Yes, in the form of 'hi, you're always alone, so I'm dragging you into the market where you're forced to interact with people.' So, barely."

"Hey, you both laughed," Lord Sigurd pointed out, completely unrepentant. He even grinned. "And now we're all friends, so I fail to see why it was a problem." His cheer faded slightly. "Though, maybe it is one now. Eldigan, is Augustria…?"

"Fear not, Sigurd, I shall never become your enemy," Lord Eldigan instantly reassured. He smiled to enforce the words. "I simply wanted to warn you about my fellows. They seem to forget that it is not the nobles who suffer when war comes, but the people. We are supposed to protect them, not have them thrown about because of whimsical bouts of greed."

Lord Sigurd laughed softly. "You haven't changed one bit."

"I'm not the only one." Lord Eldigan smiled. "Neither of you have changed either."

"And neither has our vow of friendship," Lord Quan murmured. He brought his hand up, and the other two automatically reached out to clasp it. It was clear this was something important to them. "It's as strong as always."

"Of course," Lord Eldigan agreed. His smile softened. "So, please, allow me to guard your backs. I cannot do much more, but I can keep Augustria from striking you."

"Thank you, Eldigan," Lord Sigurd replied. He grinned. "And then, when all of this is over, let's sit together in front of the fire and catch up. The three of us, a bottle of wine… it'll be just like old times!"
"Yes, that does sound good." Lord Eldigan suddenly became thoughtful. "You two haven't met Ares yet, have you?"

"Your son? No, we haven't. Then again, I haven't met my niece either."

"That's right; Quan is a father too." Lord Eldigan turned to Lord Quan with a grin. "I can hear the gossips already."

"I'm not handing over my precious baby girl," Lord Quan instantly retorted, looking playfully stubborn. "Not even to Ares." He shook his head. "How is Grahnye doing? Has she been driven up the wall yet?"

"No, not yet," Lord Eldigan laughed. "But she insists that between Ares and me, she's going to go grey early."

"Of course she does," the blonde girl suddenly interrupted. She looked both exasperated and amused. "After all, a certain lord goes about taking his son on early morning rides without telling her."

"Oh, Quan does that with Altenna!" Lady Ethlyn sighed. She crossed her arms and nodded. "I think Grahnye and I will have much more to talk about nowadays. But, that's not why Lachesis and I interrupted your guy time." She pointed to Sir Finn and me. "They've been here for a while."

"And I don't know either of them, which probably means Eldigan doesn't either." The blonde girl smiled warmly, and I noticed her gaze linger on Sir Finn. "I'm Lachesis, Princess of Nordion. My rude older brother over there is Eldigan, the Lionheart."

"Must you introduce me with that ridiculous nickname?" Lord Eldigan sighed. He smiled, though, and bowed. "A pleasure to meet both of you. One of you wears the livery of a Leonster squire."

"Yes, Finn is my squire," Lord Quan introduced. He gestured for Sir Finn to come to his side, and rested a hand on his shoulder when he did. "He's young, but I think he'll be leading the Lanzritter before long."

"Quite a bit of praise, since you're so critical of who leads your soldiers."

"I picked up that trait from you."

"And here I thought I picked it up from you."

"Well, you two can keep bantering over the poor boy's blushing head," Lord Sigurd teased. Sir Finn was a bright red, and he'd ducked his head to try and hide it. "But I'm going to be polite before I get another lecture." Lord Sigurd actually came to me, instead calling me over to him. "Eldigan, this is Miss Alicia, our chief healer, and lifesaver of just about everyone in the army."

"Especially you and Quan, if your recklessness is still the same," Lord Eldigan deadpanned. He bowed to me again. "I apologize for how much work they'll give you, Miss Alicia. I never did get around to teaching them caution."

"Says the one who stubbornly sticks to his decisions no matter what until you get hit in the head enough." Lord Sigurd grinned. "Like that time when-"

"My lord!" The doors to the hallway burst open, and Sir Noish raced inside, armored and armed. "My lord, we're under attack," he reported, saluting. The cheer of the room evaporated. "Scouts report Prince Kinbaith is leading his forces directly here."
"So, they moved first," Lord Sigurd murmured. He frowned in thought and turned to Lord Eldigan. "What will you and Lachesis do? If you leave now, you might be able to get back to Nordion before being caught up."

"As if I'd pass up the chance to fight alongside you and Quan again, Sigurd," Lord Eldigan replied with a slight smile. "I have Mystletainn with my things. I'd feel better knowing I was here to watch your backs. I won't be able to help beyond this battle as Nordion calls, but…"

"Thanks, Eldigan." He turned to Lady Lachesis, who bit her lip. "What about you?"

"I… think I would like to help in the infirmary," Lady Lachesis answered slowly. She turned her attention to me. "That is, if you would like some more help. I am trained in a staff."

"I shall take all help that is offered," I replied calmly. I didn't expect her to be much help at all, but she could hold things if nothing else. "But if you are to help, we must prep the infirmary now."

I wondered how many graves we would dig tonight.

I had expected Lady Lachesis to balk and panic when the first badly injured man came in, but she wasn't even sick until after he was 'secure'. Then, after she finished vomiting, she rinsed her mouth out with water and returned to my side, even as her hands shook.

"Who is Lady Grahnye?" I asked her as I changed some bandages. It was mostly as a distraction to help her focus. "Lord Ares's nanny?"

"No, she's my sister in law," Lady Lachesis replied. She passed me some water to rinse the wound. "She's originally from Leonster, and she and Eldigan were arranged to be married when they were children. I'm not sure if they're in love or anything, but they're amazing friends, meaning it's a happy marriage." She made a face. "The wedding was so much fuss, though. I'm glad I won't have to go through with it."

"How so?"

"Well, Eldigan told me he'd never force me into a marriage, and I refuse to marry a man who is lesser than my ideal: Eldigan." She nodded to herself, and I chose to not point out the incestuous implications of the statement. "Of which I know only two: Sigurd and Quan. And those two have basically been my older brothers since I met them."

"You certainly seemed intrigued by Sir Finn. I noticed your gaze lingering."

"He's cute. I'm allowed to admire." Still, she blushed. "You… don't think he noticed, right?"

"I doubt he noticed much of anything through his own embarrassment. He does not yet know how to take praise graciously." I finished with the bandaging and stood up. "How do you feel?"

"...Better." She looked a bit surprised, and smiled slightly. "Thank you."

"It is no trouble." I paused as rapid footsteps came our way. "We're getting the first real wave."

"Okay." She visibly steeled herself, but she still went pale when the first ones came in, carrying a man screaming bloody murder because his arm was half cut-off. "Oh, gods…"

"Follow my orders, and don't think." Honestly, a lot of healing was like fighting. You had an enemy to 'battle', and within an hour, you were so tired that you were running on instincts. "Keep
your expression as stable as you can."

"Okay."

We went to work, healing and stitching where we could. Those who died were moved into a side room, just in case I had to strip them down for excess bandages. My earlier preparations, though, proved to be a good thing as we had plenty of numbing concoctions for surgeries, and plenty of disinfectant for the injuries.

Lady Lachesis followed me dutifully, following my directions without a second's hesitation. She turned an interesting green-grey color as the hours wore on, and I thought she was going to lose it when I had to cut an arrow out of someone's eye, but she held on to her calm with tooth and nail, and didn't break down until the waves calmed down enough that both of us could step into a side room for a better-than-cursory wash.

"Oh gods..." she mumbled, shaking. She had collapsed to her knees, and hugged herself as she struggled to not cry. "Oh gods... some of them were my age..."

"Here, chew this," I whispered, passing her a little bit of ginger as I focused on making some more medicine. "It'll help your stomach."

"Thank you..." With trembling hands, she took the piece and chewed, wincing at the intenseness of the flavor. But it helped her calm down, and she managed to stand. To my surprise, though, she wetted her hands and ran them through my hair. "Your hair is bloody." She finger-combed it carefully, making sure that she didn't drip water over my work. "I know it's probably not something to care about, but..."

"Actually, it is." I glanced back at her to smile before returning to mixing the medicines. "It is one thing when you're in the middle of working, but the new patients would rather not see too much evidence of how many of their fellows were injured. My hair color helps hide it, though."

"It's a beautiful red, as red as Lord Arvis's." Her hands paused, and I wondered what she thought. But then she went back to getting the blood out of my hair. "It's soft."

"People trust a pretty healer. After all, if you don't look as if you take care of yourself, then you don't look like you can take care of others."

"That sounds like being a leader. You have to dress nicely, because people are more likely to follow you." She stopped finger-combing and stepped to my side. "I think that's all I can get without a brush."

"Then work on your own hair." I poked a section, and she looked a little green again. "Do you need more ginger?"

"I... no, I'd like to try and push through." She took a deep breath, and started finger-combing the blood out of her hair. "Should we change clothes?"

"The clothes can wait. I have a few spares." I looked at her. "They might be a little big on you, but I'm sure they'll be preferable."

"R-right..." She sighed. "Is it worse or better on the field?"

"I don't know. But a healer always sees the worse of a fight." A knock on the wall made me turn. "Come in." There was no screaming, so I assumed that the next wave of wounded hadn't arrived yet.
"Are you two alright?" Lord Eldigan asked as he walked in. He was sweaty, but he looked in almost perfect shape. "You look… well, Miss Alicia, you look perfectly confident. Lachesis, not so much."

"Lady Lachesis is looking quite well considering everything," I replied calmly, mostly to head off her defensive reply. I turned to face him, eyeing him critically. "Do you need healing?"

"No, but I thank you for your concern." He held up his sword, and my blood warmed at the sight. That alone told me this was a Holy Weapon, and because he was of Hezul, that meant this was Mystletainn, the Demon Blade. "It gets its nickname for how it acts as a more powerful Earth Sword, among other things. It's magic heals me as I kill people."

"I see." I nodded, accepting that. I had heard Arvis mention that property of Mystletainn, once. All of the Holy Weapons had special properties. "Then what brings you here? Are you checking on Lady Lachesis?"

"In part." He turned serious again. "The ambush has been routed, and Kinbaith is dead. I understand Lord Lex has claimed his handaxe for his own use. It was an easy, quick battle."

"That was easy?" Lady Lachesis yelped. Her eyes went wide. "The infirmary is…!"

"You must keep your voice down," I chided. She instantly became contrite. "The infirmary is only half-full. That is very good." I turned my attention to Lord Eldigan. "However, since the ambush is done, you must return to Nordion, correct? I imagine Lord Sigurd will use the momentum to push forward."

"Yes," he confirmed. "Already, Sigurd and Quan are planning a bait and strike assault on Genoa Castle." He focused on Lachesis. "Would you like to change before we head home, Lachesis?"

"I…” Lady Lachesis began. She hesitated briefly, glancing at me. "Actually, if it is all right, I would like to stay and continue to work here."

"You… what?"

"I want to heal. I want to help." She bowed her head, fingers twisting in her skirt. "I know I'm not much help, Miss Alicia, but if this much work is 'easy', then I cannot even imagine how much more you will have to do. What little help I can give, I really want to. If it's all right by you."

I didn't answer right away, a little startled by the offer, and found myself smiling. She was just… endearingly sincere. "You were a wonderful help, and even if you can only change bandages, that frees me to do more," I reassured her. She glanced up at me to smile and I turned my attention to Lord Eldigan. "Please, if it is no trouble, I would gladly wish her help, at least until we move to Genoa Castle."

"Well, how can I refuse when both of you are asking?" Lord Eldigan replied. He smiled slightly, and looked a little proud. "Lachesis, listen to her orders faithfully, and only argue if you do not know how to do something."

"I will," Lady Lachesis promised. She straightened and smiled. "I promise to return to Nordion after they take Genoa Castle. I know staying much longer will make for complicated politics."

"I have Cross Knights on the border, and that is only half-a-day away at most. Go to them."

"Have a safe trip back." She waved goodbye as he left, and turned to me. "Thank you very much."
"It will be much worse," I warned her. Genoa was only a day's ride, give or take, but this battle could easily stretch for two or even three days depending on how quickly Lord Sigurd's 'strike' force got Genoa. "People will die, no matter how much you try to save them."

"That's okay," she whispered. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I learned healing so that I could help the Cross Knights who protect my home. These are the sort of injuries they might face." She opened her eyes again, and locked her gaze with him. "So, I don't want to run and hide from it. This is the danger they face for being knights. I want to help." She managed a little smile. "Besides, as a Hezul minor blooded, I'm stronger than I look. I can at least help with pinning uncooperative patients down."

"I just might need you to do that." My smile softened, and I ran a hand over her hair. It was still damp, so some herbs clung to the gold strands, but she didn't care. "You're a good child." Rapid footsteps caught my ear, and when I peeked back into the main part of the infirmary, I found Azel carrying a wounded man through the doorway. "Come. It's time to work again."

"Right!"

Lady Lachesis and I worked through the night, as the wounded flooded us. Dawn came and went the next day, and still we worked. When things calmed, she and I took turns napping, but it was basically just enough to not faint as more injured came in.

Sir Finn appeared on the second day, limping from a pulled muscle. He insisted that he didn't need to be healed, and had told me he had requested falling back so that he wouldn't receive an injury requiring treatment. Instead, he wanted to help. I paired him with Lady Lachesis, and left the more minor injuries to them while I worked on the more major ones.

At some point between stitching up someone's insides to stop internal bleeding and sending someone to get me another heal staff as all the ones I'd had on hand were broken, I discovered I actually had two more helpers: Azel and Sir Midir. I gave them orders in the same calm voice as always, even as I wondered what they were doing here. Then, when things were calmer, Sir Midir went to patrol, while Azel cleaned what he could. Lady Lachesis and Sir Finn were asleep in a corner, leaning into each other. They looked so adorable that I didn't have the heart to wake them up, and instead, found a spare blanket and used it to cover them.

Only then did I turn to Azel and said, "I love being able to spend time with you, little brother, but I am confused."

"You are, Lady Sister? I didn't notice," Azel replied honestly. He looked exhausted. "Sir Sigurd's strategy required using me as a bit of a trump card." He smiled proudly. "So, I did! But we got pinned between Genoa's forces and Marpha's, so I got a bit overworked. Sir Midir offered to escort me back here, as he was running out of arrows. When we arrived, we saw you were up to your knees in blood and to your eyes in wounded, so we came in to help."

"Oh?" I smiled softly at him. "How do you feel?"

"Even more tired, and maybe a little ill, but otherwise, I'm okay. I'm not injured." He peered at me worriedly. "What about you? Are you okay? You look fine, but I'm bad at reading people."

"I'm fine, Azel." I couldn't help but laugh a little. It really did warm my heart that he'd be concerned about me. "I am used to this sort of pace."

"If you say so." He became a little pouty. "But if you need help, let me know, okay? We've barely
spent any time together."

"Oh, you." I ruffled his hair, laughing as he squeaked. "You're unbelievably sweet."

"I don't see what's so sweet about wanting to help my Lady Sister." He sighed. "You're like Arvis. Working, working, working. Did I miss that family trait?"

"Considering our father, I think Arvis and I just happened to get it from our mothers, separately."

"I don't know. From what I heard, Father worked very hard, at raping and drinking, and generally making life miserable for everyone. That requires effort."

"Well, clearly, you do have some of Arvis's sarcasm." My cheer faded a bit as I stroked his head, frowning as I noticed just how tired he was. "Azel, I know you wish to be helpful, but you really must be careful."

"Because of the Final Strike." The 'Final Strike' was something only those of Holy Blood could do. It took all the magic of the area and the mage and released it in one last burst. Vala's blood was one of fire and magic, meaning her descendants were capable of great destruction if they loosed one, and were in greater danger of accidentally reaching that point. "I know. That's why I fell back."

"Sorry, I'm sure you know the dangers better than I do. I just can't help but fret."

"That's okay." He ducked his head shyly. "I... like being fussied over? A little?" He made a face. "Well, not so much fussied as... um..." His face slowly turned red. "I know you fuss because you care. And I like that you care? Um..."

"Miss Alicia, Lord Azel!" Sir Midir's voice heralded his approach, and both of us automatically stepped away from each other as he swung into the room. "My pardon," he murmured, leaning against the doorframe. "But the scouts have reported two people being chased by Verdanite soldiers. They were very close."

"Oh?" I asked, curious. The best guess I had was that they were two villagers seeking help. "Are we capable of sending help?"

"Yes, if we are quick," Sir Midir looked to Azel. "Are you recovered enough, my lord?" Azel paused for a moment before nodding. "Then you and I can lead a small group."

"I'd better come along." I turned away and gently woke Lady Lachesis and Sir Finn. "These two can watch the infirmary, but if they're civilians, they might need immediate treatment."

"Very well, Miss Alicia." Sir Midir waited all of a second for me to tell Lady Lachesis and Sir Finn what was going on before leaving, Azel quickly on his heels. Unfortunately, both of them seemed to have forgotten that I was tired, and wasn't very fast anyway, so I was left trailing after them, just barely able to keep either of them in sight as they rallied a small group to chase down the Verdanites.

I'd barely made it out of the castle before they charged the enemy striking them hard and fast. I sighed, barely checking the urge to mutter about impulsive soldiers, and made my way towards the edge of the castle town, wondering where the two civilians were. I found them before long, and froze. One was a small boy, easily Lord Oifeye's age. The other was Lady Aideen.

"Oh, hello," she greeted with a warm smile. Her expression, though, was a little dazed. "Um... Dew was just saying that this is Sigurd's army?"
"Yes, my lady, though Lord Sigurd is currently fighting at Genoa," I answered. This just felt bizarre. "You were captured."

"Yes, but Prince Jamke helped both of us escape." She glanced towards the fighters. "Um… why are there so many people?"

"You are very loved, Lady Aideen, as is Lord Sigurd. The people flocked to helping both of you." I stepped closer and checked her over for signs of fainting. I noticed she was barefoot, but didn't call attention to it. "That's all." I looked over to the fighters and saw them returning. "It seems they routed them."

"Yes…" Her eyes focused on something, and then wavered. "Is that…?"

"Sir Midir? Yes." I moved back as her eyes filled with tears. "He's been quite worried about you."

"He…" Her voice cracked and, as soon as Sir Midir rode over and dismounted, she threw herself at him, sobbing. "Midir! You're okay!"

"Lady Aideen…" Sir Midir murmured. He awkwardly stood as Lady Aideen sobbed into his chest. "I'm sorry. Because I was so weak, you had to go through such a trying time."

"All that matters to me, Midir, is that you are safe!" She pulled away, and tried to wipe her tears away, but they just kept running down her face. "You gave your all to protect me, and I feared you gave your life as well!"

"Miss Alicia saved my life, Lady Aideen." Hesitantly, Sir Midir reached up and wiped away the tears himself. She smiled gently and leaned into his hand. "To which I am grateful. I could see you rescued."

"Midir…" She hugged him again and, after a moment, Sir Midir returned the hug.

I noticed how Azel both looked happy and like he was about to cry and hesitantly reached out to offer him a hug. He took it, leaning against my shoulder and crying silently. I ran my hand through his hair, and didn't say a word until little Dew made a snarky comment about lovebirds, making the soldiers laugh and Sir Midir and Lady Aideen blush.

Only then did I suggest we return to Evans. It seemed appropriate.

"Oh, so you're Miss Alicia," Lady Aideen murmured. She held still as I checked her over, and made small talk as I worked. "I'd heard of you in the castle, actually. One of the healers who left with Father and Andrei told me that if I needed help with healing, I should come to you." She smiled warmly. "I was making plans of coming to visit when all this happened."

"That is very kind of you, Lady Aideen," I replied. I knelt down and started working on her feet. "Try not to kick me, but you have rocks and the like stuck inside."

"And if you tried to heal it, there's an even-odd chance of you healing it inside." She held herself very still as I carefully plucked rocks and splinters. "My shoes fell apart while we were running."

"I had wondered." I focused entirely on my work. We were in a side room, leaving Lady Lachesis to check over Dew while Sir Midir, Sir Finn, and Azel tended to our injured. "How did Dew hear we were here when you hadn't?"

"He was thrown into the dungeons as a thief after I was captured."
"I see." I paused as I worked a particularly stubborn rock out of her heel. "Do you wish for a… miscarriage tea?"

"That won't be necessary." She smiled wryly when I looked up at her skeptically. "He didn't touch me. Not like that."

"Oh?" Getting the last of the debris out of her feet, I healed them easily and stood up. "Do you mind if I check you over? Sometimes, victims block out their memory of the trauma."

"Certainly." She closed her eyes as I urged my magic to wrap around her and check for any bleeding or bruising, for any diseases, and for any signs of pregnancy. But there was nothing.

"Well, then." I could honestly say I was startled. Considering everything I'd heard of Prince Gandolf, I'd been certain he would've… "I think, my lady, that your Ullur luck is the stuff of legends."

"I think so too. Prince Jamke freed me not two hours before the 'ceremony' Gandolf was going to force me through." She opened her eyes and smiled gently. "I suppose he had some sort of honor."

"Maybe." Though I wasn't going to try and figure out how that worked. "How are you feeling?"

"A lot of things, truthfully." She sighed, and let her perfect poise slump. "I am… happy that people came to save me, and frustrated that I needed saving. I am ecstatic Midir is alive, yet devastated that so many good soldiers died. I want to apologize to Sigurd that I was captured, and wring his neck for being so reckless."

"No fear?"

"Oh, I think I'm still in shock of everything for the fear and what-ifs to set in for now." She shook her head. "I'm sure I'll be screaming later tonight, when it all catches up."

"Well, you can cuddle with Sir Midir." I couldn't help but laugh as she flushed. "My lady, if I may be so bold, most of Jungby was taking bets on when you and Sir Midir would announce a courtship."

"Please tell me you're joking!" Her face went even redder and she pressed her hands to her cheeks in a vain attempt to hide it. "Oh, goodness…"

"Now, now, my lady, it warms everyone's hearts that you are in love. Your little brother is engaged, is he not?"

"Ah, yes, he is." Lady Aideen sighed. "But that does not mean I should be so easy to read! I am a healer. I should be calm and unreadable."

"Throwing yourself at him while in tears is not exactly subtle, my lady." I laughed softly as she winced and whimpered. "My apologies. I should not be so teasing."

"No, please, especially since you and I will be working together." Lady Aideen smiled. "You and I are both healers. Healers… are the only ones who help each other."

Who healed the healer? No one, unless another healer happened to be near. "That is true, and there are very few here who even know herbal medicines."

"Besides, you and I do not fight. We are both healers, not warriors who happen to know how to heal." Her smile softened. "So, please, call me 'Aideen', and feel free to tease. A little bit of
"Laughter is often the best medicine." Noise in the main room caught my ear. "Oh, dear." Was it another wave of wounded?

"It sounds like only one or two people." Lady Aideen stood up, and moved to the doorway. "Yes, just one person."

"Well, that can be good or bad." I stepped out of the room and smiled at the messenger, a farmer turned soldier. "Oh, hello." I wondered what he was doing here. It was much too early for the messenger I had sent to Lord Sigurd, telling him of Lady Aideen's rescue, to have returned, so this could not be a reply. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, Miss Alicia," he replied. He saluted, the movement a little clunky. "I'm here to inform you that Lord Sigurd has successfully taken Genoa castle." The room instantly cheered. "He also requests that you come to the castle, Miss Alicia. He did not say why."

"Oh?" I could think of a few thousand reasons, and all of them involved lots of blood and pain. "Give me a moment, then, to check on things here."

I just wanted to go to bed.

I tried not to whimper as I dismounted from the horse. The messenger had been insistent on getting back to Genoa Castle as soon as possible, meaning that we'd ridden at a gallop, pausing just long enough to keep the horse from foundering. I couldn't tell the messenger that I had no riding experience, not when haste was apparently very needed, and so, I hurt, a lot.

I didn't even have a chance to stretch out. Lord Oifeye was waiting for me, and quickly led me into the castle. I noticed Lord Lex and an unknown woman with black hair glaring at each other, and wondered who she was. But then she was out of sight, and I focused again on Lord Oifeye. Of course, I couldn't do that for long. Lord Sigurd was clearly waiting for us, and he soon took over leading me through the bloody, corpse-ridden castle, with Lord Oifeye staying back.

It was only when we were heading down to a place smelling of damp and mold did he say anything. "I apologize for the haste and the quiet," he said as we carefully walked down the stairs. He held out his hand to help me when I stumbled. "There's a prisoner down here who needs a healer, a young child."

"Is there a reason why Lady Ethlyn could not heal him?" I asked, squinting as everything darkened. There were no windows down here, and the smell wafting up was almost nauseating. "She is skilled."

"We tried, but he saw her weapon and panicked." He sighed as we made it to the bottom, and took a torch off the wall to help light the way as we walked. Our steps squished along the way, and I tried not to think of how many prisoners died in a place like this. "She removed it, of course, but he still panicked."

"Why did she have it on at all?"

"Why else? She came straight from the field, and hadn't noticed the weight." We came on a cell in a particularly damp corner. "He's in there. I dare not get much closer, but if you want the torch…"

"No, if you keep it there, there should be enough life for me to work." Cautiously, I approached the cell, and I pushed the door open. It creaked loudly, and I winced as the sound assaulted my ears.
A whimper caught my attention, and I focused on the little boy in the corner. Dark haired and thin, he looked barely older than ten, and I'd be willing to bet that he was actually younger. I crawled over to him, sat on my heels, and waited for him to look at me, studying what I could see. He was bound with ropes, and had found against the bindings so much that he bled. Bruises mottled what bits of skin I could see through the dirt.

After a long moment, he looked up at me. His eyes were dark, both in color and in emotion. It was all too easy to see the pain and fear in them, and a deep rooted sadness that made the eyes look too old for his face. He stared at me, studying me as I studied him, and then, very slowly he reached out. The ropes limited the movement, but I moved a little closer until he could touch me. Then, to my surprise, he grabbed a lock of my hair, and tilted his head.

"Oh, it's cold," he murmured. His voice was raspy, like he'd been crying. "It's so red. I thought it would be warm."

"It's fire-red, yes, but it is just hair," I gently teased, smiling softly. He relaxed slightly. "My name is Alicia, and I'm a healer. Will you let me tend to you?"

"You're not with Kinbaith?"

"No, I'm not. He and his men are dead." I paused as he looked alarmed, and I looked again at his hair. I was reminded of the woman outside. "Do you have a family member fighting with them? A woman?"

"My auntie, Ayra." His eyes wavered. "Is she okay? Is she still…?"

"I saw a woman who looks like you outside, glaring but alive." I heard footsteps and knew that Lord Sigurd was leaving to fetch her. "I think she's fine. Will you let me help you?"

"O-okay…" He let go of my hair and held still as I carefully untied the ropes. It was slow going. The knots were tight, and had been made tighter by his struggling, but I remained determined, even as my vision blurred slightly from exhaustion. He whimpered when I managed to undo the knots and pulled the ropes off of him. Once they were off, I gently tugged him out of the corner, mostly so that he was no longer trapped there. Then I stripped him of his shirt; it was little more than rags anyway.

He flinched, and at first, I thought it was the cold. But then I noticed something startling. There, wrapping around his torso, was a very large Holy Mark. The black lines were smooth and spiraled, almost looking like a patterned robe imprinted on his skin. A second look showed that the pattern was set up almost like a moon and stars.

He was a Major Holy Blooded, and given the circumstances, I had a very good guess as to which Crusader he was descended from. However, I purposely ignored it and worked on tending to his injuries, using both my staff and some medicines. After all, I could easily count his ribs, and it was clear the boy hadn't had a decent meal in a long time. I was a healer; a person's allegiances didn't matter to a healer.

Footsteps heralded someone's approach, and they were purposely loud to make sure neither the boy nor I would be startled. I did not look up from my work until someone knocked on the cell. Then, I turned to smile, because only Lord Sigurd would be so cautious.

He waited at the cell door, and did not enter until the boy hesitantly nodded. Even then, he moved slowly, holding up his hands slightly so that the boy could see that he was unarmed. When the boy looked uncomfortable, he stopped, and sat down there.
"Your Aunt Ayra is currently being treated for some muscle strain," Lord Sigurd explained. The boy smiled hesitantly. "I'm sure she'll be here before long. She was screaming at Lex, Ethlyn, and Quan when I left."

"That sounds like her," the boy replied. He shook slightly, but he looked more curious than afraid of Lord Sigurd. "She's really nice, but she has a temper."

"I'm sure she's also mad at Lex. He used taunts to keep her from cutting his head off." Lord Sigurd smiled softly. "I take it you were used as a hostage to keep her cooperative."

"Yes…" His eyes wavered. "Um… what's going to happen to us?"

"Well, that depends on what you two want to do, but we can talk about that later." Lord Sigurd shook his head. "But what is your name?"

"It's…" He hesitated again, and he glanced at me as I continued to work. He watched me close up a cut, and he seemed to find courage from it. "My name is Shanan." He looked Lord Sigurd right in the eyes. "I'm Shanan, of Isaach."

"Really?" Lord Sigurd looked surprised, and his eyes focused on the Mark on Lord Shanan's chest. Lord Shanan flinched, but did his best to not hide. "Poor child. You must have gone through so much." Lord Sigurd smiled warmly, and I saw Lord Shanan's expression blank from shock. "I cannot even imagine. You're quite brave, to hold up through all of that."

"I… I'm not…" Lord Shanan's eyes filled with tears. "You…" He lost the battle and started to cry. I shifted so that he could cry into my shoulder. "S-sorry…"

"Do not be sorry for crying." Lord Sigurd carefully approached, ready to back away if needed. But Lord Shanan let him come close, and even rest his hand on his head. "Especially when so much has happened in such a short time. Trust me. Crying is perfectly natural."

Lord Shanan continued to cry, and Lord Sigurd and I let the poor boy sob. It was increasingly clear that he'd gone through rough times since the campaign started, and he had been holding back his tears this entire time.

He had just calmed down when we heard someone running down the hall. We barely had time to look up before the woman I'd seen earlier swung inside the cell and went straight to Lord Shanan, crashing to her knees and gathering him in her arms. He started crying again, and this time, Lord Sigurd and I stepped away to give the two some privacy.

"Did you get my messenger about Lady Aideen?" I asked him. I made myself ignore how my knees ached and how my vision was greying at the edges. I needed to go to sleep, but I needed to do my job. "I left her in charge of the infirmary."

"I did get that message," Lord Sigurd replied. He smiled in relief. "It made me feel a little better dragging you away from the injured." His smile faded. "Dare I ask…?"

"I have no counts for you yet. It has been a very busy few days." I gave him a look. "I'm assuming you had a field infirmary?"

"Yes, though it was mostly a 'Ethlyn heals people enough to either fight or be transported back to Evans'." Lord Sigurd sighed. "When we take Marpha, I might need you and Aideen closer to the fighting, unfortunately. I'm sure the trip didn't help their injuries."

"It depends." But that did make me wonder just how many bodies littered the road between Evans
and Genoa. "But the distance between here and Marpha is not too bad."

"Marpha and Castle Verdane, though… that is a hike." He shook his head and focused on the woman and Lord Shanan. "Verdane is very far from Isaach."

"You risk a lot." It was all too easy to imagine how the courts would react to him giving the Prince of Isaach safety. "It is, in many ways, too much kindness."

"Perhaps, but I would rather risk death by kindness than to kill a little boy for an accident at birth." His words were firm. "He's so young. It's not fair that he should suffer."

"Life isn't very fair, Lord Sigurd."

"Why not?" He paused, expecting an answer, but I had none. I could only stare, because my only response was 'it just is', and that was an answer I knew he wouldn't accept. "That phrase nothing more than an excuse for all the cruel and petty things people inflict, and get away with it. But there's no reason why life shouldn't be fair, yes? Why can we not make it fair?"

I could only continue to stare, as I had no real reply to it other that 'you are a naive idiot and will get yourself killed'. That wasn't something a healer said, especially to the leader of an army. Thankfully, though, I was spared trying to think of a reply anyway. The woman had torn her attention from Lord Shanan, and focused her hard, fierce eyes on us.

"My name is Ayra," she told us. "I'm Shanan's aunt, Minor Odo." Her eyes glinted, daring us to say anything. But, of course, she remained silent. "What do you plan on doing with us?"

"My plan is to either grant your sanctuary among my army, or to help you go to a place you believe is safe, Princess Ayra," Lord Sigurd answered without a moment's hesitation. He even bowed to her politely. "Whichever you wish."

"Is that so?" She seemed skeptical, but she glanced down at Lord Shanan, the fierceness in her eyes faltering. But then they sharpened again, and focused on me. "You. You're a healer, yes? The pink-haired girl said you were."

"I am," I confirmed, crossing my arms and schooling my expression back to being impassive and serene. "I'm assuming you wish for a healer's opinion on your nephew's condition?"

"Yes. Things were rough before… all of this…"

"He is in very bad shape." I kept my voice even and my face, calm. "He's underfed, so much so that I hesitate giving him solid foods for some time. He is suffering from injuries, both physical and mental. It would not surprise me if he has caught some sort of illness from all the mold around."

"In short, suck up my pride or he will die." She saw the underlying meaning of my words and sighed. "I was tasked with keeping him safe and, more to the point, he is my nephew and the only family I have left." The fierceness in her eyes faded for a deep, sorrowful pain. "So, please… I know Gran-"

"I am a healer, my lady. I heal people. I leave the politics to the politicians, and the fighting to the soldiers." I looked up at Lord Sigurd. "The first order of business is to get him out of this cell. I want to get him a bath, and a good scrubbing. I thought I saw signs of lice, and I was not kidding when I said I think he might've caught something from the mold."

"Of course," Lord Sigurd replied. He offered his hand to Lady Ayra and, after a moment, she took it. "It is an honor to meet you. I shall do everything in my power to ensure you're both safe. You
"...I am not certain how much I trust that word..." Lady Ayra mumbled. She used the hand to pull herself and then bowed, tucking Lord Shanon into her side. "However, you didn't slay Shanan out of hand. For that kindness alone, I will take the leap of faith."

"And I shall endeavor to never prove unworthy of that faith."

We were definitely going to catch a storm from the court for this. But I couldn't find myself faulting his kindness. Maybe it was because Shanan was a child, and one in dire need of something to show him that the world wasn't entirely cruel. It was just... mostly cruel.

Then again, maybe I was just getting used to crazy Lord Sigurd. I liked that opinion better.

______________________________________________________________________________

**Records on Sir Noish**

*Cavalier, 20 years old*

*A proper knight of Chalphy, cautious and serious.*

*Slow and precise in his fighting, but he'll often will score critical injuries on his enemies, and his stamina is enough that he can often pursue an enemy even after they break off combat.*

*He's often sent at the front alongside Sir Alec, as he is one of Lord Sigurd's most trusted knights*

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**Chapter End Notes**

Author's note: Lachesis does cameo in this in-game chapter, but she doesn't have a substantial appearance (she cameos after Genoa's captured, actually). I chose to include her for extra characterization, and for ship tease. Missletain's ability in-game is 'critical', since the critical skill is required to actually do critical hits in game (well that, or being adjacent to siblings or lover or by using a weapon with 50+kills). I switched it to 'life steal' as a) it suits the name 'demon sword' and b) that was done in the Inflation Patch.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Genoa
Our first push into Verdane has been a rousing success, with Prince Kinbaith dead and Castle Genoa captured. The locals are pleased to have someone do away with their tyrannical leader, though I worry that a dead prince means King Batur will be less willing to surrender.

For now, though, Lady Aideen is safely with us, meaning Lord Sigurd is sending messages asking for Prince Gandolf's surrender. He hopes that the prince will see reason, but I doubt it. After all, he attacked in the first place. Then again, I'd been certain he'd rape Lady Aideen at the first opportunity, so perhaps I can be wrong again.

None of that is really my problem, though. I focus my energy in tending to the injured and preparing the infirmary. Lady Lachesis has returned to Noldion, but with Lady Aideen here, the work load is not so bad. Prince Shanan takes up a great deal of my time, but I was expecting that.

There are not enough hours in the day.

"Easy, Prince Shanan," I chided, reaching over to touch his hand. "If you eat too quickly, you will only make yourself sick." It was a higher risk, considering he'd barely had anything proper to eat in quite some time. "I promise you that it will not taste so good the second time."

"Yeah, throwing up sucks," Prince Shanan sighed. He looked up at me pleadingly. "But it's so good!"

"Then that's another reason why you want to eat slowly. You can savor the taste."

"Oh. Right." He smiled sheepishly and went back to eating his soup slowly. "It's so good. I forgot broth could be rich. Auntie Ayra did what she could, but she never exactly learned how to cook."

"No, I imagine not." Few noblewomen did. "What all did you eat?"

"Mostly what we could find. Soup. Barley or rye bread." He made a face. "I don't like those much. They never seemed to fill my stomach and just made me hungrier."

"There are some little tricks, but I suppose you two never asked." I was rapidly learning that Lady Ayra rarely asked for help. While that might've been simple overprotectiveness, I thought no small part of it was pride, and it was a blessing in disguise that she had run into Kinbaith. I had doubts both she and he would've survived much longer, simply because she had no idea how to live outside of her castle. "How are you feeling? Do your injuries still hurt?"

"No, not really." His eyes clouded over with fear. "The nightmares are worse. Didn't you give me a thing to make them go away?"

"I gave you a sleeping potion to help you sleep too deeply to remember, but too much of it will be bad for your health." Slowly, I ran my hand through his hair. He stiffened briefly, but relaxed quickly, pouting when I tried to pull away. He still feared the touch of others, but at the same time,
he craved it. The poor child was just… very messed up, and I did not doubt some of this would linger even until adulthood. "So, I do not wish to give it to you again. But if it gets too much, tell me at once."

"I'll try to stick it out." He gave me a brave little smile. "Um… I'd like help out around camp, though?"

"For now, you must focus on your health. You may help in the camp afterwards." I pulled away then, and turned towards the door as I heard footsteps approach. "What is it?" It didn't sound too hurried, so I assumed no injuries and I was quickly proven right when Lord Oifeye, Sir Finn, and Lady Ayra all appeared at the door. "Well, this is a very unusual group."

"Finn and I happened to meet Lady Ayra on the way here," Lord Oifeye explained. He smiled broadly and produced a bag from behind him. "Finn and I were in town, and we found a game we thought Lord Shanan might like."

"We also found a few books we thought he might find interesting," Sir Finn added softly. His smile was shyer, but he seemed just as eager as Lord Oifeye to spend time with Prince Shanan. "Might we show him?"

"Hmm…" I hummed, thinking. I glanced at Prince Shanan, who looked cautiously enthused, and nodded. "Very well, but he is eating, and I would like him to finish eating it all. And if he says he needs to be alone, you must listen."

"Of course, Miss Alicia." Sir Finn's smile grew, and he was careful to sit in the chair next to Prince Shanan's bed, and to shift it so that he was close, but not overwhelming. "Have either of us really introduced ourselves to you?"

I lingered briefly as the three cautiously began talking, and left to speak with Lady Ayra when it quickly became apparent that Lord Oifeye and Sir Finn were taking utmost care with Prince Shanan. "I assume you wish to ask about his health?" I murmured, smiling slightly. It was as constant as the sunrise. "He is slowly improving, bit by bit, just as he was yesterday and the day before. You will not see a sudden change, except negatively, and I assure you, I would inform you."

"I… understand that logically," Lady Ayra muttered. She had the grace to become embarrassed. "But emotionally, I keep panicking. I keep thinking that something bad has happened…"

"I suppose that is only to be expected." I was grateful that she was always willing to wait. "He is starting to eat more solid foods. That is a sign that he is healing. I do not expect many lingering effects, considering the shortness of time, though that could change. It all depends on how his body heals, and it may very well be that effects will not be seen until he is done growing."

"Of course." Lady Ayra sighed and slumped. "Thank you, again."

"Lady Ayra, I do believe you have thanked me over a thousand times already, and you have only been here a week." I laughed a little as she made a face. "I am a healer. I am simply doing my duty."

"From my understanding, a healer's duty is only to heal a person's body. You take great efforts to ensure his mind also heals, and you take even greater pains to make sure he feels safe." She shook her head. "Perhaps that is simply 'duty' to you, Miss Alicia, but that is simply because you are a good and kind healer. There are many who are not, and would not, be as thorough."
"You shall make me blush with all the praise!" I made myself laugh. "I assure you; I look horrible when blushing. It clashes with my hair."

"That makes me curious, Miss Alicia." She grinned slightly and I caught an air of mischievousness. I wondered if she'd been a little prankster as a child. "Perhaps-"

"Ah, Lady Ayra." Lord Quan appeared then, smiling gently with serious eyes. "I had thought I might find you here," he continued. "Might I have a moment of your time?"

"You may," Lady Ayra replied slowly. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What is it?"

"If we can talk privately…"

"You can ask with her with me." Lady Ayra nodded to me. "She cares for Shanan. I trust her."

"I am good at keeping quiet, Lord Quan," I added. I smiled slightly to make my words teasing. "You may ask your wife. She chats with me often."

"Well, now I fear what she's been saying," Lord Quan sighed. "Very well, I lose." He didn't exactly try very hard. "Where is a quiet place to talk?"

"We can go to my office. People will only come near if there is an emergency, especially since Lady Aideen is here." I often went there to get a moment to myself nowadays. "Come, this way."

The three of us went into my little 'office', the side-room off the infirmary here where I did my mending. I shut the door behind us as Lord Quan and Lady Ayra sat at the small table, and then moved my mending to the side to make things a bit more comfortable.

"Thank you very much," Lord Quan murmured. His smile dropped, leaving only the serious eyes. "Please, allow me to get straight to the point." He rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward. "Darna."

"That was…" Lady Ayra began before she hesitated. "I know it must be difficult to believe, but-"

"I find the attack much more difficult to believe, Princess Ayra. King Mananan was always kind when I talked to him, and Prince Mariccle was always just as kind, and even wiser than his father."

"You knew them?!" Lady Ayra leapt to her feet, startled. "How…? Leonster is infamous for..." She hesitated, perhaps sensing she was about to say something completely tactless.

"We do keep to ourselves a lot, partially because of our on-going struggle with Thracia." Lord Quan, however, figured out a gentle way to acknowledge one of the biggest flaws of Leonster. "I am the first heir in many generations to have a foreign bride, and even best friends from different countries. But Isaach is also rather insular, yes?"

"...Yes, we are." She slowly sat down again. "In recent years, people have… looked down upon us. Our rituals are different, even if we worship the same gods. That difference makes them wary. We grew uncomfortable outside of our borders." She shook her head. "But that only makes me wonder more."

"To reach the academy, I'd travel through the Yied desert. Your father and brother would also travel to the Yied desert to pay their respects in Darna. I had the honor of meeting them a few times." He smiled slightly. "More than honor, in one case. I'd been separated from my group in a sandstorm and they saved me. That is why this all confuses me. Their kindness makes me think they would never hurt civilians; their wisdom makes me certain they'd know the retaliation that
"...It wasn't them." Lady Ayra shook as she whispered. "It was my… no, it was the ruler of Rivough's own doing."

"The ruler of…?" Lord Quan looked surprised. "Is he not your brother-in-law?"

"He… was, but we have erased him from our lineage for his crimes, as per our laws. I do not know what happened to his son, Galzus, but I fear him dead." Lady Ayra shook more. "When Father learned what had happened, he led our forces to conquer Rivough. I was on the front lines, and bore witness to Marricle decapitating… Rivough's leader." She was careful to not even use his name. It was clear she was still getting used to it, but she was careful. "Afterwards, Father left to go to the border with the head, to tell them what happened and to prove that it was a heinous crime that we dealt with."

"Did something make him change his mind?"

"We found him on the border nearly cleaved in two." She shook more and tears filled her eyes. "Marricle and I… we found him. We found him, and then the guards dragged us back to the capital because there were others waiting in ambush."

"Ambush?" Lord Quan looked startled. "But that's… Prince Kurth would never reject a proposal for-"

"If I may?" I interrupted, moved to Lady Ayra's side. I passed her a handkerchief to dry her eyes and rubbed her back as she struggled to not break down. "Lord Quan, surely you know that between all the political machinations of the court, this country is on the brink of civil war. The campaign against Isaach is the first time in decades that everyone has been united on anything. I am not suggesting Prince Kurth had anything to do with it, but the divisions in our country mean there are quite a few who would." I almost named House Dozel, for I could think of few others capable of cleaving a man in two, but decided that would be a bad idea, with Lex among our numbers. "King Mananan was used as a scapegoat, likely. What better way to hide plots than ensuring a war will be fought?"

"You… are very canny with political things," Lord Quan murmured. His eyes narrowed slightly, and I met his faze impassively. "I wouldn't have thought a healer would pay attention."

"Healers do not take people's political allegiances when tending to patients. That does not mean we keep our fingers in our ears and walk about oblivious to everything. If anything we pay more attention, as when nobles play their games, we have a sudden influx in patients."

"Clearly, I have not given my own healers enough credit." He shook his head. "Still…" He smiled slightly. "You spoke up so that Princess Ayra could regain her composure."

"I am a healer. My job is to tend to people." I looked back to Lady Ayra, who was still pale, but no longer looked on the edge of falling apart. "Can you continue? If not, I will exercise my authority as Chief Healer."

"No, I think… I can tell the last bit," Lady Ayra murmured. She took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes, there is not much left to tell."

"In that case…" Lord Quan began. He focused on her again. "Please."

"Yes." She took another deep breath. "Much like your own people protested and urged the king to go to war, so did ours. They did not realize, or care, that we could not win such a war. So, Marricle
entrusted his only son, Shanan, to me, and had us both escape before he went to war."

"Thus, preparing for his death..." Lord Quan closed his eyes and sighed, leaning back in his chair. "This makes... much more sense." He opened his eyes again and looked at her. "Have you told any of this to Sigurd?"

"No." She shook her head. "No, I did not wish to bring him more trouble, and I was not certain if..." She hesitated again, and I knew the rest of the sentence. She did not trust that Lord Sigurd's kindness would continue if he knew everything. Prince Shanan's life depended on that continued kindness for now.

"Probably a good idea." Lord Quan laughed a little. "Otherwise he'd turn this army right around and demand the truth, and likely spark that civil war Miss Alicia mentioned in his determination to do what he thought was right. No one can afford that right now."

"That..." Lady Ayra looked startled. "Um..."

"I am certain that, one day, the truth will come to light, of course. Until then, do what you can to bear with it." Lord Quan smiled at her. "Thank you for answering my questions, Princess Ayra. But I fear Miss Alicia will have my head if I keep you long!"

"I am but a simple healer, Lord Quan," I replied lightly. "Surely, an unarmed girl is no threat to such a talented warrior."

"In Leonster, we have a saying, Miss Alicia," Lord Quan instantly retorted. "Beware the healer. Someone who knows how you are put together knows how you can be taken apart."

"That assumes the healer has the strength to pull someone apart. I would much rather break the joints. They are easy." I nudged Lady Ayra up. "But let us depart, Lady Ayra. I would rather Prince Shanan not be without one of us for long, for his mental health."

So, the various factions of the court sacrificed Isaach? I could hardly contain my surprise.

Lady Ethlyn came bursting into the infirmary while I was tending to Prince Shanan, and dragged me outside. According to her, I spent far too much time in the infirmary and not enough time in sunshine, and she had appointed herself the head of the 'local sunshine committee', so it was her job to ensure I got out and about. Lady Aideen happily joined her, and the two seemed quite enthusiastic about the local market while I fretted over the patients that we, as healers, were supposed to be guarding.

None of this was helped by Lady Ethlyn finding a fortune teller and insisting Lady Aideen and I talk to her. I did not believe in this sort of nonsense when I was in a mood to play along with people, and I was not in such a mood at all.

Of course, I did not let any of this show on my face. I kept up the polite smile, and even managed to laugh a little when the fortune teller correctly divined that Lady Aideen was in love with Sir Midayle. Of course, she had asked pointed and leading questions, and never once gave a name. The fortune teller was more of a master of asking good questions and coming to reasonable conclusions.

I was much less convinced of her sense, though, when she read my future. She predicted love, which I had no intention of seeking, and said the person would be 'one who gives you an answer to the question you think you know by heart'. The whole thing was ridiculous.
"Oh, I can't wait to see who you fall in love with, Miss Alicia!" Lady Ethlyn gushed as we wandered through the market. I did my best to ignore her and assumed this was post-marriage-bliss where she thought everyone sought romance and the world was filled with rainbows and bunnies. "I bet they'll be all strong and kind and amazing!"

"I would guess them to be a quiet sort," Lady Aideen mused. The two of them were having far too much fun with this imaginary, likely-never-to-ever-exist person. "Quiet but strong, kind and gentle…"

"Oh! And she'll meet him while tending to him for an injury! And he'll fall in love with the angel who cared for him!"

"And he'll linger around and help, and she'll slowly fall in love with his dependable nature…"

"These apples look good," I murmured, just flat out ignoring them at this point. I had no time nor inclination to indulge them in their creative friend… fiction… antics. "Let's see…" I crouched by them, and studied them closely, comparing their apparent quality with the price. "Excuse me!" I hailed the shopkeeper and made sure to smile at him. "I'd like a couple of bags of the apples, please."

"Oh, apples?" Lady Ethlyn asked. She popped to my side, peering over my shoulder curiously. "Are we subscribing everyone to 'an apple a day keeps the healer away'?"

"I was thinking of making some applesauce for… Lord Shanan, actually." I smiled at the shopkeeper and took the bags of apples. They were heavy, but the bags were strong, so I didn't mind carrying them. "He still cannot eat much."

"That's… really sweet!" She beamed at me, and dragged me back to where Lady Aideen was waiting. "Oh, think we can make some cider from it?"

"I think so." I hoped so, at least. "But, for now…" I trailed off as I noticed some gossiping old women nearby. "For now, let's wander over to them and eavesdrop."

"Good idea." Lady Ethlyn nodded, and her cheer faded slightly. This would be a good chance to see just how our army was being viewed. "Aideen?"

"I should be fine," Lady Aideen reassured. She smiled warmly. "I didn't really talk to much of anyone. Mostly."

"Mostly?" I prompted as we carefully edged closer to the ladies. I frowned as I caught murmurs of a 'Sadima' and how King Batur had been 'different' ever since he was came around. That was definitely something to inform Lord Sigurd about.

"Well while I was in Marpha, I did run into a beautiful woman I could see being called a 'fairy'." Lady Aideen laughed a little. "She had this long silver hair and amethyst eyes, and she was so kind and gentle. She told me this story about a princess trapped in a tower, and the prince who defeated the evil sorcerer to save her." Her smile faded slightly. "She had this air of lonely melancholy around her, though, so I talked to her about home. It helped me feel a little less scared and her eyes lit up."

"That sounds..." I was about to say 'typical', but I had a feeling neither of them thought that. "Well, it seems as if Lord Sigurd is regarded well enough to not be gossip, but also not so well that people are falling over their feet for him."

"That is, perhaps, the safest place to be." Lady Aideen smiled suddenly. "Ah, but that is enough
serious talk. Let's buy some more practical clothes. I need some, at least." The flowing gown would just snag all over the place, especially when you had to race about an infirmary. "But I'd love to buy you some clothes too, Miss Alicia!"

"I'm fine."

"Oh, a girl can never have enough clothes!" Lady Ethlyn laughed. She jumped forward, and hooked her arms around both mine and Lady Aideen's. "Oh, but be careful of your back, Aideen. We wouldn't want everyone to see your Holy Mark."

"Mine is very small, Ethlyn," Lady Aideen gently reminded. "It's not like Brigid's. Hers covered the whole left side of her back."

"Brigid's your twin sister, right? The one who got lost during the storm at sea?"

"Yes, but I am certain she is alive." Lady Aideen's smile faded slightly, though, and I knew why. All of Jungby had given up hope that Lady Brigid would ever return. "She is my identical twin. Surely, I would know if…"

"Are you two identical twins if she inherited the Major Blood and you, the Minor?" Lady Ethlyn frowned a little in thought. "Holy Blood makes it all confusing. Sometimes it's not even the oldest child who is the Major." She shook her head. "Oh, whatever. Let's shop."

The worst part was that I couldn't think of a way to protest, since my eventual reminder of the apples just led them to pay a boy to take them to the castle, and I could not tell them that I hated shopping for clothes without making my smile falter. I needed to keep that up, no matter what.

Lady Ethlyn and Lady Aideen were perfectly prepared to shop the entire day away, buying more clothes than I had seen in my entire life, and was fairly certain was more than an entire village had seen. However, a messenger recalled us back to the castle, as some of the soldiers wanted to try the arena, and we were the three main healers.

"I see you got caught by their shopping addiction!" Lord Sigurd laughed as we sat in the stands. He was positively tickled by my misery. "Did you at least get good things?"

"I suppose," I mumbled, unable to really think of anything else to say. I did pick up a few new dresses and long gloves, as well as a few hair pieces to hold my hair back. But I would have rather mended my old things and used the money to buy things for the infirmary. I did not get the point of buying things for myself. "How go things here?"

"Everything remains quiet. I hope it means Prince Gandolf is considering my proposal."

I doubted it. I was certain he was preparing for an ambush. "Well, it will mean less work in the infirmary if the war ends now." I glanced at him, freely ignoring the battles. Lady Ethlyn and Lady Aideen were 'ahead' of me in duty right now. "There were rumors of a 'new advisor' for King Batur, and how everything changed."

"I'll have scouts look into that." Lord Sigurd sighed. "An untrustworthy advisor… that implies that this won't end until we're at the castle. Though, Aideen mentions Prince Jamke was going to work to encourage his father to lay down arms. He must be a good person. He saved Aideen."

"He could simply be pragmatic and hope you will not raze his country to the ground. He does not know you, Lord Sigurd. He does not know you are no warmonger."
"Well, I suppose. But that pragmatism would also mean the war ends, yes?" He smiled warmly. "I hope so. I've no love of fighting, and no intention of ruling anything but Chalphy. Ruling a country sounds far too hard, really. I'm too lazy for that!"

"A lazy person would not mount an assault just to save a friend." Some noise caught my attention, and I twisted to see Lord Lex and Lady Ayra chatting. "Oh, dear."

"Something wrong?" He turned too and winced. "Uh oh. Lex doesn't have much tact."

"Neither does Lady Ayra, and she is emotionally…" I could not think of a word to describe 'she had her country destroyed because of two sets of madmen, lost all of her family save a nephew who she must protect, suffered greatly to protect him and because of her pride, and is now at the mercy of her technical enemies because otherwise her nephew might die'. "Oh dear."

"I'll…"

"No, please, let me." I stood up slowly and smoothed out my skirt. "This is part of a healer's job."

"I'm not sure 'peacekeeper' is in your job description, but I'll yield to you." He waved as I walked away. "Yell if it gets violent. I don't think it will, but…"

"I shall." I carefully picked my way through the stands, noticing Lady Ayra and Lord Lex were both increasingly becoming more agitated.

"Look, all I'm saying is that you can trust Sigurd," Lord Lex growled. His temper was definitely burning. House Neir was rather infamous for being a family of hotheads. "He won't tell anyone you two are here. He's not a guy to lie. I've spent a lot of time in the courts, so I can tell."

"Is that so?" she immediately snapped. "And how do I know you aren't lying?!" Her eyes widened as Lord Lex's expression blanked. "I…"

"Well, guess you don't." He shrugged, and just walked away. I could see the pain in his face, though, and remembered how Azel's letters told me of how Lord Lex always strove to be honest, even if he disliked telling people about his feelings.

"Oh…" Lady Ayra had the grace to look guilty as she watched him walk away. "I…" She gasped when she saw me approach. "Miss Alicia… I…"

"Why don't you go talk with Lord Sigurd?" I recommended, smiling gently. She looked even guiltier. "Let me tend to him." She hesitated a moment before nodding, ducking her head. "Good." I walked on past her, and followed Lord Lex's path into the hallway and found him glaring and sulking at the ceiling.

He glanced over, jaw set to snap, but he relaxed slightly when he realized it was me. "Oh, Alicia," he called. He tried to smile, but only managed a grimace. "What do you need?"

"I heard the last bit of that conversation," I explained. His fake smile fell at that. "I could give you reasons, but Azel's letters always portrayed you as someone of reasonable intelligence. I am certain you have thought of justifications for her words yourself. That does not erase the pain you feel." I walked a little closer and reached up to pat his head. "So, how do you feel?"

"I…" He sighed, bowing his head a bit. "Bit annoyed. I mean; we were trying to kill each other, so I was trying to break the ice. Might've been stupid, but she went through a lot, so I want her to feel comfortable. So, I'm also a bit hurt, because I was just trying to reassure her that Sigurd's a good guy."
"I think she knows that. But it runs contrary to what she had to tell herself for weeks in order to survive." I shook my head. "She is relearning that there are good people in Grannvale. That bothers her, because it also has the same people who destroyed her world. Reminding herself that the world is complicated is enough to make anyone grouchy."

"So, I guess I should just… be a little more tactful?" He sighed, but smiled slightly. "Shame you didn't grow up with us. That calm and insight might've been a good thing to rely on."

"I fear you place too much credit in my sense. I did, after all, volunteer for this."

"That's a good point." He grinned and I let myself smile. "Ah, I think I'll try a few rounds in the Arena. Good spar always helped me feel better."

"Then I shall return to the stands. Do be careful. I would rather not have to reattach your arm."

"I will. Thanks." His grin softened to a smile. "I mean it."

"It is no trouble, Lex." It actually was, but I was used to such trouble. "It is no trouble at all."

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**Author's Note:** The conversation with Ayra and Quan is based off of their in-game talk. The conversation between Ayra and Lex is based off of the Oosawa Manga. The idea of Rivough's leader being Ayra's brother in law comes from revelations in FE5 (that could have them just be distant cousins, but the brother in law thing makes it more believable that his action was authorized). The idea that Aideen chatted with Diadora also comes from the Oosawa Manga.

Next Chapter - Marpha
Chapter 4) Cracks

The argument between Lord Lex and Lady Ayra was far from the only argument among the army, and it ended up being a rather tame one compared to some of the others. The soldiers are antsy, and no few just wish to ravage Verdane for 'daring' to break the treaty. Their respect for Lord Sigurd keeps them in check for now, but I had heard many mutter about Lord Sigurd sending a messenger with a peace agreement to Prince Gandolf. Those who make the mistake of saying it loud enough for me to justify hearing it... those ones are 'gently' reminded of just how many have already died.

Everyone thinks war is full of glory until they're on a cot in the infirmary. I wish there was a way to knock such idiocy out of them.

Laughter caught my ear, and it wasn't just because I hadn't been expecting it. It was the mix of sounds that made me set down my mending and peek into the side room where Lord Oifeye, Sir Finn, and Prince Shanan were playing cards. Lord Oifeye's laugh was bright and cheerful, far more so than you'd expect for a child who was often wise beyond his ears, and yet, it suited his smile perfectly. Sir Finn's laughter was a bit more subdued, fitting his quieter nature, but there was a warmth in it that showed the kindness hiding behind his shyness. Prince Shanan's was almost a little confused and startled, like he couldn't believe he was even able to laugh, but there was a brightness that suited a child his age.

I smiled softly as I watched them play, Sir Finn and Lord Oifeye teaching Prince Shanan with patience and teasing kindness. The two had made a point of coming every day to visit Prince Shanan, and he blossomed with their friendship. His body still needed to be mended, as did his spirit, but I no longer felt like Lady Ayra or I had to be near for him to feel safe. Slowly, he was learning to trust again.

I went back to my chair and picked up my mending again. Some part of me wondered if I should teach some of the soldiers how to sew, so that I could spend more of my time grinding herbs. It wasn't as if we didn't have a plethora of soldiers with free time, after all, especially given the business the local taverns were having.

Pounding footsteps made me pause, and I set my mending to the side and stood up to open the door to the infirmary. It crashed open before I could take two steps, and I stilled when I saw just how much blood Lady Ayra was covered in.

"Gandolf refused the peace agreement," she informed me calmly. She glanced around and I pointed to the side room. I noticed that Sir Finn was in the doorway now, and he was firmly not budging, despite Prince Shanan trying to peek around him. "He's marching on us, and has attacked the nearby villages in 'retribution' for their support of us. Since I was the fastest of the scouting group, I volunteered to warn you." Her eyes wavered slightly. "Lex... was following with some of the worst wounded. He should be here before long."

"Where are Lady Ethlyn and Lady Aideen?" I asked, clasping my hands in front of me. "Are they
"Yes, I think so. Ethlyn definitely is; she was in my group. I think Aideen is with Sigurd. He went to the worst hit."

"I see." I went to a nearby shelf and found her a towel. "Clean yourself up a bit, and then take Prince Shanan out of here. I would rather him not being stuck in the infirmary right now."

"I'll do it," Lord Oifeye volunteered. He managed to get around Sir Finn and came to stand right in front of me. "I have a feeling that I'll be needed for tactical things soon anyway."

"Very well," I replied. I smiled slightly and turned to Sir Finn. "And you? What shall you do?"

"I think, with your permission, Lady Alicia, I'm going to make sure our perimeter is secure," Sir Finn answered. "If it is clear, and if we have enough to keep it clear, I will come right back here to assist you."

"Thank you." I turned back to Lady Ayra, who fidgeted awkwardly. "Well, they solved that on their own. Please, return to what you were doing. The infirmary is ready."

"...You are a brave woman, Miss Alicia," Lady Ayra murmured. She bowed slightly. "Good luck." She raced off, blood dripping and splattering as she went. Lord Oifeye and Prince Shanan disappeared just seconds later, careful to go in the opposite direction. Sir Finn lingered to help me retrieve some items and then went to do his duty.

Not long after he left, Lord Lex arrived with the first of the badly wounded, and that was when I realized just why Lady Ayra had made a point to call me brave and wish me luck. He was carrying the body of a five year old boy who had been gutted.

I did my best to shut off my brain as more victims piled in and it became all the clearer what had been going on in Genoa and Marpha. Prince Kinbaith and Prince Gandolf had, likely, conscripted all the able bodied men between the ages of sixteen and sixty, leaving only the very young, the very old, and the women behind. So, my patients were the very young, the very old, and the women.

I had to ignore the elderly. They'd likely die even with my help. I was lucky in that the elderly didn't even want my healing. They fought the soldiers carrying them with every last ounce of their strength and breath, feebly scolding them for 'wasting time'. They smiled when they realized I prioritized the younger ones over them. They had lived good lives; they wanted others to experience the same. Even if I was certain they were thinking 'I wished I could see my child one more time' or 'I wished I could have met my grandchild', they silently urged me to continue my prioritizing.

A pregnant woman miscarried because of blows to the stomach; another one was far enough along that she gave birth amidst the mess. A third did the same, but bled out from complications. I gave the babies to some of the lesser wounded to help treat, and the first went to a sympathetic woman with her leg broken in five places, but still enough kindness to give a hug.

A two year old bled out under my fingers. Another lost their arm, but kept their life. A third technically lived, but was stuck in a coma after a blow to the head, and would not wake no matter how much healing magic I used. I broke a staff trying, and had to fetch another one to prevent a fourth from suffering the same fate. They lived, but were blinded.

I even had to deal with pets. I had no idea why or how they were here, but they were. A little girl
desperately asking for me to save her precious puppy even while she bled from a hole in her chest. A few kittens mewled as I tried to save their legs; I succeeded with all but one, who died. One little boy clung to his pet cat as they both breathed their lasts. A dog tried to nudge their owner awake, and couldn't understand why they wouldn't wake, no matter how many times they licked them.

I worked on them all, saved those I could, and moved the dead to the side. When the waves of victims slowed to a trickle and I got a moment, I calmly stepped into my side office and shut the door. I managed to wash my hands and get some of the blood off my face. Then I collapsed, covering my mouth to keep my sobs from being heard.

No matter how much my heart broke, a healer mourned alone, and then gathered up the pieces to inform the family that their loved ones didn't make it. This was a healer's duty.

I worked on the villagers for three days straight. The less wounded were recruited to help me with the worse wounded. Orphaned kids and pets were recruited to help calm patients while I tended to them. I ran out of medicine and had to make more. I'd long given up on numbing herbs and sleeping potions; I couldn't keep enough on hand.

When things calmed, though, I was dragged away from them. Lord Sigurd had to meet Prince Gandolf on the battlefield in order to prevent Marpha's soldiers from devastating more villages. Lady Aideen and Lady Ethlyn were going to act as 'on-the-field' healers, Lady Ethlyn sticking with the mounted, and Lady Aideen with the unmounted. I was tasked with setting up and managing the Infirmary.

The wounded poured in as soon as the battle started. Prince Gandolf was taking no prisoners this time, and he attacked with a brutal efficiency, even forcing his soldiers to march over their own dead in order to strike Lord Sigurd's soldiers all the faster. My mind went numb as I treated everyone, shredding the clothes of the dead to use as makeshift bandages. As I worked, I always made sure to doublecheck the sigil on the ground just outside the tent, making sure it was not scuffed. Lady Aideen and Lady Ethlyn had managed to go shopping just before the attack, and Lady Aideen had bought Lady Ethlyn a Return Staff. While a very situational staff at best, its weaker abilities made it much easier to use in the chaos of a battle, and Lady Ethlyn could use it to quickly 'Return' people to the infirmary, instead of simply carrying them.

This numbing pace kept up for easily a day. I was incredibly disoriented and confused when the dawn came; the fighting might've stopped during the night, but people didn't stop bleeding because the sun set. But the dawn did bring a slowing to the flood of injured and I could step out to get a breath of air that didn't feel wet with blood and death. I found Lady Aideen and Lord Sigurd not far away, and absently wandered towards them, mostly curious as to what they were doing here.

"I just simply do not understand this," Lady Aideen murmured. Her hair was much shorter, the ends uneven enough to make me certain she'd ducked under an axe and lost her hair instead. "Prince Jamke was supposed to…"

"I think Prince Gandolf is doing this on his own," Lord Sigurd replied. He had a scratch on his cheek, and the stiff way he held himself as he crossed his arms hinted at least muscle soreness. "In his pride, he does nothing but drive his country into the ground."

"I hope this won't hurt Prince Jamke's arguments."

"As do I, Aideen."

"What are you two doing here?" I asked when I realized I was actually close to them. I'd been so
dazed that I honestly hadn't noticed. "Has the fighting stopped?"

"Miss Alicia, I didn't expect to see you out of the infirmary!" Lady Aideen yelped. She looked flustered, for some reason. "Oh, goodness, you're pale…"

"I only just now got a free moment. So?"

"The answer is that we don't know," Lord Sigurd answered. He reached over and wiped something off my cheek. "He pulled back during the night. Quan is on the frontlines for me while I rest."

"I see," I murmured. I massaged my palms as my brain registered how much my hands cramped from holding a healing staff so long. "I do not have a casualty reports yet. Things have been touch and go for too many."

"I feared that." He sighed and reached into his pocket, pulling out a handkerchief. "Here."

"I suppose I missed some spots on my face." Sighing, I used it to try and clean my face better, grimacing at just how dirty it became. "I might just boil this to use as padding for a bandage. I doubt you'll want it back."

"Can you not use fresh?"

"We ran out while tending to the civilians, and I need to keep water boiling anyway to sterilize needles."

"Miss Alicia, would you like me to take over?" Lady Aideen asked. She peered at me worriedly. "You've been working for four days straight."

"You have been working just as long," I pointed out. She, after all, had been on the field. "I see your hair was a casualty."

"Ah, yes, a fire spell caught me. Ayra cut my hair because we were not close enough to any source of water. Azel was upset, for some reason."

"Azel dislikes friends being hurt." That was easier to explain at the moment. "That's all." Movement caught my attention, and I pointed as Lord Quan rode up. "Look who's here."

"Quan, is everything all right?" Lord Sigurd asked. He stepped apart and held Lord Quan's horse's reins as Lord Quan jumped off without waiting for a full stop. "I thought I'd have to come to you."

"Our lovely Gandork is on the field," Lord Quan deadpanned. The ridiculous play on Prince Gandolf's name made me smile tiredly. "He's insisting on a duel. Something about being able to end this war in one strike."

"...He says that he can end this is one decisive blow?" Lord Sigurd's voice was very soft, and treacherously calm. I couldn't help but stiffen in fear, and I saw Lady Aideen do the same. Only Lord Quan looked unperturbed. "What a laugh. After all that has happened, he has not earned the right to make such a boast." He stepped forward, and held himself with all the poise of a king, and with all the anger of a righteous, good man. "I will take care of him, and I shall show him just why this is all such a farce."

"I figured." Lord Quan stepped to the side and gestured to his saddle. "Your horse is still out for a pulled leg, so use mine. You've ridden him enough to know his little tricks."

"My thanks, Quan." Lord Sigurd mounted up, and rode off without a single second of hesitation.
Lord Quan silently followed on foot, with the little smirk of someone who was gleefully anticipating someone's misery. Lady Aideen and I glanced at each other and hesitantly decided to follow as well, all the way to the battlefield.

It wasn't as far off as I had originally thought, and it was eerily still as we walked up. I saw Azel and Sir Midir, both looking as if they wished they were fighting, but both stayed back as Lord Sigurd rode forward to meet Prince Gandolf on the field, far ahead of his own army. I noticed Lady Ethlyn hanging near Lord Sigurd, likely to heal him if necessary.

But it wasn't. Prince Gandolf charged forward, laughing like a madman, and struck. Lord Sigurd easily blocked the blow, though, and shoved Prince Gandolf back. Then, while Prince Gandolf tried to right his footing, Lord Sigurd charged forward, easily cutting him down, and then he turned, trampling the body for good measure. I wondered if it was an accident or on purpose, but decided it was fitting for Prince Gandolf to be grinded into the dirty.

"Soldiers of Marpha!" Lord Sigurd cried, his voice easily carrying throughout the field. "I have defeated Gandolf, First Prince of Verdane!" He lifted his sword, and the dawning sunlight made the silver sparkle and the blood on it glisten. "Those of you who have no will to fight, leave the field!"

It was almost comical how quickly the enemy fled. If only they had been so cowardly earlier…

Soldiers cheered and milled about, relaxing after the long battle. Lady Aideen went straight to Sir Midir, before going around checking on injured. Lady Ethlyn did something similar. So, I decided to pick my way through the field and go to where Lord Sigurd was. He had dismounted from Lord Quan's horse, sighing and wincing. He definitely pulled something. However, Lord Quan beat me to his side, and I slowed, debating whether or not to get closer. With a little shrug, I decided to go ahead. I could get away with scolding the two of them about their health.

"I suppose he was right," Lord Quan observed dryly. He looked almost amused. "It was decided in a single blow."

"I just got lucky," Lord Sigurd replied. He looked a little ill. "He wasn't wearing much armor. Ah, I'll clean your horse's hooves. I… well…"

"Gandork was a fool to rile you like that There's a reason you keep a good grip on your temper." Lord Quan shook his head. "But what do you plan on doing now, Sigurd?"

"For now, Quan, we move into Marpha and I place my hopes in Prince Jamke, and wait for his proposal." Lord Sigurd sighed and looked up at the sky. "We're probably seen as unwelcome invaders, especially at this point, and yet…"

I scoffed, unable to help it, and managed to smile as the two whirled to face me. "Lord Sigurd, are you truly so blind?" I chided. "There is a castle filled with people who only live because of you."

"But…" Lord Sigurd began. He visibly groped for words before shaking his head. "Prince Gandolf wouldn't have attacked them if not…"

"Lord Sigurd, you need to consider something." I made sure to soften my smile. "Consider just how little they must've meant to him if he could attack them so easily. Consider what life must've been like, living under a lord who willingly and eagerly crossed the border, invaded a peaceful territory, slaughtered hundreds, and kidnapped a woman with the intention of forcing himself on her. You must not look at things as if they are straightforward. Not everyone in the world has your kindness, and not every lord cares for their people. The people know the difference."
"But…"

"It is well known that you only entered Verdane to rescue Lady Aideen, Lord Sigurd. It is well known that you immediately called in your troops and urged for peace once she was safe." I shook my head. "And it is also well known, or will be well known, that when Prince Gandolf trampled his people, you led a rescue mission, on your own, and risked your life many, many times to save as many as you could."

"She's right, Sigurd," Lord Quan said, moving to stand next to me. "You've always had a problem in realizing just how well regarded you are, like a star unaware of how brightly it shines, just by nature." He smiled a little. "This is just the same."

"But…" Lord Sigurd protested again. He just couldn't seem to wrap his head around it, and it was almost, almost, endearing how pure-hearted he was. But few things were scarier and more dangerous than innocence. Someone could use him so easily, and I had to wonder if Lord Quan also came to help lessen the chances of that. "I…"

"If you truly feel so horrible, Lord Sigurd, then you can help me in the infirmary," I told him. "If you feel you cannot stomach that, then you can help comfort those who have lost. I could not save everyone." I didn't mean to let that part slip. Even if it was an obvious truth, I shouldn't have said it.

But he didn't care. "...And you have your hands full." Lord Sigurd sighed. "Ah, I'm being selfish. Even if the world hates me, I should still keep doing what I know is right, and I should keep doing what I can to make the world fair."

"Yes, you should." I crossed my arms. "You may help me now, in fact. I have some heavy things that need to be moved to make more room for the injured, and if we are going to be living in Marpha, I must prepare rooms."

"Yikes, strict taskmaster." But, finally, Lord Sigurd smiled and laughed. "Well, give me my marching orders, Miss Alicia! And Quan's too. He'll help, of course."

I couldn't help but laugh when Lord Quan yelped and tried to protest being volunteered, and the sound was… strange. It had been a long, long time since I had laughed so freely.

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Lord Sigurd was a very eager pupil, sometime a little too eager. He recruited some others to help me make my infirmary rooms, and with the help of Lady Aideen getting a very convenient Warp Staff from Dew and Lady Ethlyn's Return Staff, we got everyone moved with relative ease. Once that was done, Lord Sigurd helped me with tending to the injured. I swore he adopted every single orphan, child or pet, along the way, tending to them with ease. It actually got to the point that I left the more minorly wounded children and pets to just him, as his ability to calm them was something I just could not match. When his fingers started fumbling, I sent him off, only for him to talk with those left behind, listening to their stories while still keeping the children busy and comforted.

At some point, I chased him out of the infirmary entirely, telling him to go get some sleep. Then, when Lady Aideen came to take over the infirmary, I went to check on him, only to discover he had apparently gone straight to Prince Shanan and had apparently chatted and played with him until both of them fell asleep. I shook my head and draped a blanket over them both, smiling because Prince Shanan was curled up on Lord Sigurd's shoulder and they looked like… well, not quite 'father' and 'son'. 'Older brother' and 'younger brother' was more accurate, given their ages.

"Oh, I didn't expect to see anyone." Lord Quan knocked on the doorway as I whirled, and leaned
against it. "I suppose I should've knocked after all," he noted with a wry smile. I shrugged and managed to smile back. "He was reading to Prince Shanan when I checked in before."

"It seems as if it put both of them to sleep," I replied. I checked the blanket was secure and walked out of the room, nudging him along the way. "How are you? Lady Ethlyn was fretting earlier."

"I pulled my back, and didn't realize it until after I was done helping you, so I'm not surprised." He walked down the hall with me. "Though, I do warn you. She's also been grumbling about how formal you are. Something about healer girls needing to stick together."

"I shall take the warning seriously." I doubted it would amount to much, though. Lady Aideen had given up making me call her by name already. "Oh, there's a balcony…"

"Oh, huh. There is." Lord Quan stepped out onto the balcony and I tentatively followed him. The night air was cool and refreshing, even if I was startled by how it was already dark again. "That forest in front of us is supposed to be the Spirit Forest of Verdane."

"Is it?" I walked to the railing to look at it better, and I squinted as I noticed something in the distance. "On the other side is Castle Verdane, isn't it?"

"Yeah, you can just make out the flags flapping in the distance from here." Lord Quan fell silent, and I wondered what he thought. The forest stretching towards the horizon made it very, very clear that neither of us were 'home. "Miss Alicia, it occurs to me that we know so little about you."

"There really isn't much to know about me." I shook my head. "I'm a rather boring girl, all told."

"No ambitions for the future or anything?"

"No, I am a healer, and thus, I shall remain a healer." I glanced at him. "Why?"

"Oh, just a thought." His voice was rather light. "You know… Chalphy wouldn't throw a fit about Sigurd having a 'commoner wife', like some other provinces would."

"No, it wouldn't?" I was confused for a split-second, before I realized just what he was implying: that I marry Lord Sigurd. The idea seemed so ridiculous that I couldn't help but laugh, and laugh hard enough to tear up. Then I laughed even harder at how panicked he became.

"I must admit; I do not know what was so amusing, though it is good to see you smiling, Miss Alicia," Lord Quan murmured once I had calmed my laughter to simple giggling and snickering. "I think I missed the joke."

"It is fine," I replied, my voice wobbling from my mirth. "It was simply the idea of marrying Lord Sigurd was enough to…" I burst into laughter again, and it took me a while to calm down again. "I do not have any grand ambitions, especially in marrying above my station, Lord Quan. I am content in being a simple healer, without the responsibilities related to being the Lady of the House."

"I finally managed to calm my snickers, and dabbed at my eyes. "Oh, goodness, I apologize. The very thought was just…"

"I see." He laughed a little, perhaps to reassure me that my own laughter was fine. "A bit of a shame, as you two get along well. Then again, despite how charismatic Sigurd is, he really doesn't have a lot of close, close friends. Friends who challenge him, while also reassure him. Off hand, I can think of only three: Eldigan, myself, and Aideen." He smiled warmly. "Perhaps it is too forward of me, but I do hope that you can continue giving him your counsel, even once this campaign is over, Miss Alicia."
"...We shall see." I looked up at the stars, noticing how clear the night was. "For the moment, I am Prince Shanan's primary healer, and he is Lord Sigurd's charge. I will remain for however long Prince Shanan needs me."

"It might be longer than his body's injuries. The boy is used to people leaving and never coming back."

"Yes, I know." It was entirely possible that I would be Prince Shanan's healer for two or even three years, until his mental scars were healed. "So, perhaps you will get your wish through that."

"I'll be more than happy with that." Lord Quan stretched, and flinched as his spine popped. "Ow… I think that's a sign that I need to get to bed."

"You should make sure to go straight to sleep." I kept my tone perfectly innocent as he gave me a confused look. "Arching would be bad if your back is hurting like that."

"You…!" His face went bright red, but he laughed. "You're a lot more mischievous than you seem, aren't you?"

"No, not at all, Lord Quan. I am merely giving you a healer's recommendation." I curtseyed, mostly for the excuse to duck my head to hide my little smile. "Good night, Lord Quan."

"Night, Miss Alicia. And thanks, for joining up with our craziness." He clasped my shoulder and smiled warmly. "I fear how many of us would be dead or crippled if not for your tireless work. So, thank you."

"I am simply doing my job." It was so strange to hear so much gratitude. No one had ever thanked me so much for doing my duty. "Pleasant dreams, Lord Quan."

"And you, Miss Alicia."

Records on Sir Alec:

Cavalier, 20 years old

A flirtatious knight of Chalphy, reckless and cocky

Fast, with an awareness that seems almost at odds with his personality. Lady Ayra has mentioned that, during a spar, he was able to block her 'Astra' at the first strike, preventing her from completing it. I wonder if it is a type of magic.

Often seen with his fellow knights, teasing them mercilessly

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Sigurd's speech about Gandolf 'not earning the right' comes from the Oosawa manga, as well as the whole 'star being unaware of its own light' (albeit that is from a scene MUCH later in the manga). Midir and Azel both have boss conversations with Gandolf, but they're just 'rawr, will not forgive' sort of thing that Gandolf isn't important enough to get.
If Ethlyn and Aideen talk after she enters the field, Ethlyn picks up a Return staff, which… well… returns people to the home castle, basically working as a weaker warp (same amount of uses, but can be used at a C rank in staves, which is Ethlyn's set staff rank prior to promotion). This is my explanation for why it works there. If Aideen and Dew talk after Genoa Castle is captured, he'll give her a Warp Staff (and he'll get a minor Love Point Boost).

(I neglected to mention this previously, but when Aideen is freed, either Azel or Midir can talk with her for a Love Points Boost; I did a version of the one she has with Midir)

Next Chapter - Interlude, Marpha
Interlude - Marpha

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude - Marpha

Prince Gandolf is dead. The royal family of Verdance is getting significantly smaller, but it's impossible to feel too bad about it. After all, they attacked us, and so brutally at that. But now, we wait in Marpha, having moved all of the wounded into the castle, to see what Prince Jamke, now Crown Prince Jamke, can do to end this peacefully.

I have a suspicious feeling it's not going to be peaceful at all, but I hold my tongue. Lord Sigurd and Lady Aideen believe in this man. I won't be the one to crush their hopes.

The infirmary was strangely lively, especially considering it was filled with wounded civilians and soldiers. I thought it was because of Lord Sigurd and Lady Ethlyn. They were almost insufferably cheerful, as bright and blinding as the sun. But to the wounded, that light was everything.

"It's amazing how good with kids Lord Sigurd and Lady Ethlyn are," Lord Oifeye murmured as Lord Sigurd managed to get some kids to laugh while Lady Ethlyn worked on charming, and healing, their parents. "Well, I suppose Lady Ethlyn is a mother now. Maybe she sees Altenna in them."

"That could be it," I replied absently before nudging his hand. "You're not sewing that straight."

"Ack!" He ducked his head and went to work undoing the thread. "I'm sorry…"

"You're still learning how to sew, so you must not let yourself become distracted."

"Yes, ma'am." He smiled sheepishly, before laughing. "You have a friend."

"I… what?" I had maybe two seconds to process his sentence before a cat jumped into my lap, right on the blanket I was mending. "Oh." This was… awkward. I already had a couple of puppies asleep on my feet. "Okay, cat, you need to get off." The cat completely ignored me, purring up a storm as it rubbed its face against mine. "Lady Aideen tried to get you to come over to her." She was in here as well, weaving bandages as she gossiped with some of the patients. "Why are you with me?"

"Because cats, Miss Alicia!" Lord Oifeye was far too amused by the situation. "They like making a muddle of things."

"I have work to do." I sighed heavily, and slowly managed to extract the blanket from underneath the cat. It protested, but quickly settled into my lap to stare at my thread. "If you bother it, I will throw you out, cat."

"I've got him!" Prince Shanan popped into my view and scooped up the cat with ease. He laughed as it squirmed before reluctantly settling down in his arms. "I'll bring him to the kids," he told me, already running off. I chose to not point out that I had assigned him to do some sweeping. After all, Sir Finn was doing it, and Prince Shanan likely had never done a chore in his life. Besides, I was just glad to hear him laughing and see him smiling so much, even when the room was filled with
strangers. It was progress.

"Break time!" The booming voice startled most of us in the room, but we still couldn't help but smile as Lord Lex stepped into the room, bearing a few trays piled high with snacks. In fact, the room cheered at the sight, especially the kids. They knew that meant a sweet for them. "Where should I set this, Alicia?" he asked, barely keeping his balance as the kids and pets tried to swarm him. "Before I drop it!"

"On the tab…" I began, only to realize it was covered in the blankets Oifeye and I had mended. "Ah. Well, let's see. Prince Shanan? Sir Finn?"

"We've got it," Sir Finn answered immediately. He scooped up the larger of the blankets, and left the smaller ones for Prince Shanan to grab, which he did so cheerfully. "Side room?"

"Yes, please. Don't worry about folding them. I'd rather not see your attempts again." I smiled slightly to soften the little barb, and Sir Finn made a face. He was very bad at folding clothes, as I'd learned a few days ago when I set him on laundry. "Well, Lord Lex, on the table."

"Got it!" Lord Lex replied. He managed to wade his way through the sea of kids and pets to set the trays on the table. "Azel, you coming in or not?"

"Oh, Azel is here as well?" Lord Sigurd asked. He smiled when Azel shyly poked his head in, bearing a couple of trays too, this one with little cups. "Hey, let me help you with that."

"Thanks, Lord Sigurd," Azel replied. He smiled sweetly as he passed one of the trays to Lord Sigurd and took the other to the table. "I thought you all might want something besides water with your snacks today."

"That's very thoughtful of you." Lord Sigurd set his tray on the table as well, and gently nudged some children away when they looked like they were going to go ahead and grab something. "What is it?"

"Apple cider. We had some fresh apples from Genoa."

"Oh, marvelous!"

"Yeah, Azel was strangely insistent that we serve the cider," Lord Lex said with a teasing grin. Azel promptly flushed in embarrassment. "Very insistent."

"W-well, it's good!" Azel promptly squeaked, face turning redder. Still, he gave me a shy smile and I couldn't help but return it. It really did warm my heart that he made sure to serve my favorite. "Anyway, what about you? You're only here to avoid Miss Ayra, again."

"I am not!"

"I heard my name." Lady Ayra poked her head into the infirmary then, and then frowned as the room erupted in giggles and snickers. "Did I miss a joke?" she asked calmly, stepping inside. She frowned a little suspiciously. "What's so funny?"

"We were just praising your skills, and then you arrived with perfect timing," Lady Aideen lied easily, smiling sweetly. "Why don't you come in for snacks and cider?"

"Well…" She glanced up at Lord Lex, who smiled a little awkwardly. "Very well. But please, allow me to help out here in exchange."
"That sounds wonderful." Lady Aideen set her weaving to the side and stood up. "Ethlyn, why don't you help me serve everyone?"

There was a bit of fuss as everyone insisted that no one had to serve anyone, but as always, Lady Ethlyn and Lady Aideen prevailed in their stubbornness, treating each and every patient, soldier and civilian alike, like lords visiting their home.

I simply smiled and returned to my mending until Azel sat beside me to share his snacks and cider. Days like this were not so bad.

"The town is quite lively," Lord Sigurd noted as he and I walked through the town. We had run out of herbs, thread, and spare cloth in the infirmary, so he and I went shopping while the others continued to tend to the patients and do chores around the infirmary. "I'm not sure how to feel about that."

"What is the problem this time?" I asked, paying more attention to the crowd than his introspection. There were a lot of 'roucher' looking people than usual in the crowd, and I did not like the way some of them leered at me. "I was already proven right in how happy they were with you."

"But that means they suffered so much before." He sighed and looked almost forlorn. I focused on trying to find the stalls we needed to get everything. "Then there are those who--"

"Stop the thought there, or you will drown in 'what ifs'." It was what I had to do. Otherwise, I would be bogged down by all those I couldn't save. "They are happy now. They are safe now. Focus on that, or you shall frighten everyone with your frown."

"...Well, I guess we can't have that." He sighed heavily. "How do you keep from 'what-ifs'?"

"Typically, I don't have the time for it. There is always something to be done, Lord Sigurd."

"I see." He paused, and actually stopped walking. "Hey." He waited until I stopped as well, and turned to face him. "I have a request. Well, it's two, but one is more of an asking."

"Oh?" I crossed my arms. "What is it?"

"Can you stop calling me 'Lord Sigurd'?' He looked strangely serious about it. "Please?"

"It is only proper, Lord Sigurd." I kept my voice neutral, mostly to hide my surprise. I'd heard others suggest it, but I didn't think he would've.

"I think it's actually very improper to keep to such formal titles when you had to work together to keep someone's intestines inside them so they healed properly." He grimaced and turned a little green. "Oh, wait, I was trying to forget that one. And the eye one. And the--"

"Breathe."

"Right, sorry." He sighed, shaking his head, and actually sulked a little. "Regardless, my point is that you have really done a lot for us. Perhaps, in the eyes of politics, our stations are different."

"Only perhaps?"

"Okay, definitely, stupid politics." His sulk deepened. "However, in terms of this army, ragtag as it is, I would say you're easily my equal. I may command the soldiers, but you are in charge of their
health. You can, and have, given me orders to keep them alive. I might decide where the soldiers go and how they fight, but you are the one who decides who gets to fight. You are the one who decides, ultimately, how many soldiers I have."

"...You really think too highly of a simple healer."

"A 'simple healer' you may be, but these soldiers of mine live only because of your skills." He looked me right in the eye, and gave me the most entreating look. "So?"

I matched him look for look, stoic to his entreating, before I sighed. I could resist Lady Aideen and Lady Ethlyn, but Lord Sigurd had a simple sincerity that was hard to refuse. "I have one condition."

"Yes?"

"You must stop calling me 'Miss' Alicia." I frowned. "If you are so insistent that we are equals, then we must speak as equals."

"I think I can agree to that, Alicia." He grinned, as pleased with his 'victory' as a child who got extra sweets. "Thank you."

"I still say you think too highly of me, Sigurd." But I was rapidly learning that Lord Sigurd was simply someone who followed his own path and beliefs, no matter how much the world hated him or how much people teased him. "You mentioned a second request?"

"Ah, yes!" He snapped his fingers, as if to spark the thought back to life. "Alicia, do you think I can get Shanan a practice sword?" He looked almost eager at the thought, like a puppy. "I think the exercise would do him well, but if he's not well enough…"

"Mmm…" I closed my eyes as I thought and nodded. "I think he is recovered, physically, to exercise some. But I would recommend bringing Lady Ayra into this conspiracy. I'm sure she would rather his primary form of fighting be Isaachian."

"Of course." He grinned. "This'll be fun!" He really was attached to Prince Shanan. I could only pray that it wouldn't lead to tragedy. "So, let's get our stuff, and a practice sword for him, and…" He trailed off, cheer fading for a frown. "What's that there?"

I turned to where he was looking and frowned as well. "It looks like a trio harassing a young woman." I assumed they were harassing her. The men were leering, and the girl was trembling and trying to get away. "You're going to intervene, aren't you?" I had meant for my tone to be a little exasperated, but something about the girl turned it entreating instead. I couldn't help but think how much my own mother had likely wanted 'someone' to help her, back when my father had…

Regardless, Lord Sigurd strode forward purposely and I trailed behind him, mostly to give the girl a woman to run behind, just in case Lord Sigurd only scared her further. I could barely contain my scoff when I heard one of the men say, "Don't be so stubborn!" He snagged her arm. "We just want to show you around, have a bit of fun."

"Please, I really must be going!" the girl replied. Her voice shook as she tried to pull her arm out of his grip, but she failed. "I…"

"You won't regret it; I promise!"

"I think you are doing something you're going to regret," Lord Sigurd sighed as he reached the group. He easily pried the man's arm off of her, twisting it a bit for good measure. "She doesn't
"Oh? And just who do you think you are?" the man sneered. His eyes narrowed, and his friends started crowding around. "We saw her first, buddy!"

"Are you two or something?" Lord Sigurd sighed again, and shifted to stand protectively in front of the girl. "Just go on. I'm tired already."

"You really think you can-!"

"You know, considering their armor and weapons, it's possible they're from Prince Gandolf's army," I noted, keeping my voice as innocent as possible. The three instantly squirmed, and the nearby villagers turned some surprisingly cold glares their way. I tried to not scowl at how they'd been willing to just stand back while the girl was harassed. "I could be wrong, of course, but…" I laughed a little as the three ran. "Well, maybe I'm not."

"I'll have someone track them later," Lord Sigurd replied. "Maybe Ayra. I'm sure she'd have fun with it."

"Let her take Lord Lex along."

"Sounds good to me. They need to work through their awkwardness anyway." He shook his head and turned to the girl. "Are you okay?"

"Ah, yes, I am," the girl whispered. She looked up shyly and then both her and Lord Sigurd froze, as if time had stopped for them. She blushed a little and ducked her head to break the 'spell'.

"Thank you very much, Lord Sigurd…"

"You know my name?" He looked a little started by that, and yet strangely happy. "How?"

"Sigurd, you do realize you're rather distinctive," I deadpanned, mostly because I couldn't believe he'd lost that must sense. Both of them jumped and I waved to remind them both that I was still here, and they were in the middle of a market. "Miss, do you require healing?"

"No, I'm fine," she whispered. Her smile faded slightly, but returned again as she laughed. "Thank you, though. But, I am afraid I do not know…"

"It's Alicia." I nudged Lord Sigurd's leg to try and get him to stop staring. "You know him already, from the town gossip, I guess?"

"No, actually." She shook her head. "I talked to this lovely woman with beautiful gold hair and a gentle smile last time I was here. She seemed scared, so I told her my favorite story. I came to town to see if she was still okay."

"A woman with…" I trailed off as I remembered something Lady Aideen had told me, about how a girl with silver hair and amethyst eyes had told her a story. This girl… had silver hair and amethyst eyes. "That was Lady Aideen. She's safe with us."

"Oh, I am so glad." Her smile somehow brightened, to the point that I was almost dazzled. Lord Sigurd looked beyond coherency at the sight. "I… should get home, in that case, though."

"Would you like me… us… to escort you?" Lord Sigurd asked. He smiled softly, and the girl's face went bright red with a blush. "I would hate for you to be accosted again."

"I… um…" the girl stammered. Her face went even redder. "N-no, I will be fine. Thank you!" Her
voice ended with a little squeak, and she fled. There was no other word for it.

"Ah, wait!" Lord Sigurd reached out, and a look of longing flicked over his face. "Ah..." He glanced at me. "Did I...?"

"I'm sure she was simply embarrassed," I replied, answering the unspoken question. "You didn't really do anything that I would've thought untoward. Then again, things might be different in Verdane."

"That's true," he murmured. His eyes returned to where the girl had run. "I hope we meet again..."

"You had best forget about that hope, my lord." The soft voice made both of us whirl, and I vaguely recognized the speaker as the 'elder' for the village. "She is a maiden of the Spirit Forest," he explained, coming to stand before us. "She, like the others of the Forest, are forbidden attachments to the outside world, lest catastrophe consume the world."

"That... forgive me for my blunt words, elder, but that sounds like a bunch of superstitious nonsense." Lord Sigurd's demeanor became far too determined, by my eye. "Something that vague... that sounds like something used to justify the persecution of others!"

"Perhaps to you, but to us..." He continued talking, but I stepped away then and tuned their conversation-argument out as I studied Lord Sigurd. Everything from his tone to his posture reminded me more of a husband protecting his wife from slander, instead of simply a young man hoping to see a girl again. It was as if he was in love with her.

The very thought unnerved me. Lord Sigurd had been infamous in the gossips in having no real interesting in anyone romantically, leading people to fret over who would inherit Chalphy. Yet, he met a random girl in another country, in the middle of a market, and fell in love at first sight? It seemed ridiculous, like the plot of a bad romance story. But, more importantly, it reminded me of the stories back in the Church, about how 'love at first sight' was truly the gods manipulating the world. It was their way of saying 'you two must meet, and must fall in love in order to allow or prevent something from occurring'. The stories also said that when you had people falling in love at first sight, trouble and devastation were on the horizon, because the gods did not interfere with humanity's free will otherwise. It made me wonder just what could be coming, to make Lord Sigurd fall in love with that silver-haired girl.

It made me fearful of the future, because that 'catastrophe' the elder mentioned was likely coming, no matter what that girl did, and I wondered just why the gods hated her, and Lord Sigurd, enough to force both of them into that sort of fate.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: So, for Sigurd and Deidre, I'm taking some notes from the Valdemar series by Mercedes Lackey, where you have 'lifebonds', which typically involve the gods of that universe either a) ensuring that a particularly powerful yet not exactly mentally stable person sticks around long enough to actually fulfill their destiny or b) making sure certain people are bonded to make sure things run more smoothly.

Next Chapter - Goddess
Chapter 5) Goddess

Time passes slowly as we wait to see Prince Jamke's response. The people heal, graves are dug, and buildings are slowly reconstructed. The infirmary empties person by person, pet by pet. Some stayed to do chores for the castle, to help with the infirmary. Some, like ownerless pets and orphaned children, became pages to... well, practically everyone. Sigurd, in particular, rarely went anywhere with a little trail of pages and pets following him, basking in his praise and teasing.

I tried to continue with my normal jobs, but many of which were actually taken over by some of the civilians, who insisted I have fun. As if a healer knew what that meant...

"Prince Shanan, please stop squirming," I chided as I tended to his arm. He had decided to prove that he'd recovered by climbing a tree, and promptly fell as he tried, resulting in some rather yucky looking scrapes. "I need to clean this."

"Why can't you just heal it up?" he asked. His tone might've implied 'whining', but his eyes were simply curious. "I thought staves cured everything."

"Different staves do different things, Prince Shanan." I shifted in my chair and tugged him a little closer so that I could continue cleaning his injury. I debated pointing out that we also had a limited supply, but decided against it. Children were allowed to be a little selfish, after all. "Healing staves do heal, yes, but only that, truly."

"And while they do also disinfect wounds, they don't clear the wound of debris," Lady Aideen added as she looked up from her weaving and smiled. We'd both been chased out of the infirmary today, something about how we shouldn't be working for 'so long after dinner', and were in a little study on the far end of the castle where we'd both been making bandages before Sir Finn dropped Prince Shanan off with us. "And for some, you really do have to cut away the dead skin first, to make sure infection isn't sealed into the wound. They are not 'cure-alls'. They are just... helpful."

"Oh," Prince Shanan replied. He looked confused still, but nodded. I tugged his arm to silently remind him to be still. "So, basically, my scrape needs cleaning because Miss Alicia could've healed the splinters inside?"

"Precisely, among other things. Then you'd be in a lot of pain and we'd have to peel the scab off to get to the trouble. Draining the puss and all."

"Gross!" He sighed and pouted a little. "Okay... I'll stay still."

"Good." Lady Aideen's smile warmed. "Perhaps you should also hold off on climbing the trees around here."

"But I'm bored!"

"I'm sure there's lots of games you can play."
"Everyone's busy!" He tried to flail, but I gave him a stern look and he drooped. "I don't want to bother them."

"I can assure you that Sigurd, at least, would never think you're bothering him." Lady Aideen laughed a little. "He'd gladly teach you what he's doing. Didn't he buy you a practice sword?"

"Yep! He and Auntie Ayra are teaching me!" He beamed, clearly ecstatic. "Oifeye takes his lessons with me! It's super fun!"

"Is it?"

"Yeah!" He babbled a bit more, happily explaining each bit of his training. Lady Aideen listened closely, setting her weaving down, so I tuned them both out to finish cleaning and bandaging the Prince Shanan's scraped arm. I took my time, making sure that there was no trace of infection or debris within the wound, since such a thing would set him back in his training, and he truly did enjoy it. It gave him a little bit of 'normality' in a world where everything was just going wrong for him. He was exiled from his home, his grandfather was dead, his father was going to die if he wasn't dead already, he was far away from anything familiar, he'd been a prisoner and hostage, and he was surrounded by people of the same country that destroyed his family. It was a lot for someone not even ten years old, yet he kept up a smile and cheerfulness. I wanted to make his life as easy as I could, both because it was my job as his primary healer, and because he was just... far too young.

As I finished bandaging him, though, I noticed something was... off. There was a feeling in the air, a humming in my blood. Frowning, I stood abruptly and strode to the door, jerking it open and peering outside. There, close to us, was a person in plain garb, scrubbing the floors. It seemed normal, on the surface, but...

"Pardon me," I called. The person stiffened. "I'm sorry to trouble you." I smiled as they stood up slowly and faced me. "I think that area was already cleaned." Dread dripped down my spine as they continued to stare. "Besides, this area isn't really used. I'm just here to treat a child's injury in relative quiet." Something flashed through their eyes. I thought it was panic, fear, and guilt. "So, please, go on and-

The person lunged suddenly, pushing me back into the room. As I fell back, just barely avoiding crashing into Prince Shanan before the door slammed shut, and there was the sound of a something heavy thudding against the door. Two seconds later, the smell of smoke filtered in.

Immediately, Lady Aideen and I were on our feet, trying to open the door. While the knob turned the door itself would not budge, proving my worst suspicions true. It was barred from the outside. We were trapped in a room with no other doors and no windows, with smoke and fire closing in.

"What are we going to do?" Lady Aideen whispered. She glanced back at Prince Shanan who was pale and shaking already from fear. "If we both hit, perhaps...?"

"I'm not too certain on that one," I muttered. Still, even if I redirected the flames, we would be in a great deal of trouble. Fire might take longer to hurt me, but smoke certainly didn't. "But, say a prayer to the gods that your Ullur luck will kick in."

"Will you not pray?"

"No, I don't believe they'll hear me." It wasn't as if I entered the church by choice. "But they might hear you."
"Why do you... no, never mind." She closed her eyes briefly and then nodded. "On three?"

"Yes." I twisted the knob as both of us braced. "One..." The smell of smoke made my eyes watered. "Two..." There was a slight warming in the air, a sign of a fire crawling closer. "Three."

We both slammed against the door. Once. Twice. Thrice. On the fourth, we heard something fall. On the fifth, we heard something sixth. On the sixth, the door cracked open. On the seventh, we got it open enough for me to slip my hand through and get better leverage. On the eighth, we got it open enough for Prince Shanan, Lady Aideen, and me to slip out.

Neither Lady Aideen nor I commented on how bruised our shoulders and sides were, or how raw my hand was. Neither of us commented on how our clothes were ripped and we were scratched up by the makeshift barricade, made from a pile of armor, stripped from the suits that had lined the hall. No, instead, I took Prince Shanan by the hand and the three of us ran, hoping to find someone. But it was hard, because screams echoed harshly off the walls, almost drowning out the crackling of fire.

But, even as they echoed, the words overlapping, a single message made through loud and clear: "Prince Jamke is attacking the castle! Prince Jamke is attacking the castle!"

Lady Aideen stumbled as the words battered our ears, but I caught her with my free hand and we continued to run. We had no choice; staying in place would doom us. Thick, black, acrid smoke was already filling the hallways, and bright and harsh fire was climbing up to the roof, a dangerous thing. Like most castles, Marpha wasn't made entirely of stone. The roof was wooden, and the heat from the flames made the mortar in the stone walls weaken. Unbalanced, they crumbled, blocking paths left and right, and what bits they didn't block, the burnt out support beams of the roof served as an impassable obstacle.

"The fire is burning too quickly," Lady Aideen whispered after we encountered yet another dead end. "How?"

"...Marpha Castle is one Prince Jamke would know well, meaning he'd know the structural weak points," I pointed out slowly. I held onto Prince Shanan's hand tightly, and he clung to me with all his strength. "Since he knew we weren't attacking, he had plenty of time to sneak people inside and-"

"He's not like that!"

"He's attacking us right now with that!" I couldn't help but let my temper burn a little. "For all you know, Lady Aideen, he only saved you to one-up his brother."

"I told you, he's not-!" She screamed as a flash of fire erupted next to us. The decorative tapestries that had been fluttering above our heads were more char than thread. "A-ah..."

"Prince Shanan, stay close to me." I tugged him more into my side, and he whimpered as he clung to my skirts. "Lady Aideen, perhaps we might shelve that discussion for later?"

"Y-yes..." She bit her lip. "Resin."

"Pardon?"

"Resin. I think resin was used to accelerate the flames, along with oil and pitch. The smell is..."

"...Well, they do have a lot of trees." I supposed it also made sense that it would be flammable, considering how fast trees went up. "But, forgive me, is that important right now?"
"No, but it does reassure me on the scent. I was worried it might be a poison, like what Gandolf used."

"Oh, that explains some of the deaths back then." I'd just assumed it was blood loss. "We need to find someone." If the three of us were attacked…

"Let's try this hallway." She pointed to a small and narrow one, with cobwebs and dust clinging to the top. "It's not been used, so…"

"Well, it'll be a tight fit for us." I glanced down at Prince Shanan, who looked up at us with tearing, yet trusting eyes. I was both touched and terrified that he placed so much faith in our ability to get out of this. "But you lead. Prince Shanan will be between us."

She nodded silently and strode forward with her head held high, despite the dust staining her almost instantly. Prince Shanan followed her at my urging, and he kept a tight grip on my hand as we walked forward, with me bent awkwardly over him to shield him as debris and other things, like spiders and insects, fell on our heads. Loud, raucous shouting echoed down the little hallway, growing louder and louder as we got closer. When we stepped out, to my shock, we found the sources of the voices instantly.

"Lady Aideen!" Sir Midir was the first to notice us in the ragtag group of Sigurd, Lord Quan, Lord Lex, Lady Ayra, and him. "Miss Alicia! Prince Shanan!" The group then whirled to face us, sooty faces lighting up with tired, yet relieved smiles. "Thank the gods… we tried to reach the study you were in, but…"

"We got very lucky," Lady Aideen murmured. She hesitated before surging forward and catching Sir Midir in a hug. "Thank goodness…"

"Why are you all gathered here, though?" I asked. Prince Shanan held onto my hand, even when Lady Ayra came over to fuss over him. "This does seem like an odd space."

"Unfortunately, it's not all luck," Sigurd answered. His smile fell for grimness, and he turned back to a particularly bad batch of flames very close to us, too close for my comfort. "Oifeye and Finn are trapped." I felt everything freeze at the words. "We've tried to get through, but…" He growled something under his breath, and my eyes flicked over everyone. Their clothes were damaged, and each of them bore minor burns. "Lex, if one of them has a healing staff-"

"I'm fine," Lord Lex growled. He paused and sighed. "Sorry, didn't mean to sound so angry. But seriously, Sigurd, I'm fine."

"You shielded Ayra from some burning falling beams."

"Okay, I'm in pain, but battle fever is keeping me going. Let's focus on the kids before we all die of smoke."

"Yes, yes, but… how? I refuse to leave them, as does Quan, no matter what they keep trying to shout, but…"

There was some arguing, some debating. There was some screams, even, as the fire surged and a wave of heat dried out our eyes and mouths, made our skins prickle. Prince Shanan finally let go of my hand as a roof beam crashed down right next to us. But I barely noticed as I focused on the situation. Lord Oifeye and Sir Finn, both only fifteen, both of whom I knew quite well thanks to all their help in the infirmary and with Prince Shanan, were stuck in a room filling with fire.

I could help. I knew that. Arvis had even shown me, during those first visits. I was of Vala's blood.
Fire was my blood. But doing so, I would reveal my bloodline. I would reveal that I was Vala Minor, and combined with my hair, that would out me as Arvis's sister, as Azel's sister.

I've always hidden. I was the child who was thrown away, to avoid a scandal. I was the child thrown away, to forget the violence that led to my conception in the first place. I was the hidden child of Velthomer, the hidden bastard. Even if I loved my brothers, I was scared. I was scared of leaving that 'safety'.

I was scared of being used. Worse, I was scared of being used against Arvis, against Azel. Another bastard would bring our father back into the gossips, despite Arvis doing all he could to bury that man and forget him forever. I loved him dearly. I loved them both dearly. Arvis was the first person in the whole world that ever said 'I am so glad to know you' and 'I love you' to me. He was the first person to acknowledge that I was here, and frequently wanted to bring me back to Velthomer. He was proud of having me as a sister. No one had ever been 'proud' of me. No one had ever wanted me. And Azel wrote letters on a daily basis, wishing he could see me, me. Grannvale's court was cutthroat and cruel. I would be used, and used against them, in ways I could not even imagine. I did not want that. I was scared of that.

I was surrounded by strangers, and semi-strangers. Even if Sigurd was kind, even if an oath was sworn, I knew, if I revealed it now, then rumors would spring up. Rumors about me, about my blood, would spread like weeds and sickness, all the way to the court. Rumors could cause Arvis no end of trouble, especially with tensions running so high. I could be used as simple an excuse. The nobles of Grannvale were more than petty enough.

But if I didn't reveal it now, Lord Oifeye and Sir Finn would die. Sigurd and Lord Quan would injure themselves, cripple themselves, trying to save them. The longer we spent here, the more people died, the more people were wounded.

So, I grit my teeth, closed my eyes, and called to the power sleeping in my blood.

I could not conjure flames without a tome, just like any other magic user, but those of Holy Blood could control their element if it was already present. While I'd have to overwhelm the magic in a spell-cast fire to seize control, a natural fire would bend easily. So, my blood hummed and warmed as I reached out and demanded it listen to me, breaking it under my will easily. Then I gestured and 'pulled' it, drawing the fire up and back and parting it for Lord Oifeye and Sir Finn to have a clear path out of the room.

Thankfully, they took it without hesitation, even though I was certain they were confused, and they both collapsed on the floor, hacking and choking, covered in soot and ash, with blotchy burn scars and tattered clothing.

Once I was certain they were out, I threw the fire elsewhere, out a nearby window. It shattered instantly and smoke billowed out the broken window, clearing the air around us briefly. However, as the crinkling of the glass slowly died, silence reigned. I stiffened as I felt all eyes turn to me, and I automatically checked for my gloves. But the feedback from the magic had set them aflame, burning them into bits of ash and cloth, so even though my sleeves were intact, and long, my Holy Mark was easy to see.

"Well," I finally began after squirming in the silence. I tugged my sleeve over the Mark. "Shall we find a better location to coordinate fire fighting?"

Thankfully, the screams, fire, and everything else override their curiosity, and we all spent the next… well, it felt like days, but it was probably only hours. What bits of the sky that could be seen
through the sooty windows and billowing smoke clouds showed the stars still twinkling. My time was spent helping with evacuations and tending to the injured. Azel handled what bits of fire redirection were needed. I noticed most of the injured were soldiers, with many civilians escaping with only minor burns and minor smoke inhalation. That told me that Prince Jamke was focusing on the 'invaders', us. But he was still attacking his own people to get to us, just like his elder brother. I supposed they weren't so different after all.

A loud, echoing thud jolted me from my thoughts, and I jerked up from my work. I was tending to Sir Finn in the 'War Room', a giant study with a table large enough for Sigurd, Lord Quan, Lord Oifeye, and some others to gather around, like Lord Lex and Lady Aideen. Lady Ayra also stood among them, while Prince Shanan was curled into my side, trembling but trying to hide it.

"They're battering the outer gates," Lady Ayra whispered. Her eyes were dark. "It won't take them long. They likely weakened the gates while sending their soldiers about." She looked at the others around the table, and glanced at the others in the room. As many soldiers as possible were crammed into him, making everything cramped and uncomfortable. "Are all the civilians in the castle?"

"Yes, but if this keeps up…" Sigurd murmured. He frowned heavily. "Still, I do not wish to fight. If we kill Prince Jamke, we will lose our one chance to keep thing from being a conquest." Only Sigurd was naive enough to believe that there was any chance of peace now. "How did the castle…?"

"It seems he snuck people inside, disguised as civilians." Her eyes flashed. "A cowardly, but effective, tactic, though he is lucky you are the one in charge, and not someone else. Someone else would've just killed all the civilians."

"Surely not!"

"Yes, they would've. I've seen it. Sophara, a castle to the north of Castle Isaach, fell to such tactics, and the lord who took over killed all the civilians to ensure that no 'spies' remained." She shook her head. "We dealt with him, of course, but Prince Jamke gambled his people's lives for this chance. It's easy to see how he and Kinbaith are of the same kin."

"B-but Sigurd's kindness is on all the gossips!" Lady Aideen protested. As always, she defended Prince Jamke, ignoring the dark and darkening looks from the soldiers. "And I talked about him a lot, so surely…"

"Doesn't change that he took the gamble, even if he was certain he'd win," Lord Lex pointed out. He steadied Azel as he swayed; Azel had overextended battling the flames, and was barely conscious, standing through sheer stubbornness alone. "And doesn't change that he's here to kill us. So, what are we-?" A sickening crack cut him off, and all of us froze. "I think that was the gate."

"Everyone down!" Lord Quan snapped, dragging Lady Ethlyn down and shielding her as he followed his own order. Not two seconds later, arrows started flying through the windows, thudding into the walls. Everyone shrieked, and I shielded Prince Shanan as a few flew too close. Sir Finn pulled himself over both of us, and took quite a few grazes. Some of the other soldiers… they took worse wounds. A couple, who moved too slowly, took arrows straight through the eye. Others were hit in the neck, the shoulder, the chest…

Blood trickled down to join the soot and ash in the room, arrows crowding the floor and showcasing hundreds of attempts to kill us. The arrows might've stopped, but the fear remained, and it was easy to imagine just what would've happened if Lord Quan hadn't yelled for us to duck… and just how many might be dead in the hallways.
Yelling erupted then. Arguing, accusing… they cascaded around us, rattling my ears. I tried to ignore them as I healed the newly injured, starting with Sir Finn and moving to others. Prince Shanan clung to my skirts as I worked, helping me with shaking hands to soothe the soldiers who were crying from pain, loss, and fear. The cacophony grew louder and louder as I healed, and it was impossible to tell just who was yelling what, if they were yelling anything coherent.

"Wait!" But Lady Aideen's voice suddenly cracked through the arguing, and all eyes turned to her as an echoing silence fell. "Let me…" she began. She hesitated before nodding, eyes determined. "Let me try to persuade him." She held up her hands before the arguing could resume. "There's been these rumors of dark magic and Sadima, yes? That's what the civilians think happened to their king. If Prince Jamke is also a victim, then it's my duty, as a cleric, to heal him. He also saved me from the fate of being Prince Gandolf's wife, and I think we all know what that would've entailed." She shook her head. "So, please."

"Well, it does seem like they've run out of arrows," Sigurd murmured. He and Lady Aideen shared a long look before he nodded. "Okay. It's better than anything we've been plotting. Alicia?" He turned to me. "Will you be on standby?"

"If they're not actually out of arrows, she'll be dead before I can do anything," I pointed out. Still, I sighed. I was surrounded by naive idiots. "But very well." I stood up slowly, stroking Prince Shanan's hair. "Have Lady Ethlyn take over healing the injured, please."

"Of course. Thank you."

There was a whirlwind of movement then, and before I could even blink, I was at the gates with Lady Aideen, waiting for everything to go so very wrong, so very fast. Lady Aideen gave me a gentle, brave smile as she walked up to the closed gates, and I hung back, clinging to my dying staff tightly, all too aware that there would be no one close enough to save her.

Sigurd, somewhere far behind us, gave the order and the gates opened slowly. As Lady Aideen stepped out, and the fire light streamed both out and in to reveal the enemy army, I nearly snagged Lady Aideen because it was clear that I was right. They weren't out of arrows. They were just waiting, to catch us in a trap, and that trap was aimed all at her.

But there was no time. All the arrows fired, even as the soldiers shouted when they realized their 'target' was a lone woman, completely unarmed. A hail of arrows flew, arcing as the billowing smoke in the sky blew away, revealing the glowing dawn.

I held still, gripping my staff type, ready to try, and likely fail, to heal Lady Aideen's arrow ridden corpse. But that… didn't happen. Instead, the arrows, despite being so numerous, despite all being aimed right at her… they all missed, save for one, shot by Prince Jamke, that grazed her cheek. The morning sun glittered over the castle walls, dappling the courtyard in light.

Lady Aideen seemed to glow, the wind gently ruffling her hair and dress, and she stared at the fighters, surrounded by all the arrows that missed, with a tiny bit of blood trickling down her cheek, almost like the tear she refused to shed as she looked over them all.

"Goddess…" someone whispered. The enemy started to kneel as the tiny sound became a breathless prayer. 'Goddess', 'goddess', 'we have been greeted by a goddess'.

Only one didn't kneel, Prince Jamke based on how quality his armor was. He managed to be stoic for a single heartbeat before his expression crumpled and he collapsed on his knees. "Just condemn me," he pleaded. Lady Aideen simply smiled. "Just… condemning me would be kinder."
Lady Aideen did not reply. She simply walked towards him and crouched down in front of him, to look him in the eyes, and when he began to cry, she hugged him and let him cry into her shoulder, with the dawning light surrounding them like a gentle halo.

It was like something from a storybook, really, and if I hadn't seen it for myself, I never would've believed it.

Prince Jamke surrendered, and Sigurd accepted it gladly. The two had a surprisingly amiable conversation considering Sigurd did kill Prince Jamke's older brothers, and Prince Jamke had just tried to kill all of us, and then Prince Jamke pledged his soldiers to Sigurd's army in exchange for the promise to save his father. I really didn't understand most of it, even hours later, as I was tending to Prince Jamke's wounded soldiers. I wasn't really certain why, and not just because I wasn't sure how the soldiers got injured. It just… didn't make sense to me. He just tried to kill us, and now he was an ally? Yes, Lady Ayra had technically been an enemy, but there had been a hostage, and Lady Ayra hadn't threatened the lives of civilians.

Still, despite my misgivings, I did my duty, and finally, found myself healing Prince Jamke, who had some lingering damage that seemed to be from some sort of spell. I didn't ask. I honestly didn't care.

"...Thank you," Prince Jamke murmured as I finished tending to him. "Thank you for healing my men and me."

"I am a healer," I told him. Certain that he was fully healed, I stepped away from him and gave him my most polite smile. He flinched from it. "I heal people. Personal wishes do not interfere with my job, Prince Jamke." That was… probably far too much to say, and completely unprofessional. But I did feel almost smug as Prince Jamke winced again. "If you have no more need for my services, I am going to check on the other wounded." I bowed to him and walked away, closing the door to the room he and his men were borrowing. Not even Sigurd was naive enough to keep them with his own army.

I leaned against the wall briefly, exhausted by everything. The fire, using my magic in a way I wasn't used to, the rest of the attack, healing so many… on top of having no sleep, I was ready to just collapse. But I was a healer, and healers did not faint. So, I made my way away from the room, one leaden foot in front of the other. The plan had been to make it to my room. I made it only to the nearby balcony before having to rest, doing everything I could to not collapse against the railing.

I had no idea how long I remained there, leaning heavily against the railing, crossing my arms to use what little arm strength I had to stay up. It was long enough that I completely ignored the pain from my shoulder, the bruises deciding to stop reminding me that they were still there. It was a long enough for me to watch the sun rise over the horizon and light up the area, everything just… sparkling from the morning dew. It looked so surreal that I thought I might've just passed out already, and was dreaming. A noise behind me, however, made me jump and whirl, and the pain that lanced through my shoulder, legs, and side proved this was no dream.

Sigurd held his hands up as I focused on him, and he smiled slightly as I continued to stare. "I was checking that you didn't fall asleep standing up," he explained softly. "Ethlyn did, and Aideen… well, she collapsed rather dramatically in Midir's arms."

"Of course she did, considering she dramatically avoided all the arrows," I retorted dryly, unable to help it. He laughed tiredly. "But no, I'm awake still. Did you have need of me?"

"I haven't heard anything. I was just passing by after talking a bit more with Prince Jamke." He
came to stand beside me, and I settled back against the railing, pushing most of my weight on my arms. He glanced down at me, and then focused on my right arm. Belatedly, I realized that my arms were bared, revealing my Holy Mark. "It's rather large for a Minor Mark, isn't it?"

"It's larger than Azel's, but it's still noticeably smaller than Arvis's." My Mark wrapped about my lower and half of my upper arm, swirls resembling flowers, with the stems on my wrist and the blossoms at the top. Arvis's wrapped around both of his arms, bridged by a small strip across his shoulder blades. "It appeared a bit young for me. I was about one or two, and was promptly given to the church, I think."

"It normally appears around age five, right? That's when mine appeared." He paused. "Wait, no, Ethlyn was older."

"Typically, it's five for the Majors, ten for the Minors, though that's more of a generalization." I sighed, drooping. "But, mine appeared young."

"What… happened to your mother?"

"From what I understand, she died in a mysterious 'accident' a few months after Father raped Azel's mother. Not that it matters to me. She's the one who dropped me off."

"I see." He paused, and I could tell he was trying to think of what to say. "We've… noticed the hair, but… well…"

"Yes, I'm their sister. Yes, Azel know. Yes, Arvis knows. He wants me to move to Velthomer, but I like my life, so I refuse. I think some part of him likes having a sanctuary away from everything." I glanced up at him. "I like hiding. I like being the simple healer. I… didn't want to be used, or to be mentioned in the courts."

"I promise that no one will-"

"You cannot stop rumors, Sigurd." I gave him a bitter smile. "You simply cannot. Word will get out, no matter how many oaths you make people swear. I only ask… that no one make a big deal about it. Please. I am…"

"A brave and kind woman, who saved many lives today, even more so than usual, which is already impressive." Sigurd smiled gently. "Thank you, Alicia. I will make sure the others know you do not wish for a fuss to be made."

"...Thank you." I debated a moment before sighing and leaning against the railing, resting my chin on my crossed arms. It was a small moment to gather my thoughts without relying on my mask, a dangerous thing for a healer. But Sigurd smiled and watched the stars with me, a gentle presence that didn't comment or scold me.

I thought about how Lord Quan had said Sigurd didn't have many close friends, and how he'd hoped I could be one. But this was the first time I had thought that perhaps I needed close friends… and that Sigurd would be a good one. He was a friend I needed.

It wasn't a very comforting thought.

Records on Sir Arden:

Armored Knight, 25 years old
A strong and reliable knight from Chalphy, noted for his inability to move quickly

Often left behind to defend the castles because of his inability to keep up with the other units, and is often frustrated by this

Kind, and often helps out with moving things for me.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: So. Scene where Aideen steps out in the hail of arrows is based off of a similar scene from the Oosawa manga. Ullur luck is powerful.

Okay, so, this was written after the Jan 18th Direct, meaning that I'm announcing that while I will not be (knowingly) changing the spellings of any characters already shown/mentioned, I WILL be using the spellings on the Nintendo site for characters that have not shown up. I apologize if you dislike them, but that's what I'm going with.

Next Chapter - Spirit Forest
Chapter 6) Spirit Forest

With Prince Jamke's aid, we rally the troops and march forward to Verdane Castle. After some discussion, it is decided that some remain behind Marpha to protect the civilians, while the rest, including me, head off. The journey is long and slow, due to there only being a handful of paths that horses can travel. The forest itself is strangely quiet and muggy. It almost feels as if we have stepped into another world, a world we had no part in.

I have a bad feeling about all of this.

"Are you okay, Lady Sister?" Azel asked as we rode. He and I were sharing a horse for the morning, since I and some of the other unmounted, not-good-with-horses people tried to switch up who we rode with. Some, like Lady Aideen, never switched, and she happily rode with Sir Midir. Lady Ayra tended to be paired up with Lord Lex through the shenanigans of Sigurd, who delighted in their constant bickering, even as the rest of us worried they'd start drawing weapons. "Lady Sister?"

"I'm just fretting over Lord Lex and Lady Ayra again," I replied, twisting to smile at him. "They are… well…"

"Oh, no worries. Lex is just having fun. She's easy to tease. But the second she makes it clear that it's gone from teasing to bullying, he'll stop outright or dial it back." He grinned. "Tailtiu made sure of that!"

"Tailtiu is the youngest daughter of House Freege?"

"No, she's the middle one. Ethnia is the younger one, and the only one to not inherit the Tordo silver hair of the bunch. Bloom is the eldest."

"Ah, yes, that's right. But you're best friends with her. Tailtiu, I mean."

"Yeah, though she can be a bully sometimes." He made a face before shrugging. "But she's super nice. I hope you can meet her, Lady Sister. I've told her about you, of course. Something about bonding over being the 'middle girls'?"

"Oh, dear, I hope I can live up to her expectations!" Truly, though, what I focused on was just how… happy he was, calling me 'Lady Sister' in front of everyone. He practically beamed, and that was almost enough to make me cry. I could only pray that Arvis would not be too… well, I sent a letter off to him, explaining everything. I hoped everything would be okay. "I hope Arvis is all right."

"I'm sure Lord Brother is just fine." Azel said the words so certainly that I just had to smile. "Oh, but you're worried about rumors." He smiled. "Don't worry. Lord Brother will be fine. He'll balance out what you want with what he wants. He'll probably just ignore the rumors. That way he doesn't confirm them, and thus put you in a bad situation, but he also doesn't deny them, because I know he'd never want to deny it. He always talks about you so happily back home."
"Does he?" I smiled slightly. "I trust only with you and Aida, yes?"

"Yep." He grinned. "He was super excited when we got your letter about completing your healer training. Sadly, he and I don't really have that good of a hand for it, but Aida actually had to tell him to shut up because he wouldn't stop babbling about it."

"That certainly matches the letter I got." I laughed as I remembered it. I kept that letter in my things, just because it was so rare to see, or rather read, him acting so childishly excited. "He's so silly sometimes."

"I think he can be scary. But, then again, he's had to be both brother and father to me. He got to be just a brother to you." Azel fell silent, glancing up at the swaying branches above our heads. "Lady Sister, do you think that, once this is over, you can visit Velthomer?" He looked at me pleadingly. "I'm sure we can come up with a cover story, but I'm sure you'll love Velthomer, and really, it would be hilarious to surprise Lord Brother! And you can meet Aida and Cyas and-"

"Breath, Azel." I laughed a little as he went red. "Oh, goodness, what am I to do with you?" I sighed, nodding. "Oh, very well. If you can come up with a story, and if no one needs me, then I will visit Velthomer." I held up a hand as his eyes lit up. "But only then, and only for a week, at most. I have my duty, and I am Prince Shanan's primary caretaker."

"Okay!" He beamed. "This is going to be great! We'll shock him silly!" He started humming off-key, likely making plans before even thinking about the cover story he'd need to concoct.

Eventually, we reached a part of the forest just before it opened up to the approach on the castle. From there, we set up camp and everyone made plans. The mood of the soldiers was surprisingly cheerful, possibly because we were reaching the end of the campaign at last. Then, it would be reconstructing and the like, the job of politicians and diplomats, not simple soldiers. Their job was almost over. Mine, however, was just beginning, especially since Sigurd insisted I join him, Lord Quan, Lady Ayra, and Prince Jamke for a little War Council. I wasn't exactly certain why, but Sigurd was insistent, and I didn't feel like debating.

"And that is about all I know of the defenses," Prince Jamke explained, setting his pen down. He'd done his best to make a detailed map of the entire castle, both inside and out. "I do not know what changes Sadima made, and I'm sorry for that. When I was last in the castle, I was focused far more on trying to convince my father to stop this pointless war." He sighed. "If only I had investigated more. I do not know what trials await."

"What you have told us is invaluable, though," Sigurd reassured. He smiled briefly, but it soon faded. "If anything, I should be apologizing to you. This has to be painful for you."

"No more painful than what you all endured when I attacked." Prince Jamke shook his head. "No, this is something I should've done sooner. Regardless of how much I love my father, I am the prince of Verdane. Now, I am the Crown Prince of Verdane, actually. I have a duty to my people to end this pointless war."
"...Right, your brothers…"

"We never got along. I mourn their passing, but I know very well they attacked you first. By our laws, their lives were forfeit, and, this way, I didn't have to be the one to execute them." Prince Jamke smiled, but it was pained. No matter how much he tried to shrug it off, even if they didn't actually get along, their deaths still hurt. "I should check on my men, though."

"Certainly." Sigurd smiled again, and he turned to the rest of us. "So, what do you three think?"

"Personally, I think that if we have an infirmary area set, I need to leave to make sure it is prepared," I answered, seizing the easy way of escape. A simple healer really didn't have much role to play here. "No matter what you plan, there are going to be a lot of injured, and I need to make sure we're ready for them if we're to ensure minimal casualties."

"She has a good point, Sigurd," Lord Quan added, either because he also didn't see why I needed to be here, or because he realized I just wanted to leave. "You'd be amazed at how long it takes the healers to get everything ready. I made the mistake of not listening to the healers bringing that up during my first battle, and I remain forever grateful that they told me exactly where to shove my arrogance and went ahead." He flashed a grin as Sigurd burst into laughter, while Lady Ayra and Prince Jamke politely chuckled. "I think Miss Alicia has already given us the numbers we can field?"

"I have, and divided them between those I thought could take full duty, light duty, and those that can be fielded in an emergency, but most of those are people who broke their legs tripping over roots and the like." We left most of the injured back at Marpha Castle, after all. "So, it had better be a very bad emergency to rally them."

"So the healer says with a look of 'everyone better be dying'," Lady Ayra deadpanned. It made the group snicker. "Please go on. I'm sure Shanan will wish to help, as best he can." There had been an extensive amount of debating, bringing Prince Shanan so close to the battlefield. Ultimately, however, it was decided it was best to do so, since we had no idea what the soldiers remaining in Marpha would do if they learned the Crown Prince of Isaach was there.

There was a few more murmurs of polite nonsense and then I walked outside the tent, holding back a sigh as the muted, humid hair bashed my face. At least we could see the sun here, thanks to the slight thinning of the trees. It was a small comfort, but one nonetheless.

Gentle laughter caught my ear, and I turned to see Sir Midir fussing over Lady Aideen, specifically over the bandage on her face and how her robes kept catching on thorns and shrubs. Lady Aideen was the one laughing, teasing him over something with a small, sweet smile, and Sir Midir looked fondly exasperated at whatever she said.

"So, that's the knight she was talking about." Prince Jamke stepped out beside me, crossing his arms. "She talked to Dew about him," he continued, almost absently. "Feared he was dead."

"He took grievous wounds trying to protect her, but your brother pulled quite a few tricks," I answered. His wince made me wonder if I should've kept quiet about his brother, but then I decided that I really didn't care. I was allowed to be a little petty. "Are you upset?"

"About…?" He gave me a confused look before he became shocked and rolled his eyes. "Oh, please, after everything, I don't…" He shook his head. "I saved her from what I knew would be a bad fate. Yes, she interested me, and I wished to meet her again, but that was not why I saved her. I'd probably refuse her feelings if any somehow sprung, just because of how… odd everything is."
"My, my. That is quite noble of you, more than I would expect."

"You really don't like me."

"I am a healer. I heal people." I gave him a long look. "However, that means I was the one who healed, and tried to heal, those you attacked. Your men also locked Lady Aideen, Lord Shanan, and myself in a room. You could have killed them."

"They could've killed you."

"I don't care about that, much." I only had two people who would mourn me, after all. "Regardless, however, I have my duties and you have yours." I stepped back and curtseyed. "Pleasant day to you."

"That has to be the first time that phrase ever sounding so much like 'screw you'." Prince Jamke sighed. "Good day to you, Miss Alicia." He walked off, and I sighed a little at my own childish antics. It wasn't proper for a healer to act that way, yet I really couldn't help it. If my teachers could see me, I'd get the worst of scoldings.

"Wow, is today a 'Vala frown day?'" Lord Lex walked up, clapping me over the shoulder. "You and Azel both are showing off your brooding capabilities," he continued, teasing. "Is it a contest?"

"Azel is…?" I began. But then I thought of Lady Aideen and winced. "Oh, I should…"

"Nah, leave Azel to me." He shrugged. "He's always told me that he wanted to become stronger so that he could meet, and protect, the sister that lives away from him." Lord Lex smiled wryly. "While I'm sure he'd lean on you, he might… well…"

"I understand." I sighed, though. I really wasn't that good of a sister to him. "I'm sorry. I leave him in your care."

"And, in the morning, I'll send him after you so that he doesn't mope and write bad sad poems." He grinned and I laughed a little, unable to help it. Azel was actually very good at poetry, but that was through a lot of practice. I had endured quite a few bad poems in the past. "Oh, one more thing."

"Yes?"

"Stop with the Lord Lex. I went with it because you were hiding, but now you're not." He sulked a little. "You're Azel's big sister, and I've heard a lot about you, growing up."

"Oh, goodness." I sighed, mentally debated, and decided it was not worth the argument. "Very well, Lex, if you can forgive a few slips here and there."

"Yeah, no problem." He grinned triumphantly. "So, where do we need to start moving things? I'm assuming we need to, at least. Infirmary and all, and it's you."

"This way." I couldn't help but smile slightly at just how silly everyone was. This was such a strange assortment of fellows, and yet, they were more and more endearing by the day. "Fetch Sir Finn and Lord Oifeye, won't you? Prince Shanan should be with us as well, to make sure he doesn't get caught under everyone's feet."

"All right! I'm off to wrangle them!"

"No ropes."
"Oh, damn it, did Azel tell you about that?" He groaned and I laughed, covering my mouth with my hand to muffle the sound. "I tell you that it was perfectly reasonable!"

"I'm sure. But the tasks?"

"Right, on it."

Thanks to everyone's help, I had the infirmary set up minutes before everyone marched, far faster than normal, and even had time to walk to the edge of camp and see everyone off, alongside Lord Oifeye and Prince Shanan, who were going to be my helpers. A handful of soldiers remained behind to defend the camp, and gladly threw themselves into whatever chores I assigned to make things more comfortable and efficient for the infirmary.

"Miss Alicia!" Prince Shanan's job was to 'help watch' the road, really just keep himself out of trouble, and he happily rushed into the tent where I was mending blankets to 'report', normally asking about various herbs and flowers, or about little animals he'd seen. But, as I looked up, I saw a dark, almost frightened look on his face. "Miss Alicia, there's something weird," he told me. "Really weird. Super really weird."

"Oh?" I replied. I would've tried to tease him, but something about the look on his face told me I should take this very seriously. So, I set my mending to the side and followed him outside, and I frowned when I... saw nothing wrong. "So..." I turned my attention to him, and noticed his frown. "What was the strange thing?"

"It was right there!" His frown grew and he raced over to Lord Oifeye, who looked a little confused nearby. "You saw it too, right? The black little dots and-!"

The sky suddenly darkened, and I jerked my head up to the sky and could only stare as black flames twisted among the clouds, blocking out the sun. From the flames, a hideous, twisted skull emerged and it grinned sickly before opening up it's mouth. An ear-splitting screech made me automatically cover my ears, but it did nothing to muffle the sound as black light shot out from the flames like launched spears and fired arrows.

The screams that echoed back were sharp and clear, and made my heart break.

"...Prince Shanan, Lord Oifeye, I want you two to stay out of the infirmary," I whispered as I brought my hands down. I turned to face them, and saw them staring, wide eyed and unmoving. "That is not negotiable. I don't want you in here when they bring back the wounded. Go, and help with discarded armor and horses. Now." They both hesitated a little bit more. "Now." Finally, they both moved, though Prince Shanan made certain to first give me a hug before bolting away, leaving me to make last minute checks on the infirmary.

One minute after that, we got the first wave of victims.

The main thing I noticed was the black blood. All of the victims, apparently hit at random, were spewing it. Every other second, we had to toss out bowls and buckets of the strange, rank blood-like substance, and it stuck to our hands and clothes like burrs and burned where they lingered. We had to set up a second tent, just for them, for fear of this being some sort of contagious poison or disease, and set them off on haphazardly strewn blankets as their skin slowly discolored into a mottled purple and red.

At some point, Lady Aideen and Lady Ethlyn joined me in the tent, doing whatever they could to help, burning through staves in an attempt to save the victims. I had to snap at them to switch to
medicinal herbs, and even temporarily ban them from even touching a staff, as no matter how horrific this was, they were not the only victims of this fight. There had been 'normal' fighting prior, meaning we still had soldiers bleeding from their guts, soldiers missing arms and legs, soldiers with their bones splintering from their skin. We still had soldiers screaming over their missing eyes, fingers, feet. We still had soldiers with their heads cracked open, with pieces of their armor digging into their skin. Chainmail links pressed deep into skin, pieces of armor burrowed deep under injuries. I threw those two at the more 'typical' injuries and worked on the ones who had been struck by… whatever sort of spell that was.

As I worked, I noticed something that I thought might be key. Despite how horrific it looked, the actually damage did not… it was a lingering effect, meant to take a soldier out, but the damage did not escalate. Those who did not die within the first five minutes were miserable and aching, but fine. That was why healing staves simply had no more effect. It reminded me of the tales of dark magic, of the nightmarish things the Loptyrian Cult had inflicted with the magic they learned from the Dark Dragon. It reminded me of the horror stories told even now, to justify the hunts for Loptyrians.

Some part of me, for the first time, thought those hunts might've been a good thing, but the rest of me wondered if they'd learn such horrific spells if they weren't told by everyone and everything in the world that they were evil, sick, wrong, and thrown to the side to let fester while they suffered the losses of family and friends. I had no idea what to think, and so, I just did my best to stop thinking and keep on working.

Finally, after what felt like forever, I determined that while they would have to be watched, no one left in the second tent was in a great danger of dying. So, I quickly washed the black blood off, noticing the red welts that dotted my skin where the blood had made contact with my skin, seeping through my gloves and clothes. After checking that they were simply welts, I threw the dirty dress and gloves into the fires, not trusting them to even be cut down and boiled into bandages, and changed into some clean clothes before peeking into the 'main' tent. When I was certain Lady Aideen and Lady Ethlyn had things under control, I left to go tell Sigurd what I had determined.

It took a bit of walking, more so because now that I was away from my patients, my exhaustion was catching up with me, so my vision was a little grey around the edges. But I managed to find Sigurd, only to see him in the middle of what seemed like an argument with Lord Quan. I lingered back, hesitating at coming closer, but then I noticed Sigurd was actually bleeding from an arm injury. So, deciding that my job as a healer meant I definitely should be interfering, I marched forward, only to see Sigurd turn and race away to the forest, like an overly dramatic twit. Lord Quan looked ready to chase, but then he saw me and, after a moment, bowed his head in a silent 'please, help him'. I tried to smile reassuringly as I passed by, jogging a bit to try and catch up to Sigurd. I didn't think it was a very good one, though.

"Sigurd?" I called as we entered the trees. He continued forward, either not hearing me or ignoring me. "Sigurd." He kept on walking and, like an idiot, I kept on following, even after we left the bustle of camp completely behind, swallowed up by the trees. I couldn't even hear them. "Sigurd!" He walked aimlessly, making turns at random moments, and going just fast enough that it took most of my concentration to even keep up. "Sigurd!" Finally, I felt my temper snap as he just. Kept. On. Walking. "...Darn it, Sigurd!" I grabbed a fallen branch from nearby and threw it right at his head. Of course, it only hit his back, but that was enough to startle him and make him whirl to finally react to me. "It's about darn time!"

"Alicia?" he said, looking really confused. "Wait, what are you-?"

"I've been following you to try and give you a report and heal your wounded arm, but you were too
busy moping about everything to listen or pay attention!" I stomped over to him and glowered. "And now we're lost, by the way, unless you actually were paying attention to where you wandered about, in the Spirit Forest of Verdane, infamous for being darn hard to navigate!"

"...Oh..." Guilt flashed over his face. "I'm sorry. And now you're away from-

"They're stable!" Finally having enough, I snagged him by the arm and dragged him down by a tree, crouching by him and pushing up his sleeve so that I could deal with the injury. "By the gods, if they weren't, I wouldn't have given chase. I wouldn't have even left." My movements were crisp as I cleaned him wound. Thankfully, I had some basic medicinal herbs on me, as otherwise, this would be infinitely more tedious. "But everyone is stable. It looks worse than it is. Those not already dead are just guess is that it was just a long range magic attack meant to demoralize, and gods damn it, you walked right into it."

"I know, and I sent them-

"I'm not talking about that." I reached up and bopped him lightly on head, more to startle than to do any real damage. "I'm talking about now. He wanted to break you, and you're breaking. Is your resolve to save Verdane really so weak?"

"I..." His eyes filled with tears and he bowed his head. "But all of them... death in battle is... there was a dark mage, and I should've-"

"What? You should've what?" I shifted so that he could cry into my shoulder. "Tell me."

"More precautions. More-"

"What precautions? What did we have that could've actually done anything?"

"I..."

"I'm sure Lord Quan already said this, but given what we knew, you did what you could. But if you're going to let yourself falter just because of this, then what's the point of keeping on going? What's the point of staying here in Verdane and not going straight home?"

Lord Sigurd didn't reply. He just leaned into me and cried as I continued tending to his injury. What he needed, more than anything, was time to cry, and someone to make him think. Lord Quan tried, but no doubt Sigurd had lashed, considering how everything, and that only hurt both further. But I had a slight advantage in this; I had knowledge about the patients and the injuries and I hadn't been on the field, being the one to give orders, just as those two were. I was the outsider, and sometimes, you needed the outsider to repeat a friend's words, so that you finally believed them.

"I yelled at Quan," Lord Sigurd whispered, confirming what I suspected. "He tried to comfort me, but I lashed out and said a horrible lie."

"Then, if we manage to get out of here, you can apologize, again, and he'll probably apologize for speaking poorly," I replied. I grimaced as I realized I had no bandages on me. "You have a knife on you?"

"Yes?" He pulled one from his boot and handed it to me. "Why?" He yelped as I started cutting strips of cloth from my dress. "H-hold on a moment!"

"We're in the woods, lost, and you're bleeding." I tied the makeshift bandage around the injury. "We'll have to keep a very close eye on it, but at least it's clean."
"...Thank you." He started laughing suddenly. "I just realized. I think you lost your temper with me."

"I very much did." I sighed. "Look at what you all do with me. I'm a professional healer, acting like this."

"No, I think it's good!" He laughed harder. "I've worried a bit over how calm you are!"

"It's part of a healer's job to remain calm. You want a healer panicking in the middle of putting someone's skull back together?"

"Well, no, but..." He just continued laughing before calming down. "Ah, I'm a fool. No wonder you lost your temper, with me acting like this." He shook his head. "I've never really 'lost' a battle before. I've had hard victories, yes, but I always managed to come through with the aid of my friends. This time, though, it was a total loss, and here I am moping. I'm pathetic."

"While I'll agree with the fool part, and that you are acting pathetic, I am obligated to inform you that the healer's recommendation for dealing with this spiel of self-pity will likely be a sharp blow to the head if it continues for much longer." I checked that the bandage was secure and sat back on my heels, giving him a weary look. "Believe me, I am both tired and aggravated enough to do it, even if I have to break one of the branches above us to get a strong enough hit to get through your hard skull."

"Ouch." He snickered a bit, but it faltered when he glanced at my arms. "These red marks..." He took my left arm gently, pushing up the sleeve to study the welts. I felt a little touched that he'd made sure to not bare the arm that had my Holy Mark, even if it was far 'worse'. "How did you get these?"

"The black blood. I did a check, but there's nothing that suggests they're anything more than they appear." I shrugged, and held still as he cautiously prodded around the welts. "I'd recommend touching them, just in case, but if anything, I'd guess it's just an additional thing to freak people out."

"I see." He sighed, still staring at the welts. "I'm so sorry."

"Yes, you are, and you should be. But now you know, so..." I trailed off as he suddenly brought his hand up. "What is it?"

"Something's coming." He stood up, and pulled me behind him. He held the knife I'd used to cut my dress, and I realized that was really his only weapon. "Don't worry. Eldigan taught me a lot of tricks, so if it's an attacker, I can disable them and we can run."

"What, exactly, does he know about knife fighting?"

"A great deal, since Eldigan used to sneak out to taverns and start bar brawls for fun." He tensed as the shrubs nearby began to rustle, and I chose to not comment on the mental image of the prim and proper knightly lord of Noldion starting bar fights on whims. "So, if this becomes a fight, you should..."

Whatever I 'should' have done was never quite explained, as the shrubs and trees rustled a bit more, and out stepped a very familiar looking girl with silver hair and purple eyes. "Oh!" she gasped, shifting so that her staff and tome were behind her back. "I... hello?"

"Hello," Sigurd replied automatically, just staring. "I'm... glad to see you again, actually."
"I'm… glad to see you too." She smiled shyly. "Both of you. Um… would you like some help?"

Those two continued to awkwardly talk, but I could only stare because what were the chances of this happening? Seriously.

The girl's name was Deidre. She'd told us that as she led us to a nearby lake, where we could soak our feet as she made us a quick meal with some local plants. She'd called it 'simple fare', but I honestly found it delicious, and I could tell Sigurd would kill to be able to eat it every day for the rest of his life, and not just because Deidre was the one who made it. As we ate, we explained to Deidre a bit about just what we were doing here.

"So, in summary, I'm an idiot, and poor Alicia has to deal with me," Sigurd finally finished, laughing a bit. He laughed harder as I rolled my eyes. "So, what brings you here, Deidre? I heard you lived in the forest. Are we near your home?"

"No, not exactly," Deidre whispered. She scooted a little closer to the fire, which Sigurd had started. "My village is much deeper in the woods. But even if you know where it is, you have to break through the magic to get through."

"Magic?"

"It sounds like wards," I answered. I set my empty bowl to the side and held my hands up to the fire. "It's a subset of light and dark magic, I think? You don't hear too much about any magic besides healing in the church."

"Yes, it is!" Deidre confirmed. She flashed a bright smile and her eyes sparkled a bit. "The elders use a combination of both to shield the village. I don't know why, though. They don't tell me much of anything."

"I'm surprised. Not many even know about wards nowadays except in stories, much less practice it."

"The village has always been a little strange." She shrugged. "I think that, at least, and I live in it."

"But if it's so far away, what brings you here?" Sigurd asked. He smiled gently as Deidre shyly looked at him. "It seems strange to ask, but did you also manage to get lost?"

"N-no, I know the paths well," Deidre whispered. She fiddled a bit with her hands. "I'd… actually been following your group, from a distance. At first, I thought more scary soldiers had come, but then I saw it was you, and your friends, so I…" She shook her head. "Th-though, I do apologize!"

"We're not like that," I finally managed, wiping my eyes as I noticed I'd laughed so hard that I'd started crying. "We are not like that at all, and frankly, I've not interest in being involved with him like that. No offense meant, Sigurd."

"None taken!" Sigurd replied, visibly struggling to get his own laughter under control. "So long as you take no offense to my saying that viewpoint is mutual?"

"Of course!" I took a couple of deep breaths, in an effort to not start hiccupping. "But, that's the
"Second time someone has thought that!"

"Second?! Who was the first?"

"Lord Quan!"

"Seriously!?" Sigurd collapsed into laughter, and I followed suit, unable to help it. Deidre simply watched us for a short while, before she started giggling as well, a relieved smile on her face.

Finally, though, we all calmed down, and she whispered, "I'm sorry for assuming, then?"

"It's fine," Sigurd dismissed, rubbing at his eyes. Like me, he'd laughed so hard that he'd started crying. "Apparently, even one of my dearest friends thought…" He started snickering again, but he caught himself quickly. "But… I'm glad."

"About?"

"You ran so suddenly last time. I thought I'd offended you." His smile faltered as she flinched. "I did, didn't I? I'm sorry. If you can tell me, so that…" He trailed off as she shook her head. "No?"

"No, that's not it." She bit her lip and tears welled up in her eyes. "I'm sure they told you in Marpha. They tell everyone. About the Girl of the Spirit Forest who will bring catastrophe." She tried to smile, but it was a broken one, brought on by old, old pain. "I didn't… want to bring that to you, to either of you. You're so nice, and…" She ducked her head. "So, I ran. You did nothing."

"What is this supposed catastrophe? Because, if I must be blunt, it sounds like a bunch of superstition to me, but then again, I am not from here."

"I don't know." She shook her head almost violently and twisted her hands in her skirt and she tensed up. "I don't know. It's just something, so I…"

"But, if that's the case…" The two started… well, it wasn't really an argument. It was more of a debate. I tuned them out and just watched them, as I had at Marpha.

Deidre leaned towards him, almost unconsciously. She wanted to be near him, but she was scared, because of that 'catastrophe'. She refused to look up, but she cried, both from fear and pain. Sigurd, however, purposely moved a little closer, still keeping a slight distance to not force her, but holding his hand close, silently saying that he was there, he wanted to be near her too. He looked right at her, with eyes filled with hope and pain. He wanted to with her, and he was hurt that she pushed herself away.

They really did seem like… a married couple, except they weren't even together. But I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand seeing either of them in such pain. As a healer… as a friend… I couldn't stand it.

"I think they're using you as a scapegoat," I finally blurted. Both Sigurd and Deidre looked to me, startled. "I think a catastrophe is going to happen, no matter what you do." I thought of the stories I had been taught, and how certain I was that the gods had bonded these two together. This made me so uncomfortable, but if this was all true, then the two would be miserable without being near each other. That was something I didn't think any of us in the army could deal with, and I had to wonder if some of Sigurd's 'pathetic' reaction was caused by that soul-deep misery. "But they want someone to blame, ultimately, and you're very convenient, for whatever reason." I shrugged as they both stared. "But if that's the case, then why let it stop you? Why let them dictate your life, just because they want someone to burn at the stake when things go wrong?" I smiled encouragingly and shifted so that I was sitting right next to her. "What do you want to do, Deidre?"
"I..." she began. She hesitated, but when I nodded, I saw some sort of resolve enter her eyes. "I want... to be with you, Sigurd." She looked to him shyly. "I... I tried getting you out of my head, but I couldn't, and..."

"I've thought of you often as well," Sigurd whispered. Now he offered his hand and, when she tentatively place her own hand in his, he lifted it up to kiss it. "I will protect you. Whatever comes, I'll shoulder it gladly."

"Sigurd..."

"That means not wandering off lost in the woods with your poor healer," I instantly deadpanned. Both of them squeaked, and I smiled innocently. "Think of the scandal!"

"You..." Sigurd began. He sighed, smiling slightly. "Quan's right; you're way more mischievous than you like to let on."

"I am simply giving you advice, Lord Sigurd."

"Oh, don't start back up with that."

"Well, you have a fiance now. We must be proper."

"I already told you that calling me by name as Chief Healer isn't proper at all."

"You two are silly," Deidre giggled, bringing the playful little argument to an end. I still saw fear in her eyes, but she leaned into Sigurd's touch as he reached up to wipe away her tears. "But, truthfully, it was not this love alone that had me following." Deidre smiled proudly and pointed to her staff, set up not far away. "I also want to come along because... I think I can help you. That was actually why I was so close. I really wanted to help."

"I'd take another healer in the infirmary easily..." I replied. I frowned a bit over the staff, though. It looked like none I had ever seen. "But that's not a healer's staff, is it?"

"Nope~" Now she laughed. "It's name is 'Silence', and so long as my magic is stronger, I can stop any mage from casting spells with it!" She clapped her hands, delighted. "And, well, I am quite confident in my magic. So, I can stop that dark mage for you!" She continued giggling as Sigurd and I stared, and all I could think was just how big of a coincidence this was. The gods... really were interfering heavily in her life, and in Sigurd's.

I could only pray that they'd have some happiness before everything went to hell. I had a bad feeling that was all these two would get.

After determining that it was too dark to safely travel, we decided to just camp out during the night. Deidre set up a ward to keep us safe, so that all three of us could sleep and not have to set up watches. It turned out to be a good thing, since Sigurd passed out before long.

"Is he okay?" Deidre whispered, hovering over him worriedly. She hesitantly brushed the hair out of his face, and smiled softly. "He just..."

"He's fine," I reassured. I dangled my feet in the lake nearby, a little too awake despite my exhaustion to really sleep. "It's just been a very long day. Fighting takes a lot out of a person, and then you had a lot of emotional turmoil."

"Oh, is that my fault?"
"Well, I wouldn't say entirely. The bulk of that is Sadima's fault." I smiled slightly. "Emotional exhaustion can be caused by both bad and good emotions."

"I suppose." She started playing with Sigurd's hair. "He's so adorable."

"I guess." I shrugged when she glanced over. "I'm a healer. I see lots of people sleeping. It's a thing."

"Healing always sounded so difficult." She cautiously crept over to me, and sat down, drawing her knees into her chest. "I could never get a handle on it."

"You seem to be proficient with staves."

"I know, but healing is something that always seemed to escape me, no matter how strong my magic got." She sighed a bit, and looked at me. "Do you think things will be okay?"

"It'll be difficult. You're going to become the Lady of Chalphy, which means a lot of responsibilities, and a lot of lessons to learn everything." I shrugged again. "But, other than that…"

"But what could he see in someone like me?" She sighed heavily. "I mean… he's so dashing, and kind! He's strong and courteous. He's like… like a knight in shining armor!" Her eyes sparkled briefly before it faded. "Meanwhile, I'm just…"

I was about ninety percent certain that this love they had was more of a compulsion from the gods that neither could really fight, but there was no way I was going to say that. "You're a kind hearted woman. We know this because you not only comforted Lady Aideen, but took the time to return to Marpha and check up on her. We know this because you had wanted to help a large group of strangers. Kindness goes a long way."

"Yes, but-"

"You are also very beautiful, and you took the time to take care of both of us. Your smile is dazzling."

"You're going to make me blush!" Considering she was red all the way to her ears, I doubted I was 'going' to make her, so much as I had already made her. "But… but…"

"You're also willing to deal with his naivety." I pointed to the sleeping Sigurd for emphasis. "He is loyal to a fault, reckless and impulsive when it comes to keeping those he loves safe. He does not deal well with loss, and feels his perceived failures very keenly, so you're going to have to deal with a lot of moping."

"B-but that's okay, because his smile is wonderful, like the sun after a terrible storm!" She paused, eyes wide, and I struggled not to laugh as she somehow went even redder. "Oh, that sounded… I mean; it's true, but it sounded… so… so…"

"It sounded like a cliche from a bad romance tale." I lost the fight and started giggling. "But seriously, I think you'll be fine."

"Really?"

"Yes, I really do." I quieted my giggling and smiled slightly, even as I made sure my tone was serious. "Historically speaking, whenever bad things happen, someone is blamed. Often, it's set up 'in advance', so to speak. But, most of the time, that bad thing was inevitable. Maybe in a different way, but it would've happen. They just want someone to kill to make themselves feel better. Sigurd
wouldn't do that, though, and none of his people will do that either." I made a face. "We have Prince Jamke traveling with us, for instance, who actively attacked us, killing some of the soldiers, but everyone just accepts he's on our side because Sigurd says he is."

"Really?"

"Yes." I nodded. "Grannvale is also at war with Isaach, but we're keeping the last two survivors of their royal family with us, including the crown prince, because Sigurd extends his kindness to them, and that's enough for everyone." I sighed. "His kindness is likely going to get him killed, but I'm pretty certain that if that happens, it won't have anything to do with you."

"You say it so certainly." She sighed and shyly scooted a bit closer. "I wish I could be so confident. When I'm near him, when he smiles, all the anxiety floats away, but I think of all the warnings…"

I studied her for a long moment before smiling slightly. "You love him, yes?" My smile grew as she nodded, face turning bright red. Even if the whole thing made me uncomfortable, I had to admit that they were adorable. "You love him enough to follow even though it's been… how many days exactly?"

"Thirty-three." She answered so quickly that I could only stare as she squirmed more. "I… um…"

"You… actually counted." For the sake of my own sanity, I decided right then to not ask Sigurd if he knew the actual days too. I didn't need to know how much she'd been weighing on his mind. "Well, regardless, you love him. Yes? Yes. So, just… focus on that one, for now. Figure out the rest later, and if this catastrophe comes, then panic and work to fix it, right? That's what you should do if you're a good and moral person?"

"I… well, yes." She peered up at me, smiling slightly as she brought her legs a little closer to her chest. "Will you tell me a bit more about the others in the army? Do you think they'll… like me?"

"I think so, yes." I smiled slightly. "Lady Ethlyn, Sigurd's sister, will likely squeal, before being shocked and tease her brother. Lord Quan, his best friend, will likely do the same. The rest will be quieter, but your beauty will hold their attention, and your kindness will win them. I'm certain of it."

"I hope so." Her smile turned wistful. "I've never really had friends, or people who liked me. Even in the village, people only tolerated me, since my mother broke the 'sacred rule' to never leave, and then didn't have the 'grace' to survive my birthing."

"So, you're an orphan, too? That answers my next question of 'should we get a message to someone'." I tried to make my voice light, but it felt a bit hollow. I knew what it was like, to be surrounded by people who only really tolerated you. It wasn't a very pleasant experience.

"No, not really. I don't have much I'd really call precious either. Just my Silence Staff and my circlet, really, though I do have my Aura Tome on me." She lifted her head up a bit more. "But you don't have parents either?"

"No. My father raped my mother, and she threw me away to the church to avoid me." My words were far blunter than I intended and I grimaced. "Sorry, that came out worse than I'd wanted."

"It sounds painful." The look in her eyes was sympathetic, though, without a trace of pity. "Did anyone really… um…"

"...When I was ten, I met my older brother. He's the only 'proper born' son in the family, you see, and I'd heard of him, but didn't think he knew me." I looked up at the bits of sky I could see
through the leaves, and the twinkling stars. "But, he did. He'd apparently the three years prior trying to figure out exactly which church I'd been given to, so that he could meet me, and check up on me. Before then, I was just… another orphan in the church, one who had a talent for healing. He was the first person to ever really do more than… he was the first person to actually smile at me."

"He sounds nice." She smiled sweetly. "Will I meet him?"

"Eventually, yes, but it might be a bit. Politics are crazy right now, and he's in the middle of it all." I smiled back. "But, yes, you'll meet him."

"Oh, good. I'll tell him he has the sweetest sister and he needs to spoil her." She grinned and I laughed, unable to help it. "Can you tell me a bit more about Grannvale?"

"Yes, I can, but I don't know much."

"It's more than me."

"That's a good point." The two of us just… continued to chat while Sigurd slept nearby. It was hard not to be a little charmed by her, and she seemed to warm to me quickly, possibly because so few people had even been more than icily polite to her.

It was… fun. It was strangely fun, and I didn't quite know what to make of it.

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Records on Lord Quan:

*Duke Knight, Noba Major, 22 years old*

*Heir to the Leonster Province, a prince in his own right. His loyalty and confidence are typically the first things anyone says about him, though that soon might be replaced with stories gushing over how happily married he is.*

*Bears the Mark of Noba across his lower and mid back*

*A skilled warrior, but doesn't seem to take the threat of Thracia seriously, considering that he, the heir, came all the way up here to get involved in a war his brother-in-law was fighting. Hopefully, this lack of understanding won't bite him too much*

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Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: The description of Fenrir, and the effects, are inspired by the Oosawa Manga, as is the decision to have an actual *loss* here for the FE hero. There is also no clear 'timeframe' between Sigurd and Deidre's meeting at Marpha, and their reunion in the forest in-game, but I'm going with over a month to… make things seem a little *less* contrived? (Love at first sight always creates problems.) Chapter One of FE4 is titled 'Girl of the Spirit Forest', btw, referring, of course, to Deidre. As if it wasn't obvious already she had an important part in the plot, right? Deidre being unable to heal is NOT something that occurs in game (healing is a pretty good way to get her some experience actually). I'm adding that in for my own reasons.
Oh, right, since this has come up in a couple of PMs: Alicia does actually have 'skills' like in game; specifically she has Prayer/Miracle and Charisma/Charm. It just doesn't really come up because she's never in combat. If you want to know her 'growth rates', just ask.

Next Chapter - Silence
Chapter 7 - Silence

So, with what can only be described as divine intervention, Sigurd and Deidre are happily engaged, despite not doing even a token's worth of courting, and we make our way out of the Spirit Forest with her as our guide. I try to hide how uncomfortable I am with how fast they've fallen in love, but so long as they're happy, I'll keep my sarcasm in check.

I'm more curious as to how she plans on dealing with Sadima and his magic. Will he really die so easily?

The camp was strangely lively for the hour as we finally made it back to camp. The dawning sun barely managed to creep through the thick branches and leaves, but you would think it was Sun's Height, and lunch, given the noise. Deidre stiffened instantly, clinging to Sigurd as the noise hit us, and her eyes darted about nervously. She relaxed, however, as Sigurd smiled at her, and rested his hand on hers.

Two seconds later, we were in the camp, and chaos erupted. Most basically tackled Sigurd, relieving that he had returned, safe and sound, though to my surprise, quite a few came to me as well. Azel, Lex, Lord Ofeye, Prince Shanan, Sir Finn, Sir Midir, Lady Aideen... I lost track after that of the number of people who came to hug me. When the crowd cleared enough for me to breathe, I realized that I had one more person clinging to me: Deidre.

"Why are you hiding behind me?" I asked softly, a little amused. Deidre tentatively looked up at me and pointed to the very large group drowning Sigurd. "Ah. Did it get too much, or were you pushed away?"

"It was... a bit of both," she whispered, smiling shyly. "He's very well loved, isn't he?"

"Extremely. He's a popular lord, and popular commander."

"That's no surprise. He's wonderful." Her smile fell. "W-will they really...?"

"Relax. If they don't like you, then win them over. That's what my brother always says, and it worked for him." I smiled at her. "You can do it too. I'm certain."

Deidre didn't look very convinced, but Sigurd managed to extract himself from the crowd and head over to us. "Guys, you're being rude," he half-scolded, gesturing to Deidre. "We have a guest."

"Oh, we do?" Lady Ethlyn popped out of the crowd and squealed. "Oh, she's so pretty!" she gushed. "Like a fairy!"

"Her name is Deidre."

"Deidre, huh?" Lady Ethlyn frowned a little, eyes darting between Sigurd and Deidre as others in the group politely gave their greetings. She focused her attention on Sigurd, and it was as if the two were having a silent conversation. Then her eyes widened as Sigurd grinned. "No way!" She
pointed dramatically at Deidre and Deidre instantly ducked behind me, glancing about nervously. "She's way too good for my brother!"

"I have such a cruel sister." Sigurd dramatically pretended to faint, of all things, before moving to a suddenly very confused Deidre's side. "Don't scare her away."

"B-but…!" Lady Ethlyn looked like she really had no idea what to feel. The rest of the group just looked really focused. "Since when did you start dating?! You can't hide things like that from me!"

"And… you and Quan can?"

"That's different!"

"Lady Ethlyn, keep it down," I chided. Deidre still looked confused. "She thought you were yelling at her."

"Ack!" Lady Ethlyn yelped and darted over, taking Deidre's hands in both of hers. "No, no, I'm yelling at my stupid brother for not telling me he had such a pretty girlfriend," she reassured, smiling. Deidre tentatively smiled back. "I'm being rude, aren't I? I'm Ethlyn, Sigurd's little sister." Her smile widened. "Oh, I get to call you 'Lady Sister'! This is going to be so much fun!"

"It'll be more fun if you let Sigurd introduce her to everyone, like he wants, so that she can get acclimated to all the noise." I shook my head. "Tell the others to behave. I know they're enthused that he's back, and bringing such a pretty bride with him, but if everyone gives us a greeting like this, she'll be overwhelmed!"

"Leave it to Quan and me~" She did carefully let go of Deidre's hands, and laughed when Deidre immediately seized Sigurd's arm. "Well, come on, lovebirds~ We'll show you off to the camp!"

The siblings led Deidre around easily, and though Deidre still looked nervous, she relaxed slowly, though she squeaked as Lord Quan fell in beside Sigurd and started chatting with her. I watched them leave, a bit worried, but Deidre glanced back and gave me a brave smile, so I decided to go about my duties, and check in on the infirmary. If she needed me, I was certain the others could direct her to the infirmary. However, as I walked away, a burning pain shot down my arm.

Confused, I pushed up my sleeve and checked my arm over. But there was nothing but the red welts, which should have faded by now, yet were as vibrant as ever.

...I had a bad feeling that I'd been very, very wrong about these welts, and I could only hope that I would be the only one to pay for my arrogance.

After introductions, we settled down for the battle plan. My job would remain the same, of course. Two bait forces would be utilized to draw attention and to spread out the royal guard, in hopes that would force Sadima outside to cast. From there, Deidre would Silence him. According to her, she could, technically, Silence all mages within a certain reach, but that was much more draining, so it was decided that she'd just try to get a line of sight on Sadima, and only using the 'widespread' version if absolutely necessary.

I saw them all off with a smile, and worked on tending to the injured just as I always did. I took extra care that my gloves fully covered my arms under my sleeves, worried that these welts could spread that dark magic. They did not hurt, aside from that burst of pain. They did not itch, so I assumed this was not some strange allergic reaction. I'd need to do some research in just what they were, later. For now, I had to just take pains to make sure it didn't spread.

"Are you okay, Miss Alicia?" Prince Shanan suddenly asked, startlingly me. I blinked slowly, and
realized he'd stopped folding the blankets to peer up at my face. "You look tired." He went up on his tiptoes so that he could touch my face a little more easily. "There's no more injured, and Oifeye and I can handle bandages, so if you want to rest…"

"You're so sweet," I murmured. I ruffled his hair, but was careful to not linger, just in case. "I'm all right. I'm just fretting a bit."

"Scouts said that the battle is going well." He grinned. "It'll be fine. Sigurd's strong and Auntie Ayra is the best, so there's no way they'll lose!"

I chose to not point out that Lady Ayra and Sigurd had fought this very enemy just yesterday, and now they were working with a reduced force. "You sound so grown up." I gave him a little smile. "Don't try to grow up too quickly."

"But…" He sighed. "I want to grow up strong to protect Auntie Ayra and Sigurd and Oifeye and Finn and you!" He pouted slightly. "Besides, I'm not that little! I'm eight and a half!"

"That is less than half my age." I found myself giggling as he began sulking. "So…" I trailed off as I heard some sort of scuffle outside the infirmary tent. "What's going on?"

"I… don't know…" Shanan whimpered and clung to my skirt. "Oifeye went outside, so maybe…"

"Miss Alicia!" Oifeye, as if on cue, burst in, and to my shock, he was splattered with blood. "We… we have infiltrators!" he yelled. The entire infirmary erupted in chaos at the words. "Someone wielding strange magic…"

"…Lord Oifeye, take Prince Shanan and whoever can keep up, and run, however far you have to," I ordered with a calm I did not feel. I felt nauseous from the sudden surge of fear. What had happened to the others? "The rest of you, help each other and try to limp off. Head to the river."

"What about you?"

"I will join you momentarily. I'll set fire to the supply tents so that they can't use them. I can do it far more quickly." I managed a smile, and wished that we had considered the Verdanites would come here. I had no idea what to do. I honestly, honestly, had no idea. "Go on. Quickly."

"R-right…" He gave me a worried look, but took Prince Shanan's hand. "We'll be waiting, so don't be long?"

"Of course." I picked up my staff from the wall. "Everyone, gather close and I'll tend to your injuries a bit more."

It was difficult, trying to organize the chaos, and it was even more difficult to get everyone to leave instead of waiting for me. But, it was managed, and I made my way towards one of the supply tents, and the torch set up next to it for easy lighting even in the dark forest. Everything was eerily silent now, and I had to stop myself from twitching at every little noise.

When I made it to the torch, I concentrated and focused on the flame. My hands shook, though, and my terror made it difficult for me to command the fire, making it dance, but not jump. I tried to tell myself to get a grip, but I couldn't. I was just so terrified right now, though. There were barely any fighters here, and all of them were slain. My patients had to flee for their lives, and there was really no one to defend them.

Nothing in my lessons even hinted on what I should do here. It seemed like our only choice was to pray, but I…
"Here's one!" Someone growled, and when I whirled, they wrapped their hands around my throat. I coughed and struggled automatically, but couldn't break free, and dots speckled my vision as whoever it was squeezed… "It's all ruined!" they snapped. They actually lifted me up slightly, so that my toes were barely on the ground and I tried to think of how that was possible, but came up blank. I just… wanted to breathe… "Damn everything! How did they find that woman's daughter first?!"

"Sadima!" Sigurd's voice cracked through the air. "Sadima, where the hell are you, bastard?!" Sigurd had lost his temper, so something had definitely happened. "King Batur told us what you were planning!"

"Damn that miserable wretch…" The someone, Sadima I guessed, released his grip on my neck, but before I had a just to even gasp from relief, he threw his arm around my neck and collarbone and pinned me against him as he turned. "Not one more step, Baldur brat, or the girl dies!"

"Alicia!" Sigurd stepped into view, with Deidre at his side and Lord Quan and Lady Ayra just a step behind. It was difficult to see who else might be here, but I could hear more fighting. "Let her go!"

"Not a chance!" He tightened his grip on me and I coughed, struggling to breathe. "You all are going to lay your weapons down, nice and slowly, and yes, that includes the damnable Silence staff." He cackled and the noise made me wince. "You should've just killed me, Baldur brat! Then Silence wouldn't have worn off!"

"Does your god truly approve of this nonsense?" Despite the angry words, Sigurd did actually drop his sword, and Deidre laid the Silence staff next to it. She gave me a worried, fearful look and then placed her Tome down on top of the staff. "What sort of nonsense is this?"

"He is our glory! Our salvation! And we will resurrect him!" He kept on laughing. "You even helped us out!" He brought one hand up and I felt the pulse of magic around him. "Now, hold still and take the hit, or the girl dies."

Sigurd glared, but I realized he wasn't moving. He pushed Deidre a bit away, but as the spell formed, he really… wasn't moving. He was really going to let himself get hit, get killed, by this dark magic… just because I was a hostage.

I… I'd rather die than be used against someone. No matter how terrified I was, that one thought shone clearly. I would rather die than be used against someone, especially someone I cared about.

"BACK OFF!" I shrieked, jerking my head back to yell directly in Sadima's ear. He yelped, and the magic flickered, disrupted. "Don't you dare! Sigurd, don't you dare just stand around! Fight back! You're supposed to be saving Verdana from this madman, right?!"

"Shut up, wench!" Sadima yelled. He twisted his hand and the magic actually turned back, catching me across the stomach. Dots appeared in my vision at the pain. "Or you really will die!"

"You think I'm afraid of death? I'm a healer! I fight death everyday and win!" Despite the pain and the fear gnawing on my mind, I kept on struggling, and managed to actually bite down on his arm. He yelled and threw me to the side instantly, right into the torch and its holder. It fell on me, but thanks to being of Vala's blood, I only blistered, and hit out the flames on my dress with ease. Now, of course, I could control the fire easily, since I was a little more angry than scared. As he approached, snarling something in a language that I didn't recognize, I glared at him with all my anger, and twisted the flames around my hand to have a chance at attacking back. I wasn't trained
for this, but I wasn't going to be used, by anyone, against anyone.

Then, there was a strangely loud 'thud', and I blinked slowly as I realized Sadima… had been shot by an arrow with remarkable precision and strength. Sadima crumpled, and I pushed myself up slowly, trying to figure out who had shot. It took me a moment before thinking to look 'up', and that's where I found Prince Jamke kneeling in the branches, with his bow out. It was easy to connect the dots from there. Prince Jamke had shot Sadima, and saved my life.

"Made it," he breathed, shifting so that he was sitting on the branch. "It took a while to get a good line of sight. I'm sorry for taking so long." I opened my mouth to say it was fine, but found myself buckling as everything came roaring back, and it took everything I had to not just outright faint.

Sigurd caught me before I fell. "I got you," he whispered, actually shifting so that he was carrying me. "I've got you, Alicia."

"We need to bandage her injuries," Deidre murmured, coming up next to him. She took one of my hands and squeezed it gently. "I can do that, actually. Aideen and Ethlyn are still in the field, right?"

"They are."

"Then yes, let me do that."

"Send… people after the others…" I managed to mumble. Everything was spinning, and I couldn't decide if I wanted to throw up from fear or cry from relief. "Told them to run…"

"Quan, can you handle that?" Sigurd called. There was some sort of assent, I guessed, since I heard running shortly after. "I'll get you to a tent and then go check on the others. Deidre?"

"I'll protect her, easily," Deidre firmly declared. She tiptoed and smiled at me. "You're okay."

They kept on whispering reassurances, and I just tried to stay conscious to hear them. I figured fainting would be bad for their health, and mine. It tended to be.

Deidre was rather good at bandaging, so it really didn't take long for me to get fixed up. The injuries from the spell were shallow, clearly meant to be more of a warning than an actual attack, and I was blistered from the fire, but nothing more. My hair proved to be an unfortunate casualty, though, and Deidre fussed as she cut off the burnt ends and evened things out, bring my hair to just above my shoulders. She even procured some hair barrettes from who knows where, and pinned my bangs back with a few beaded clips.

"Are you certain those welts aren't anything to worry about?" Deidre asked. After she bandaged me, I'd insisted on going back to work, and Deidre had insisted that I could only work if she could help, so she was helping fold blankets while I checked on the patients. "They looked painful."

"Truthfully, no, I'm not certain," I answered absently. It was a testament of how tired and drained I was that I let that slip. "I don't know much about dark magic. But there is no pain." I adjusted the blankets over Azel and smiled slightly as he mumbled 'lady sister' in his sleep. Azel had bolted for me after the battle and, after hugging me, demanded to assist me in the infirmary. Now, he was passed out asleep like most of the others. "So, I am well."

"If you say so." She still looked a bit skeptical and sighed. "I don't know much about dark magic either. The elder was very insistent that I not learn anything about it, so I only really know that it is the equal, and opposite, of the light magic I wield."
"Yes, though for some reason, the Book of Naga completely destroyed the Dark God." I shuddered unconsciously as I remembered Sadima and the words he spewed. I had no idea why anyone would want to 'revive' the Dark God, unless they truly thought the world needed to end.

"That's the Holy Weapon of the Royal House of Grannvale, yes?" She tucked a blanket around Prince Shanan, who had done his very level best to help me out, though he'd ended up falling asleep halfway through and curled up in the corner. "I think I know why, though."

"Oh?"

"Yes." She nodded, smiling slightly. "The village elder mentioned that there was a powerful light tome that was written with the 'Blood of the Gods', unlike all the other tomes in the world."

"...Wouldn't a tome like that kill the owner?"

"Well, yes, I would imagine so." She became a little thoughtful. "Perhaps they could survive one battle, but not more. That's what I think, at least." She shook her head. "Of course, that's just a theory of mine. Who knows what the truth is?"

"Maybe you can ask to look at it, when things are calmer." I turned to smile slightly at her. "At some point, you'll have to appear at Grannvale's court, after all, and I doubt Prince Kurth would refuse you. He's always been soft of Sigurd, according to the rumors."

"B-but I can't talk to a prince! I'm just… ummm…" She sighed, whimpering a little. "Oh, this is all so confusing."

"Wow, and you haven't even faced the worst of the courts yet." Lex stepped into the tent then, followed by Lady Ayra. "Came to check on everyone," Lex explained. Lady Ayra silently went to Prince Shanan and smiled slightly as she fussed with the blanket. "Oifeye wanted to come by, but he and Finn passed out in the war tent. I think they're still fast asleep there."

"They are," Lady Ayra confirmed. She stood and actually bowed to me. "Thank you, for keeping him safe."

"I… really only told him to run with the others," I mumbled. I didn't feel like that was anything to be thanked for, much less have a prideful woman bow to me. "Oh, right, Lex, what is with that new axe you found?"

"This thing?" Lex asked as he unhooked the axe from his back and hefted it up. "I'm not sure if it's enchanted or what, but it's really light. I get in twice the amount of attacks, and it's stronger than my iron axe."

"I did hear you were quite the force on the field, but how did you find it?"

"Some lady in the water gave it to me." He said the words so easily that I had to just stare a bit because those words in that configuration made no sense! "Yeah, I know. I lost my axe to the water, some lady popped up and asked about whether I lost a gold or silver axe, I told her I hadn't, and she was like 'thank you for being honest, here, take this!'"

"Oh, the Lady of the Waters!" Deidre laughed, clapping her hands. She giggled more when Lady Ayra and I gave her the most skeptical and confused looks. "She's supposed to be a Child of the Gods, who watches over the world of men. She tests people for their honesty, and their motives for telling the truth or lying. So those who lie, for good reasons, or those who are honest are rewarded, while those who are honest for bad reasons, or lie without good reasons, are punished."
"So, Lex met a fairy?" Lady Ayra asked. She crossed her arms and still looked a bit skeptical, but nodded a couple of times. "We have similar stories back home. It is said that the Astra and Luna sword techniques were taught to Odo's twins by a Fairy of the Skies."

"Astra and Luna?"

"They are… powerful sword techniques, that those of Odo blood can activate depending on their skill, and their stamina." Lady Ayra smiled slightly. "They're somewhere between 'magic' and 'not magic', though I believe some with certain traits are able to prevent their use? Another magic that is not magic, I mean."

"What do they do?"

"Astra allows for five strikes in the span of one swing, while Luna allows a strike that ignores an opponent's armor." She sighed, shaking her head. "Though, I will be surprised if we see a Luna user. Sophara's ruling family have all died or disappeared now, thanks to… that man." Her eyes darkened slightly, and I knew she was thinking of her treacherous brother-in-law who attacked Darna unprovoked. "Well, that and the bandits I mentioned earlier."

"Bah, too dreary," Lex deadpanned. Lady Ayra scowled, but he grinned, unabashedly. "Come on. Can't you hear the singing?" He jerked his thumb towards the tent flap for emphasis as little bits of offkey singing filtering through. "Everyone's celebrating. The campaign is over, after all."

"...It is, isn't it?" I whispered, a little startled. It felt like this campaign had dragged on forever. "Well, then…" I looked to Deidre and smiled at her confused look. "You need to attend the party, at Sigurd's side."

"Me?" Deidre instantly squeaked. She looked terrified, like she wished the ground would swallow her up. But then she got a little determined light in her eyes and she nodded. "A-all right." Then, however, she gave me a pleading look. "You'll come with me, right?"

"I…" I glanced at the patients, and then her pleading look, and sighed. "For a brief moment, I suppose."

"Oh, good!" She beamed and took my arm shyly. "Come on, then! Let's join the others."

Despite my best efforts, I ended up staying at the party until the dawn came, and was up even longer dealing with hangovers and drunken injuries. But I supposed I could let them get away with their antics in light of the victory. Just this once, though.

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**Records on Lady Ethlyn:**

**Troubadour, Baldur Minor, 16 years old**

*Younger sister to Sigurd, and wife of Lord Quan. A recent bride, and even more recent mother, she is still recovering from the pregnancy and birthing, but holds her own well.*

*Her Holy Mark is on her lower right leg.*

*Devoted utterly to both Lord Quan and her brother, it's hard to believe that she's skilled with a blade at all, but as a Baldur Minor, she holds some instinctual knowledge that is bolstered by training. Prefers healing, though.*
Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: And now we are officially done with Game Chapter 1 (and, in gameplay terms, Sigurd and Deidre are 'officially' lovers as, iirc, it does take them one in-game turn to become lovers, instead of just auto-becoming it with a conversation)! Lex gets the Hero Axe in this chapter thanks to a very out of the way secret event that the game gives absolutely no hint to. King Batur is killed by Sadima, and clings to life just long enough to give hints of the plot; if this sounds familiar, King Batur has an Expy in FE7, Marquess Santaruz, who basically serves the same purpose in FE7's plot. There is no in-game explanation for why the Book of Naga is so much more powerful than the rest of the Holy Weapons, so here's a theory as to why.

So, since there's about a year, give or take, between Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, we'll be having three interludes to cover that time skip.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Family
Interlude - Family

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude - Family

The Verdane Campaign is finally over. With Sigurd's aid, Prince Jamke managed to negotiate a peace treaty with Grannvale again, citing that it was his brothers, not his father, who broke the previous treaty, and that they conspired to kill his father. It's a lie, of course, but if we spread that dark magic had been involved, panic would rise and innocent people might be burnt at the stake for 'being of the Loptyrian Cult'. Luckily, everyone bought the lie, and King Azmur happily accepted Prince Jamke's wish to reconcile, though he did insist that Sigurd remain the lord of Evans Castle as a safeguard. Prince Jamke more than willingly accepted, since the people of Evans, and of Verdane, loved Sigurd, and were positively enthused that Sigurd was taking a Verdanite woman, Deidre, as his wife.

I didn't see the last bits of negotiations. Sigurd learned that Azel and I had tentatively planned to visit Velthomer and he sent us out ahead of the madness, insisting that he could come up with a story should anyone actually bother to ask. Thus, I visit Velthomer for the very first time. Azel is practically bouncing with excitement, and his cheer is contagious. I can only pray the visit will be as happy as he thinks, and I hope.

"So, this is Velthomer…" I whispered as Azel and I rode into the castle and dismounted. Servants swirled about, happily greeting him and taking his horse. I pulled my cloak tighter around me and checked that my hood was up as they crowded closer to coo over Azel. "Loud…"

"Sorry, I guess everyone was worried!" Azel laughed. He waved and smiled at the servants. "Can you tell Lord Brother that I've returned? I'd like to meet him as soon as possible."

"We wouldn't be able to keep him back if we tried!" one of the servants instantly replied with a bright smile. "Lord Arvis has been fretting fiercely since you left, Lord Azel! Next time, actually tell him goodbye!"

"I-I tried, but we fought!" Azel defended. He then sighed, whimpering a little. "Oh man…"

"Go and face the music, little lord."

"I don't want to!" Still, Azel smiled. "Oh well. Thanks for taking care of everything as usual!" Azel waved as he made his way through the crowd. I skirted the edges of it to join him at the door, both amused by how loved Azel was and panicky over just how many people there were. Arvis had once told me he had less servants than was typical for a Grannvale Duke, and there were just far too many. I'd pull my hair out in frustration at having so many people swarming me.

Inside, Azel led me quickly and easily down some of the somewhat hidden paths to head for a very specific room. "Knowing Arvis, he's in his study," he explained as we walked. He grew more and more nervous as we went and, before long, we stopped outside a door carved with the 'Fire Emblem', the House Crest of Velthomer. "This always intimidates me. The carving."

"It's suppose to," I whispered. I studied it closely, noting this one was a simpler design that the one on the flag. "It symbolizes justice, and is a promise that criminals will be punished." That was why
most captured Loptyrians were burned, in fact.

"I'd think justice would be more welcoming." He sighed. "Can't put this off forever…” He hesitated a bit more before knocking on the door. "Stay here, so that I can surprise him?"

"Go on." I felt nervous as he opened the door and ducked to the side as he left the door open.

"Azel!" Arvis, however, sounded very happy. I cautiously peeked around the corner and saw him stepping around his desk to hug Azel and fuss over him. A woman was also in the room, laughing softly at the scene. "I'm glad to see you've returned," he continued. His eyes glinted mischievously. "How is Aideen?"

"She's fine, and yes, I know, my feelings are unrequited," Azel deadpanned. He sulked. "Mean."

"You left with barely a word, and sent no letters. I'm allowed to be a bit mean." He smiled softly. "I'm glad you have returned to me, safe and sound."

"And stronger!"

"Is that so? Then you can prove that in your lessons later today."

"Seriously?!" Azel groaned, and the woman laughed. "Aida, save me!"

"I'm sure she wants to see how much stronger you have become too." Arvis laughed as Azel groaned again. "Well, shall we."

"Actually, hang on." Azel smiled suddenly. "Just to confirm. It's just you two here, right?"

"...Yes?" Arvis glanced back at the woman, and the two shared a very confused look. "Why?"

"You sure? Super sure?"

"Azel, why are you acting so weirdly suddenly?" Arvis crossed his arms and frowned. "Is there a secret message from Sigurd or something?" Azel didn't answer, just glanced back at me. "His report mentioned nothing unusual."

"He's simply trying to be dramatic," I explained, taking this as my 'cue'. Hesitantly, I stepped inside the room and smiled slightly as Arvis froze, and the woman looked very, very confused. "Hello, Lord Brother. I'm sorry to come by with no warning." I ducked my head, fearing that he'd be mad. "Azel thought it would be fun and-

"Alicia!" Arvis raced over and gathered me up in a warm hug, laughing. "Well, this is the best surprise," he declared, stepping back and peering at me. "You're thinner. Are you alright? Are those bandages?"

"I am well, yes." I laughed a little, shaking my head. "You're worse than a mother hen, and that comes from a healer."

"Yes, well…" Arvis coughed awkwardly before realizing something and turned to the still very confused woman. "Aida, I'm sorry. This is Alicia."

"Oh, is she?" the woman replied. She smiled softly and actually bowed to me. "It's wonderful to finally meet you, Lady Alicia. I am Aida. I've heard much about you." She straightened, and laughed a little. "How long are you staying?"

"I'm not here for long, as I've some charges at Evans Castle, among other duties," I explained. I
tried not to wince at how disappointed Arvis look. "However, I am able to stay the month?"

"Then I shall clear Arvis's schedule for the month."

"Oh, there's no need to…"

"Nonsense. He works too much anyway. A month's break will be good for him, and I promise to not force back anything urgent." She laughed and turned to Azel. "And you, little lord, are going to help me." She snagged Azel by the arm and tugged him out of the room, with Azel flailing about. "Have a good break." She shut the door behind him, and a strange little silence followed.

"I can see why you like her," I finally said. I turned back to Arvis and smiled. "So, were you surprised?"

"Extremely," Arvis laughed. He leaned against his desk, shaking his head. "Completely and utterly."

"Oh, good. It's rare I get to see you surprised."

"It's rare that I am surprised." He hesitated and then gave me a wry smile. "Can you really only stay a month?"

"Yes, I'm sorry." I shook my head. "I have my charges and… well, Sigurd is getting married."

"Sigurd?" Arvis actually coughed on a yelp. "Well, that's a surprise. Are you officiating?"

"Oh, no, I'm not qualified for that." I shook my head. "I'm the Maid of Honor."

"So, his fiance is a good friend of yours?"

"It's not… quite that." I crossed my arms, hesitating on how to answer. "She was… an outcast in her village, so she didn't have friends there, and out of the people in the army, I am the one she is closest to." I closed my eyes as I remembered how Deidre had shyly asked me. She had been so hesitant, like she was certain I'd refuse. I'd found myself agreeing before she had even finished, and had nearly been suffocated by her happy hug. "I do feel a certain kinship with her, though."

"You do?"

"Yes. I know what it's like to be abandoned, and only tolerated." I smiled slightly as he winced. "I was a bit luckier, though. I had you."

"I suppose." He looked sad before shaking his head and purposely putting on a smile. "When is the wedding?"

"It's in a few months." I gave him a curious look. "Do you want to attend?"

"Want, yes. Can, sadly no." He sighed heavily. "A shame. It would've been nice to have met the woman who managed to catch Sigurd of all people."

"That is a shame. I've told Deidre about you, and she's looking forward to meeting you." I laughed a bit. "Maybe when things calm down?"

"Yes, that sounds wonderful." He smiled. "Tomorrow, help me figure out wedding gifts for them. I want them to be extra special since I cannot attend myself."

"Sigurd will be delighted that you even wanted to." I hesitated a bit before deciding to voice a
request I had. "If we're making plans for visits, though, might we visit our father's grave?"

"Our… father?" As always, the effect of that man on Arvis was instantaneous. He bristled, but kept his voice perfectly calm. "Why would you want to visit that man?"

"To give my thanks, of course." I smiled sweetly at him in hopes of calming him down. "After all, he's the reason why I have two wonderful brothers."

"...I swear the only good thing he ever gave me was you and Azel. He even took Mother away, ultimately." He sighed, shaking his head as he slowly relaxed. "Fine. We'll visit him at some point, but not today. Today is a happy day." He became thoughtful suddenly. "Would you like to visit your mother as well?"

"Her?" I did my best to not stiffen at the reminder of her. "Why do you even know where she's buried?"

"Because she was my mother's best friend, and is the mother of my darling little sister, why else?" Arvis smiled slightly, sadly. "She was always protecting Mother, and me."

"So you've said." But I didn't care. It didn't change that she had left me, thrown me away as soon as my Mark appeared. As soon as I became inconvenient, she had gotten rid of me. Perhaps she was trying to 'protect' me, but it didn't change she'd abandoned me. I wanted nothing to do with her. She had given me nothing but my life. My father had given me that, and my brothers. "No, I'd really rather not."

"If you're certain." He looked a little conflicted, and I knew it was because of how much he missed his own mother, even now. He had to believe that she had left to protect him, in order to not break down in tears over the abandonment. But I didn't have to believe anything about my own mother to remain any sort of stable. "Ah, but we should visit the gardens. I've told you about them, and the flowers I think you'd really love are in bloom."

"That does sound like fun." I smiled at how happy he became. "Let's do that, Lord Brother."

"This way, then." He snagged my hand and tugged me out of the room and down the hall, grinning like he was ten years old again.

That grin was one of the few unchanging things about him, and I associated him most with it. It always made me smile.

After going through the gardens, Arvis went to give Azel the threatened lesson. I decided to spend my time in the library, since descriptions of it were a way Arvis did try to convince me to come live with him in Velthomer. I discovered upon entering that, as per usual, Arvis was bad at describing things. It was far more impressive than he had told me.

I spent the rest of my morning, and a good part of the afternoon simply looking through the herbal encyclopedias, making notes for new herbs, or different uses for herbs I already knew. From there, I studied some history and looked into how previous healers had built their infirmaries for little campaigns. I even found some notes from the Holy War in the past, though sadly, I found very little on dark magic injuries.

A quiet bit of knocking caught my attention, and I looked up from my book to see Aida standing by one of the bookcases. "Oh, hello," I said, standing up. "Am I doing something wrong?"

"No, you're not," Aida reassured. She hesitated a bit before visibly steeling herself. "I might be
presuming too much…” She gestured behind her, and a small boy with bright flame-red hair peered out from behind her legs. "But Arvis said he told you about him and…"

"Is this Cyas?" I asked. I smiled, unable to help it. "Oh, come here. I'm…"

"Auntie Alicia, right?" Cyas asked shyly. He grinned when I nodded. "Hiyyyy~!" He bolted from Aida and tackled my legs. "Hi, hi, hi!"

"Hello!" I crouched down so that I could hug him. "I'm very glad to finally meet you." I pulled away slightly, and noticed that despite the hair and eye color, he bore very little physical resemblance to Arvis, and I was glad for it. It would make things easier if he continued to hide. "You're much more adorable that Arvis said. I should scold him for that."

"You're prettier than he said too." He actually pouted. "He's bad at describing things."

"Yes, he is." I ruffled his hair, and found myself reminded of Prince Shanan. I hoped he was okay… "Say, why don't you find a book you like and I'll read it to you?"

"Really?!" His face lit up with a bright smile. "Yay!" He bolted off, tripping a bit as he turned a corner far too fast.

I laughed as he disappeared, and turned to Aida with a smile. "Thank you for bringing him to meet me."

"Thank you for meeting with him," Aida replied. She looked very relieved. "I wasn't sure if you would want to."

"I am always up for meeting family." I bookmarked my place in my book and closed it. "What is the official story again? With Cyas, I mean."

"The official story is that he is an orphan I took in, and who Arvis insists on taking care of. Cyas himself already knows the truth. He's… incredibly smart for his age, and it's not just a mother's bias." She sighed and leaned against the bookcase. "He's already grasped that while Arvis is his father, he is not his 'daddy', so to speak."

"...He already understands that while he is blood related to Arvis, Arvis is not his father figure?" That seemed… a little complex for a child.

"It startled me too." She made a face. "He also adores, adores, looking at my tactical books, and he understands more than half, which he probably shouldn't." She sighed again. "Oh, he's already worrying me. And Arvis. Arvis does love him, after all, though not quite in a father-like way."

"Well, he was a bit… unplanned." I paused, mentally debating something before deciding to just go for it. "Might I ask why you did not force a miscarriage or is that too nosy?"

"Oh, did Arvis not tell you?" She sounded a bit surprised. "I thought he had."

"Arvis summarized it as 'your choice', which he respected, just as he respected how you refused marriage to 'make it right'."

"I highly respect Arvis, but I doubt he'd survive five minutes of my being married to him. We're friends, and we work well together, but there's a reason why we have separate workplaces, among other things." She made a face and I laughed. Arvis was organized when not working, but when he got into work, he tended to throw things all over the place. He wrote often on how it drove Aida up the wall. "The basic summary is… well, there's not a lot of research into safely aborting a child,
even among the church. My father is a bishop, but all the safe remedies he knew… well, I'm allergic to some of the components, and he dared not try substitutes."

"Did he not ask around?"

"He asked a few of his fellows, but they all wrinkled their noses or gave sermons on why Father shouldn't allow it." She laughed as I rolled my eyes. "You've dealt with that sort?"

"I had a patient die because she had an ectopic pregnancy, and the local church refused to perform the necessary surgery. She made it to our village, which does allow it, but the growing embryo ruptured the tubes and she bled out before I even knew what she was trying to come there for." I shuddered as I remembered that one. She'd been crying. "I had another try to prevent me from treating a woman suffering from preeclampsia because the only way I know how to cure that is by inducing delivery."

"Yes, I was tempted to punch many of them. It wasn't as if Arvis and I hadn't taken precautions. The precautions just didn't work." She sighed heavily. "Regardless, he didn't know, and researching turned up nothing. We determined it would be safer for my health, as it stood, to just carry the pregnancy to term instead of trying to do an… unsafe abortion." She shuddered. "A subordinate of mine had one of those. She nearly died from it, and I vowed to never go through with that."

"Yes, I can understand that." I smiled slightly. "Since you held onto your health, you gave birth to Cyas."

"Yes, though it was a near thing a few times. Pregnancy is rough on the body." She shook her head. "I had originally planned on giving him to the church, to my father's church to be specific. But then I remembered how Arvis once told me how you… had been safe, but unhappy. I didn't think that was fair to him, simply because he was a bit… inconvenient." She smiled wryly. "So, he's here. I'm ultimately quite happy with the decision, though those first few years were rough."

"I'm glad." I really was. I honestly was afraid that she regretted keeping him. Children could sense those things. "I'm also glad he's part of the family, crazy as it is. He's wonderful."

"I'm glad you think so. I must admit; I was worried how you'd react to him." She laughed a bit. "But that is enough doom and gloom. Did Arvis tell you how awkward his first meeting with Cyas was?"

"No, he didn't, and I asked numerous times." I grinned. "Will you oblige?"

"I feel it is my duty, Lady Alicia." Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "It'll likely take Cyas a bit longer to pick out a book still, so how about some tea while I tell you about it?"

"Yes, that sounds lovely. Thank you."

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After tea and reading Cyas a story, all of us joined a pleased Arvis and a tired Azel for a lighthearted dinner before Aida and Cyas left to go home for the day. Azel ended up going to bed soon after, something about 'evil brothers and gauntlets of training', leaving Arvis and I to read in his study.

"You should've gone easier on him," I chided. I set my book in my lap and gave him a playfully stern look from my chair by the window. "He did just get back."

"I would've if he'd stopped being stubborn," Arvis replied as he looked up from his reports. He
laughed a bit. "He's gotten more iron in his will. That's a good thing, especially when you control fire."

"You still should've gone easier on him. I had rather hoped the three of us could read together."

"Tomorrow, then." He smiled, as if those two words were the best thing he'd ever said. "What do you want to do in the morning? We could head out to the fields."

"You mentioned a couple of groves. We can pick fruit, and have ourselves a little breakfast-brunch picnic?"

"That sounds like fun." He grinned. "Yes, we'll do that in the morning."

"It'll be fun." I smiled back, but then it faded as I remembered something. "Oh, yes, I almost forgot."

"Hmm?" He set the report down to look at me. "What is it?"

"Earlier, you suggested Azel's behavior was due to a secret message? It wasn't, but that's because Azel didn't know that Sigurd did have a message. I do."

"A message?" Arvis looked intrigued. "What is it? Why did he not mention it in his report?"

"The truth behind Verdane is that a dark mage, a member of the Loptyrian Cult, manipulated King Batur." I smiled bitterly as his expression blanked. "He feared triggering a rash of panic and condemning innocent people to die."

"I can definitely understand that." Something unreadable flitted over his face, but he simply shook his head. "I'll have to strengthen defenses. You're certain it was a dark mage?"

"Yes, and apparently, one who wished to bring back Loptyr." I frowned as another unreadable look flickered in his eyes. "Arvis?"

"Sorry, this is just… troubling." He sighed. "Do they have access to spells?"

"Oh, yes." I shuddered as I remembered that long range spell. "Do you know about any… lingering effects?"

"Lingering?"

"Yes…" I hesitated before pushing up my sleeve and pulling off my glove to show him the welts, still there even though it had been over a month. I winced as he gasped and lunged to my side, knocking down his chair as he crouched by me and gently took my arm. "I wasn't hit directly. This is from tending to those who were." I sighed. "I don't know what's wrong with them. There is rarely any pain, there is no itching, there's nothing. They're just… there."

"Rarely any pain?"

"Every few days, there is a lance of pain, but it passes quickly, and I've kept track of when, but the timing is random." I shook my head. "So, there must be something, but…"

"I see." He frowned as he looked over the welts closely. "Do you know the spell?"

"No, I don't. There weren't even notes to peer through for answers. All I know is that it was a long-ranged, dark magic attack that made the victims cough up black blood."
"That'll be enough for me to start some research. The Royal Libraries have quite the archive." His eyes saddened as he sat back on his heels. "If only I could heal. I've never managed to master that magic." He glanced up at me, suddenly thoughtful. "Father Claude is a trustworthy man, and is the best healer in Grannvale. He's also in the capital right now."

"...You're going to fret until I agree, right?" I almost laughed as he nodded. "Very well. I'll see him. Perhaps Blaggi will whisper something in his ear like the stories say."

"I think that's only at the Tower of Blaggi, in the northernmost part of Augustria." Still, he gave me a relieved smile. "I'll arrange a story if you do not wish for him to know, but…"

"...If you think he is trustworthy, Arvis, then you may." I sighed. "I know there are already rumors."

"Well, yes. I've neither been confirming nor denying them, much as I'd love to confirm them. I'm very proud of my little sister, after all." His smile warmed as he let go of my arm. "Now that I think about it. Didn't I once promise you apple cider around the fire or something?"

"...You did." It was when we first met. He'd bought me an apple cider drink during the local festival, and had promised that one day, we'd sit in his study, and chat about nothing while we drank as much apple cider as we wanted. "I'm surprised you remember." I also knew he changed the subject so that we didn't fall into our old little 'discussion' that neither of us won or lost.

"It's a promise to you." His tone implied the 'of course I did'. "I know this is only a visit, but why don't we do that?"

"Yes, that sounds like fun." I smiled, feeling almost giddy. It was just… nice. This was a good idea. "If only I didn't cause you so much trouble."

"...I'll work on making things easier for you." His eyes were perfectly serious. "So that you do not have to feel you must hide to protect me, and so that no one uses you. I promise. For you and Azel, I'll change the country, bit by bit."

"You must promise to not lose yourself to your work." I gave him a concerned look. "You know what they say. The path to hell is paved with good intentions."

"And he who fights monsters must take pains to ensure he does not become the monster himself." He nodded, but hesitated a bit. "If… something happens…"

"I will always love you, Lord Brother, though I might hit you if you go too far." I smiled as he looked a little relieved. "You will love me no matter what after all, yes?"

"Always. You and Azel are everything to me." His smile was warm and bright. "But enough of that. Let me get some cider from the kitchens and tell you of how some of my subordinates managed to botch a Meteor spell so spectacularly that he actually summoned a Tornado spell instead."

"...Wait, how is that even possible?!!"
Author's notes: So, have Arvis and Aida interactions. Cyas, again, is a character from FE5, known as a genius tactician during that game, and is infamous for being a kindhearted individual… and someone many players happily want to murder since, thanks to game mechanics, his mere presence on the field boosts all enemies hit and avoid by 30%. He plays a part in why Chapter 17A and Chapter 22 are considering 'that one level' by many players. In the Jugdral series, the titular 'Fire Emblem' is mentioned briefly (very briefly) in the epilogue, as the House Crest of Velthomer. I believe the Jugdral games are the only main games in the series where the 'Fire Emblem' doesn't feature in the plot directly.

An ectopic pregnancy occurs when a developing embryo implants outside the uterus, most often in the fallopian tubes. Since the tube can't support the embryo, it can rupture the tubes, leading to internal bleeding (and, in fact, this is the leading cause of deaths during the first trimester of pregnancies). Preeclampsia is another pregnancy complication that is characterized by sudden high blood pressure, among other things. It typically occurs after 20 weeks of pregnancy and the only real 'cure' for it is to delivery the baby, as otherwise, it can lead to serious complications for both the expectant mother and the baby (though, depending on when the condition comes up, it is possible still for a healthy-ish birth, but it has to be monitored very closely).

Next Chapter - Interlude, Meetings
After a month of being spoiled silly by my brothers, I return to Evans, escorted by Aida, who was delivering Arvis's wedding presents. Azel remained in Velthomer, since the campaign was over, which saddened me, but I understood. Knowing Azel, he'd figure out a way to return before long, especially since Lex stayed here, in Evans.

For now, though, I return to my duties, and try not to go mad planning this wedding.

"No, Prince Shanan, hold the needle like this," I instructed, reaching over to fix his grip. Prince Shanan and I were in the infirmary of Castle Evans, where I was taught him how to sew, to keep him out of trouble. "Now, nice and patient."

"Okay!" Prince Shanan, surprisingly, was very enthused at learning, or at least, helping me. "Nice and patient..." he repeated, frowning in concentration. He winced and sulked, though, as he pricked his finger again. "Why is sewing so hard?"

"Because you do not pay attention." I tapped his nose and laughed as he made a face. "Nice and patient, and watch. That will save you some pain."

"But I was!" He sulked a little more. "Sewing is just hard. Not like swords."

"Well, you cannot simply do what you're good at all the time. You will never grow strong if you do that."

"Okay..." He sighed heavily, but then gave me a worried look. "Are your arms okay?"

"They're fine." I glanced at them automatically, though, troubled. Father Claude had determined just what I did: there was very little wrong, aside from pulses of pain. I'd actually experienced one while he was checking my arms, so he did manage to come up with a theory. He wondered if the spell was supposed to do something more, but my Holy Blood was actually protecting me, containing the dark magic into the welts, much like an actual allergic reaction. The pain might be a hint of what I would have been experiencing, or it's a byproduct of the Holy Blood slowly eroding the dark magic. It could also be something else entirely; Father Claude intended on researching along with Arvis, both to figure out what was going on, and to check defenses against Dark Magic.

"Miss Alicia, I've finished sweeping." Sir Finn's voice jolted me from my thoughts, and he smiled shyly at me, still clutching the broom. "Do you want me to go ahead and mop?" he asked. At some point, Sir Finn had become my 'official' cleaner for the infirmary, and he came by everyday to clean for me. He mentioned something about it being a good way to cool down from morning practice. "Or would you like me to wait?"

"No, you can go ahead," I reassured. I reached down and pulled the mess of in-need-of-mending blankets onto a nearby table and tucked my legs up into my chair. Prince Shanan was short enough that his legs simply dangled. "We'll move when you need the chairs to get out of the way."
"Oh, no, I'll lift you like last time." He grinned, perfectly confident. To be fair, he did manage to do that just yesterday. "I'll get started on mopping, then. Shall I use a different scent?"

"Mmm, perhaps. The one Lady Ethlyn insisted on yesterday just made my nose itch."

"That might've been because I put too much, but-

"Alicia~!" A veritable hurricane burst into the room, one with bright blonde hair. "Oh, cool, Finn is here too~!" She threw herself at Sir Finn, giving him a big hug, and Sir Finn just barely managed to catch Lady Lachesis as she laughed. "Hello, again!" she cheered, popping back. She then lunged at me, giving me a warm hug. "Good to see you!" She jumped back again and then, still smiling, she knelt and offered her hands to Prince Shanan. "Hey, I don't think we met before. I'm Lachesis, of Noldion."

"H-hello?" Prince Shanan squeaked. He hesitated but took her hands, and she simply squeezed them reassuringly. "Nice to meet you? What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I came here to say hello to Alicia!" She grinned. "Unless you meant Evans in general. It's not that far from Noldion, and Sigurd is finally getting married~" She waited for Prince Shanan to pull away before hopping to her feet and snagging my arm. "Come on! You need to meet Grahnye and Ares!"

I yelped and struggled to escape, but Hezul's bloodline was known for its strength, and Lady Lachesis proved it with her vice-grip as she dragged me easily down the hall, chattering about dresses and jewelry all the while. Eventually, she dragged me into the receiving room of the castle, where Lord Eldigan chatted happily with Lord Quan and Sigurd.

He turned and laughed when he saw Lady Lachesis dragging me along. "When you said you'd bring her here, I didn't expect you to succeed," he commented, with a little smile. "I'm rather impressed."

"Nothing to be impressed about, since I was certain she'd be in the infirmary," Lady Lachesis replied loftily. She grinned triumphantly. "Never underestimate me!"

"Yes, yes." Lord Eldigan shook his head and focused on me. "I apologize if she interrupted you. Sigurd said you were Deidre's Maid of Honor, and I mentioned offhandedly that I'd need to speak with you about the Wedding preparations since I'm Best Man, and off she went."

"I was simply giving sewing lessons," I answered. I looked a little curiously at the trio. "How did you three decide who would be best man, though? Did you use rock-paper-scissors?"

"Oh, no, if we did that, Quan would win. He's a master." Lord Eldigan laughed and shook his head. "No, it was just a little system. Quan served as my best man, and Sigurd served as Quan's." He gave Sigurd a fondly amused look. "I must admit, though, that I did not quite expect to actually see you married. You were rarely interested in that sort of thing."

"Yes, well, clearly my heart was taken by Deidre before I ever met her," Sigurd replied. Everyone in the room rolled their eyes at how sappy the line was. "But you need to meet her, Eldigan. She's in the nursery with Ethlyn and Altenna."

"Speaking of meetings, actually..." Lord Eldigan gestured behind him to a quiet woman standing nearby, holding a baby to her chest. "Grahnye, you're quiet. Was the trip hard?"

"Oh, Elto, you know very well that I'm fine," she instantly replied. Her eyes sparkled with quiet mirth. "I've been riding horses longer than you."
"But you're still recovering," Lord Eldigan pointed out. He held out his hand to her, and she took it, walking to his side. "I fret."

"As always." She shook her head and smiled at Sigurd and Lord Quan. "You two have not met Ares yet."

"No, we haven't," Lord Quan confirmed. He bent over Lord Ares and held out his hand. He laughed as Lord Ares instantly took his finger with a tiny, pudgy hand. "Wow, what a grip! He might give Altenna a run for her money."

"Wouldn't he win?" Sigurd asked. "I mean; Hezul blood. Strength."

"Hush." Lord Quan cooed over Lord Ares, grinning. "Oh, what a shame! He looks like Eldigan!"

"He'll have to deal with people trying to buy him when he wanders towards the red-light district, just like him!"

"I can and will hurt you two," Lord Eldigan instantly deadpanned, while Lady Grahnye simply laughed and Lady Lachesis squeaked and went red. "I can tell your wives many, many stories, you know."

"We can retaliate!" Sigurd retorted, grinning. Lord Quan, however, looked a little more worried by the proposition. "But seriously, this will be a great opportunity for Ares to meet Altenna too, so…" He trailed off as Lord Ares suddenly started babbling and reaching out towards… something.

"Hmm? Looks like something caught his eye." Sigurd bent down and shifted so that he could better 'see' what Lord Ares was looking at. Surprisingly, he ended up looking right at me, and grinned. "Oh, I think Alicia has his attention." Sigurd waved me forward. "Grahnye, this is Alicia, by the way, our chief healer."

"I've heard quite a bit of praise of you," Lady Grahnye murmured. She held out Lord Ares to me. "Here. Why don't you hold him?" She smiled. "Children are good at seeing the hearts of people and like warmth."

"If you say so," I mumbled, a little embarrassed by all of this. Still, I took Lord Ares, cradling him a little awkwardly, and I squeaked when he instantly reached up and grabbed a lock of my hair.

"What is it with Major Blooded children and my hair? I'm two for two."

"Three," Lord Quan corrected with a laugh. The rest of the group smiled indulgently and laughed. "Altenna snagged your hair too."

"Ah, yes, that's right." Though, unlike both Prince Shannan and Lady Altenna, Lord Ares did not 'tug' my hair. He just held it with a smile, gurgling as he curled up. "Babies are strange."

"I meant to ask earlier, but you're not your normally confident healer self when you hold a baby."

"I've played midwife a few times, but my job stopped after checking their healths. I have little to no experience with babies." I looked down and noticed Lord Ares… had actually fallen asleep.

"Apparently, though, I'm comfortable. Lady Altenna fell asleep too."

"As I said, babies know good people," Lady Grahnye laughed. She smiled sweetly at me. "So, Miss Alicia, Lachesis said you were a skilled healer. I know some herbal remedies, so I was hoping we might compare notes."

Very easily, she drew me into a conversation about various herbs, with Lady Lachesis soon joining in, while Sigurd, Lord Quan, and Lord Eldigan chatted over things. Lord Ares continued to sleep,
clinging to my hair, blissful. It was very… strange. Nice, but strange.

Eventually, of course, someone in the little group remembered that we really should bring Lady Ethlyn and Deidre into the conversation, and so we moved to the sideroom-turned-nursery-turned-playroom that we'd set up for Lady Altenna. I had intended to return to the infirmary, but Lady Lachesis once again vice-gripped my arm, dragging me along with the group, even after I'd give Lord Ares to Sigurd. The sight of Sigurd cooing over Lord Ares, and Lord Ares gurgling and clearly adoring his 'Uncle Sigurd' was incredibly heartwarming.

So was how easily Lady Altenna had taken to Deidre. When we walked in, she was curled up in Deidre's arms, smiling brightly as Deidre sang something to her. Lady Ethlyn was tending to something in the corner, and scent of incense and cleaner hinted that they'd just got done changing Lady Altenna's diaper.

"Oh!" Deidre gasped as she looked up and saw all of us. "Hello!" She smiled, but it became nervous as she noticed the four new people. "I.. uh…"

"You weren't kidding when you warned she was shy," Lord Eldigan noted. He stepped a bit out of the group and bowed. "I'm Eldigan, Deidre."

"Oh, one of Sigurd's best friends. He's told me a lot about you." Her smile warmed and brightened. "Did you really start a dining room brawl back at the military academy?"

"He would mention that story." Lord Eldigan sighed and gave Sigurd a dirty look. Sigurd barely even looked up from playing with Lord Ares to acknowledge the look. "...Clearly, my son is charming."

"Oh?" Deidre got up, still holding Lady Altenna, and crept over to Sigurd's side. "Oh, so cute~" She carefully reached out and poked Lord Ares's cheek. "Squishy, just like Altenna's..."

"That's common for babies~!" Lady Ethlyn skipped over and gave Lady Lachesis a hug before hopping towards Sigurd, Deidre, and the babies. "Aw… they're adorable~!"

"It seems Altenna takes after Quan in looks," Lady Grahnye murmured. She tiptoed to look over Deidre's shoulder and smiled. "Though, I see Lady Ethlyn in her face. She's be absolutely lovely."

"Aw, Grahnye, you're so sweet!"

The group babbled a bit more, and I quickly lost focus as I noticed Lord Eldigan take on a serious expression. When the girls split off to play more with the babies, he grabbed Sigurd and Lord Quan by the arm. Then, to my surprise, he actually glanced over to me and waved me over to them. I hesitated, and noticed Lady Lachesis had actually let go of me, instead of dragging me with her over to the girls. She glanced back briefly, and I got a feeling that she and Lord Eldigan had used the 'Maid of Honor' thing as a bit of a cover.

So, I walked over to them, and the four of us stepped out of the room, quietly closing the door behind us to make sure we weren't followed. "I apologize for bringing up something serious," Lord Eldigan whispered. The look on his face was dark. "But, I will have to make trips to Augusty, Noldion, and back here to Evans. The situation in Agustria is…"

"What happened?" Sigurd asked. He crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. "You mentioned your fellow lords before…"

"King Imca has fallen ill and, despite the best efforts of the healers, it seems like he will not make a
full recovery. Meaning that I have to throw my weight around as the Hezul Major, inheritor of Mystletainn to try and prevent chaos from erupting until Chagall takes the throne." He sighed heavily. "There is a chance, though, that I won't be enough, and someone will attack here. I promise to do -"

"Eldigan." Sigurd reached out and hugged Lord Eldigan. "I want you to promise to take care of yourself. That's all I ask."

"...Of course you would." Lord Eldigan sighed and leaned his head against Sigurd's shoulder. "Sorry, I'm a little tired."

"You always were one to overwork, and overthink," Lord Quan pointed out. He smiled and slung his arms around Sigurd and Lord Eldigan's shoulders. "But we'll know if anything happens, it's not your fault."

"...As heartwarming as your friendship is, I do wonder why I was dragged into this discussion," I interrupted after a moment. I felt uncomfortable, just staring at them. "You clearly had a reason. Lady Lachesis was in on this."

"Ah, yes," Lord Eldigan murmured. He pulled out of the hug and turned to face me with a small smile. "My apologies. But knowing Sigurd, he'd forget to tell you while in the middle of matrimonial bliss, and I'd rather you have the time to prepare for an ambush, just in case."

"I see." I frowned a little, thinking rapidly. "I do not suppose you know what sort of tactics your fellow lords favor? That could give me an idea of what sort of injuries to expect."

"...I had not thought about that. I do know a few tactics commonly used, yes." Lord Eldigan smile grew. "I'll gladly share what I know."

"Good." I might have continued, but the door squeaked open. All four of us turned, and we saw Lady Altenna and Lord Ares both sitting at the door, looking up at us with big, beseeching eyes. "Well, it seems these two want their daddies and uncles."

"Or your hair." Lord Eldigan grinned and he bent down to pick up Lord Ares, while Lord Quan picked up Lady Altenna. "All right, all right. Play time, play time."

I lingered in the doorway, watching all of them play with the two children for a moment before turning away and heading to the infirmary. It was all the more important now, to make sure it was ready. If I wasn't... No, I would be ready. I'd make sure of it.

In Grannvale, it was tradition for a tournament to be held when the Heir to one of the Crusader Houses got married, with cash prizes. Sigurd had hesitated, since Evans was a Verdanite castle, technically, but Prince Jamke had insisted for Sigurd to keep up his traditions, and so, one was held. Thus, my afternoon was spent being part of the healer rotation for arena matches. Again.

"Wow, that foreign mercenary is good," Lady Lachesis noted. She was next on the rotation, so she was seated at the end of the bench as we watched Sir Finn fight with a blonde haired mercenary who was very skilled with a blade. "Finn has an advantage thanks to his weapon, but you wouldn't know it."

"The mercenary has experience," Lord Eldigan murmured. He was sitting with us for now, letting Prince Shanan take his 'traditional' spot up with Sigurd and Deidre. I'd traditionally be up there as
well, but I was serving as healer, so the 'rules' were all thrown around anyway. "Experience can make up for any sort of advantage. Finn has done well making it this far, though. I can see why Quan has such high hopes."

"He is pretty good." Lady Lachesis smiled, but it faltered as Sir Finn took a particularly bad hit. "I'm gone."

"Try not to make him blush too much." Lord Eldigan snickered as Lady Lachesis gave him a surprisingly rude gesture before flouncing off. "She's too easy to tease."

"Where did she learn a gesture like that?" I asked, a little startled. It didn't match her prim and proper image at all. "Did she go tavern hopping with you?"

"Oh, did Sigurd tell you about that?" Lord Eldigan asked with a laugh. It quickly turned to a wince as Sir Finn took a second bad hit, and the match was declared 'over'. "That one will hurt."

"As a warrior, you should know that even a little scratch hurts."

"I have vague memories of it. Mystletainn, however, tends to remove injuries." This time his laugh was almost a little bitter. "The demon sword indeed…" He shook his head, though, and smiled before I could ask about it. "So, Deidre."

"She's a very sweet, shy girl."

"Yes, she is. She and Sigurd are well suited. She's like a princess, and he's always been the knight in shining armor." He frowned a bit. "I'm just a little troubled. Quan is of the opinion that Sigurd just kept his courting quiet, but it's not really like Sigurd to keep secrets from us two. Now, granted, it could be revenge against Quan for hiding his growing feelings for Ethlyn, but I cannot quite…" He sighed. "They seem almost too suited for each other. Like the gods got involved. It makes me uneasy."

"...Just focus on how they are happy." I looked out as the crowd cheered, and Lady Ayra and the mercenary both stepped out onto the field for the last match. "If the gods got involved, then things shall become very difficult."

"Yeah, I suppose given what's going on, I shouldn't look for more trouble." He leaned forward slightly, eyes glittering with anticipation. "This will be short, but interesting."

"You think so?"

"They're both very skilled, and they know it." He shot me a grin. "They'll know to hit hard, fast, and that'll tire them easily."

"...I'm going to have to heal a near death wound, aren't I?"

"Oh, I don't think it'll be that bad."

I might've replied, but Lady Ayra lunged forward to begin the fight and it was near impossible to focus on anything else.

They were blurs to my vision, with shining 'smears' of their blades swinging. Both were very fast and, more importantly, skilled. They dodged and parried with complete ease, and only the tiny spots of blood on the ground hinted that they'd been hit at all. The match only went for a few minutes, or maybe just seconds, before Lady Ayra broke off suddenly and set her feet into a stance. A strange greenish glow, almost like stars, surrounded her and she lunged forward, almost
appearing to 'split' into five to strike, clearly planning to end it right then and there.

However, the mercenary shifted and, with a grunt, he blocked Lady Ayra's assault, to her visible surprise. His blade cracked under the force, though, so he twisted, hooking the hilt of his sword around her blade, and disarmed her. That was enough to make his sword outright break, though, and so the two stood, both unarmed, completely unmoving. The air itself stilled, waiting for something, anything, to break the tension.

"Tie!" the announcer called then, and the crowd roared in complete and total glee and excitement.

"I'm going to go heal," I told Lord Eldigan. He nodded slowly, grinning though he did not cheer with the crowd. I simply left, walking the well-known path from the stands to the waiting area in the halls of the arena. When I reached there, though, I paused, startled. Normally, combatants would retreat to their respective entrances to leave, but Lady Ayra and the man were both here, talking with one another.

"How did you know how to block my Astra?" Lady Ayra's voice was soft, and a touch threatening. "It couldn't have been coincidence," she whispered, ignoring the blood that dripped down both their arms. "You knew exactly where…"

"I'm a mercenary, Princess, and a former gladiator," the man replied easily. She bristled at the title. "If you don't want people to figure out that you're the Princess of Isaach, you need to cut your hair and not throw around Astras."

"That…" She bristled even more, and glowered. Just answer the question."

"I did. I'm a former gladiator turned mercenary. I did jobs in Isaach before moving over this way. Your brother sparred against mercenaries and gladiators to better himself." He shrugged. "It's not that hard of a logic puzzle."

"Are you mocking me?"

"No, of course not. I am simply stating facts. Princess."

"Don't call me that!"

"You clearly don't mind, since you threw out Astra without a thought."

"You…!"

"Excuse me?" I finally interrupted. Both of them whirled to face me, and Lady Ayra relaxed when she realized it was just me. "I'm here to heal… both of you?"

"I dragged him over to talk," Lady Ayra explained. She glowered at him again. "But he's most unhelpful."

"I apologize for not giving you the answer you seek," the man replied instantly. What amazed me was how calm he was. "But let me ask you something. What are you fighting for?"

"What?"

"What are you fighting for? You clearly weren't motivated there by the cash prize." His eyes were serious. "So?"

"...I fought for my nephew." Her voice was soft again, but this time, a little fragile. "And I fight for
Sigurd, who gave us safety and sanctuary. I am still... wary, but I cannot deny his kindness. I am gladdened he has found someone he wishes to spend his life with. I remember how happy my brother was, before illness took his wife away. That's... all.

"I see." He faintly smiled, and it softened his expression considerably. "Interesting. Makes me rather curious."

"Well, if you want to sign on, you can. I doubt Sigurd will say no to a skilled fighter being around."

"I think I might. Fighting for something grander than myself might be just what I need." He nodded once and turned to me. "I apologize for being rude to you, miss. You are...?"

"Alicia, the chief healer around here," I answered. I brought up my staff up for emphasis and smiled. "What is your name, sir...?"

"Chulainn," he answered. His smile grew slightly. "It's Chulainn."

"So, Sir Chu-"

"Just Chulainn." His voice was firm. "I have no title."

"...Chulainn." I pointed to his bleeding arm. "If you do not mind holding that up, I can begin healing you."

"Thank you." He brought up his arm and I hovered over it to start knitting up the injury. "It's strange, to be healed again."

"It is strange?"

"Gladiators treat their own injuries." He actually unbuckled his armor to make things easier for me, and his smile grew just a bit more as he watched the skin knit up. "Healers are better than gods, in my eyes."

"Quite the blasphemous thing to say, especially to a cleric." I gave him a calm look. "Are not healers agents of the gods?"

"Perhaps, but you can actually see a healer help people. You have to hold faith in the gods helping." He waited until I pulled away and snapped his armor back on. "Besides, you didn't hit me with a staff like the last cleric I said that to."

"Do you say that to all clerics?"

"No, I was delirious from an infected wound and babbling." His smile fell and he looked to Lady Ayra. "Are you not getting healed?"

"I-I am," Lady Ayra replied. She glowered again. "I didn't want to interrupt!" She stomped over and held out her own injured arm. "Thank you, Miss Alicia."

I healed her up easily, and she marched off, Chulainn following her to be introduced to Sigurd. I lingered back, a little... confused by all of this. I felt like Chulainn had actually been testing me, and had used me as a distraction to keep Lady Ayra was pressing. At the same time, though, he felt completely honest.

Someone who could do both, easily, was very, very clever, and there was a very good chance that
someone so subtly clever was actually a spy. I knew Sigurd would accept him with open arms, so that was just all the more reason to be wary.

I'd keep a close eye on him. I didn't want any harm coming to Sigurd, Deidre, or Prince Shanan.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: And now we have Chulainn (formerly called Holyn in fan translations). Chulainn is recruited during Game-Chapter 2 by beating him in the arena (he is the original final opponent of the arena; once he is defeated and recruited, he's replaced). I moved his recruitment up a little bit. Altenna being there for Sigurd and Deidre's wedding comes from the Fujimori Manga; I added Ares showing up for fun. Same with Eldigan being Sigurd's best man.

Chulainn and Ayra sparring comes a bit from the Fujimori manga as well, though in that one, Chulainn ended up winning. Here, they tied.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Wedding
Interlude - Wedding

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude - Wedding

The months pass, and slowly but surely, things pick up as we prep for the wedding. The people of Evans are really getting into it, so thrilled that their new lord, kind and gentle, is getting married to a shy, but sweet Verdanite lady. The army itself is beside itself, since Deirdre has been charming everyone easily. Few now point out how sudden the wedding is, which is a relief on my part, since I never know how to explain to people that I was very certain this was a compulsion by the gods.

At least they are happy. It would be hard to bear otherwise.

"I'm so nervous," Deirdre murmured. I had her set up in front of a vanity as I brushed out her hair. "I mean… um…"

"Wedding day jitters are a normally thing for brides, I'm told," I reassured. I leaned down slightly and pointed to the tea sitting on the vanity. "Drink that. It'll help soothe you. I made it for that reason."

"You're wonderful." She took the teacup and cradled it in her hands, sighing slightly. "I don't know why I'm so nervous."

"Ah yes, whyever would you be so nervous exchanging vows of love and marriage in front of an entire crowd of people, many of which you barely know by sight and name." I laughed a little as she sulked. "Relax. Just focus on Sigurd. This is simply you two making your union official, and all of us celebrating in it." I smiled as I thought of something that might cheer her up. "Think of Prince Shanan. He's super excited to take part."

"Ah, yes, my little ring-bearer!" Deirdre laughed, smiling again. She'd grown quite close to Prince Shanan over the past few months. "He was so nervous earlier."

"Well, yes, since he'll be actually carrying the real rings, which isn't typical." However, Sigurd had absolute trust in Prince Shanan, and so, Prince Shanan would carry the real rings. "He wants everything to be perfect for you two."

"Yes…" Her smile sweetened as she sipped the tea. "Do you want everything to be perfect?"

"I want everything to run smoothly, but I think a perfect wedding will lead to big trouble later. It's better to have a few little hiccups along the way to avoid big ones later." I finished brushing her hair, and set the brush down to begin braiding her hair. "Are you certain you want to leave the circlet?"

"Yes…" Her expression dropped. "I know you think it's silly, but I was always told that wearing the circlet would 'keep me safe'. It's the one nice thing the elders of the village gave me, so…"

"It's fine. I was just wondering." I paused as I gathered some of her hair and thought I saw something silver against her skin, but then I shook my head and decided it was just a trick of the light and her hair and resumed braiding. There was no point at jumping at shadows. "Are you
certain your foot is all right? That looked to be a very dark red mark."

"Oh, yes, it's just an old scar that never quite healed." She went back to smiling. "I'm fine!"

"If you are certain, then I won't bring it up again." But it had looked a little too 'smooth' to be a scar, and it wasn't common for scars to heal up as a blood red. Then again, I did not know how she had been injured, or what herbs had been used. The issue with the welts, still there but slowly fading finally, proved clearly that I did not know everything about healing, after all. "If you are ever injured, or just feel down, though…"

"I come straight to you!" She beamed at me. "I'm so glad we're friends, Alicia!"

"...Yes, I am too." I smiled gently at her and continued braiding her hair, tucking flowers into the braid at set intervals. "Though, I'm not sure I liked spending so much time having to deal with fittings."

"They took so long! There were so many things I'd planned on doing, but they ate up the whole day to make everything 'perfect'." She looked down at her wedding dress, though, and smiled. "But, well, it is pretty. So is your dress. Dark blue suits you."

"It makes the hair stand out." The dress was easily the richest I'd ever worn, made of silks and satins, and it made me uncomfortable. I preferred my simple cotton dresses. They were easier to clean, and replace. "I feel like it needs to be displayed as a work of art more than worn."

"I know! It's so…" She trailed off, almost tilting her head before I stopped her. "I think I hear people-"

The door burst open, and in came Lady Ayra, Lady Aideen, and Lady Ethlyn. They all talked over one another, a cacophony of insistence, and Deirdre looked more and more bewildered, while I found myself sighing. I didn't catch a word of what they said, but a look at the fancy dressed Lady Ethlyn and Lady Aideen wore, the very not-so-fancy dress Lady Ayra wore, and the dress Lady Ethlyn and Lady Aideen held helped me figure it out.

"I don't suppose you considered giving her a dress that has less ribbons?" I pointed out dryly, returning to my braiding. Lady Ayra breathed a sigh of relief as Lady Ethlyn and Lady Aideen sulked. "Why don't you compromise with that?"

If we got through today in one piece, I'd consider it to be a miracle.

There were a bunch of mini-disasters as we got closer to the main event. Some flower arrangements were broken; some food wasn't going to be prepared in time. A hem frayed; a heel broke. They were all little things with quick fixes, though the more that happened, the more I decided that running a wedding required the same mindset of running an infirmary, or an army. It was absolute madness and I silently vowed that on the off chance I did get married, not very likely, I would never have such an elaborate wedding. I'd elope or something.

Still, everyone made it through in one piece, and there was no mishaps during the actual ceremony that might symbolize bad luck or anything. That was a victory.

Laughter was a main part of the evening as the reception dragged on and on. I participated in a single dance with Lord Eldigan, since it was expected for the Maid of Honor to dance with the Best Man apparently, and made certain to call for a toast for the couple. Afterwards, I retreated to the edges of the party to simply watch, far too uncomfortable by all of the madness. Thankfully, though, my absence hadn't really been noticed, and so, I simply watched and laughed at everyone's
antics. Lex had actually managed to convince Lady Ayra to dance with him, and he gleefully teased her throughout the entire thing. Sir Midir and Lady Aideen danced quietly nearby, with her gently instructing him on how. To my intense amusement, Lady Lachesis had dragged Sir Finn out to dance with her as well, and the two danced a little off-beat next to Lord Eldigan and Lady Grahnye. Sigurd danced with Lady Ethlyn, with the two of them clearly teasing each other relentlessly and having a ball with it. Deirdre, to my surprise, wasn't dancing with Lord Quan, but instead, danced with little Prince Shanan, laughing as they went through the steps slowly. Other couples swirled into view, blocking off the people I actually knew. Many were starstruck villagers, inviting into the reception as a show of goodwill, as well as soldiers who remained with Sigurd even after their homes were freed as thanks.

I turned my attention from the dancers to the drinkers in the corner. Most have devolved into a drinking contest, and poor Lord Oifeye had been dragged into the middle of it. I suspected the likely perpetrator was Sir Alec, who gleefully edged on others to join in as well. Still, the other soldiers were rather enthusiastic in participating. Apparently, it was becoming a point of pride among them to be able to last long. I had no idea, but then again, I also never saw the thrill behind alcohol in general.

"So, this is where the Maid of Honor hides." A calm voice startled me from my thoughts, and to my surprise, I found Chulainn next to me, holding out a plate of fruit. "You were running around a lot, so it looked like you didn't eat," he explained. Hesitantly, I took the plate and noticed an abundance of apple slices on it. "Something wrong?"

"You put a lot of apples on it," I mumbled. I hesitated a bit more before popping one into my mouth. He was right; I didn't have much of a chance to eat with everything going on, and the food was being very carefully watched for poisons, just in case. "I was startled."

"You seem to like apples more than other things. Was I wrong?"

"Well, no, you're not." I gave him a confused look, even as I continued eating. I doubted he'd find it rude, since he'd brought me the food in the first place. "How did you figure that part out?"

"People tend to forget to watch out for the healer." He matched my look with a stoic one of his own. "Especially healers who keep an eye on newcomers despite having too much work anyway."

I stiffened at the gentle accusation. "Someone needs to watch the newcomers." I ate the last bit of fruit, and felt a little more reasonable, even if I was kicking myself for so quickly trusting something a stranger gave me. But, I knew I was safe. If something happened, there would be over a hundred people coming to my rescue. It was an odd feeling, but reassuring. "I doubt I am the only one."

"No, you're not. And it's easy to see why. Lord Sigurd didn't even as a single question when Princess Ayra said I was joining." He took my empty plate and handed it off to a passing servant before passing me a napkin to wipe my fingers off. "But you have a lot of work anyway. That's all."

"A healer is always working." After cleaning my hands, I folded the napkin very small. "There is always someone to heal, or always something to do to prepare for the injured to come. A little bit more isn't going to bother me."

"Even healers are human." He shook his head and took the napkin from me, also passing it off to a passing servant. "No amount of calm confidence changes that you have your limits." He nodded to something and, to my surprise, there were a bunch of girls crowded about the dancing area, and Deirdre stood there with a bright, if nervous, smile. "Bouquet toss."
"Oh, I see." I wasn't sure what it was like for Verdane, but in Grannvale, it was believed that the woman who caught the bouquet would find love soon. Based on the crowd and the nervous tittering, I assumed there was something similar in Verdane. "Isn't she supposed to turn around?"

"Verdanite tradition dictates no."

"Oh, I didn't know that." I almost asked how he did, but then Deirdre threw the bouquet and the crowd jumped up almost in unison to try and grab it. But the bouquet sailed over them easily, arcing gracefully and shedding petals, and hit me straight in the face. "What the-?!" I automatically brought my hands up, and the bouquet fell into them, leading to me being the one to catch the bouquet. "Uh..."

Absolute chaos erupted, and I was surrounded by bunches of babbling girls all 'congratulating' me for my luck. I thought it was less luck, especially when I looked up at Deirdre and saw her laughing and clapping next to Sigurd. She'd purposely thrown the bouquet that hard to try and reach me. That was the only explanation that made sense.

I'd get her back for this. I really would.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: In the 'real world', the tradition of the bouquet toss is that the one who catches it will be the next to marry; I changed this slightly to be simply 'find true love soon' just to differentiate it from our world.

Next Chapter - Disturbance in Augustria (Game-Chapter 2 start)
Life takes on a sort of… strange peacefulness in the weeks following Sigurd and Deirdre's wedding. However, each day, it becomes increasingly clear that such peace will simply not last. Grannvale's subjugation of Verdane, despite Verdane's initial assault, has caused discontent among the other countries, likely because Grannvale continues fighting, and subjugating, Isaach as well.

Augustria, in particular, is… troubled by it, likely because Evans is on their border as well. Most lords have expressed worries, and anti-Grannvale sentiments. Then, shockingly, King Imka, known for his peaceful ways and firm control, dies suddenly, not from illness as Lord Eldigan had implied, but by assassin. Rumors already spread that it was a Grannvale assassin, though of course, there is no proof. Just as many rumors indicate Crown Prince Chagall, the king's only child, killed his father. No one knows.

All we know is that the only reason why Augustria does not try to take advantage of Grannvale's weakened military is Lord Eldigan and his Cross Knights, and that is too much of a burden for one person to bear. This peace will not last. The only question becomes… how will it break?

"Here, hold the sword like this." Chulainn reached over to adjust Prince Shanan's grip, moving slowly to not frighten Prince Shanan. It amazed me how gentle he was, really. "This makes your grip more secure," he explained. "Makes it less likely you'll be disarmed."

"But my hands want to move there," Prince Shanan complained. He sulked a bit, and I couldn't blame him. This was the third time. "They want to!"

"And your stomach wants sweets, but you don't give it that, right?"

"...I want sweets now."

"I'm sure Alicia will give you candy once you're done."

"I have some cookies waiting for both of you," I called, laughing a little as I looked up from my mending. "Cookies and milk."

"Which you can get when you get your grip secure," Chulainn easily added. Prince Shanan's eyes sparkled. "Now, let's try again."

I returned to my mending as the two went back to their sword lessons. This was a compromise Chulainn and I came up with, so that I could still work. He even set me up with a little table and chair before working with Prince Shanan, insisting on it, even. After all, the main reason I was here was because Chulainn had been worried that Prince Shanan would be uneasy around him alone, but at the same time, Chulainn had wanted to teach Prince Shanan some different sword tricks, things that were more… pragmatic than what Lady Ayra and Sigurd taught. Prince Shanan, of course, had been absolutely delighted to have more lessons, and delighted to just… have attention. Most of the people he liked among the army were often busy helping to run it, sadly, so there were times where
he was left alone to do whatever. He often came to the infirmary to help me out, or did extra studying with Sir Finn and Lord Oifeye, outside of lessons. But he liked having the personal attentions of someone, just as any other child would.

"There, that's it," Chulainn praised, leaning down to help Prince Shanan fix his stance. Prince Shanan beamed up at him and he smiled slightly. "Good. Now, this block is good against lances. It'll help you push it away and dodge."

"Lances have an advantage against swords because of their reach, right?" Prince Shanan asked. He looked confused suddenly. "Or… maybe that was axes?"

"Axes have an advantage against lances, due to their heavier weights allowing them to knock aside, or even break, lances. Just as the heavier weights of the axes put them at a disadvantage to swords." Chulainn gave him a studying look. "Why think the other way?"

"Oh, something Lex said." Prince Shanan relaxed and looked up at Chulainn. "He was teasing Auntie Ayra like normal, and there was something about him having 'reach' and this girl he sparred with having 'flexibility'?!"

"..." Chulainn cracked a smile, and actually started laughing quietly, shoulders shaking. I had to put down my mending as I put the pieces together, struggling not to laugh. "He wasn't talking about weapons. Or he was, but he was implying otherwise."

"Wait, what would he be talking about?" Prince Shanan reached up and tugged Chulainn's shirt. "Auntie Ayra went really red and Lex laughed and teased her more, but I don't get it."

"Older. When you're older."

"I'm almost nine! Just a couple more months!"

"Maybe when you're sixteen."

"That's way too long!"

"Okay, since you two have clearly stopped for a break, come over here for sweets!" I called, setting my mending to the side and waving at them. Prince Shanan instantly bolted for me, and I laughed. "No longer curious?"

"You can't be curious on an empty stomach!" Prince Shanan declared with a bright smile. He reached for the plate and squeaked as Chulainn came up from behind to pick him up. "Whoa!"

"Sit first." I watched as Chulainn set Prince Shanan in a chair, and passed him some milk. "Then try to mimic a chipmunk by stuffing your face."

"I will not!" Prince Shanan pouted, but it was spoiled by how he already had cookie crumbs on his face. "These are good!"

"Deirdre made them, actually." I'd told Deirdre on the way outside what I was planning, and she instantly went to bake cookies. "Because you're such a good helper."

"Yay~!" Prince Shanan grinned and started eating again, albeit a little more slowly. "Cu, can we do this again?"

"Whenever there's a break," Chulainn replied, not even reacting to the nickname. He shrugged when I gave him a curious look. "A name is just a name. So long as I know it refers to me, I've no
"quarrel, and it's better than…" He trailed off, glancing at Prince Shanan again. "Dastard."

"People called you 'Dastard' as a name?" I asked, curious. Then I figured out why he looked at Prince Shanan first. He'd been swallowing 'bastard'. "Why?"

"People are people. You have the good and bad." He shrugged again. "Gladiators tend to be around the bad for a long while, especially when they first start."

"When was that?" I waited for an answer, even just a 'I do not want to talk about it'. Instead, he tensed slightly and glanced at Prince Shanan. I had no idea if that was him saying 'I do not want him to hear' or 'I was his age'. "Ah, sorry to be so intrusive."

"It's fine." He smiled slightly. "Nothing to worry about, though that might change soon."

"Huh?"

"You guys might want to get inside." Lex walked up and, for once, he didn't look playful, or like he was plotting a way to tease Lady Ayra. Instead, he looked deadly serious. "Messenger from Noldion just rode in," he explained. "Don't know the message, but the messenger nearly fell off the horse from sheer exhaustion, and the horse itself is near death from the strain apparently."

"Then, definitely not a social call," Chulainn whispered. He glanced to me. "I'll clean up here, and watch Prince Shanan."

"...Thank you, Chulainn," I murmured. I hesitated a bit, especially since Prince Shanan looked so confused, but if this was bad… if nothing else, I needed to check messenger over. "We'll head inside then."

This… was going to be bad.

It was. Noldion was surrounded by other Augustian lords, with Lord Eldigan imprisoned in Augusty, and the Cross Knights that made up most of their defenses stationed at a fort to the far north. Lady Lachesis sent a messenger out, desperate for some sort of help, out of fear of what would happen to Ares if captured.

Sigurd wanted to go immediately, but reason prevailed for one clear reason: we'd have to cross the border. We needed permission for that. While we had no doubts that we'd get it, we did need it. So preparations began, but we all waited for the messenger to return, hoping that Noldion could hold out until we could make it.

"By the time we make it there, it's quite likely the fighting will be over," I whispered, going through my lists. There were medicines I'd need, and I simply could not make everything, especially for an army this side. "If it continues, then we have the issues that come with…"

"I wish I could be more helpful," Deirdre murmured. She sighed heavily as she set a mug of tea next to me. "But I really can only attack, and the only 'offensive' staff we have is Silence, so unless we're fighting mages…"

"You're delivering these lists to Sigurd for me so that I don't have to deal with it." I smiled up at her and sat back in my chair. I wished I'd taken more notes in Velthomer about how to run an army infirmary. "But they're definitely going for speed. The mounted fighters will be going at a gallop, and will likely carry nothing extra…"

"Then they'll need medicines, right? Only Ethlyn will be able to keep up with them…"
"That's true." I took a blank sheet of paper and began jotting down basic medicine kits that all of them would need. "Deirdre, can you check those books for medicines good for horses?"

"Yes!" Deirdre smiled brightly and went right to work. "I think Sigurd is a bit mad, though…"

"You won the argument to fight alongside everyone fair and square." Though, it had been a bit of an argument. Sigurd had wanted her to stay here, both to be safe and to reassure the people. But Deirdre had wanted to come with him, fearful still of the 'catastrophe'. Lord Quan had weighed in with Deirdre, as had Lady Ethlyn. "Besides, I doubt he can stay mad at anyone long, much less you."

"He seemed so distracted and curt earlier…"

"His best friend is imprisoned, his best friend's sister is under assault, and he's stuck waiting." I gave her a look and smiled slightly as she squirmed. "Try to remember to take those things into account, Deirdre. But also pout and scold him for lashing. He's an idiot."

"He's wonderful!"

"He's a wonderful idiot."

"You two sound like you're having fun." Lady Ethlyn knocked on the door frame of my side-room study and walked inside. Little Lady Altenna gurgled in her arms, and looked about with wide eyes. "Mind if I listen in?" she asked, shifting Lady Altenna a little higher, so that she was resting more of her chest. "Altenna refuses to nap."

"Is she hungry?" I asked, already standing to get Lady Ethlyn a little blanket. Unlike many noblewomen, Lady Ethlyn breastfed her children herself.

"No, I fed her earlier. Now, she's just being fussy. I think she knows something is wrong."

"Children are more intuitive than people give credit, or so I've frequently heard." I slowly sat back down, gesturing for her to take the free chair. "What shall we do with her?"

"Quan doesn't want to leave while Eldigan is in danger, and neither Finn nor I really want to leave either. If it's to be another campaign, you'll need every healer, and it's Lachesis. We've been friends for years. Finn doesn't want to go back alone." She shrugged. "So, we're sending a messenger to come and pick up Altenna, but it's… quite likely we'll march before…"

"I'll keep her safe." I said the words without thinking, but her bright smile told me how much she appreciated it. "Besides, having a little one to tend to will likely help keep Prince Shanan out of trouble. He takes such duties very seriously." There had once again been a debate as to where Prince Shanan would go, and it was decided that he'd be in the last group that would come to Noldion, the ones that would leave even after I left. "So, he'll take care of her, nice and sweetly, and with luck, by the time he'd leave, you'll be sending people to come get her anyway because it's peaceful."

"That does sound… hopeful." She smiled a bit, and laughed as Lady Altenna squirmed more. "Do you mind if I set her on the floor or table?"

"Go ahead with the floor. I baby-proofed my study after her last little visit." I grimaced as I remembered that. She'd nearly poisoned herself because I'd left a vial of sleeping potion where she could get it, though in my defense, I hadn't known she was even in the infirmary, much less my study. "But… keep an eye anyway."
"Of course." She set Lady Altenna on the floor, and Lady Altenna immediately started crawling about, giggling as she touched *everything* she could. "I fear for the day she learns to walk."

"She's... actually, she's within the normal age bracket for that, isn't she?" I'd done a little research when it became clear Lady Altenna was staying with us for a bit longer. "A year old, right?"

"Yes, her first birthday is soon. Ares's was about a month after Deirdre and Sigurd's wedding." She laughed, clearly having a fun time remembering. We'd held a little party here for him, before Lord Eldigan, Lady Lachesis, and Lady Grahnye took him home. It was a few weeks after that when we heard King Imka had died. "Three months married, though." Lady Ethlyn turned her smile towards Deirdre, who blushed. "You know... have you and Sigurd talked about kids?"

"E-eh?" Deirdre squeaked, blush going even darker. "That's not... um..." She tried to hide her face behind a book. "A-Alicia, look! Here's some... um..."

"You're so cute~" Lady Ethlyn giggled, clearly delighted by her reaction. I simply took Deirdre's notes to add to my own, and kept one eye on Lady Altenna as she continued to explore. "Do you need tips, by the way? For the sex, I mean."

"N-no, I do not!"

"You sure? You better not be faking anything either."

"I-I'm not!" Deirdre's face went even redder. "U-um... er..."

"Good~" Lady Ethlyn laughed, smiling broadly. "But seriously, if you want tips. I mean; Sigurd and Quan are different people and have different pleasure points, but I've heard that some things tend to be a little."

"You're mean, Ethlyn! Mean!"

"How rude! I'm simply looking out for my Lady Sister~"

"Just for that, I'm not giving you the gift I had made for you." Deirdre sulked and Lady Ethlyn looked confused. "Your birthday is coming up. I got you a present for it, but you're being mean."

"What?!" Lady Ethlyn instantly jumped out of her chair and went to Deirdre, hugging her tightly. "Aw, but I love you so much!"

"Yes, yes, show repentance when a gift is involved." Still, Deirdre softened and leaned into the hug. "I'll give it to you tomorrow, since I think it'll be helpful in the... coming battles."

"Really?" Lady Ethlyn looked curious. "What is it? Come on; tell me~!" She went back to cuddling Deirdre. "Tell me; tell me!"

"Oh, goodness!" Deirdre laughed, and smiled brightly, even if she still looked a little nervous. Slowly but surely, she was getting used to people actually hugging her, and wanting to be around her. "It's a light sword."

"A light sword?!" Lady Ethlyn squealed and tightened her hug on Deirdre. "You're the best!"

"W-well, I thought you might find it useful, and... um..." Deirdre blushed again, this time from sheer... happiness. 'The best' was something never said to her before. "Oh, shoot, Alicia, I'm supposed to be helping you!"
"Thanks to your notes, I'm actually just about done," I answered, continuing to make my lists. I, after all, had continued working while they bantered. "Though, if you could keep Lady Altenna from trying to climb the shelf?"

Both of them squeaked, and went to Lady Altenna, cooing over her. I continued to work until Lady Ethlyn dropped Lady Altenna into my lap and stole my lists, leaving Deirdre and me to keep Lady Altenna occupied while she double-checked my lists for me. This… ended up with Lady Altenna curling up to finally fall asleep in my lap, and then me being stuck with her for the rest of the night since no one wanted to move and risk waking her up again.

It was… very, very strange, but there wasn't much I could do about it.

It took two weeks before we finally got confirmation to leave. Azel actually brought it, along with some official money and supplies from the king, and unofficial ones from Arvis. Of course, Arvis didn't just send supplies.

"He seriously sent you a letter warning you that I'd better not get hurt again?" I groaned, sighing heavily. Sigurd, of course, was just amused, even as he dangled the letter in my face. "I'm going to have a few words for him."

"No, no, it's just an older brother's protectiveness," Sigurd laughed. He set the letter down and shrugged. "He loves you both dearly, and he's simply asking me, awkwardly, to keep an eye on both of your."

"I suppose you would be the authority on 'Older Brother' speech."

"Very!" He laughed again and pulled out a box from under his desk. "Also, this is yours."

"He sent gifts?!" I groaned again, finally understanding just why Sigurd had requested I'd come to his office. I'd assumed there was an issue with the first aid packs I'd assigned. "Are all older brothers idiots?"

"We're all very doting, yes." He grinned. "Particularly when a birthday is coming up?"

"Mine is in three months. Three." I sighed, and set about opening the box. Then I blinked slowly as I looked at the contents. "Huh." I pulled out the first thing, a beautiful hair ornament in the shape of a blue and gold flower. "He spent too much money again." I then pulled out the second thing, a small medicinal pack made of worn leather, one that came with a belt. "Yes, he definitely spent too much."

"They're practical." Sigurd smiled. "Your hair is getting longer again, after all, so you need to pin it back to work, and the pack is self-explanatory."

"I suppose…" I peeked inside the pack and sighed. This was a specialized one, which often costed far too much. I could tell by how many compartments it had. "I tell him not to spend too much, though." "Nothing is too much for a little sister~!" Sigurd pouted suddenly. "But darn. I'd planned on a hair ornament for your birthday. I'll have to think of something else."

"...You're getting me presents?"

"Yes?" Now he looked confused. "Why wouldn't I? You're a dear friend and you're Deirdre's best friend. She's already got lots of plotting going on."
"Everyone is ridiculous." I was saved from my intense embarrassment by some knocking on the door. "Come in?" I paused, remembering at the last moment that this wasn't my study. "Um…"

"And now you prove yourself ridiculous!" Sigurd laughed, even as the door opened. "Aideen, Midir! I didn't expect to see you two!"

"Now why would you think that we'd stay behind?" Lady Aideen asked, sulking slightly. Sir Midir simply bowed politely, and I noticed he was holding a rather bulky, cloth-covered thing. "You saved my life, and Midir's, and Jungy, in case you forgot. You're also my dear friend, and we're leaving to save Lachesis. You need all the healers you can get."

"Well, true," Sigurd conceded. He stood up and came over to hug her. "I just thought you'd have a lot to deal with, since… well…"

"Oh, that's what stewards are for. I was barely doing anything anyway." She shrugged, giggling. "So, here I am, with Midir-"

"As always."

"Hush, you." She pouted and Sigurd laughed. Sir Midir just set the package over against the wall, completely ignoring everyone. "We're here with what fighters Jungby can spare. It's not a lot, but…"

"Aideen, considering what you pulled off, I'm grateful for just the Ullur luck!" Sigurd grinned before pointing to package. "Is that Yewfelle?"

"Yes." She glanced at it, sighing softly. "Asleep, just as it has been since Briggid disappeared."

"Your father isn't wielding it?" I asked, a little startled. I waved as Lady Aideen squeaked. "Yes, hello, I'm here too. Don't mind me; I'm just curious."

"Ah, yes," Lady Aideen murmured. She pouted a bit, for some reason, and this time, Sir Midir chuckled. "The reason is simple. Father has refused to wield it ever since Briggid disappeared, and now I just… have a feeling that I'll see her before long. So, I want it near, just in case." She shrugged, smiling slightly. "After all, we lost her during a storm while sailing in the waters north of Augustria. I'm certain it will call her to it, and she will call it to her. That is how the Holy Weapons are. They dislike being away from their Majors." She shook her head and came over to hug me. "It's so wonderful to see you again."

"You haven't been away that long." It had been a month, at most. "How are things?"

"Your village is just fine, and all those you healed are making full recoveries." She stepped back with a smile before turning to Sigurd. "Oh, before I forget, you wouldn't believe who we passed on the way to your study, Sigurd."

"...That feels like far too good of timing." Prince… no, King Jamke leaned into the room, to Sigurd's yelp and my stare. "Hello, I just got here," he explained, bowing slightly. "With a good portion of Verdane's army to bolster your forces."


"You need the help, yes? I've already heard what's going on. Word spreads fast." King Jamke shrugged. "There's still many domestic affairs to be solved, but if Augustria takes Evans, they have a foothold into Verdane as well, and all my efforts to repair my country will go to waste. Plus, helping you should, I hope, reinforce my words that I wish to repair the strained relationship
between Verdane and Grannvale." He shrugged. "So, I announced that I was coming to help you, and asked for volunteers, and was nearly drowned in all the people eager to join up."

"Drowned?!"

"In case you've forgotten, you're quite well liked in Verdane, since you saved my people, tended to their hurts, and married a Verdanite." King Jamke gave Sigurd an amused look. "Anyway, I'm here. You're stuck with me. Mind if we talk some logistics, though?"

"Yeah, sure, that's fine."

"In that case, I think I'll be better off packing up the infirmary," I murmured. I couldn't quite help but feel uncomfortable. Yes, King Jamke had saved my life, but I... could not so easily forget the number of our allies he'd killed. I could not easily forget their injuries. I could not forget how close Lady Aideen, Prince Shanan, Lord Oifeye, and Sir Finn had been to death. I could not thank him. I could not be comfortable around him. "I'm assuming the first group will leave at first light?"

"Yes, if not before," Sigurd confirmed. He nodded to Sir Midir. "It's all of our mounted, since we need speed above anything, so please, stay. It'll help you catch up on everything." There was some bits of polite conversation, and I escaped as soon as possible, ignoring King Jamke as 'politely' as I could. It wasn't how a healer should act, but I couldn't help it. I really couldn't.

Sighing heavily, and hating how I couldn't quite keep my healer-calm anymore, I stepped into the infirmary, intending on spending the rest of the day packing. Instead, I found myself looking at a bunch of carefully set up boxes, filled with things, and the slow realization that the infirmary... was actually mostly packed already.

"I thought you might need help." The culprit of this unexpected bit of help was Chulainn and, somehow, I wasn't surprised. "When you weren't here, I decided to get started on it," he explained, casually moving things. I noticed how the more fragile things, he left next to boxes, tucked in cloths and blankets.

"I... see..." I replied slowly, feeling a little off balanced. I really wasn't used to having this sort of help, especially unprompted. "How are you even...?"

"It's pretty simple. You keep everything organized anyway." He glanced at me. "You marching with the others, right?"

"Yes, though I will be in the second group. I believe you're in it as well?"

"I am, yes." He continued setting things to the side, and I went to look at how he was grouping things. I discovered pretty quickly that he was keeping everything pretty much as I organized them in the infirmary. There were a few boxes that could probably be combined, but that was one of the very few 'complaints' I had. "Look okay?"

"Yes, more or less." I started packing up the more fragile things, wrapping them in the provides cloths to lessen the chances of them breaking. I also noticed pretty quickly that the boxes he had were treated with fire resistant coating. That was something I hadn't even requested, since I wasn't sure if it could be done on such short notice. "Thank you."

"It's nothing. Just helping." He pointed to the table suddenly, and I noticed it actually had quite a few vials and jars I didn't recognize. "When I went into town, I asked the locals if they knew medicines particularly good for wounded or ill children, and for elderly. You might know these things, and they might be silly old wives' tales that don't actually work. But I thought you might
want to take a look. I made notes."

"When did you even have the time to do that?" I abandoned my packing to look through the notes, and saw very quickly how meticulous they were. "...I have a feeling this wasn't simple chatting."

"Oh, I paid for the information. I'm told I made a very lovely spool or whatever the term is." He glanced up and smiled slightly. "I helped some old ladies spin their thread, mostly by just sitting there and letting them use my hand."

"When did you have the time?"

"Mercenaries don't have a lot of things to do when there's no fighting, and gladiators less so." He shrugged. "I also don't have many things to pack."

"...I owe you." I glanced at the medicines and notes again before looking back at him. "I owe you a lot."

"You owe me nothing. It might be a bit before we see combat, but when we do, I know I'll get injured and you'll either be healing me, or be directing someone to tend to the wound." He shook his head. "No one owes a healer anything, in my opinion. You do so much for everyone anyway, and that's just your normal duties, not the extra things like babysitting Prince Shanan or teaching Finn and Oifeye how to sew and mix up medicines."

"I'm simply doing my job as a healer."

"Well, yes, but who tends to the healer when she's overworked?" He paused what he was doing to look right at me. I just stared back, a little startled. The ready answer of 'no one' bubbled to my lips, but the look in his eyes kept me silent. "I thought so." He returned to what he was doing, and I could only keep staring, feeling almost disoriented. "Where does this one go? I can't figure out what it is."

"That's... that one should be with this pile." Slowly, I started directing him on where things went. I sat down at the table to look over the medicines and notes there, and he continued to help me pack up everything. By the time Sir Finn and Lord Oifeye finished their own preparations and came to help, Chulainn and I were almost done, and I was actually brewing some tea for us. We quickly invited them to join up, and I reassured them there was still more to be done besides packing, which cheered them up. They both... really wanted to help me.

'Who heals the healer?' was a question I knew well, and I knew the answer was always 'no one'. But Chulainn... had a different answer. His eyes had told me what his answer was: 'those who she healed, giving back what she gave.'

I had no idea how to react to that. I'd never, ever, heard that 'answer' before.

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**Records on Sir Finn:**

*Lance Knight, 16 years old*

*Squire to Lord Quan, chosen for his keen observation skills, grasp of tactics, and great potential in weaponry. Not that, of course, he'd believe any of it. He's humble to a fault.*

*Kind and polite, he watches over Lord Oifeye and Prince Shanan almost like an older brother, and often spends his free time playing and discussing things with them. He also spends quite a bit of time helping in the infirmary.*
Is quite popular with girls, but seems completely unaware of that fact, despite many girls giving him gifts and the like.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: And thus we start Game-Chapter 2, Disturbance in Augustria (also the title of this chapter). Though, this is more of 'setting up to march out', instead of any actual battles. If Deirdre talks with Ethlyn during this chapter, Ethlyn gains the Light Sword, one of the magic swords of the game (which goes off strength versus defense in close range, and magic versus resistance in long range), though the conversation in game is much different. Altenna is not here during the game; this is more to give her a little bit of screentime. And foreshadow a really stupid decision Ethlyn and Quan make much later in the game (more Ethlyn than Quan).

The whole 'reach' and 'flexibility' thing comes from Mass Effect, specifically Mass Effect 2.

Next Chapter - Hound
Chapter 9) Hound

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 9) Hound

Everything is packed. We're heading to reinforce Noldion, and praying that Noldion still stands, and most of the population still lives. There is even more panic now than during the frantic chase after Lady Aideen, when all this began, likely because before, it had been just 'one' attack. This was basically a civil war, but they'd all turned against one duchy.

My ginger and stimulant supplies dwindle in the hours before the first group leaves. I simply do my best to warn everyone of the side effects, and do not judge. I'm tempted too.

Far before dawn, the 'first group' readied their gear to set off. I wandered through the lines, doing last minute checks on all of them. They greeted me with smiles and boasts of confidence. I gave them smiles in return, and made them promise to be as careful as possible, particularly the ones that had only been recently ill or injured. This whole situation had my stomach in knots, and I worried desperately for the few I knew in Noldion. There was not even a rumor of how bad things were. I had no idea if Lady Lachesis, Lady Grahnye, or Lord Ares were well. I even worried for Lord Eldigan, as it would be 'easy' to execute someone you'd imprisoned. Lord Eldigan's popularity kept him relatively safe, but if King Chagall was, by any means, intelligent, he was probably forging evidence even now…

"The warriors of Augustria will be a step up from the Verdanite barbarians." The casual words caught my ear and I stepped around some knights to see Lord Quan speaking to Sir Finn. "So, you need a proper weapon," Lord Quan continued, handing Sir Finn a strange looking lance, one that almost seemed to glow, and had a strange 'webbing' within the 'blade' part. "Go on."

"This is a Brave Lance!" Sir Finn yelped. He took it hesitantly, eyes wide. "It's so light…"

"That's why it is said to give two strikes for each time you attack. Well, that and a little bit of luck and maybe some magic." Lord Quan shrugged. "I will admit to not quite understanding. I just bought it."

"For me?!

"Yes. Your birthday is next week."

"But, my lord, this is…" Sir Finn looked to the lance again, and shook his head. "It's simply too much…"

"You are a valuable knight of Lenster, or will be once you finish your training. You must have a suitable weapon." Lord Quan smiled. "I have high hopes. If it troubles you, simply work to reach the point you feel worthy for it."

"I… yes, sir…" Sir Finn bowed. "I'll try."

"Good." Lord Quan's smile grew and then he walked off, going to Lady Ethlyn to help her, and flirt.
I lingered back, wondering if I had a right to... well, do anything. But Sir Finn looked so small, and a little frazzled, so I found myself walking towards him. I waited for him to notice me there, and studied his pale face as he tried to smile at me. Then, impulsively, I reached out and tugged him into a hug. "Please, be careful," I whispered. He stiffened briefly before relaxing, shaking slightly. "That's all I ask."

"I promise," he mumbled. He looked a little better when he pulled away. "I'll... do my best..."

"...Finn, I simply want you to stay alive." I reached up and fixed his collar. "You don't have to ever do your best, so long as you live."

"...Okay." His smile was sweet, if a little confused. Lord Quan's words still weighed heavily on his thin shoulders. But he looked less like he was about to faint. "I need to check my horse."

"Of course. I'll see you in Noldion." I gave him a smile and walked off, trying to think of what else to do. I ended up catching sight of Sigurd kissing Deirdre goodbye, and wandered over towards them to support Deirdre.

"Ah, Alicia!" Sigurd called, waving. He had a giant grin on his face, while Deirdre was blushing deeply. "Everything check out?"

"Yes, though it does seem as if you're trying to kill Deirdre with embarrassment," I deadpanned. He simply laughed, while Deirdre ducked behind me. "For shame, Sigurd."

"Sorry, sorry!" His cheer faded slightly. "I'll do my best to end the fighting before you arrive."

"Ah, that way I can tend to the injured immediately." I crossed my arms. "Try not go so quickly that you cause reckless deaths. I can heal a wound. I can't bring back the dead."

"I'll... try. We'll have to go fast if we're to have a chance."

"I know. That's why I said 'try'." I hesitated a bit before shrugging and reaching out the hug him. He yelped briefly, but returned it easily. "Stay safe, idiot. I don't want to deal with having you as a patient, and if you make Deirdre cry, I'll get you back."

"As it should be." He pulled away and laughed, looking quite touched. "We'll be off. I'll see you in a few days."

"All right." I stepped back, and reached down to take Deirdre's hand as she smiled and leaned against me. She trembled as Sigurd mounted up and ordered his knights to charge, but she kept up her smile and waved everyone goodbye as they disappeared into the horizon, a cloud of dust kicking up behind them.

"...Everything will be okay, right?" she whispered. She tightened her grip on my hand, and I knew she was worried about 'the Catastrophe'. "Right?"

"Yes, it will," I replied, keeping my words firm. "We must believe in them." I smiled at her. "Come on. We need to double check our own preparations, and spend some time with Prince Shanan and Lady Altenna."

"...Right!" She gave me a brave smile. "Let's do this!"

The walk to Noldion was... surprisingly quiet. Perhaps it was because everyone was so tense, but there was barely even conversation. I watched everyone in 'my' group closely, checking that no one
was wobbling or limping, but I didn't really notice anything that would require my attention. I did notice Lady Ayra instinctively looking around for Lex, and Lady Aideen seeming a little droopy with Sir Midir away and in danger. But Azel chatted with Lady Ayra, prompting little rambling rants about how Lex was an idiot, and Deirdre shyly distracted Lady Aideen with talks of dresses and fashion.

"There, I think that'll ease him." Chulainn's voice brought me out of my observations, and I turned to see he had done what I'd thought impossible: calm the horse that was carting some of my infirmary supplies. "He's simply nervous," Chulainn continued, gently petting the horse's side. "He knows something is wrong."

"I'll take your word for that," I replied, eyeing the horse warily. It had nearly headbutted me when I'd tried to figure out what was wrong. "I'm surprised you got it to calm."

"I like horses." He took its reins and tugged slightly, urging the horse to continue walking with the others. I awkwardly fell in step beside him, making sure he was between me and the horse. "I like riding them more, though."

"You ride?" That surprised me. It tended to be only the rich who rode, or those who worked for the rich. Horses, I knew, were very expensive.

"Oh, I don't ride the ones here. They're too tame." He said it with such a straight face that I gaped at him. "Wild horses are more spirited."

"I am convinced you are simply telling me a tale." It was difficult, though. He always kept so stoic. "Regardless, why do you not ride one into battle?"

"Partly, I never got the training for such a thing and partly because I dislike seeing them injured." He pet the horse's neck with a small smile. "I don't think Liath Macha minds me not riding him, though, when there's a cart attached to him. He's no chariot horse."

"Who?" It took me a second to realize what he'd even said, much less what he was referring to. "Did you name it?"

"Him, yes."

"It could've already had a name."

"He likes this one." The horse leaned over and nuzzled his face. "See?"

"You are impossible." I sighed heavily, feeling almost out of sorts for some reason. "When did you learn to ride?"

"As a child." His cheer faded slightly, and his expression blanked. I recognized it as him trying to talk around things. He was strangely honest, and rarely if ever lied, but he hid quite a few things about his past. "I'd take a friend along."

"Did you?" I smiled, and pretended I didn't notice him talking around things. "What was your friend like?"

"A spoilt brat." He said it so dryly that I couldn't help but laugh. "She was terrible at riding, but loved the feeling the wind rushing past her, and so she always begged to ride with me. And she'd always throw a fuss if I didn't go straight into a gallop."

"Really?"
"Yeah." He shrugged. "She and I actually got into an argument about it, last time I saw her. She'd wanted to go fast, I'd wanted to go easy because the horse had been acting funny, and she stomped off to sulk and leave with her brother."

"What happened to her?" I thought I sensed eyes on us, and glanced back to see Lady Ayra giving us a strange, yet unreadable, look. "Did she get sick?"

"No." His voice became a little clipped. "Shit happened, and then I became a gladiator."

"I see." A little awkward silence fell, and I hesitated in how to fill it. After a moment, though, I decided there was only one thing that was fair. "I didn't have friends, growing up. Others did, but I was often left alone." I had only been 'tolerated', until my healing skills proved that I was 'useful'. "I had my older brother, and eventually my younger, but they lived away."

"No friends, until you were a healer who could help them." His expression relaxed slightly, still stoic, but not as much of a wall. "Then they loved you."

"I wouldn't call it 'love'. I wouldn't even call it 'like'." 'Amicable respect' might've been a better summary. "So, I suppose the idea of having even an argument with a 'friend' seem a little odd to me."

"Do you not argue with your brothers?"

"We communicate mostly through letters, and the few times we're face to face, we simply… don't." I shrugged, smiling wryly. "There is an old 'argument', I suppose. My older brother wishes for me to live with him, and I do not want to be involved in the politics, but it's so old that we go through the motions, and just agree to the stalemate. Nothing, at least, like the one you described."

"Now that seems odd to me. Then again, I had friends before everything, and you were alone until you came here." His eyes lit up slightly and he smiled a little. "What did you do in your free time, then? Study?"

"I read, and I sewed. I made medicines..." I shrugged, laughing softly. "Really, my habits haven't changed since I was little. If I'm not healing, I'm working to make later healing easier."

"No wonder you do not socialize."

"I do not need to hear that from you."

"I socialize. Some. I went out for drinks with Alec and them."

"Is that why Alec came to me for hangover remedies this morning?"

"It's not my fault that he tried to keep up with me, and then didn't notice I wasn't drinking nearly as much as he thought I was." He chuckled and I reached up to muffle my own laugh. "Ah, your hair ornament is coming loose." He reached over and gently began fixing it, unpinning it briefly to pin it back better. "That's a very elaborate ornament."

"It was a gift, so now I am obligated to wear it." I held still, feeling a little embarrassed. It really was far too expensive. "It doesn't suit me, does it?"

"If you mean in terms of color and look, then it suits you very well." His fingers lingered in my hair. "But, it seems more elaborate than your preferred wear, so I suppose in that sense, it does not suit. You should wear more expensive clothes."
"My clothes get blood splattered too often for me to justify buying anything but the cheapest I can get, while still looking put together."

"I think the army owes you some more expensive clothes." He smiled slightly. "But you like the cotton."

"...Yes, I do." I frowned at him. "Is there any point in bringing that up?"

"No, not at all." His smile widened, just a little. "It was just a fun distraction."

"You're impossible." I rolled my eyes, and resigned myself to another silence, less awkward than the one before. However, King Jamke began pushing his way towards us, and his expression was grim. "What is-?"

"Injured," King Jamke informed me curtly. He showed no signs of battle, though he did look quite harried. "There's injured ahead, civilians from Noldion."

I didn't even bother asking further. I just snagged my staff and medicinal pack from the cart and rushed ahead, walking as quickly as possible. I half-thought about running, but worried that a running healer might cause a panic. A healer at a dead-run always meant something horrible had happened.

All thoughts of that, however, disappeared as I saw the small group of badly injured, and bandaged, people. I ran to them, but each person I tried to tend to shook their head and pushed me closer to the center of the group. I wondered why, especially given how many of them were in serious danger of bleeding out. But then I made it to the center, and saw why. Lady Grahnye was there, and she cradled Lord Ares to her chest, a Lord Ares who had blood on his shirt, a stained bandage underneath, and whimpering, crying, and sweating. The people here wanted me to tend to him first.

"Lady Grahnye!" I called, sliding to my knees to gain just an extra little moment of time. She looked at me in a daze, like she wasn't quite sure I was really here, silently crying. "Please, hand him to me." I held out my hands to her. "I'll do everything I can."

"Miss Alicia..." she breathed. She gave me Lord Ares without hesitation, and I quickly took off his shirt to look at the injury. It looked like an arrow wound. "Oh, thank the gods... we had to stop because everyone was so tired, and Ares..."

"I'm here, and the rest of my group isn't far behind, if they haven't caught up already." Some noise behind me hinted they were here. "What happened? Why are you here?" Asking her questions would keep her from panicking while I worked. There was something 'off' about the injury, and I needed to figure out what it was first.

"We got word that Elto was imprisoned, and then not even a day later, Heirhein's forces were attacking." She shuddered. "They hadn't been friends of ours for years, ever since Lachesis refused their heir's courting. But the others are reinforcing, and we had so few..." Her voice cracked. "Then, while we were trying to bring civilians inside the castle for safety, someone shot Ares. I've been trying to tend to him, but none of the medicines seem to be working."

"I see." A terrible thought occurred to me, and I brought up my staff to check if I was right or not. "How far are we?"

"We're not too far. Honestly, I'd hoped to be farther, as I'm certain they sent people after us, but..." She looked down worriedly at Lord Ares still resting in my lap. "Just... when he was hit, and Lachesis whispered she didn't know what to do and couldn't figure out how to heal him... well,
that's when Sigurd and his reinforcements came. He cut a path straight through to us, and we showed him. Sigurd said you were on your way, Miss Alicia, and Lachesis suggested I take a group of injured to come meet you…”

"I'm glad you did." My hands shook slightly, from sheer rage, as I realized I was right. "That Elidiot or whatever his name is better be dead by the time we get there, or I might just go against one of the tenants of being a healer. The medicine wasn't working because Lord Ares is poisoned." To hide my shaking, I ran a hand through his hair, and smiled when he looked up at me with cloudy eyes. "I'll make it better, sweetie. I promise."

"Poisoned?!" She gasped, covering her mouth in horror. "They…"

"I'm going to pretend it was an 'accident', but somehow, I doubt it." But with the knowledge that poison was interfering with the injury, I used some medicines and my staff to clear it out and to get the wound to close. "There. It might scar, but…” I straightened and smiled at her. "But he should be-"

Something thudded into me. Absently, I quickly discerned that, whatever it was, it hadn't really hit anything vital. If I'd still been bent over, it might've caught me in the skull or eye or something, but since I was sitting straight, it was just in that awkward bit of flesh around the collarbone. It still made me numb, and all the air escaped my lungs as my eyes widened from the surprise.

Then the pain flooded me, and I hissed, doubling over, and trying to not squish Lord Ares in the process. That was when I saw the arrow and realized what had happened. I'd been shot, and likely because I'd been healing Lord Ares.

My ears roared, and it took me a second to realize that it wasn't just the blood and pain rushing through them. There were screams, and sounds of fighting. There was the sound of movement, and I looked up to see there was someone in heavy armor, running up with a lance aimed right for Lord Ares and me, and Lady Grahnye moved to shield us both as the person closed the distance far too quickly.

But then there was another bit of movement, a blue and gold blur out of the corner of my vision, with… with a trail of blue and white stars surrounding them, according to my hazy eyes, but that was likely just a hallucination brought on by the pain. The blur hit the enemy in one brutal hit, one that just cracked through the armor as if it were nothing but paper. As the shards of armor clinked down, the blur turned around and cut their head off with ease. The corpse hit the ground with a loud 'clang', one that seemed to make everything freeze, and I could only stare as the blur 'solidified' into Chulainn. He was heavily splattered with blood, all the way to his hair, and his expression was stony, his eyes like chips of ice. But it was him.

For some reason, though, I smiled at him. It might've been the pain, but his rescue… it made me think… it made me think of 'that question' and his 'answer'. 'Who heals the healer?' 'Who protects the healer?' It just… made sense to me, that he'd be right here when I needed the help.

He stared at me for a moment, before his expression softened, and his eyes warmed. He did not smile back, but I didn't need that to know he was glad he made it on time. His expression quickly hardened, though, as more enemy soldiers appeared, and he fell on them viciously, cutting through them with ease. I did not see the 'sparkles' again, making me almost certain that it had simply been a pain-induced hallucination. But he didn't need any sort of 'extra help'. He cut through them with a brutality that almost seemed more like a beast than a human, and some part of me wondered if one reason why he was always so stoic… was to keep 'this part' of him in check.

"Death's Hound…” Lady Grahnye's words caught my ear, and I glanced at her, a bit curious. "I'd
heard of a golden-haired mercenary who was once a gladiator," she explained once she realized I was looking at her. Her hands were shaking, and I wasn't sure what all in this craziness had sparked the trembling. "One who wore blue armor and fought with a sword. He earned the name of 'Death's Hound' in the arena for how brutally he fought, and it was a name that followed him even as he bought his freedom and became a mercenary."

"...His name is Chulainn," I told her firmly. "He is a good man."

"I'm sure." She nodded, and smiled at me. "Elto is also fierce in battle, but there are few I'd call kinder. I was simply… startled by Chulainn."

"Okay." I looked down at the arrow still in me, and tried to think through the pain. "I need you to get me L... Aideen. Get me Aideen." I thought that perhaps if I dropped the title, just as she had wanted, she might move just a bit faster. It was manipulative, but I needed that extra bit of speed to survive this. "I'm going to need help with this. It might be poisoned." It definitely hurt, and I half-wanted to pass out. But I had work to do.

"I'll get you a guard."

"I don't need one. Chulainn won't let anyone through." I nodded towards where he was holding off the enemy for emphasis. "I'm sure others won't be long. Please."

"...All right…" She ran off, and I closed my eyes, focusing on staying conscious and not ill while holding Lord Ares protectively.

It was harder than I would've liked, but I managed to hold on until Lady Grahnye and L... Aideen returned. Barely.

I'd been lucky; the arrow hadn't been poisoned. It was, likely, that they hadn't had time to apply the poison to the arrow before firing. So, instead, I just had a bandage across my upper torso, and shoulder, and some bits of pain as I worked on healing those I could. Aideen had wanted me to rest, but there were too many injured for her to take on her own, and I was the only other healer. I was just very thankful Lord Oifeye and Prince Shanan were still back at Evans. I did not want to think about what might've happened if they had been ambushed.

"How are you?" Chulainn asked me. He was one of the last to be treated, mostly because he'd jumped into a nearby river to clean up before submitting to a checkover. It resulted in me giving him a lecture on how improper cleaning of injuries could lead to infection, and a lot of people, mostly the civilians, eyeing him up because wet shirts clung, and he'd removed his armor to make it easier for me to treat his injuries. I had to actually chase a few away to assist some of the others when they offered to 'help' me. I had no patience for such nonsense. There was nothing special about shirtless men. "How is your injury?"

"It's been tended to," I replied, working on cleaning the last of his injuries, one on his arm. My tone was a little clipped, but that was because I had to deal with some other 'helpers' who really just wanted to ogle Chulainn. There were others more injured. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't take out my exasperation on you."

"It's fine." He gave me a little confused smile. "But why are they…?"

"I don't know." I shrugged, and shifted a bit. He and I were sitting on the ground a short distance away from the rest of the group, with my medical kit next to me. His armor, and sword, were next to him. "I guess it's because you're handsome and well-built, and they're being silly because they're
relieved to be alive."

"...I am?"

"Yes, yes, I suppose. I'm not really the one to ask. I see people in all sorts of states, and I'm often stripping them down to reach the injuries." I shrugged, still cleaning his injury. It was a shallow cut to his arm, so that was why I'd left it last. I tried to not focus on the faint scars lingering around his wrist, just as I'd ignored the scars across his abdomen, torso, and back. It was hard, though. These ones looked far more deliberate, and I… didn't like the thought. "Does this burn?"

"A little." His smile grew slightly. "I suppose that means infection?"

"With this medicine? Yes. You must've washed some moss or something into it when you jumped into the river." I gave him a look and he actually squirmed a bit. "This is why you have to be careful when you bath in rivers."

"I… just thought it would be harder for you if I was covered in blood."

"I would just do as I do with everyone else. I would wipe the blood off, and then do a check for blood-borne diseases. You will submit to that as soon as I get my staff repaired or go get one from whichever box we put them in." There had been so many injuries that Aideen and I had run out of charges in our staves. I'd almost gone to get one more, but Chulainn had been the last one, and his injuries hadn't strictly required one.

"I think we labeled that one with three stars."

"Ah, yes, that's right." I put down the medicine and began winding the bandage around his arm. As I did, though, I remembered when he'd saved me, and what Lady Grahnye had said. "Chulainn?"

"Hmm?"

"Does the nickname 'Death's Hound' mean anything to you?" I glanced at his face, and saw it blank. This time, though, it was the blankness of someone trying to remember. "Does it?"

"I… oh, yes, now I remember. Yeah, that's something I've been called. I forgot all about it. Then again, no one ever called me it to my face." He shrugged, unbothered. "I was called 'dog' a lot in the ring. It's my own fault. I was only a gladiator because I accidentally killed some lord's hound in self-defense. I was then 'his' until he got a new one, and then thrown into the ring for him to win money. Then as I won, they began to fear me. Made it easier to buy my freedom, that fear."

"You seem so…"

"I like dogs." He shrugged. "They're loyal, and caring. Overwhelming sometimes, though. They're silly."

"...We can get you one? I mean; I think we have some around Evans."

"I know. I feed them." He actually smiled, and there was a trace of boyishness to it, a ghost of the smile he must've had before… whatever happened to him happened. I had a feeling 'gladiator' and 'mercenary' were the least dark parts of it.

"I see." I smiled back, tied off the bandage, and set my hands in my lap. "I almost forgot. Thank you, Chulainn, for coming to my rescue."

"Oh, I was just the fastest. Others were heading that way too. Jamke, for instance, had an arrow."
"Ah." My smile fell as I thought of him. I still hadn't thanked him for saving me from Sadima. I was still just… horribly uncomfortable around him. I couldn't get past it. I knew I really should. He had proven himself a good ally, many times over. He had literally saved my life. But I couldn't move past how he'd killed some of our soldiers, had nearly killed Aideen, Lord Oifeye, Finn, and Prince Shanan. I just…

"What did he do?" Chulainn, however, just looked curious. "You avoid him."

"...He simply nearly killed some of… my friends…" I shook my head. "I can't… I try, but…"

"Take your time. Trust and forgiveness are earned, and everyone has a different 'threshold'. He lost a lot from you because he hurt some of the few people who care about you." He gave me a reassuring look. "You said you were alone. It makes sense that you would be less forgiving to those who you actually befriend."

"...I'm not sure if that's you saying it's okay to be petty, or if I'm just a petty person and should accept that."

"You are very hard on yourself."

"I don't think that's something I should be hearing from you, mister."

"Miss Alicia! Sir Chulainn!" Lady Grahnye's voice made both of us look up, and we saw her waving at us. "If you're done, we can return to Noldion!" she called. Lord Ares was asleep in her arms, exhausted by everything. "I'll show you how we can sneak in!"

"We'll be right there!" I called. I packed up my medical kit, and Chulainn quickly snapped on his armor and hooked his sword on his belt. When he stood, he offered me a hand up, which I took after a moment, a little startled by the assistance. I really wasn't used to such things. "Is everyone well enough to move?"

"Those who aren't are in the carts of supplies you brought." Lady Grahnye smiled, and it looked cheerful enough, though I saw the fear in her eyes. If the battle wasn't already over, or didn't end shortly after our arrival, sneaking in was going to be very difficult. Dew, the only 'thief' and sneaky one of the army, was with Lord Oifeye and Prince Shanan. "Follow me."

Despite her words, it did still take us a bit to coordinate our little group to move forward. Some of the faster and quieter of our group, such as King Jamke, Chulainn, and Lady Ayra, went ahead to scout. Azel and Deirdre kept close to me, with Deirdre actually clinging to one of my arms. I noticed some others in the group giving me worried looks, most noticeably Aideen, but she remained with the more heavily injured. Besides, as we walked, we soon heard the sounds of fierce battle. Horses whinnied as metal crashed on metal. People screamed through the pounding of hooves on dirt. We saw nothing, but I could imagine the field all too easily as a mess of churned, bloody mud, with corpses all over the place. It wasn't a very nice imagery.

It was even worse as we crested a hill and actually saw the battlefield. Now we could see the ruined houses they fought around, the smoke of barely deadened fires. Armor and weapons glinted in the sunlight, and there was so many that they almost blinded me.

Through the glare, I quickly hunted for a spot of blue hair in the mess. I found one towards the 'center' of the field, but soon realized it was the 'wrong color' for Sigurd. Based on the bits of armor I could make out from here, I guessed it was Finn, and he was fighting… he was fighting someone that even I knew was strong, and likely stronger than Finn should be fighting.
Time slowed as I was quickly proven right. His opponent, whoever it was, scored a brutal, messy hit to Finn's abdomen, slipping right through his guard. I could've screamed; I almost did. Then I saw Finn swing his own lance and actually strike whoever it was straight through the head, a strange 'second wound' hitting near it to just… split the head wide open. But time still ran slow, like molasses, as Finn slipped off his horse and fell to the ground. Two eternities later, a yell went up, revealing that the one Finn had killed was Elliot of Heirhein, the leader of the opposing forces.

Gods, that was not what I meant by Elliot being dead when we arrived. That wasn't even close.

The infirmary was a mess. Haphazardly set up bits of blankets and pillows for beds, some hay to soak up all the blood, and more chaos than usual because of having to set up 'my' things while healing were the least of my concerns. There were many injured, especially among the civilians, and it did not help that some more, like Sigurd, were injured because they'd tried to do the nice thing and help the Heirhein soldiers, and they'd tried to kill them in return.

One thing became all too clear. Noldion was hated. I tried to listen to rumors, but all I could hear was… pettiness. Heirhein hated Noldion because Lady Lachesis refused the now-dead Elliot and he had felt entitled to her because of 'flirtations', which I was sure existed only in his mind. A castle in the north, Anphony, disliked Noldion because Lord Eldigan had discouraged the high taxes their lord forced on his citizens. A castle to the east, Mackily, was a little more neutral, but viewed Lord Eldigan as an 'upstart' for throwing his weight around as the Hezul major, all done just to prevent a war.

Growing up, I had always heard Augustria as the 'country of knightly honor'. I supposed it showed, clearly, just how far corrupted most leadership was. Lord Eldigan was probably the only 'knight' left in the whole country, and that… being the only 'honorable' one in a mess of corruption and manipulation didn't end well, normally.

I shook my head free of such thoughts and focused again on my current patient. Finn. Things had finally calmed, so I was giving him a second check over, before going to give Sigurd a preliminary report on what was going on in the infirmary.

"You really should sleep, Finn," I whispered, bringing the blankets over him again. It had been touch and go for a long while. Abdominal wounds were always messy, and Finn's had been deep enough to actually to damage organs. Thankfully, though, I'd gotten to him quickly enough to save him. "You're going to have a hard recovery."

"Mmm… sorry…" Finn mumbled. The pain medications made him groggy, but he still did he best to look at me. "Asked to be… careful… but…"

"..." I ran a hand through his hair, and smiled. "You're alive, Finn. I will forgive you for anything and everything, so long as you stay alive."

"But…"

"Hush. You're forgiven. Now rest. I want my best sweeper back in perfect condition as soon as possible." I let my smile widen to better show I was teasing, and he managed to smile back. "Just rest, Finn. You're fine."

"K…" His eyes were slowly losing focus. "You're… a nice big sis… jealous of Azel…"

"...Well, you can think of me as your big sister if you'd like." The words were odd to say, but they didn't feel uncomfortable. I supposed at some point, I did sort of 'adopt' Finn as another 'little
brother', because of all the medicine lessons, and all the times he helped me and Prince Shanan. "Okay?"

"K…" He nodded off then, smiling sweetly. I wasn't sure he'd even remember the conversation when he woke up again. But I would, and I supposed I could tease him a bit more, like I did Azel.

It was probably an odd time to realize that this army had become my family, a bit. But it felt 'right', like I'd come to that conclusion before, unconsciously. If I thought of them like that, then many of their 'strangeness' no longer became so 'strange'. I still disliked being spoiled, but it was like Arvis and Azel. They just did it, and I rolled my eyes and let them get away with it.

I checked him and some of the other badly wounded before giving myself a cursory wash, and a change of clothes, and heading off to give Sigurd a preliminary report. It was important for a healer to look 'clean' when not job. There was no need to freak out the people in the halls. A messy healer brought only worry, almost as much worry as a healer at a dead run.

It didn't take long to reach the study Sigurd was using. Apparently, Lady Grahnye had him set up in Lord Eldigan's study, to his discomfort. But it was easy for people to remember, especially the panic Noldions, and it wasn't far from the infirmary. It was also easy for the sounds of arguing within, and as I opened the door, I quickly realized just who was arguing: Sigurd and Lady Lachesis.

"Please, Sigurd!" Lady Lachesis pleaded. She looked ready to cry. "I've had enough of simply waiting around!"

"Lachesis, you're not trained for an army," Sigurd countered. He looked conflicted, and glanced at Lord Quan. Lord Quan had his hands up in the air, shaking his head. "You just don't want to get involved because you know Eldigan will kill us."

"Eldie would understand!"

"And what of Noldion castle?"

"Grahnye is here!"

"Ares was nearly killed."

"That's why I want to fight! I want to keep them from reaching here again, instead of just waiting for word!"

"I don't suppose you can finish this discussion when both of you aren't exhausted," I suggested, gently interrupting the argument. All three whirled to face me, and I made sure to smile. "I'm here to give a report, Sigurd."

"Ah, yes," Sigurd murmured. He leaned against the edge of the desk, and I noticed that the chair didn't look like it had been pulled out. He hadn't sat at the desk. He had just stayed near. "You sent Oifeye earlier…"

"That was for the first round of things, to give you an idea of what we were dealing with." Truthfully, in the mess, I had forgotten I had even sent Lord Oifeye off. I'd mostly done it to keep him busy, as he was doing what he could to help, but we were completely overrun and he had been running out of things he could do. "Do you still have the numbers?"

"Yes, right here." He picked up a piece of paper, and for a moment, I tried to think of when I would've had the time to write anything. But when I took it, I quickly realized what had really
happened; Lord Oifeye had written down the numbers himself. "I'm guessing then you're here to clarify the unknown?"

"Yes." I skimmed the note, feeling the urge to wince when I saw the actual numbers. At the least, I needed Lady Lachesis in the infirmary for now. Aideen and Lady Ethlyn were not enough, and we were running low on medicine. "We have fifty more dead, about a hundred more that could die at any moment, and the rest are injured. I'll get those exact numbers for you when you are ready to leave."

"Unfortunately, that'll be in the morning." Sigurd grimaced at my incredulous look. "Heirhein is sending more. We already got word on that. We must meet them, quickly, and Noldion cannot take another assault. They were taken completely off-guard, and had no defenses set up."

"Which is why I want to help!" Lady Lachesis insisted. She scowled. "I helped when I was in Evans! Miss Alicia said so!"

"That… was a different campaign," Sigurd mumbled. He still looked conflicted. "Regardless, Alicia, I'll need those numbers tonight."

"I'll do what I can, but it will be impossible to get an accurate count until the morning, and even then, it depends on when you leave," I replied. I resigned myself to no sleep tonight. "Oh, there is one I can say easily, though." I looked to Lord Quan, who seemed surprised. "Finn will remain here."

"Oh, he'll be fine with a bit of healing and some rest," Lord Quan scoffed and I felt my temper burn. He was known for his pride, and his dismissal of things that he should probably take seriously, yes, but I was a healer, and this was Finn! I had literally just told him to consider me his 'big sister', and if there was one thing I'd learned from Arvis, it was that the older siblings protected the younger ones. "He's my squire and-"

"And I am the Chief Healer of this army." I kept my voice quiet, calm, even. But something in my demeanor must've alerted him that he'd just said one thing too much because he instantly looked panicked. "That means I have final authority on the health of everyone in this army. You, and Finn, are part of this army. I have the final word on whether or not someone is ready for combat, Lord Quan, not you or anyone else in this room. My word overrides even Sigurd's."

"W-well, yes…" His eyes darted around, desperately looking for some sort of shield. "But…"

"Finn will be staying here, in the castle, where I can keep an eye on the injury that tore through his abdomen and damaged internal organs. If you insist on fielding him despite my order, then you may purchase a coffin for him and find another healer to deal with your cursed pride." I put a lot of venom in those last three words and he flinched. "If you want your pride to kill yourself, that is your own business. I have no right to order you otherwise, so long as your health remains good, though I will remind you that you have a wife, a child, many friends, and an entire country that would mourn your loss. But you will not kill Finn because of your pride. I will not let you, especially right now. Do you understand?" I glowered when there was no response. "I asked if you understood."

"Y-yes…" Quan mumbled. He looked down, like a child scolding for not doing his chores. I refused to let that pass. "I didn't hear you. Repeat that. Clearly."

"Yes, Miss Alicia, I understand." Now he glanced up, but he quickly looked away when he saw how angry I still was. "I-"
"No. Quiet. I will hear no more from you today. I am extremely disappointed that you let your pride rule over your reason, considering Finn has a gut wound." I turned to Sigurd, who looked like he couldn't decide between being shocked and laughing. "I will return to the infirmary now. Lady Lachesis will come with me for assistance, since I'm up to my eyes in injured. Send if you need me, but I have people's lives to save and those numbers to get to you."

"Certainly," Sigurd replied. He left it unsaid that I had effectively recruited Lady Lachesis into our army. In matters of the infirmary, I held more authority than him, and I needed more healers. He and Lachesis could talk later of her joining the army as a fighter as well. I needed her now. "Try to get some rest."

"I will try to get some while keeping children from bleeding out," I replied, still feeling cranky. Thankfully, he smiled, aware that I wasn't mad at him. "If he complains-"

"I'll handle it. I'm used to it. Go on."

"Thank you." I turned on my heel and marched off, returning to the infirmary, still absolutely furious, barely slowing so that Lachesis could catch up.

Lord Quan's pride was going to get himself killed. His pride was going to lead him to make a fatal mistake, to overestimate himself and those he held faith in, and get himself killed. I just had to hope it didn't get others killed too. But I doubted it. He was a prince, and a leader. When leaders made mistakes, it wasn't just them that paid. A healer knew that all too well.

'Family' could be so aggravating sometimes.

Back in the infirmary, I directed Lachesis to keep an eye on Finn while Aideen, Lady Ethlyn, and I worked on others in the infirmary. I kept one eye on her, though, and noticed she was actually quite skilled with staves. If she gained a little more mental fortitude, she'd actually be a huge help in the infirmary. At the same time, though, that skill would make her an excellent field healer. I made a mental note to bring that up to her later.

But those were thoughts for another time. Eventually, we managed to get everyone we could stabilize and Aideen and Lady Ethlyn went to bed. I remained awake to stay on watch, and to figure out what numbers Sigurd would have for his morning charge. I hoped Deirdre would be okay, since I had little doubts that she'd remain here. This required a lot of speed, and we dared not leave Noldion on a skeletal defense.

"Oh, so that's how you heal that," Lachesis murmured, watching me tend to a little girl she called 'Jeanne'. Apparently, she was the daughter of one of the Cross Knights, one stationed away from here. She'd… had a brother, but he hadn't made it, and neither had her mother. But, with a little extra attention, she'd live, though she'd have a scar on her head from now on. "If only they could die twice. It's one thing to kill soldiers, but children… civilians…"

"This is what war is like, and why your brother wanted to avoid it," I whispered. I hunted through my packs and found a pink ribbon, likely stashed there by Lady Ethlyn without my noticing. I looked at it briefly, shrugged, and set it next to Jeanne. She could use it to hide the bandage on her head, if she wanted. "We're all stuck in a lot of madness."

"I suppose." Lachesis sighed heavily, drooping. "Gods, if only I had been stronger… if only I had been a better healer…"
"Lord Eldigan is to blame as well, for not giving you a better defense when he went to confront his king." I had little doubts Lord Eldigan hadn't already figured that out, though. "Most lived, Lachesis."

"But not all."

"...The first rule of being a healer is that you can never save everyone." I stroked her hair, hoping it would reassure her. "Death comes, and it is the job of a healer to fight death off. Our job is to look death in the eye and say 'not today'. Sometimes, death is intimidated. Other times, death scoffs. But, still, we save many death came for. That is what it means to be a healer. We tend to the injured, and keep death at bay for a little while longer."

"While a warrior's job is… to point death towards others?" Lachesis glanced at me, and she looked a little fragile. "To protect those under their charge? That seems… selfish."

"To be a warrior, or leader, one must pick a side. That side could be 'none', but they still pick. A healer, though, remains perfect neutral. They heal those who come to them, without letting their personal feelings come through."

"So, if Elliot had come to you, would you have healed him?"

"..." I fell silent for a moment, glancing back to where Finn was sleeping. "If he had come to me as a patient, then… yes, I would've. That's my job, to heal. Sigurd then could've used him as a hostage to force Heirhein to surrender, or that kindness might've made him pause." I shrugged. "It is my job, to heal people. If an injured is brought before me, I will tend to them, regardless of how much I want to kill them myself." Though, I would've been tempted. I would've been tempted to just let him die slowly, for what he did to Lord Ares and Finn. "However, what would've happened after he was no longer my patient wouldn't be my concern."

"I see." The look on her face implied she didn't quite 'see', actually, but she at least understood that this was important to me. "I'm going to check on Finn again. He… he only got into the fighting because Elliot targeted me, you see, and Finn was the closest one."

"Of course he got hurt protecting a princess. He's a knight in shining armor." I smiled a bit as she managed a weak laugh. "He'll be fine, Lachesis. His recovery will be rough, but he'll be fine."

"I'm glad." Her smile looked like it was hiding tears, but she quickly turned away and began fussing over Finn. I returned my attention to Jeanne, giving her one last check, before standing to go check on the next one.

A knock on the doorframe, however, caught my attention, and I turned to see Lady Grahnye standing there. "It's incredibly late," she chided, walking in. Lord Ares was in her arms, and he looked around curiously. "Are you never going to rest?"

"A healer's job is never really done," I replied with a shrug. I found a nearby chair to sit in and sat down before holding my hands to her. "Let me check Lord Ares again. I'm worried about that poison."

"You know, Miss Alicia, you saved his life. You can really just drop the title." She passed me Lord Ares without hesitation, and smiled at me. "I promise; he will not mind."

"I shall consider it." I rested Lord Ares in my lap, smiling as his eyes focused on me easily. I almost laughed when he reached up to grab my hair, but it faltered when he actually reached past and patted my cheek. His hand came away bloody. I'd forgotten how dirty I was. "...I should've
cleaned myself up first."

"Relax. You're fine." Lady Grahnye's smile sweetened. "Your hands are clean."

"Of course." Sighing, I carefully checked over Lord Ares, and used my sleeve to clean his hand. He simply giggled and gurgled as I poked and prodded, apparently thinking it was a new game. "I'll want to check him again in the morning, but I do think he'll be fine."

"Thank you." Lady Grahnye tried to take him back, but he protested and reached up to grab my hair. "He does love your hair."

"I wonder why." I gently pried his hand off, and held it. "It's just red."

"Well, maybe that's why." Lady Grahnye laughed. "I'm not sure if you've noticed, but Elto wears a lot of red. It's likely he just associates the color with him."

"That makes much more sense." I smiled down at Lord Ares, who smiled back. "Oh, right, I've been meaning to ask." I looked back to Lady Grahnye, putting on my best confused look. "Elto?"

"Oh, that." She laughed again, looking nostalgic. "When I first came here, we stopped at an inn along the way, and while I was there, I talked with a gentleman with blonde hair who went by the name of 'Elto'."

"Oh, I can already guess now. Sigurd told me Lord Eldigan would sneak into bars."

"Precisely." She grinned. "So, I simply call him by that unless we're in a formal setting, as a long-standing joke between us."

"Eldie thinks it's fun," Lachesis added, coming over to us again. She took Lord Ares from me and cuddled him to her chest briefly, as if reassuring herself that he was still here. "Oh, shoot, I meant Eldigan. I swore to not call him by that nickname."

"No, no, don't say that, Lachesis," Lady Grahnye urged. She held out her hands, and Lachesis passed Lord Ares to her. "It makes him sad that you no longer do."

"I can't be a child forever."

"No, but that does not mean you leave behind affection." Lady Grahnye's cheer faded. "But that's a good lead in. Lachesis, Sigurd told me you wish to join his army?"

"I do." Lachesis gave Lady Grahnye a pleading look. "Please? I'll be careful, I promise, and I'll listen, but I can't…" Her voice cracked. "I am a descendant of Hezul. I am supposed to protect Noldion. Yet when danger came, all I could do was plead for help. I need…"

"...You want to get stronger, and you believe you can gain that strength through helping him." Lady Grahnye sighed, and gave her a wry smile. "Well, you've always been stubborn, and it looks like Miss Alicia need all the healers they can get. So long as you promise to be careful, and to come home, then I'll plead with Sigurd with you." She held up a finger when Lachesis's eyes shone with happiness. "But you must promise. You are my family, even if it is by marriage. I love you dearly."

"I promise!" She lunged and almost tackled Lady Grahnye off her feet with a hug. "I extra promise! Thank you!"

"And you must write when you're away. Whenever that is."
"Promise!"

"Good." Lady Grahnye smiled, though she did look very sad and worried. "Oh, just stay safe, please."

"I will! As much as I can!" Lachesis beamed. "Thank you so much! I love you too, by the way. Don't forget that."

"I shan't." She laughed a bit, and then turned her attention to me. "Now, then, is there anything I can do to help? I do have Ares, but I can pass him to a servant if need be."

"Well, I won't say no to an extra pair of hands," I replied. I smiled a bit, and I knew it was tired. "Give Lord Ares to someone, though. I haven't babyproofed the place yet."

Lady Grahnye proved to be more than enough help, thanks to her own knowledge of medicinal herbs, and also her stories which helped keep us from overfocusing on the injuries, while not fully distracting us. I'd have to thank her, when I wasn't quite so tired.

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**Records on Azel:**

*Mage, Vala Minor, 18 years old*

Younger half-brother to Arvis of Velthomer, and Alicia, the only known bastard of Victor of Velthomer. A shy, quiet young man, who has a strong sense of honor.

*His Holy Mark is on his lower back.*

Skilled with Fire Magic, though a frail disposition sometimes makes him slow in casting. His power, however, makes up for it.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Author's note: Technically, Finn is supposed to get the Brave Lance later in the game (after conquering Heirhein in game). Like in most games where the Hero/Brave weapons show, it allows two attacks. In FE5, it also boosts luck by 10, which when combined with a max luck stat and his ability of prayer, pretty much gives him a 90% chance to avoid a death blow. Finn is really hard to kill in FE5, and I abused that a lot when I played, even if Lance Knights as a whole were kinda useless thanks to dismounting. (I will be 'playing' the prayer/miracle skill as either lucky dodges or lucky hold to 1 HP; this is how Finn survives in chapter, actually.)

Alicia chewing out Quan is for foreshadowing an event that happens towards the end of the first generation. Also, some little mythology gags playing on Chulainn's name (Liath Macha, apparently pronounced 'Liya Vhaca' if my friend isn't BSing me, is the name of Cu Chulainn's horse in the myths or one of them, at least). FE Heroes canonizes that Lachesis will, at least sometimes, refer to her brother as 'Eldie'. Jeanne is one of the substitute kids for Gen 2, specifically Nanna's sub.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Noldion
In the morning, the cavaliers left to take the fight to Heirhein directly. Those who fought on foot remained behind, doing what they could. Patrols were set, people helped rebuild the fallen buildings, and I tended to the injured. Everything was a bit of a whirlwind, mostly so that we could ignore how our friends were out fighting, and we likely wouldn't hear about how the battles were going until after they were done.

I worried over how many might die. They only had one healer, after all.

"I think this would look lovely on you, Deirdre!" Lady Lachesis cooed, tossing a dress of pale greys and purples at Deirdre. "Try it on, try it on!"

"Only if you try this one on," Deirdre shyly replied, passing Lady Lachesis a short white dress. "I think this will look nice on you…"

"Oh, I love it!" Lady Lachesis squealed and took the dress, holding it up in front of her as she twirled. "So pretty!"

"You should pair it with this!" Aideen suggested, holding up a sleeveless, pink surcoat or something. "A little color, and it'll go great with your boots!"

Lady Lachesis squealed again in delight, and I watched the three continue looking through the various clothes set up in the large market. Because so many stalls and stores had been destroyed, everyone had just set up in the town square. Normally, I knew, Lady Lachesis and Aideen would just order custom orders, but they didn't want to put more stress, and it seemed like the merchants were delighted to see them simply shopping. Especially since we were getting a discount, and surprisingly, not just because of Lady Lachesis. It was also my fault, because the merchants all had family and friends who had been injured, and they'd known I was the Chief Healer for Sigurd's army. They'd actually not wanted to charge us at all between her and me. We'd compromised with a discount.

I, however, had no idea why Aideen and Lady Lachesis had dragged me along. The only reason I could think of was so that Deirdre felt more comfortable, but she blossomed under everyone's attentions, so I rather thought I was superfluous.

At least, I thought so until Lady Aideen turned to me with a bright and cheerful smile. "Alicia, over here!" she called, beckoning me forward. She had a bundle of light blue cloth in her hands. "I think this will suit you!"

"...Are you buying me clothes again?" I asked, incredulous. I also remained where I was, refusing to get near. "You just bought me some!"

"That was months ago!" She reached over and dragged me towards her. "Here, try this on!"

"Why me?" I tried to protest, but Deirdre instantly jumped in, since she had to go to the changing
"Alicia, why are you hiding?" Lady Lachesis laughed, dragging me out from my hiding spot. It didn't seem to occur to her that I might not enjoy the attention. "Come on! Show off your prettiness!"

"I'm not pretty," I grumbled, unable to even pretend to be fine. This was not why I had agreed to come here. "So if you please-"

"Ah! Ayra, Chulainn!" Aideen suddenly called, waving. I jerked my head up to see Lady Ayra and Chulainn walking out of the local arena. They bore some bruises, hinting they'd been fighting on their own time. "Come over here! We're trying to convince Alicia that's she's pretty, but she's not believing us."

"You're not doing any convincing with a single statement." I barely checked the urge to glower as Lady Ayra and Chulainn glanced at each other, shrugged, and headed our way. "There is no proper argument to any of this."

"Oh, gods, you three are shopping," Lady Ayra groaned. She rolled her eyes and scowled as Aideen and Deirdre smiled. "Nope. I'm not being a doll for you today. Especially you." She pointed at Aideen, who pretended to sulk. "Your last attempt was disastrous."

"I maintain that dress would've looked lovely on you," Aideen countered. Her eyes sparkled as she turned to Lady Lachesis. "I don't think you saw it. It was the original choice for her dress for Deirdre's wedding and it was just-"

"It had too many gods damned ribbons! The thought of having to fight in that…"

"Well, it's not made for fighting."

"What's the point of clothes that you can't fight in? Or at least be able to actually safely move around in?"

I breathed a sigh of relief as Lady Lachesis, Deirdre, and Aideen focused their attention on Lady Ayra, leaving me to my space and quiet. I glanced up at Chulainn, still silent, and saw him give me a measuring look, expression unreadable as he studied my dress closely. I stared back, feeling a little… it wasn't quite unnerved. It was more like I was too big for my own skin, or perhaps too small, and he could see that easily. I nearly squeaked as he reached up and tucked some of my hair behind my ear, and I glowered, feeling even less like I was actually in control of my body.

He smiled back slightly, unbothered, and whispered, "it suits you. Are you comfortable?"

"Shopping is not my idea of 'comfort'," I retorted instantly. He actually laughed a little. "Being the middle of a spectacle is also not my idea of 'comfort'." I would need to thank Lady Ayra later.

"But what about the clothes?" He gestured to it for emphasis. "Are they comfortable?"

"...I suppose." I looked down at the dress. It was cotton, but very fine cotton. It was expensive, but not overly so. The color was nice, though I had no idea if it really did look good on me or not. It had a slit up one side so to allow freer movement, but that didn't bother me too much. Honestly, its design seemed to be a cross between what Deirdre wore and what Lady Ayra wore, meant to be both pretty and practical. "Now that I'm able to think about it."
"Then you should buy more of them."

"But that's...!" I automatically tried to protest. My brain hit a wall as to just how to do it. "It's really... I mean..."

"They're your friends." He put a tiny bit of emphasis on the last word, and I was reminded of our conversation on the way to Noldion. "That's why it seems strange. You're not used to friends buying things for you. Only your brothers. But you like the clothes, yes?" His slight smile widened when I nodded. "Then let them spoil you. You spoil them too."

"...I'll take your word for it." I felt... awkward. Awkward was the word I wanted. "But please save me from their talks of jewelry. I know that's next and I really have no need for."

"Ayra and I will do what we can." He stepped away briefly, before pausing. His expression was blank before he leaned down to whisper in my ear. "You're very beautiful, by the way." Then he walked off to Lady Ayra, nudging her side and murmuring something I didn't catch from the sudden roaring in my ears. I barely noticed Lady Ayra sending me a sympathetic smile, and only just caught her convincing Aideen, Lady Lachesis, and Deirdre to just keep things simple.

My attention was on Chulainn, though he hung back, because his simple compliment echoed through my head far too much, and he was smiling every so slightly, and even though I didn't think it was his best smile, it was still nice.

...I felt horrible awkward. What was wrong with me?

That evening, we got word that Heirhein had been captured. However, there were apparently bandits torching villages to the very north in Anphony, and of course, Sigurd was going to press on to help them. It even made sense tactically, since it would convince the locals that we really weren't here to invade. We'd just come to help Noldion, and got dragged into something much bigger since Augustria was attacking us.

Lady Ethlyn sent back the injured reports, and the numbers were enough to make me wince. I saw the small tear stains in the corner, where she hadn't pulled back in time. I wrote her a letter back, reminding her of one of the central rules of being a healer ('You cannot save everyone') and, after a moment's hesitation, deliberately crossed out the 'Lady' in front of her name, and used her name without title for the rest of the letter, telling her silly stories of what was happening here, reassuring her about Altenna and Ares. I hoped it would make her smile, slightly, especially since I knew she likely wouldn't tell anyone. A healer had to be confident at all times, and she was the sole healer with Sigurd at the moment.

Little bits of laughter caught my attention, and I looked up from my letter to see Finn and Prince Shanan happily playing with Altenna and Ares. Finn was still bedridden, though his wounds were healing very nicely, so Prince Shanan made a point to spend time with him every day, often combining it with babysitting duties. At first I had worried that taking care of two babies would be too stressful, but both blossomed with the responsibility, and I wondered if it kept them from fretting over Lord Oifeye, who had ridden ahead with Sigurd.

"...Miss Alicia." However, looking up made me realize there was another person in the infirmary, and it was one who made me tense. King Jamke hesitated in the doorway, and I was tempted to order him out just for that. It made the nearby patients uncomfortable. "My pardon," he began. Even his tone was awkward. "I..."

I set my letter to the side and walked over to him slowly, ruffling Prince Shanan's hair as I passed,
checking on Finn's injury, tending to other patients. I took my time, mostly to gather my own calm and politeness. If it had been an emergency, he wouldn't just said so. When I finally reached him, I gestured for him to join me outside, and stepped into the hallway. After a moment, he followed, but still hesitated, as if waiting for me to say something. I, however, simply stood where I was, arms crossed, and held still. I was a healer. Healers knew waiting far better than most.

"I was wondering if you knew where Dew was," he finally said. He looked to the floor and the wall, anything to avoid looking me in the eye. "Azel said he was heading here?"

"Dew acquired some medicines he wished to drop off with me, as well as some healer staves." I chose not to ask where he had gotten either. For one thing, the staves he brought had blood crusting the cracks, where someone had washed it, but hadn't done a thorough scouring. That alone gave me a giant hint. "Once he had done that, he asked what else I needed, and told me he'd 'keep an eye out' before leaving." We both had known he'd meant to steal it, but my supplies were already so low; I did not have the luxury of maintaining 'moral superiority' when the things he 'acquired' saved sizes. I had simply told him to make sure he did not take from the 'needy'. "Why? Did you need something?"

"I try to keep an eye on him. He's one of the younger ones, after all, and he gets into trouble easily." He shrugged. "I guess I'll keep looking for him."

"I'm surprised you have the free time to look for a single child." The words came out a little more… caustic than I had intended, mostly because I was concentrating so much on keeping polite, calm, and cool.

"I'm on break. Breaks are important."

"Alas, a healer only knows breaks when she sleeps, especially during a war. Wounds are such fickle things." I smiled calmly. "Well, if that was all, I shall return to my watch, and thinking of tips for Ethlyn. Arrow injuries are difficult to treat." The last line was definitely the result of my temper burning. I could not forgive him. I simply couldn't. Perhaps it was hypocritical, since I was such good friends with Lady Ayra, and she had also been our enemy, but I just couldn't forgive him yet. "Pleasant day."

"...Pleasant day." He turned and walked away. I watched him leave, eyes narrowed slightly. I couldn't forgive him. But there was something that… I could do.

"I almost forgot." I pitched my voice so that it carried, and I watched him still. "Thank you for saving my life, with Sadima." I kept my expression impassive, even as he turned around to look at me with his own unreadable expression. "I realized I had not yet thanked you for that."

"...You're welcome, Miss Alicia." He bowed slightly, expression still unreadable, and turned around again, walking away.

This time, I simply watched as he turned around a corner to disappear, and sighed, drooping. At least I managed that much. It bothered me that I couldn't do more. I'd never realized I was the type to hold a grudge. Then again, I never really had anything to hold a grudge over, I supposed.

"Alicia!" However, all gloom and the like vanished as Deirdre popped out of nowhere and hugged me from behind. "Hey, are you busy?" she asked, leaning forward to look me in the face. I knew she was barely standing on her tiptoes to do that. "I was hoping we could talk."

"I've enough time for that, yes." I replied, laughing. I turned slightly so that I was still in the hug, but she didn't have to strain so much to talk to my face. "What is it?"
"Well, actually, I… have an idea." Her eyes took on a serious light, even as they sparkled with enthusiasm. "I'd like to run it by you."

"Okay?" I gave her a confused look in return. "Why me?"

"Well, for one, you are my very best friend, and for two, you have the most sense of anyone in the army." She grinned up at me. "So, you can find the holes in the idea, and together, we can make it a plan! Or discard it." She shrugged. "Like I said, it's only an idea at the moment."

"I…" I sighed, and smiled in resignation. I could not say 'no' to her, especially when she was like this. "Well, let me check over my patients one more time. I have a feeling this will take more than a moment."

"I'll help!" She giggled and even hopped a bit. "Let's do this!"

I'd later spend the next couple of hours thinking she'd hit her head, but in the end, she was right. She and I did manage to make a decent plan, one that we brought to Lady Ayra for refining. The next few days were going to be very, very long.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Just a little restful chapter compared to the last one. While FE4 has an emphasis on mounted units throughout the entire game, the first part of Chapter 2 relies a lot on speed if you want to get everything, meaning that for the most part, your foot units aren't going to see combat until the last half of the Chapter.

Side note - in game, if you have Arden move to a specific spot on the peninsula south of Heirhein, he'll have an event that lets him gain the Pursuit Ring, a very useful item in game (though it's infinitely more useful on other units; I often leave it on Ethlyn for Leif to inherit). Another event that happens in game, but not in this story, is the event between Dew and Lachesis, where they get a minor boost to Love Points, and Lachesis gets the Thief Sword, a weak sword that gives her the steal skill, likely as a means to make it easier for her to buy the Elite/Paragon Ring (which appears later in game, but like most rings, will not feature in this story).

Next Chapter - Sleep
Chapter 10) Sleep

Quickly, taking our time, we put our little plan into motion. Lady Lachesis has heard terrible rumors of Mackily's lord, Clement, using a powerful Sleep staff to make it easier for his soldiers to collect 'taxes', among other things. While we're uncertain if they're true, it is enough to make us worry, especially since we did have proof that Mackily was harsh on its people, and that Clement seeks to acquire more 'beautiful staves'. Worse, Mackily was the safeguard castle between Noldion and Agusty, and it was becoming increasingly clear that we would have to march on Agusty itself to free Lord Eldigan.

Thus, Deirdre's ruse. If it works, Mackily is ours, without a drop of blood shed.

Messengers had been coming back and forth from Mackily for the past few days as Deirdre set up her little plan. I was thoroughly certain Sigurd was going to hurt us for this, but I had to admit we had things covered rather nicely.

"So, I need to stay here and help Finn?" Shanan asked, trailing after me as he helped me carry some medicines. He'd finally put his foot down and begged me to stop calling him by title, and I just couldn't say 'no' to his pout. "I'll make sure he stays just fine!"

"I'm sure you will," I replied, smiling down at him. "That's why I assigned that job to you." Finn was not quite recovered yet to join our backup team, to his displeasure. "He is well enough to walk, so you two can patrol the Noldion while we're gone."

"Leave it to us!" He grinned. "We'll keep everything safe for Grahnye, Ares, and Altenna! Promise!"

"You're the best, Shanan." I glanced up and noticed Chulainn walking down the hall. The look in his eyes told me he wanted to talk. "Shanan, actually, why don't you pass your burden to Chulainn and go ask Grahnye what tasks you can do for her?"

"Huh?" He frowned, but then he looked up at Chulainn, curious. Then, suddenly he grinned. "Oh, wait, I get it! Yeah!" He passed the medicines to Chulainn, laughing for some reason. "Have fun! Make sure to say goodbye before leaving!" And he dashed off, in a strangely good mood.

I watched him leave, startled. "I didn't expect so much cheer." I looked to Chulainn. "Do you have any idea?"

"Maybe one, but he's a little young to be that observant," Chulainn replied softly. But he simply shrugged off my curious face. "I wanted to check on the various groups. Do you really have to have only the four of you within?"

"We figured he'd let down his guard if a group of women showed up," I explained. He and I began walking down the hall, towards the infirmary. Deirdre had been ill this morning, so I'd wanted to give her another checkup. "There aren't a lot of women in the group, you know, that would be safe in a battle situation."
"Including you. You have no combat ability."

"A healer needs to be near, just in case." I had insisted on it, since so many things could go wrong. "I won over Aideen, so she's remaining with your group."

"Why?"

"Well, I agreed to the plan, and helped make it, so it follows that I see it through." I felt a little odd, and peered up at him worriedly. "Are... you mad?"

"...I'm frustrated." He sighed heavily, not quite looking at me. It made my heart hurt. "You are going to the heart of enemy territory, with three others, and you... don't fight. You don't really know how. If something happened..."

"Lady Lachesis will be bringing her live staff along."

"Then why can she not be the healer of the group?"

"Mostly? She'll be needed more as a fighter." We reached the door to the infirmary, but neither of us moved to head in. "But, really, I'll only be in danger if everything goes wrong, and in that case, you'll be there quickly enough." I smiled up at him. "Just move fast?"

"I swear; you are the only person I'd run to rescue." He opened the door and stepped through, leaving me to stare at that curious statement that made my face heat up. "Where does the medicine need to go?"

"J-just place them on the table." My voice was a little squeaky, and I ducked my head as I walked in and set my own little pile on the table. "Thank you."

"It's fine." His fingers brushed my cheek as they tucked some hair behind my ear, lingering a bit. I couldn't decide if I wanted to pin my hair back tighter or looser. "Don't do anything reckless."

"I'll do what I can." I shyly smiled at him, and he smiled back slightly before turning and walking away. I watched him a bit before fussing over the medicines, mostly to have an outlet for the nervous energy bubbling through me. I wasn't quite sure what else to do.

"Alicia!" Thankfully, Deirdre popped into the infirmary then, looking much better than she had earlier. "I passed Chulainn on the way," she explained, plopping down on one of the empty beds. Most of the injured had finally been allowed to move out of the infirmary and into their own beds. "Everything all right?"

"He's just fussing," I explained, smiling at her. I walked over and started giving her a once over, taking my time. "He's worried."

"I don't blame him. Besides, he's always fussing over you." She grinned, her eyes dancing. "Just you, though."

"You don't see him fuss over Shanan in that case. He's always making time for lessons." I frowned a bit as I noticed something a little odd. I couldn't even place what it was, so I snagged my staff and followed that feeling. "He's quiet about his worries, and everything."

"But not with you~" She giggled. "It's cute. I love it."

"Well, I'm glad you're having fun with it?" I almost asked more about her thought, but my staff's healing energy focused on a single point, and with the little other things I couldn't even name, my
mind came up with a 'diagnosis' instantly, and it was one that floored me. "...Deirdre?" I bent down to look her in the face. "Have you been feeling odd lately? I don't mean just this morning, either."

"I… suppose a little?" She frowned, tilting her head as she thought. "I've found that certain smells make me nauseous. That's what got me this morning, I think. My breasts have been a bit sore too, but nothing that wasn't unusual before a period. Well, maybe a little more, but still…" She shrugged. "Perhaps a little more tired? It didn't seem enough to slow me down, or anything, so…"

"One more thing." I gave her my most serious look. "Have you missed a period? A moonday?"

"Um…" She frowned a little again. "Now that you mention it, I suppose I am a bit overdue. But with everything going on, I didn't think anything of it."

"..." I sighed, heavily, head dropping. "You're pregnant."

"Huh?" She sounded squeaky. "I'm… what?"

"Pregnant. I think you're pregnant. You've a baby growing in your womb. Congratulations, you're going to be a mother." I gave her a wry smile. "Which I have now found out right before a mission."

"Oh!" Her eyes widened. "I promise to be extra careful!"

"I'm still worried that the stress will..." I sighed again. "Oh, but this won't work properly without you, and dang it, I know you'll stress either way." I paused, thinking quickly. "We'll move Chulainn's group closer to react more easily."

"Yes."

"And you're not going to participate in any fighting we might have unless you're directly threatened. I'll tell Lady Ayra and Lady Lachesis so that they know to prioritize defending you."

"All right." She hummed a little in thought, and nodded. "I've a thought. May I stand up?"

"Yes." I stepped back so that she had the room, and to my surprise, she walked over to where her Silence rested in the corner. We stored it here, so that there was no chance of the messenger accidentally seeing it. "What is it?"

"I want to test something." She took Silence and, for some reason, held it out to me. "Here."

"...Okay?" Slowly, I took Silence from her, and it buzzed in my hands. "What the-?!"

"I thought it might like you. I do, after all." She smiled sweetly. "Okay, stay extra close. If I get too nauseous or nervous, you can use this instead of me."

"...Okay." I sighed, not quite liking this. "But after this, no more battles for you. I mean it."

"Okay!" She beamed, looking very pleased, and I just smiled, unable to help it. It was hard not to smile around her. "Let's get Ayra and Lachesis. The messenger will be here soon."

The messenger did arrive, barely giving us enough time to tell Lady Ayra, Lady Lachesis, and Chulainn the slight changes to the plan. I wasn't sure if that was a blessing or a curse, since it meant they had no time to be angry, and we proceeded to go through with the plan with barely any pausing.
The trip to Mackily was in comfort, a day's ride in a carriage, with the rest of our group less than half a day behind us, hiding in the shadows of the path. Deirdre spent most of it sleeping, using my shoulder as a pillow, while Lady Ayra spent it tense, and growing tenser. Lady Lachesis used the time to trick me into calling her without title, and to whisper on how she couldn't wait for the baby to be born, so that Ares could meet them.

When we arrived in Mackily, we were escorted directly to the castle, where we were allowed to freshen up a little, and where Lady Ayra and Lachesis were instructed to tie their swords in their sheathes, for safety reasons. After a bit of time, long enough to make us wonder if he had really bought the ruse, Lord Clement of Mackily allowed us to come speak to him.

"My, my, I had not realized Lord Sigurd had won such a beautiful bride," Lord Clement murmured. He sat on his throne, a little bit above everyone, and he smiled slowly as Deirdre curtseyed. "He's quite lucky."

"I fear I must disagree, in that I am the lucky one, Lord Clement," Deirdre replied, clinging to her cloth covered Silence staff. I lingered directly at her side, mostly as moral support, while Lachesis and Lady Ayra hung a bit back. "Then again, perhaps he and I are both lucky?"

"Perhaps indeed." He sat back in his throne, and a staff clinked on the arms of it. That had to be his Sleep staff, kept in open view. "It's quite a pleasure to meet you."

"It is a pleasure to meet you as well. I'm grateful you allowed us an audience."

"I couldn't help but be curious, given everything," He looked concerned, but his eyes darted around. It only took a subtle look to see the soldiers edging closer. He agreed to this to make us hostages. I was certain of it. "I mean; you're the cause of our civil unrest, and yet…"

"Can you blame a wife for wanting her husband to come home?" Deirdre smiled sweetly, and the mood of the entire room lightened. "But, there is another reason…" She gestured to Lachesis, who stepped up. "Though, perhaps Lachesis can explain it better?"

"I can certainly try," Lachesis whispered. She took on a shy demeanor, nervous. "It's been a while, Lord Clement. I believe I was barely a child."

"That you were," Lord Clement replied. He actually chuckled. "It seems you inherited the same good looks as your brother, though."

"Thank you for the compliment, my lord." Lachesis blushed prettily, before becoming serious. "I am the one who called for Sigurd's aid. He only came at that request."

"Oh?"

"Yes." Lachesis nodded. "This is all a horrible misunderstanding. Heirhein attacked us, and…" Her voice cracked, and she shivered. Lady Ayra drew close and placed a comforting hand on her back, using the distraction to pull the cords on their swords. "They actually shot Ares. If not for Alicia, he would've died. A child, Lord Clement!" She looked up at him beseeching. "I tried sending out word, but Elliot, gods burn him, intercepted all the ones I sent to you and Anphony! So, fearful for Ares's life, I sent word to Evans, and… they came to help. But Heirhein kept on attacking, so…"

"Ah, so that is what is going on." Lord Clement looked thoughtful, but his eyes were calculating. "So, a truce, you suggest? What is the plan from then?"

"Ideally, we will talk to King Chagall about my brother's charges and imprisonment. No word has reached us, so we're completely lost in all of this." Lachesis sniffed and ducked her head. "It's all so
confusing…"

"I understand." He took on a mournful expression. "But, considering everything, if our king discovers this…"

"We do not mean for you to simply accept the offer on our word alone," Deirdre murmured. She held out her cloth covered staff, still smiling. "We've brought a gift."

"A gift, you say?" he asked. He looked intrigued. "Well, I have much of what I already want, so…"

"It's a beautiful staff." Deirdre's smile grew as Lord Clement stiffened. "As beautiful as your own, if I may be so bold?"

"Truly?" He gestured for her to come forward, eyes now glinting with greed. "Bring it here, so that I might properly see it."

"Of course." Deirdre walked forward slowly, with me following her. Lord Clement paid me no mind, nor did he pay attention to how Lachesis and Lady Ayra slowly shifted their stances, their hands 'just so happening' to be near the swords on their waists, and hiding how those swords were no longer bound.

Lord Clement paid none of us any mind at all, as Deirdre stopped just in front of him, and drew back the cloth, revealing the beautiful Silence staff. "Oh, my…" He grinned widely, like a child looking at a toy. He didn't notice how Deirdre was careful to set the cloth down, instead of just letting it fall. "It is not inferior to the one I have."

"I'm pleased you like it." Deirdre pulled it back slightly, shifting her hold on it nervously. We'd only get one shot at this. "It's quite rare."

"Is it?" His eyes sparkled. "What's it's name?"

"...Silence." The gem on Silence glowed, and a bit of light wrapped around it, before snaking out to strike Lord Clement straight in the throat. He tried to yell, but no sound came out. "Silence is this staff's name."

Both she and I ducked to the side then, as Lady Ayra and Lachesis charged. As the soldiers in the room yelled, and tried to attack, the two held their swords right at Lord Clement's neck in a clear warning. 'Come closer, and he will die.' None of them ever considered we'd take him hostage, and now, they paid for it.

"All of you stand down," Deirdre called. She took Sleep from Lord Clement easily, and held both staves in one hand. "I am a powerful mage, and these two are talented swordsmen." She pulled her tome from the cloth, revealing why she had set it down so gently, and stood again. "If you do not wish to see his head roll, or be reduced to dust by my magic, you will do as I say!"

Everything froze for a brief moment, and then, one by one, the soldiers did as she said. I relaxed slightly, realizing the hardest bit was over. Chulainn and his group would be in before long to secure the castle, so, we'd be…

A little bit of movement was all the warning we had before an arrow flew straight for Deirdre. She yelped and ducked underneath, dropping the staves and her tome. As she did, the soldiers began picking up their weapons again, clearly deciding they could kill us before we could kill our hostage. So, thinking quickly, I snatched Sleep from the ground and brought it up, putting all the force of my magic, empowered by my Vala blood, and the staff buzzed in my hand as its crystal shone like a sun on a cloudless day. From that light, thousands of tiny little sparks flew throughout
the room, and all those they touched dropped to the ground, fast asleep.

By the time the light faded, every enemy soldier in the room was unconscious. And we weren't dead. Even more surprisingly, I felt only a little drained, though I quickly noticed tiny cracks in the staff itself, and a slight cut on my palm, likely from the feedback. It couldn't do something like that often, and it was possible I'd damage my hand if I tried anyway, though I supposed that could be mitigated by switching hands. But that was a theory for another day.

"Send for Chulainn and his group," I suggested, smiling slightly at the other three. Lachesis's jaw had dropped, while Lady Ayra looked impressed. Deirdre beamed at me, perfectly pleased. "We need to get them tied up still, and since we have the castle, we can move some of the wounded here, yes?"

Well, that… ended up working after all. Perhaps miracles did happen.

"Good, you're still healing well," I whispered, tucking Finn into his bed. I had worried the trip over to Mackily would reopen his injuries, but they still held fast. "I'm glad." Of course, it had tired him out. He'd barely had time to stumble into the infirmary and collapse on a bed before passing out. He still slept peacefully.

"Is that normal?" Lachesis asked, looking worriedly at Finn. She bit her lip, wringing her hands. "I…"

"He used up his energy reserves, that's all." I straightened and smiled at her. "Are you up for keeping watch tonight?"

"Yep! I already slept anyway." She smiled warmly, and sat in the chair besides Finn, picking up a book from the table. "I'll be just fine."

"All right." I hesitated a bit at leaving them alone, but Lachesis was determined to continue healing Finn, and he was the only one who required someone to watch him. "Send for me if anything goes strange."

"I will!" She waved me goodbye, and settled into her chair, starting her book. I hesitated a bit more before leaving the infirmary, closing the door behind me. I felt almost restless. I couldn't believe it was a bloodless takeover. The worst wound had been my palm. I'd already checked over the captured Mackily soldiers in the dungeons, and all of my infirmary supplies were over full capacity, so I really had little to do. It made me feel… weird. I'd never… not had something to do, before.

I walked slowly through the halls, thinking a little bit on the recent events. We sent a message off to Sigurd, telling him that we had captured Mackily. I'd sent the Sleep staff for repairs, and claimed it as my own. I could make the best use of it, out of everyone in the army. Even now, hours later, the Mackily soldiers were only just beginning to stir away. That alone proved how valuable the staff would be in the infirmary. I could put the more injured to sleep, and maybe save on numbing herbs. Maybe, just maybe, I could deal with a little less screaming. So, it was mine. No one had fought me for it.

"There you are." Chulainn's voice startled me, and I whirled to see him walking down the hallway. "I went to the infirmary, and you weren't there," he half-teased. "I thought you lived there."

"No, I do technically have rooms outside the infirmary." I had them 'assigned' at each castle we stayed at. I just rarely used them, because I had to spend so much time in the infirmary. "Lachesis took over watching Finn, and there's no one else that needs me. No mending to be done at this
hour, and I have no more room for medicine. It's a strange feeling, really."

"I'm sure Lord Sigurd's group will give you enough heartache later." He shrugged. "Where is your room?"

"It's… this way, I think." I pointed down the hall and, hesitantly, began walking towards it. "It's not far from the infirmary. People still need to be able to find me easily."

"Of course." He fell in step beside me, escorting me to my rooms without the slightest bit of hesitations. I almost wished there was, if only so that I knew I wasn't the only one feeling so… odd. "I can't believe how well it worked."

"I know. It's quite startling."

"Princess Ayra was singing your praises. How you saved it?"

"I just snagged the Sleep Staff. I'm sure Deirdre could do it before long." An odd feeling pooled in my stomach, almost like I'd somehow swallowed a rock and it sat there. It wasn't a nice feeling, and I couldn't think of why I felt that way. I could only see that the feeling came at the mention of he and Lady Ayra spending time together, which… really wasn't my business. "Azel looked almost put out that he didn't get to do anything."

"It was an odd feeling, just being able to waltz right in. King Jamke and I talked about how we expected traps. But, there aren't any." He smiled slightly at my curious look. "We checked."

"Of course you did." I giggled, unable to help it. "Ah, here. This is my room." I knew it because Deirdre always tied a little silver ribbon on the doorknob, to help people find it, including me. "I suppose I shall actually get some rest, for once." I turned to smile at him, reaching up to brush my hair behind my ear. I really did need to pin my hair better. "So, thank you for-"

"Your hand." He took it gently, turning it so that he could better see the bandage Deirdre had wrapped around it. "I didn't notice you were injured." He sounded… sad about that. At least, that's what I thought it was, sadness and frustration, all at himself. "How did that happen?"

"It's minor." I made my smile reassuring. "It's a feedback thing, from using Sleep on so many people at once." Deirdre had confirmed that Silence actually did the same, and that she was so used to it that she didn't even think about it anymore. "Aideen checked it for me. It'll heal up in no time, even without a staff."

"I see…" His fingers lightly touched the bandage. "May I?"

"...You may." I held still as he unwrapped the bandage slowly, to look at the scabbing on my palm. It was a bit awkward, since I used my hands so much, but it would heal nicely. I already knew that. So, instead, my mind decided to focus on how gently he held my hands. His hands could grip a sword with ease, kill a person like breathing, but he was so careful, and not only with me. His hands were gentle as they ruffled Shanan's hair too, after a lesson.

He was such a gentle person, at his heart. It was almost heartbreaking he'd been thrown into such a hard life.

He studied my injury a bit before wrapping the bandage around my hand again. Then, to my surprised squeak, he actually kissed the palm of my hand, right on the bandage. I felt my face heat up with a blush, and it only darkened when I felt him smirk against my hand. "An old children's tale," he whispered softly, still holding my hand close. My face just went redder and redder. "Kiss the injury to make it better."
"That's a placebo effect," I retorted, stumbling a little over the words. I felt I had no control of my tongue, or really anything. "Nothing more."

"Maybe." He released my hand slowly, still smiling slightly. It grew when I tucked my hand against my chest protectively. "But does it feel better?"

"...You are a very mean person, aren't you?" I felt far more embarrassed and awkward than pained at the moment. "Nice, but mean."

"You have fun reactions." He actually grinned, and it was his boyish little grin. I adored seeing it, even if he was being horrible right now. "I'm off to patrol."

"Come to my room afterwards for a check-up." I glowered at him when his grin faded. "I mean it. I will hunt you down if you don't show."

"...All right." He smiled again, this time looking a little incredulous. But happy. He looked genuinely happy. "I will. Until then."

"Until then." I watched him walk off, resisting the urge to chase after him. I had no reason to, after all, and I just felt horribly awkward. Awkward, awkward, awkward. If only I had another word for the feeling, but that was all I knew.

That was it. I was writing Arvis about this. Maybe he could help me figure it out!

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**Records on Lex:**

*Axe knight, Neir Minor, 18 years old*

Youngest son of Duke Langbalt, a kind and hotheaded young man, who is known as the rebel son of Dozel. Childhood friend of Azel, and Tailtiu.

*His Holy Mark is on his upper right arm*

*Hits hard, and often gets the jump on enemies even when they ambush him. His fighting prowess has improved considerably thanks to the Brave Axe that he apparently got from a fairy.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

Author's Notes: So, this scene is inspired by a similar scene from the Oosawa manga, though in the manga, Deirdre learns she's pregnant a lot earlier. There's technically another castle, and three more units to recruit, before this one, but since those ones are farther away, they're actually off-screen, since Alicia's not with them.

As a cleric, Alicia has a B in staves, the same rank as the Silence and Sleep staves. That's why she can use both. (FE4 didn't have weapon ranks that gradually increased with use; it was a flat rank dependant on class and holy blood.)

Next Chapter - Interlude, Mackily
Interlude - Mackily

We sent a message off to Sigurd, letting him know we took over Mackily without shedding blood. We set up watches on the Mackily soldiers to make sure they don't revolt, and I deal with the more troublesome ones with Sleep. Deirdre tries to get a promise out of Clement to not do anything, but he only shouts insults at her, so she tends to keep him Silenced. It's no trouble on the staves; the local smiths are excellent at repairs, even for unusual staves.

So, the days pass, as we wait for word from Sigurd, or maybe even words from Agusty. But, so far, the only letters are the ones from home.

I'd written a letter to Arvis, just so that this oddness stopped distracting me. He'd replied promptly, but it took me a few reads to even process the words.

'I am pleased to hear everything is well, aside from your confusing emotions, but from what I can see, it appears I need to challenge this man to a duel to ensure he can properly protect you! No, don't frown; I merely jest, mostly. But, truly, dearest sister, it seems as if you're in love with him. I can't wait until you're back home in Grannvale, so that I might meet him. Though, I must admit to feeling conflicted, as I wish to also have a Very Important talk with him about how he'd better treat you right. No, don't frown; it's a big brother thing. Sigurd will back me up on it. Regardless, though, do let me know if you two end up becoming a proper couple. I'll prepare a small welcoming feast for him. No, don't frown; it's the proper way to welcome him to the family. Yes, I know that's the third time I've written that. You always frown when you're about to disagree with me, and I'm sure you're disagreeing a lot at the moment. Oh, but don't let 'small' make you think that I mean to insult him. I just know that you'd rather keep such things simple. If you want a bigger feast, though, merely say the word, and I'll ensure it. I'll make sure there's lots of apple cider, of course. Azel says that there's not a lot in Agustria, so I sent some along with my letter to him. You deserve all the treats in the world, but I fear that this is what I can send without weighing down the messenger. Write again soon, Alicia. You know I live to read your letters.

With all my love, Arvis.'

It was definitely Arvis's handwriting. It was even how he normally wrote when he was particularly excited, freely. But I couldn't quite... I was in love with Chulainn? That's what this mess of emotions were? What madness was this? If it had been anyone else, I'd be tempted to dismiss the words out of hand, but Arvis was always honest with me, and more importantly, always did his best to answer my questions the best that he could.

Arvis thought I was in love with Chulainn. I had to admit that the phrase did 'thunk' into place, like the last stone in a wall. But it was still so baffling. I couldn't believe that I'd even have the time to fall in love.

"Oh, hey, is that from your brother?" A sudden voice behind me made me squeak, and I jerked my head up to see Lady Ayra leaning over my shoulder, not even pretending to be subtle about reading my letter. "Given how he's described, I didn't expect so friendly a letter, but then again, you're his
"First of all, what are you doing in my room?" I finally managed to ask. I wasn't even in the infirmary. Since Finn was still the only patient, and since Lachesis had taken over for his recovery, I'd actually been in my room! "Second of all, there's no name mentioned. What makes you think it's about Chulainn?"

"Well, the answer to your first question is that I knocked, but no one answered, so I peeked in to make sure you weren't collapsed or something." She straightened and shrugged, crossing her arms. "My brother overworked a lot, so it's just something I'm used to still."

"I see." I squirmed, feeling like I couldn't quite scold her for that. After all, if I had collapsed, her coming in likely would've saved me. "Why did you remain?"

"What else? Curiosity. You've acted a bit strangely the past few days. I wondered if the letter had anything to do with it." She smiled slowly, eyes dancing with mischief. "As for how I knew it was about Chulainn? You two are the talk of the army."

"W-what?!" My voice went really squeaky, and my cheeks burned. "You must be joking!"

"Nope. Armies gossip all the time, and the current topic is you two. Even Shanan joins in." She laughed as I groaned. "I think there's some betting pools, but no one brings that up much around me. I think there's one involving me too."

"Ugh…" I had no idea how to react. How could they respect me as a healer if they thought I was… was some sort of lovesick twit? "This is the worst."

"Nah, most think it's cute." She plopped down on my bed, since I had no chairs besides the one I was sitting in, and pointed to the letter, which I quickly tucked into a medicinal book to hide. My blush darkened when I realized it was one of the notebooks Chulainn had gathered for me, with local remedies. "So, you had to ask? You really didn't know?"

"I didn't even have friends growing up, much less crushes!" I never got close enough to anyone. "So, yes, I had to ask!"

"Oh." She tilted her head, and she really reminded me of a cat right now, especially with her all perched on my bed. "Well, alright. Points for you, though, is that I'm pretty certain Chulainn is at least interested."

"I don't even know!" I groaned, burying my face in my arms on the desk. I felt mortified. "What the heck am I supposed to do?"

"You could ignore it, which isn't fun, or tell him, which… isn't very fun, but it's slightly better, at least in my opinion." She got up and rested a gentle hand on my back. "Ultimately, at least. For now, why not just spend some more time with him?"

"I have my work." My voice was muffled. "I always have my work."

"Now that sounds like running away." She shifted, black hair falling down almost like a curtain, and she smiled at me. "Come on. Won't it be more distracting thinking of thing while trying to work?"

"...Darn it." I whimpered. "Why do you have to be right?"
"Someone has to be." Her smile grew. "Well, how about for now, just for now, you come with me to the market? We can shop for Shanan, and you can calm down a bit and actually think of what you want to do."

"...I can do that." I straightened slowly, still feelinghorribly awkward. Why did the bards always sing of 'glorious love'? I just felt like an idiot. "Hey, is this the advice you're taking with Lex, by the way?"

"FREAKING HELL!" Her yelp, and blush, made me laugh. "L-Lex has nothing to do with anything!"

"I'm sure." I smiled finally. "Here, ramble at me. You listened to me, after all, Lady Ayra."

"...Fine, on one condition." She leaned down and frowned at me. "Drop the 'lady'. Just call me 'Ayra'."

"...Very well, Ayra." My smile grew, and she returned it. "Shall we head to the market, then?"

After returning from the market, I went to find Deirdre. It occurred to me that, as my best friend, Deirdre really should be one of the first to know I'd 'figured out' my feelings for Chulainn. I even had a good excuse for bringing her into the infirmary. Knowledge of her pregnancy had spread through the army, and her morning illnesses were getting worse as she progressed through her first trimester. I needed to give her a check up anyway.

Of course, that was made harder but just how giddy she was. "Oh, I'm so happy for you!" she gushed, giggling and beaming. Her bright smile almost made me think all this confusion was worth it. "Are you going to tell him?"

"I haven't decided yet," I replied, sipping my cider. I'd let Deirdre have a little bit, but her stomach was still turning, so we stuck mostly to a bit of ginger tea for her. I made sure to make it myself, since I'd always heard that 'too much' ginger increased the chance of miscarrying. "I did just realize it."

"Right, right!" She giggled again, and it amazed me how happy she was. I wondered if it was a side effect of the pregnancy. "Azel, aren't you excited?"

"Not really," Azel mumbled. He'd come to deliver the apple cider, and I'd told him about my feelings for Chulainn as well, since he was my little brother. He'd been sulky ever since. "I mean… my sister. No one's good enough for my sister. She's the best."

"Aw, but Azel, isn't it better to focus on how happy she can be?" Deirdre asked. She pouted at him. "After all, falling in love with Sigurd has given me more happiness than I ever dreamed of!"

"But…" He groaned, and sunk more into his chair. "This is why I should've spent more time with you, Alicia. I'm supposed to scare off suitors."

"You're scaring no one with that sulk, Azel. You look like a puppy, actually."

"Hey!" His sulk deepened, and proved Deirdre's point further. She giggled, and I couldn't help but laugh as well. "Mean…"

"Well, what's wrong with Chulainn? What makes you not like him?"

"It's not that I don't like him. I mean; I barely know him." Azel shrugged. "I can admit he's kind,
and that he helps Lady Sister a lot. But it's the principle of the thing!" He flailed a bit, and then yelped as he nearly fell off the chair. "Principle! Sigurd would understand."

"So, it's a brother thing?"

"Pretty much. No one is good enough for the sister, especially when she's the only sister."

"I'm the only one you know of," I pointed out. Honestly, given how many mistresses our father had, it really wouldn't surprise me if there were more. "How did Arvis find out about me again?"

"His mother's journals," Azel answered easily. He shrugged. "I mean; your mom was her best friend. I think she hoped things would calm enough for her to take you back. It's not like our father kept any sort of records on things like that."

"There's no way he cared enough." I sighed, drooping at the thought of him. He had so many mistresses, but Lady Cigyun cheated once, after years of abuse, and suddenly, she was the pariah. He truly had been a horrible, hypocritical man. The only good thing about his was that he gave me my brothers. "That's a bit of a shame."

"Oh, now you two have gone and made yourselves sad," Deirdre scolded. She pouted again at both of us. "Don't do that!"

"Sorry, our father brings the mood down all the time," Azel replied. He shrugged, and smiled slightly. "I don't like him. But I got Arvis and Alicia thanks to him, so it's fine."

"I suppose." She got a thoughtful look on her face. "All that just makes me wonder about my own father. I don't know him. My mother just appeared at the village, heavily pregnant, and passed away soon after giving birth to me." She became worried suddenly. "Oh, wait, is that going to cause problems for Sigurd?"

"Wish I could deny it, but there's people in the court already mocking you and Sigurd for your 'unknown' past." Azel's smile grew, though, even as Deirdre drooped. "But just as many leap to your defense. Most of the ones mocking you are just angry that Sigurd didn't marry one of their daughters." He snickered. "Someone made the mistake of thinking Arvis would sympathize. Tailtiu told me that the only way Arvis could've burned him more is by using Valflame on him!"

"Really?" Deirdre perked up a little at that. "Does he like Sigurd that much?"

"Well, he does, but I'm sure part of it is also because you're Alicia's best friend." Azel flashed me a smile, and I smiled back. "So, you're like… family. Arvis protects family."

"I really need to meet and thank him." Deirdre's smile returned. "Do you think we can just make a little trip out of it, after things calm down in Agustria?"

"Well, that could take a bit. But I'm sure he'd love it!" Azel grinned. "He loved the last surprise visit, after all!"

"Alicia told me about it! It sounded like so much fun!" Her eyes sparkled. "Velthomer sounds beautiful. I hope to see it."

"That's right! You've never even seen Chalphy, have you?"

"No, I haven't. Can you two tell me about it?"

"Well, it's definitely just as pretty as Velthomer in my opinion, though in a different way, and-"
"Hey, Alicia, can I come in?" Shanan suddenly peeked around the doorframe, smiling shyly. The necklace Ayra and I bought him dangled from his neck, a simple thing with a blue 'good luck charm' pendant. It was, apparently, a prized trinket in Augustria, so we had to get it for him. "I want to see something outside," he explained. "And I think the infirmary has the best view."

"You are always welcome with us, Shanan," I reassured, holding out my hand to him. He grinned and raced over, bypassing my hand entirely to give me a hug. I barely had time to hug him back before he jumped away to hug Azel and Deirdre. "What is it you want to see?"

"Come look!" Shanan grinned and raced for the windows, laughing as he used the ledge to lift himself off the floor. I spent a moment marveling at how he'd regained enough strength to do that. "Come look, guys!"

Deirdre instantly went over, and Azel and I exchanged a look and a shrug before heading to the window too. This was the first time I'd realized the infirmary actually had a very lovely view of Mackily's inner gardens, overflowing with peonies and irises. So caught up was I in the view, that it wasn't until Deirdre and Azel started laughing that I even realized that Shanan had wanted to see something in the garden, and not just look at the garden itself.

It took me a moment to find what it was, but when I did, I smiled, unable to help it. Finn and Lachesis were walking slowly through the gardens, with her supporting his back and shoulder as they looked at the flowers. Though I knew it was mostly physical therapy, helping Finn regain the strength he'd lost from healing and being stuck in bed, I had to admit that the two of them made a very pretty picture.

"Say, can we set them up?" Deirdre whispered, her eyes sparkling. She grinned as Shanan instantly nodded. "You think that's a good idea too?"

"I think you should wait until Finn's healed," I pointed out. I couldn't help but smile, though. "Don't stress the poor boy and keep him in the infirmary longer. He'll be miserable."

"Which would be bad, even if it would give Lady Lachesis more time to tend to him," Azel dryly pointed out. He grinned when I swatted him on the shoulder. "Whatever. Let's move our drinks over here by the window. Prince Shanan, do you want cider?"

At one point during our little 'tea party by the window', Finn actually looked up, as if he knew eyes were on him. Thankfully, though, at the time, I'd been the only one looking, so I simply smiled and waved. He smiled back, and nudged Lachesis, who grinned and waved too. I had little doubts I'd get one of her little reports later.

But, for now, Finn was healing, Lachesis was gaining confidence, and I was spending time with some of my favorite people. It was strange, how content I was with my life, tangled emotions over certain mercenaries notwithstanding. But it was a good 'strange', so I didn't mind.

While going through my medicines, I realized I actually wasn't well stocked with all the proper things to help a woman through her pregnancy, and even less in things to maximizing the chances of a safe birth. So, I went into the market again, and this time, I went with Chulainn. I hadn't planned that. I'd actually planned on going alone, but then someone mentioned that it wasn't wise, considering we did take over Mackily. Then, 'strangely', everyone I'd normally consider going with (Aideen, Lachesis, Azel after Deirdre kicked his shin, Deirdre herself, and Ayra) were 'busy', except for Chulainn, who mentioned that King Jamke had actually taken over his normal patrol unexpectedly, leaving him with some free time he didn't know what to do with.
They set me up. I knew they did, and I would find some way to get back at them for it.

"Ah, there's so much conflicting information," I murmured, looking at some medicines in one of the stalls. The stall owner gave me free reign once I mentioned I was a healer, leaving me alone to look through. "X is poisonous, so use Y. Y is poisonous, so use X. That's not even considering how what works for one person is useless for another."

"If you keep glaring at the vials, they're going to start shaking," Chulainn teased. He smiled slightly when I shot him a glare over my shoulder. "Are these supplements necessary? It seems to me that everyone eats well enough."

"Even with a large variety and a balanced diet, it's difficult for a mother to get all the nutrients she and the baby needs. Supplements help ensure that's the case." I sighed, whimpering a little. "But this was never my specialty as a healer. I've assisted as a midwife before, but most women would see other healers for prenatal care, preferably an actual midwife."

"So, why can't we get one for Deirdre?"

"The main reason is that we're in enemy territory, and it's not that hard to kill a pregnant woman, or make her miscarry." My hands shook at the thought. Deirdre was so happy about her pregnancy. I knew Sigurd would be too. So, I wanted to do all I could to make sure she, and her baby, would be healthy. "We have no idea if someone is genuine or not."

"I see." Chulainn reached up and tucked my hair behind my ear. Once again, I wondered if I should tighten or loosen my hair pin, but this time, I knew it was because I liked him brushing my hair back, but it was horribly embarrassing. "How about this? I find one, and ask what they recommend. I'll use the excuse that you've noticed some close bonds in the army and want to be prepared. Meanwhile, you focus more on getting some medicines that are hard for you to make."

"I…" I gave him a thankful smile. "That would be perfect. Thank you."

"Anytime." He smiled back, and then ducked out of the stall, moving through the crowd easily. I went to the medicines, picking through for ones that were always good to have more of, or those that were rare in Agustria since they weren't local herbs. Unfortunately, though, my skill worked against me, and I'd finished with that task long before Chulainn returned. I arranged with the stall owner for the medicines to be delivered to the stall, mentioned that I would likely be back after my companion got a list for me, and stepped uncertainly away from the stall. There were a lot of people here, and that made me nervous. The people of Mackily seemed mostly grateful to not be governed by Clement anymore, but was that cheer simply a way to hide their anger? No one else worried about it, but that just made me worry more. Someone had to, and if I was right, I was the one who'd tend to all the injured. So…

"Well, aren't you a pretty one?" A man I didn't know suddenly came over to talk to me. I looked at him in confusion before glancing around, wondering who he was referring to. "I meant you, miss," he continued, smiling. I gave him another confused look, and wondered if I needed to get his eyes checked. "Say, why don't you and I go for a drink?"

"I don't drink," I replied. Noticing how close he was, I stepped back, but he only stepped forward. "Would you please keep your distance? I like my personal space."

"Oh, but it's so much easier to talk when we're close." He reached up towards my hair, but I smacked his hand away. My skin crawled. "Ow, what was that for?"
"You are invading my personal space. I already told you to keep your distance." I stepped back again, and glowered when he followed me. "Leave me be. I do not wish to speak with you."

"Don't be like that." He grabbed my arm, but I jerked it out of his grip. "I'm a very friendly guy."

"I am not a very friendly girl. I am waiting for someone, and have no time for you." This time I took two steps back, but he still followed me. "What part of any of this do you not understand? I don't want anything to do with you."

"You'd like me if you gave me a chance." This time when he snatched my arm, he squeezed. "So, come on and-"

"I said no!" I slapped him in the face and stomped on his foot. As soon as I was free, I ran into the crowd, pushing my way through. People yelped as I passed, and I winced as I heard second yelps behind me. He was following, and he screamed abuses after me. Most people just stopped and stared, like they had no idea what was going on. I couldn't quite blame them. I didn't know quite what was going on either.

I ran into someone suddenly, and I jumped back, apologies bubbling to my lips. But a gentle hand brushed my hair behind my ear, and I jerked my head up to see I'd run into Chulainn. He held a list in one hand, and cupped my cheek with the other, eyes worried. I glanced back and pointed as the strange man appeared from the crowd, wild eyed and breathing heavily.

"...Is there a reason you're bothering her?" Chulainn asked softly. His hand fell from my face and he moved to stand in front of me protectively. The man simply stared in shock. "What's your name?"

"What's it to you, pretty boy?" the man spat. All eyes were on us now, and I shifted uncomfortably. "Damn foreigner."

"Well, I'm not exactly from here either," I snapped, bristling. My temper burned. "I am the Chief Healer for Sigurd's army. He's a mercenary and in Sigurd's employ." The man's jaw dropped. "Oh, so you'll listen to that, but not anything else I said? You're pathetic!"

"...Bitch!" He threw something at me, but Chulainn deflected it. "I..." His eyes widened from fear, and he bolted, knocking a few people over in the process.

"Can someone tell me his name?" Chulainn asked the crowd. I smiled at the people when I noticed they were shifting uncomfortably, my 'perfect healer' smile. It made them relax, as it always made people relax. "If he went through the trouble of chasing her through a crowd, I'm worried that he's harassed others before."

It still took a few moments, but finally, someone did give us a name. We thanked them for the trouble, and returned to the medicine stall to drop off the list Chulainn had gotten, with instructions to add those medicines to what I'd already ordered. Afterwards, we headed back to the castle, taking a long way just in case that man was still around, waiting to ambush.

We walked in silence, and now that I no longer had medicines or work to distract me, I thought. I thought about what just happened. I thought about how I let him touch my hair and cheek, but slapped away that man when he tried the same. I thought about just Chulainn in general, how he was always there, even though I was so used to a healer being alone. I thought about my feelings, newly discovered, but having been there for some time. I thought about my talk with Ayra, and how she had mentioned fretting over these feelings would be a distraction. I thought of how happy Deirdre had been when I told her, and how sulky Azel had been.
I thought of all those things, and decided that, for once, I just needed to take a leap of faith. After all, it wasn't as if I wouldn't have places to hide if things turned awkward. Dealing with this tangle of thoughts and emotions was going to be tiring before long, and I couldn't afford to be tired. Being a healer was emotionally draining as is, and I was the Chief Healer for this army. I had my duty.

"Hey, Chulainn?" I began, noticing we weren't far from the castle's gate now. I stopped on the path, and waited for him to do the same. He turned to face me, giving me a curious look. "I..." My voice was soft, though it didn't shake. I was surprised about that. "I think I like you." The words themselves also came easily, though I felt like my stomach had turned into butterflies and that my face was on fire. "I..." At his continued silence, though, I lost my nerve and looked down, feeling mortified. "I hope that will not be a problem."

"...Really?" he replied. His voice sounded so neutral. The butterflies in my stomach died from dread, and I had the overwhelming urge to run. "You don't know much about my past, you know."

"I know enough to know it's painful for you to think about. I know enough to see where it has shaped you." I glanced up at him, and felt... actually, felt my temper burn a little that he appeared so calm, while I felt ridiculous and foolish. So, I glowered, despite knowing it wasn't the least bit intimidating with my face resembling a bruised tomato. "Besides, it's not your past self I like. It's your present self. Your past is your own, and if you want to tell me more, I'll listen gladly. But I don't need to know it to know you, as you are now."

"..." He smiled then, his small, almost boyish smile, and all of my anger fled with my thoughts. "How do you do that? How do you know just what to say?"

"I speak my mind. Nothing more." I was pleased that I held command of my tongue still. "Perhaps it is the healer in me, to see your heart and the wounds on it."

"So, am I a patient?"

"You will be if you don't give me a proper answer." My temper flared back. "I asked if my feelings would be a problem, and you did not reply."

"No, I got startled, and I stalled to buy time for my mind to start again." He reached out to take my hand, unbandaged now since the wound had long since healed thanks to staves, and lifted it to kiss gently. "No, they are no problem. I think I like you too, after all."

"Really?" Now my voice became playful, and I grinned, delighted by the exasperated look on his face. "You know that I'm a workaholic, right?"

"I think I got that by now, yes. But, then again, your devotion is one of the things I like, even if it worries me." He smiled again, that lovely, almost boyish smile. "You're fun to be around, though."

"I'm pleased to hear that."

"I'm pleased to hear that." His smile grew, and he leaned down and kissed my temple. "I'm not much of a romantic, though. I don't know how to do romance."

"You think I know either?" I leaned into him, and shyly wrapped my free arm around him. His hand still held mine, after all. "I doubt I'll be good at it, with how much I focus on my duty. But..."

"We can flail together. We can make it work for us." He returned my hug, and didn't release my hand. "I could get to like sunsets."

"Hmm?" I glanced to the side, and realized the sun was setting now. "They're rather pretty, aren't
they?" I smiled, feeling giddy yet peaceful. This felt nice. "I could get to like them too."

We stayed there for a long moment, only stepping out of the hug when the sun fully set. He continued holding my hand as we returned to the castle, and I intertwined our fingers in a little bit of boldness. His smile told me he didn't mind.

We'd flail a lot. Neither of us were good with people. But… we could make this work. I thought we could, at least.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Fun fact. Aside from the canon Deirdre-Sigurd, I often get my first 'locked' couple in chapter 2, around this point in fact (shortly before or shortly after capturing Mackily), though it's typically Aideen-Midir. Here, it's Chulainn-Alicia.

Next Chapter - Feathers
Chapter 11) Feathers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 11) Feathers

The days after confessing are strange. We act mostly the same around one another, except when he brushes my hair from my face, he often leans in to kiss my temple. When he catches my hand, he lifts it to kiss. I hug him when I have a free moment, and, at times, let him nap against me while I mend or make medicine. Deirdre and Aideen give us weird looks, but Lachesis and Ayra simply giggle and coo over us. Azel and Chulainn also have 'talks' that I am forbidden to ever listen in on.

A week or so after confessing, Sigurd brings his tired group to Mackily, and the infirmary swells with all the wounded. It's clear taking Heirhein and Anphony had their prices.

Sigurd sent the wounded ahead of him, guarded by a mercenary I didn't know by the name of Beowulf. He and Chulainn seemed to recognize each other, enough to chat while I directed the injured into the infirmary and divided up duties between Aideen, Lachesis, and myself, since Ethlyn remained behind with Sigurd, in case of an ambush or if someone's injury suddenly worsened. The steady stream of returning soldiers continued for a week, give or take, and the castle walls echoed with the screams of the injured and the wails of the mourning.

At the end of the week, Sigurd returned, along with Ethlyn, Lord Quan, Lord Oifeye, and others I recognized by face, such as Alec. I met them in the courtyard, thinking that Ethlyn, at least, might want to see a reassuring smile. The way she bolted for me for a hug hinted I was right.

"I received a letter from Lady Grahnye just the other day, and it has some stories about the trouble Ares and Altena are getting into," I told her, stroking her hair as she curled into me. She didn't cry, but it was clear she had long since run out of energy. "I've got most of the injured secured as well. You did wonderfully."

"If you say so," she murmured tiredly. Still, she peeked up and managed a warm smile. "Thanks for the hug. I really needed it."

"I thought you might." I laughed a little, keeping my cheer. She needed it. "We'll gossip after you rest. You clearly need it."

"Ooo, gossip~!" She giggled, looking more like her old self. "But yeah, passing out sounds good. I'll go do that before I faint in front of everyone." She gave me a quick hug and skipped off inside the castle. I watched worriedly when I saw her trip, but Deirdre caught her and helped her walk. So, instead, I turned and gave the others my greeting. I hoped that most would find reassurance in it, since it implied their friends were not so wounded that I felt I couldn't spare this much time.

It seemed to work. I was certainly met with a lot of smiles.

"Miss Alicia!" Lord Quan's voice echoed through the crowd, and it wasn't long before he jumped out of the group, smiling far more warmly than I expected considering our last interaction. But the cheer was enough to make me smile. "I'm glad to see you're well! You will not believe how much Sigurd fretted."
"I think he frets as much as me, and I am a healer," I joked, laughing. Clearly, he was not the type to hold grudges. "Finn is fine, by the way."

"Oh, I knew he would be. You're the one healing him."

"Well, I actually left Lachesis in charge of that."

"Oh, even better~" He laughed, also clearly interested in seeing what became of Lachesis's affection and Finn's humble adorableness. "Is it alright if I visit?"

"You and he can even train in a couple of days, so long as it's light. He's in his own room. Have a servant show you." I frowned, though, and touched his cheek to angle his face better towards me. "You haven't been sleeping."

"Sigurd and I took last watch last night so that everyone could get some sleep." He shrugged, smiling wryly. "I'm fine. Remember, Ethlyn is a healer. She doesn't let me get away with even a sniffle."

"Well, of course. She won't want to catch it either." I dropped my hand, and gave him a stern look, even if I kept my smile. "You'll let me check you over when I next have a free moment, though, yes?"

"I yield." He brought his hands up in defeat. "I think I will check in on Finn, though."

"I'm sure he'll be glad to see you're safe." I struggled to think of a way to say a better farewell, but I was saved through Lord Oifeye giving me a giant hug. "Whoa!"

"Sorry, are you okay?" Lord Oifeye asked. He popped back and smiled sheepishly. Lord Quan took that opportunity to disappear. "I'm sorry. I was just really glad to see you again. Was everything alright? The letters said so, and you conquered Mackily, but-

"Breathe, Oifeye," I chided, smiling a bit. Belatedly, I realized I'd dropped his title, but I didn't have the heart to correct myself when he smiled so brightly. "Everything is well, though things shall be quite busy."

"Do you need help?"

"I would rather you rest first, silly." I stroked his hair, smiling as he sulked. "Rest, and spend some time with Finn and Shanan. It will be good for you to relax. I'm not so overwhelmed that I'd demand assistance now. Why else do you think I'd be out here?"

"I suppose that's true." He gave me another hug, this time gentler. "I'll go talk to them, then. But if you need help, let me know!"

"I will." I hugged him back. "Go on. Check on Shanan first."

"I will!" He grinned and ran off, filled with more energy than I expected. I wondered if he'd slept on the way.

"I seem to have been abandoned by everyone." Sigurd appeared at my side, grinning. "Dare I hope for a greeting from my favorite healer?" he asked, eyes dancing. However, his tone and posture betrayed his exhaustion.

"You had best hope Ethlyn, Lachesis, and Aideen don't hear you say that," I teased. I rested my hand on his cheek as a silent acknowledgement, before letting it drop. "But, welcome to Mackily,
Sigurd. Things have been quiet here, and we've many letters from Noldion for you to read."

"I'm glad to hear it's been quiet." He sighed, letting himself droop for a brief moment. He straightened almost instantly thought. "That's the first good news I've heard in a while."

"Well, we'll give you some more. But first, go see Deirdre." I smiled up at him. "She has some very good news for you."

"Oh, is it an explanation of how you all managed a bloodless takeover because I still can't believe that." Still, he relaxed, laughing. "But fine, I shall seek out my darling wife and tell her how much I missed her. I'm saddened she's not here to greet me."

"Yes, yes, go on. You may complain to her how you lost to your own sister. I last saw her helping Ethlyn."

"Alack, alay!" He bent down to give me a quick, but warm, hug. "It's really good to see you. Let's catch up after I've had a good bath?"

"Sure." I returned the hug gladly. "Anyone here I need to see in particular?"

"Well, while I'm sure Lex would love to talk to you, he's busy teasing Azel and Ayra." He pulled away and pointed to where Lex really was teasing the living hell out of the two, while Chulainn watched with that slight smile on his face. "So, there are two new members with our group. Lewyn and Sylvia."

"So, you picked up three new ones? I met Beowolf briefly." I laughed, amused for some reason. "Well, I'll go find them. You go to Deirdre, and that bath."

"Thanks, Alicia." He gave me another quick hug before disappearing into the crowd. I watched for a bit to make sure he wouldn't trip or anything, before slowly moving through the crowd, hunting for faces I didn't recognize even a little bit. While I didn't know the names of most in the army, I did know many of their voices and faces, mostly because I'd spent so much time patching most of them together. So, instead, I focused on the sound of unfamiliar accents, and soon came across two people I definitely didn't recognize.

"Well, aren't I lucky?" the man, wearing a bizarre outfit that included a scarf and a feather of all things, commented as soon as he saw him. The girl, wearing an outfit that covered so little that I worried she was actually walking around in her underwear, gave him a sulky pout before eyeing me curiously. "Another beautiful woman to grace my eyes!"

"I take it you're Lewyn?" I asked, keeping my tone polite. He nodded. "It's nice to meet you. I am Alicia, Chief Healer of the army."

"Oh, you're her. Ethlyn kept on saying how she wished you were around when we were up to our ears in injured." He winked. "She didn't mention you were so pretty though."

"I imagine I'm not her type." I shrugged before sighing. "I should let you know that I am involved with someone though." I found Chulainn in the crowd, listening to a ranting and flailing Ayra, and pointed to him. "Him to be specific."

"Wow, he's nice looking." Lewyn grinned, perfectly unrepentant. He then bowed with a little flourish. "However, I understand that my words made you uncomfortable. While they are true, I will reassure you that I have a policy to not go after women with lovers, particularly ones who look like they can break me in half with their pinky." He winked again. "Just let me know if I cross a line. The last person I want angry at me is the healer." He grinned audaciously, though. "However,
I find myself so very curious about him! I think I'll bug them both!" He skipped off, laughing all the while.

"He's like the wind," the girl sighed. I guessed she was the 'Sylvia' Sigurd mentioned. Another look proved she wore a scarf with bells attached, anklets with even more bells, and no shoes. "Once you think he's staying still, off he goes."

"That does seem accurate," I murmured. Watching him instantly jump in on teasing Ayra, it was very easy to imagine him as a particularly playful breeze. "You're Sylvia, yes?"

"I am, yeah." She smiled at me. "I'm a dancer. Lewyn and I have performed together in the past. He's a bard."

"I suppose that explains a lot." I laughed a little, and tried to think of a topic. But then I noticed something that almost made me squeam. She had fading bruises right on her hip, and they looked suspiciously like someone's fingers. "You're injured."

"Hmm?" She glanced down, looking confused, before snapping her fingers. "Oh, this?" She gestured to her hip. "It's nothing big. Just a customer that got a little rough." She said the words lightly, with a smile even, but the look in her eyes was dark and sad. That told me exactly what she meant by 'customer'. "Lewyn took care of them for me, so they won't do that again to anyone."

"..." I tried to think of how to reply, so that she wouldn't think I was simply pitying her. She was a young girl who made a life for herself, however she had to. Honestly, she didn't look much older than Finn, maybe around Ethlyn's age. So, I simply smiled and gently touched her cheek. "Want me to check you over? There could be other bruises you've missed."

She eyed me warily, mentally debating thousands of things. "...You don't mind?"

"Of course not. It's my job to take care of people." I widened my smile and hoped I conveyed that I did not judge or… anything. She did what she had to, and it was clear that even if it pained her, she didn't want pity for it. "I'll be happy to tend to you."

"...Okay." The smile she gave me then was small, far smaller than the previous, but combined with the genuine relief in her eyes, it was the brightest smile I'd ever seen. "Thanks! I appreciate it!"

Things were going to be quite a bit livelier around here. I could already tell. But it wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

________________________

I spent the next few days catching up with everyone and tending to the injured. Sigurd had comically demanded to duel Chulainn when he learned Chulainn and I were dating. Lex had laughed hard enough to fall over, before challenging Chulainn to a drinking match. I'd told them all to behave themselves, because I wouldn't treat any of the injuries or hangovers that resulted. Deirdre soon distracted everyone with the official announcement of her pregnancy, which made Ethlyn squeal and Lord Quan already make plans for getting the baby, Altenna, and Ares to be friends.

"So, do I mix them like this?" Sylvia looked at me curiously, but there was a tiny hint that she knew the answer. But she was… desperate for praise. It was clear life had not been easy for her, and she latched onto the few who were kind with everything she had. I didn't mind, though. I remembered what it was like, longing for praise. I'd just gotten it from Arvis, and it had been enough. "Alicia?"

"Sorry, I was trying to think for a synonym for 'wonderful' and came up blank," I answered,
laughing a little. She giggled, preening a little. "Go ahead and mix them up then, Sylvia."

"Will do!" She laughed and went to work, carefully measuring and mixing, frowning in concentration.

I watched her work for a moment before returning to my own mending. Sylvia actually had a knack for healing, though she refused to learn staves. It was a bit of a shame, but I respected her wishes, just as I respected how she refused to let anyone see her upper back. She mentioned something about an old scar, but I wondered if it was something else. But that wasn't my business. She was great help to me, and between her, Shanan, Oifeye, and Finn, I actually had a lot of medicine on hand for the inevitable next battle. That left me plenty of time to not only mend blankets, but to even mend various other things for the army, like shirts and pants.

I finished tying off a thread, and glanced out the window, to the inner gardens of Mackily. Lord Quan and Finn were actually practicing, where I could keep a distant eye. To my surprise, they were actually joined by Lachesis and Beowolf. I wondered why, but then saw how Lachesis kept glancing at Finn and figured that perhaps she had been so distracted by her worrying that she was doing poorly in whatever Beowolf was trying to teach her. I watched the pairs for a moment before looking to another tear in the shirt I was mending and starting on that.

"Afternoon, everyone!" Lewyn appeared at the entrance to the infirmary, and was met with cheers from the patients. "Sorry, I know I'm late today," he laughed, snagging a chair and sliding it to the center of the infirmary. He bowed to me, before bringing out his flute and sitting in the chair. "So, what are the requests for today?" As always when he asked, the injured shouted all sorts of songs, so many that the names mushed together for me. However, Lewyn's eyes sharpened and I knew he was remembering each and every song requested. "Ah, there's one that caught my fine ear. We'll start with that!" By the time he took a break, I knew he'd have played through everyone's requests, just as he had the past couple of days.

Lewyn and Sylvia often performed for the soldiers during the evenings, but the injured in the infirmary couldn't make it to those performances for obvious reasons. So, Lewyn made special trips to the infirmary, early in the afternoon, to play especially for them. Having such special attention boosted their mood considerably, and I had to admit that Lewyn was very skilled at playing the flute, so it was a delight to have my afternoons filled with various songs.

Today, though, some sort of yelling stopped the songs short. A loud commotion, loud enough to make poor Finn and Lachesis jump outside, to make Sylvia stiffen and Lewyn pause mid-song, echoed through the halls. I set my mending to the side and headed out, going to investigate. It was easy to find the source, thanks to all the noise, but I was still very, very confused by the large crowd at the gates. I pushed my way to the front, wondering just where Sigurd and Deirdre were, and frowned when I saw why there was such an uproar. There were four armored women standing by pegasi. One of them, a girl with long green hair, was trying to say something, but the roar of the crowd drowned her out.

Sighing, I almost turned away to look for someone I knew, but then I noticed something. It wasn't just the four girls and their pegasi. There was a fifth among them and they were…!

"Move!" I snapped, lunging out of the crowd and bolting for the group. Someone tried to snag my arm, to keep me back, but I jerked away from whoever it was. "Let me see them!" I kept on running, pushing right past the girl to the bleeding child resting next to one of the pegasi. I'd barely seen them. "Easy… easy…" I knelt down by the child and my eyes widened when I realized the true extent of their injuries. They'd been run through, and their pulse fluttered under my fingertips when I grabbed their wrist. There wasn't much time. "Come with me to the infirmary, quickly.
There's… still a chance, and I will not waste it."

"Hold on!" Someone protested behind me. I had no idea who. I didn't care. "We don't know who they are and-!"

I whirled to my feet, knowing that my temper was burning, knowing that my fury was showing on my face. "Let them through," I ordered, glaring at the entire army. "There's an injured child, and anyone who dares try to stop me from doing my job will have to contend with a very angry healer! They could be Chagall for all I care! Let them through!" There was a split-second pause, but then Sigurd and Deirdre, appearing from absolute nowhere by my eyes, cleared a path and I dashed through, the girls carrying the child behind me. When I reached the infirmary, I noticed Lewyn was gone, but Sylvia had remained. She yelped when she saw the child, and pulled an unused cot a little closer so that we could lay them down and get to work. I went through various healing staves and medicines. Ethlyn appeared at some point to help, coming at Lewyn's suggestion. We worked together with Sylvia's help, doing everything we could to try and save the child.

But it was all for naught. The precious seconds wasted in front of the castle, wasted in what appeared to be deciding if the group was friend or foe, had pushed the child into death's arms and no amount of healing could coax Death to let them go.

"Why did your guards not listen?" I demanded hours later, pacing the length of the room Sigurd took as his study. I knew I shouldn't be yelling, but it was just Sigurd, who listened to my ranting without interruption; the leader of the pegasus quad, who had collapsed to her knees, still covered in that child's blood; and Deirdre, who wrapped a reassuring arm around the girl, though one hand fell to her abdomen, where her baby grew even now. I knew she was wondering if her own child, not yet born, would die like this one. "I'm damn sure that was probably the first thing out of her mouth, but did they listen?! No, they decided to be paranoid!" I stopped pacing, but mostly so I could duck my head and hide the tears burning my eyes. The child had looked to be only five years old. They had been right there, and yet I… "Sorry, I…"

"You're frustrated," Sigurd summarized. He gave me a reassuring smile. "You know you did all you could, but are frustrated, because you know that if you had just a few more seconds, you might've been able to save them."

"Thank you for turning a tirade into a single sentence." I gave him a droll look, letting my minor annoyance with him take over the sheer frustration I'd felt. Poor Ethlyn and Sylvia had crumpled when I'd announced the child was dead. They'd tried so hard too, but there just hadn't been enough time. A healer couldn't save everyone, and I knew that, but this had been a single patient, and there had been those extra seconds just wasted. "I feel so much better."

"I had the benefit of hearing it all at once, whereas it came to you as a flood." His smile became a little mischievous, but it faltered as he studied my tense posture. "I'm sorry."

"Now why are you apologizing? You weren't there."

"That's why. I could've told them to stand down, but I got there after you." He sighed, leaning against his desk. "If I had run a little faster, then perhaps…" He sighed again, and looked to the girl, knowing as well as I did that the real person he wanted to apologize to was the child. After all, I was the same. "I apologize to you as well, miss. You were only trying to help, and yet my guards treated you as a criminal."

"No, you're at war," the girl whispered. With Deirdre's help, the girl shakily stood. A few feathers clung to her hair till, a sign of just how fast she and her group had flown. But it hadn't been enough. "It is only natural to be cautious. I came from the direction of Agusty, after all, and Chagall did tell
me some troubling things, but I'm…"

She bowed her head, and her legs shook. She was taking this loss hard, and I couldn't blame her one bit for it. "Oh, I never even introduced myself. I'm Erinys, a knight of Silensia."

"A pleasure to meet you," Sigurd replied. He pulled a chair from his desk and moved it over towards her. Unnaturally silent, Deirdre got her to sit to keep from collapsing again, and kept her arms around her. "Do you mind explaining just… what happened?"

"How the child was injured, you mean? I only saw the last bit." Erinys drooped, and Deirdre left her side only briefly to get her some water. "Thank you, my lady." She made sure to smile before sighing. "The people of Augusty… they were planning on leaving, seeking refuge here in Mackily. King Chagall terrifies them, whereas your efforts in protecting the people from bandits have earned you their trust. They also know you hope to free Lord Eldigan, and they love him." She laughed a little brokenly, and sipped the water to try and hide it. "Much like how our people love our prince. But he disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Sigurd paused and then shook his head. "No, later. Please, continue."

"Right." She took a shuddering breath, and Deirdre rested a gentle hand on her back to reassure her. I remained where I was, feeling like I didn't… have a right to comfort her right now, not while I was still so frustrated, and not when I had failed to save the child. "The soldiers were preventing people from leaving, but they were insisting, pushing forward. That's when…" She paused, eyes wavering with tears. "They snatched the boy from the crowd and… and skewered him, lifting him up in the air even. They then said something about how that's the fate everyone else would suffer if…"

"They used a child… as an example?" Sigurd's voice took a deadly hush, and I remembered the fight with Gandolf or whatever his name was. It was the same quiet fury. "That is…" Sigurd growled and punched the desk, the loud 'crack' making me jump. "Damn him. Doing that to a child… tainting Augustria like this…" He sighed and slowly, visibly, relaxed. "No, that won't help us right now. Instead, he smiled gently at Erinys. "You did a brave thing, trying to save the child. If there is anyone to blame for their death, it lies in Chagall's soldiers and mine. You did everything you could."

"It's strange how those words don't bring comfort." Still, Erinys laughed. It was a watery laugh, but one nonetheless. "Still, thank you for seeing to my girls. It was a hard ride."

"I'm sure." Sigurd sighed. "Still, you came all the way from Silensia and get caught up in another's country war. I'm so sorry."

"No, don't be. Maybe I can find our missing prince." She smiled bravely. "We got word he was somewhere in Augustria, you see."

"Oh?" Sigurd hesitated, but nodded after glancing at Deirdre and me. This was a much 'safer' topic for all of us. "You mentioned he disappeared. Why?"

"Our king died unexpectedly a few years ago, and Prince Lewyn was to inherit." She sighed, and didn't notice how all three of us tensed at the name. "But his uncles protested, threatening civil war. The people didn't care, citing how they'd willingly die for him, but Prince Lewyn… he couldn't bear that, I think. So, he left, hoping to remove the center of the conflict and that maybe things would calm." She tightened her grip on glass. "But we… we want him to succeed. We want him to rule. So, we've been searching for him, and now…"

"I see." Sigurd glanced at Deirdre and me again, his silent question clear in his eyes. Deirdre
hesitated, but I shook my head. If her 'Prince Lewyn' and our 'Bard Lewyn' were the same, then I worried the shock might tip her over into hysterics or a faint. For now, she needed rest. "Here, why don't you let Deirdre lead you to your room? It's quite late, and it's been a long day." He looked to me. "What of you, Alicia?"

"This recent event makes it clear that Chagall is going to hold onto this to the bitter end," I replied. I sighed, and made myself relax, slipping back into the calm, cool healer mask. "I will return to the infirmary to check our stocks and to try and get as many on their feet as possible. Will we be leaving in the morning?"

"No, I think two days from now," Sigurd answered with a small, small smile. He didn't like giving this order, but it had to be done. "I'd like to show Erinys around the army." That would definitely be one way to figure out what Lewyn will do. "Try not to overwork, Alicia."

"We'll see about that." I waved at them, giving a warm smile to Erinys, and headed out the door, closing it behind me before walking down the hall. But there, at the end of the hall, was Chulainn, resting against the wall. He opened his eyes and looked right at me and I knew, knew, he had been waiting for me. By now, word would've spread that the child had died. I knew how camp gossip worked.

He almost hesitantly held out his arms, and I felt my mask crumble as I threw myself into the hug and silently sobbed, letting my tears bleed out my frustration at not being able to save a child, since I had that luxury for once. He held me gently, saying nothing, just being a pillar of support I desperately needed right now.

I could be the healer again after crying. But I needed this. I needed this so that I didn't break. He knew that. He knew, and offered comfort freely. I'd have to thank him for it, later.

_records on Sir Midir:_

_Bow Knight of Jungby, 21 years old_

_A long-time knight of Jungby, born a commoner like most of Jungby's knights. He is Aideen's personal bodyguard._

_Since he's been trained as a bodyguard, he actually has difficulties on the battlefield unless he is specifically protecting someone._

_Gossips in Jungby just assume he'll be Aideen's husband before long, to the point that they often forget the two aren't even courting yet._

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Now, in game, Erinys and her group actually attack Evans Castle and have to be recruited by Lewyn. I went with the Oosawa Manga's version of her recruitment, though, while removing her meeting Lewyn again to focus more on her. Beowulf is a char that has to actually be hired in game, starting his own Archetype iirc (Hugh from FE6 is another example). Lewyn and Sylvia join automatically after Heirhein falls, and they're the only way you can really protect the villages from bandits. Because Lewyn is a badass.
Beowulf has a conversation with Lachesis that boosts some of her stats and her love points with him, which is a bit reflected in him training her. Technically speaking, Sylvia has a talk with Alec that boosts love points, while Sigurd has talks with both her and Lewyn that give a little more insight into their personalities.

Next Chapter - Knight Slayer
Chapter 12) Knight Slayer

After Erinys joins, our group pushes forward, setting up a camp to attack Agusty from. We worry for civilian casualties, though, and so, we continue making preparations, wondering if the reason why Chagall refuses to let anyone leave… well, I wonder, at least, that he uses them as shields. They're certain effective as ones. So, we wait. We wait, and wait, trying to figure out what to do.

If the enemy breaches the camp again, I'm going to be very annoyed.

It was amazing how you barely noticed things until they didn't happen anymore. It took me only a day to realize there was something missing from my infirmary tent, and I spent the better part of that day trying to figure out what it was. Eventually, though, I realized what it was: Shanan's laughter, and these tiny little flowers he'd leave on the table to brighten up the room. I had laughed when I realized what it was, and resolved to make a point to tell him how much I liked the flowers when I next saw him. He remained in Mackily this time, with the skeleton defenses we left there. It would be the first time he was away from Lady Ayra and me for more than a few hours.

"Oh, why aren't you and Chulainn sharing a tent, Alicia?" Deirdre half-demanded. Even as she folded blankets for me, she looked almost comically annoyed. "You're dating! No one would say a word."

"I think they'll say quite a few, since gossips are a thing," I pointed out. I set up my vials of medicine on a back table, careful to make sure the labels were easy to see. "Besides, Deirdre, I have my job."

"You also have a life," She huffed, scowling. "Chulainn has the patience of a saint, you workaholic."

"So do you, considering Sigurd is so busy." I grinned as she blushed. "But yes, I know, my friends and love are very patient with me."

"And your brother."

"Azel is used to workaholic siblings. Arvis is even worse than me."

"The next time I'm in Grannvale, I'm going to drag him on some sort of vacation. You, Chulainn, Arvis, Sigurd, me... probably a few others. A nice long vacation." She smiled softly, giggling a little. "Actually, that sounds like fun. Think we'll be able to do that after this?"

"I don't know." I sighed, stepping away from the medicines to check my staves. I had plenty of healing staves, thank the gods, and Sleep was resting quietly with them. I hoped I wouldn't have to resort to using it, but I knew I would. "This might be a civil war, but the others attacked a very well-known ally of Grannvale. Lord Eldigan even attended the military academy in Belhalla. Then, after we came to assist, they continued their assault. It's become a direct insult, and thus, King Azmur will no longer be allowed to ignore the whisperings of war from Augustria. It's all the worse since King Chagall is a 'new' king. It sets a bad precedent if allowed to 'get away' with it."
That didn't even go into how the more mild-tempered nobles, like Prince Kurth, were still in Isaach. "Likely, we'll have to set up here like we did in Evans Castle, as a watch to ensure King Chagall will behave."

"Oh." Deirdre sounded so quiet, and I glanced at her worriedly. "No, it's nothing, I just..." She hesitated a little and then smiled shyly. "I had hoped to go to Chalphy."

"That's right. You haven't seen it yet." I thought a bit and then smiled. "Well, I'm not sure if Sigurd will be able to take you, but I don't see why you and I can't take a little vacation over there."

"That would be lovely!" She giggled, and turned from the blankets. "They're all folded, by the way. They have been. I've just been fussy."

"Of course you have been." I thought of how to change the subject, and laughter outside caught my attention. Curious, I headed for the entrance of the tent and pushed open the flap, looking around to try and find the source.

Deirdre leaned over my shoulder, hands braced on my back as she got on her tiptoes to look with me. "Over there." She pointed to the grouping nearby, and it didn't take me long to figure out what was going on.

Ayra, Lachesis, Finn, and Lex were all setting up tents, and based on how frustrated Ayra looked, and how sheepish Lachesis smiled, I thought Lex and Finn were helping the two with their knots, since this was likely Lachesis's first time setting up a tent and I knew that Ayra had difficulties tying good, strong knots. Of course, knowing Lex, he was teasing them silly, and Ayra was trying to retaliate, while Finn just quietly tried to show them how to do it.

"They're so adorable!" Deirdre squealed, giggling. Her eyes danced as she leaned forward a bit more to look at me. "Shall we join in?" I almost agreed, but a quiet cough snatched my attention, and I turned to see Erinys standing. She shuffled awkwardly, holding something behind her back, but despite her hesitance, her eyes held a clear question.

I smiled at her, and turned my attention back to Deirdre. "Tease them extra for me?" I asked. Deirdre giggled and nodded, making sure to give Erinys a warm smile too. "Thank you. I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Sounds good to me." She winked and skipped over to the group, making some innocent comment that made Lachesis and Finn burst into laughter, and Lex and Ayra turn bright red.

I, however, turned back to Erinys and gestured to the infirmary. "Come on in," I told her. She gave me a warm and grateful smile. "What are you hiding anyway?"

"Oh, um..." Erinys stammered. She followed me into the tent, and then shyly set down some small ceramic jars on my table. "I... brought some medicines we use in Silensia."

"Oh?" I opened one up, smiling at the crisp scent that wafted up. "What do they do?"

"They're primarily good for helping stop blood and for disinfectant. Pegasus knights deal mostly with arrow injuries, since they're so effective against us, so our medicines are geared towards minimizing how dangerous they are." She shuffled her feet again, ducking her head. "I... also wanted to talk to you a bit. If you didn't mind."

"I don't mind, and for the future, there's no need to bring a 'payment' for my listening." I smiled slightly as she flushed. "With that said, I do greatly appreciate the new medicine. Arrow wounds are notoriously tricky."
"I'm glad to help." She sounded a little squeaky. "Um…"

"What did you want to talk about?" I sat down in a chair and nodded to the one on the other side of the table. She shook her head, though, remaining on her feet. "I'm all ears."

"It's just…" She sighed, rubbing at her arm as she looked at everything in the tent but me. "It's Prince Lewyn. I… I ran into him. Here. I know it's him. He's older, but I… I'd know him anywhere. But…" Hesitantly, she finally looked at me, and there was something fragile in her eyes. "He didn't… acknowledge me. Notice me. It's like… I don't think he recognized me. I think he's forgotten me." With every word, her voice became smaller and smaller, until I had to lean forward and strain to catch it. "I don't like… being ignored…"

"Of course not. No one does." I watched her carefully, noticing how she fidgeted with her gloves, and held herself stiffly, even as she slumped. "That's not all that's bothering you, is it?"

"It's not." She curled into herself a bit, but she still held herself tense. "I… w-well, even if he forgot me, he has to know I'm from Silensia. But he… he hasn't asked about home. He hasn't asked about his mother. He hasn't asked about… anything. He could do those things while still not knowing me, right?" Though her voice remained small, she spoke quickly, like a dam had broken and the words burst from the cracks. "So, has he forgotten? Has he forgotten his duty? Has he forgotten his home? His people? The thoughts keep spiraling through my head, and I know you're really busy, but I couldn't think of anyone else he's spent time with besides Sylvia, and Sylvia was in the middle of a performance, and I just…"

"Breathe, Erinys." I watched as she did as I said, frowning as she coughed. Now that I looked at her, I noticed she was pale, with noticeable bags under puffy eyes. I wondered when she last slept. "You ultimately want to know what I think about Lewyn, yes? You want to know if I think he has forgotten." I waited until she nodded, and then I waited a moment longer as I gathered my thoughts. "The answer is, no, I don't think he has." "I don't think so." I closed my eyes and thought of the music Lewyn played, how careful and attentive he was to the patients and their requests. It spoke of someone kind, too kind really, to willingly take a path that would lead to harm to the people he loved. I thought of how Lewyn had made sure to fetch Ethlyn when the child came in, helping the only way he could. I thought also of what she had said about him, and why he had left in the first place. "I think, perhaps, he is simply still lost, and he thinks you expect an answer." I opened my eyes and looked at her again, noticing how closely she paid attention. "So he tries to pretend ignorance, because he wants to run away and avoid the problem instead of confronting it. That's my assessment, at least."

"...That makes sense." She smiled sadly, looking down. "I don't really want an answer, though. I just want him to talk to me, like he used to. And maybe consider coming home. I've missed him horribly, and Queen Rahna wants him back. He's all she has left of her family." She sniffed, tearing up, but she also looked frustrated. "He's so… so selfish! Why is he the only one allowed to sacrifice for loved ones?"

"Why not ask?"

"I'm scared he'll run away again." She sniffed again, and I gestured to my shoulder, a silent offer for her to cry on it. She actually moved to sit on the floor and cry in my lap. "Sorry… my back still hurts…"

"That's right; you pulled it this morning." I reached down to stroke her hair, and she closed her eyes, letting the tears slip down her face. "There's a lot of broken trust here, isn't there? He doesn't trust the people around him to make their own decisions, and you don't trust him to not disappear again. Seems like you need to focus on fixing that before you doing anything else."
"Maybe." She sighed, and relaxed slowly. "You're very comfy… like Annand…"

"Who is Annand?"

"My older sister. She's the leader of the pegasus knights, the Seraph of the four Angelic Knights of Silensia." She laughed a little. "Sorry, the Angelic Knights are the highest ranked pegasus knights in Silensia. Annand is the highest, followed by Pamela, the Cherub. Archangel Deet'var is third, and I'm… the newest one. I'd just been promoted when we got word, and begged to be the one to look for Prince Lewyn." She sighed, relaxing more. "I'm… so tired…"

"Stay here a while, then." I stroked her hair again. "Sleep. I'll wake you if something happens."

She mumbled something, already half-asleep, and I switched my priorities to studying the medicine she had brought, and making some more of the ones I already had, just in case. I worked quickly and quietly, letting her nap. At one point, though, I caught a sound at the entrance, and looked up to see Lewyn peering in, looking worriedly at Erinys. I gave him a smile, and shook my head slightly, a silent 'come back later', and he nodded, leaving.

Those two had awkward days to come. I wondered how involved they'd make me.

"Lady Deirdre, have you thought of names for your baby?" Sylvia asked as she checked on the bandages boiling on the fire. A few hours ago, Sigurd had led the forces to battle, but there were less casualties than expected, especially with three people working the infirmary here, and Sylvia was, by nature, a talkative person. "Do you want a boy or a girl?"

"Honestly, I'll want both eventually," Deirdre answered. She measured out medicine for me while I checked on some of the worse wounded. "I would love a little boy with Sigurd's hair and eyes, though."

"And maybe a little girl who takes after you? That'll be cute~" Sylvia giggled, pulling the bandages out of the pot with some tongs and setting them on a towel to dry. "But names?"

"I haven't thought of names yet. I've decided I'll think of some when things calm again, after Sigurd has told Eldigan of the happy news."

"That's adorable~!" Sylvia giggled again and then turned to me. "Alicia, bandages are done!"

"Help Deirdre with the medicines, then," I called, fixing the blanket over one patient. I wasn't sure how to take the less work. The infirmary should be filled with those injured, but had a chance of surviving. Either there weren't that many injured, or we had a lot of dead. "Rest up. We don't know when the next wave will come." As it stood, I'd even had time to change my dress after the initial waves, and comb the blood out of my hair.

"Okay!" the two chorused before settling down to work. I laughed a little and returned to checking on the injured, feeling dread pool in my stomach even as I faked my calm cheer.

Knowing how battles normally went, I should've been so much busier. I should be scrambling to tend to everyone. I should've had broken healing staves. I should've run out of bandages and medicine. I should've felt under-prepared, despite days of preparations. Yet, I felt none of these things. Everything was calm, under control. The battle was going horribly. I was certain of it.

It was almost a twisted relief when the next wave of injured arrived, and I was busy again. But it was still too few. While Sylvia, Deirdre, and I frantically tried to tend to them, it was not the 'normal' franticness. It was calmer. We had bad injuries, but too few. We had unconscious, but too
few. There were just too few.

"Tell me what's going on," I whispered to Erinys, bandaging her up. She had fallen back due to an injury to her leg, nothing that would take her out of the fight, but enough that she needed it tended to. She had insisted on no healing staff, and I had allowed it after assessing it. "There's something wrong. I can tell."

"It's bad," she confirmed, speaking softly. Deirdre and Sylvia rushed about, checking on the recent arrivals, and cheering the conscious with their smiles. "We might have to fall back, truthfully."

"Why? Is Lord Eldigan in charge or something?"

"No, he's still imprisoned. Instead, we have someone named Zyne and his elite soldiers. He is known as the Knight Slayer, thanks to this stupidly large lance he wields, designed to cut down a horse and rider in one swing. I have no idea how he lifts the thing. But he can, and he's fast, and his soldiers are second only to the Lord Eldigan's Cross Knights."

"The majority of our forces are cavalry." I knew there had been too few. My bad feeling… it had been right. "How are our foot soldiers?"

"Thankfully, thanks to the lance's size, it's just… a strong lance to them. It damages, but most manage to avoid being reducing to paste. Some aren't so lucky, though." Despite the grim words, she smiled sweetly when I tired off her bandage. "I best return. My aerial capabilities allow me to pick off some troublesome enemies, like the mages. Is there anything you need me to relay to Lord Sigurd?"

"...Simple tell him that the infirmary remains ready, and that I have faith in him." I hoped the words would soothe him. "Though, if he looks as if he is in need of a laugh, also tell him that if he gets himself badly hurt, I will be very vexed with him on Deirdre's behalf. He is not allowed to make my best friend cry."

"I shall!" She hopped to her feet, bouncing a couple of times to check how much stress her leg could take, and bowed to me. "Thank you kindly." She limped off, back to her pegasus outside, and I saw her off, watching the feathers fall as she disappeared into the skies. I caught one, and barely managed to stifle a bitter little laugh as I immediately got it bloodstained. I hoped that wouldn't curse her.

Sighing, I looked around, almost hoping for someone else to come. It didn't necessarily have to be someone injured, but someone else to tell me more. How many were dead? How many did death take before I even got a chance to fight back? How many people would be crying tonight? Those questions ran through my head, and this time, I did laugh bitterly. It had been so much easier to do my job when I wasn't close to people. It was so much easier to remain detached when the only two people I cared about were safely away. But now, I desperately worried, and not just over my friends. I worried over the soldiers I knew by face, but not name, because I had seen so many of them smile and laugh. I had spent a great deal of time with this army. I recognized many from our days at Evans Castle, long before we marched into Verdante proper.

But… I was still their healer. I was still the Chief Healer of this army. No matter how much my heart ached and shattered, I'd do my duty. It was all I could do for these crazy, yet loving, people.

A slight trembling shook me from my thoughts and it took me a second to realize the ground was shaking, barely enough to notice. It wasn't an earthquake, or so I thought. In fact, it reminded me more of how the ground felt when many… horses…
I jerked my head to the horizon and gaped as I realized horses really were heading for us. But they wore the colors of reds and golds of Augustria, instead of the mix of colors that represented our own. The enemy… had broken through, and at the front of the charge was a man wielding a lance that looked almost comically large. Zyne had broken through.

There was some sort of commotion behind me, likely the patients panicking. But I held myself firm and calm, as a healer was supposed to, and I actually walked towards the enemy, keeping my expression cool and stoic, my posture tall and poised. I lifted my head slightly, just slightly, and waited for them to stop. I knew there was a not-so-insignificant chance that they'd just trample me, but I held my ground, taking the gamble.

They slowed as they approached me, the rank and file soldiers significantly sooner than Zyne, who stopped almost right in front of me, turning slightly so that I didn't get a face full of horse breath. He looked down at me, expressionless, and I returned the look with my own passive calm. The air held still as we continued to stare at each other, with only the distant sounds of battle to break the silence that fell.

He looked away first. "You will be coming with me," he declared. He shifted his grip on his lance. "I wish to duel Sigurd, yet he refuses."

"So, you intend on taking me, a simple healer, hostage," I replied softly with a polite smile. "My, my. I had no idea that knights attacked healers."

"I am not attacking."

"I view 'kidnapping' as an attack." I shook my head, holding onto my calm with all the skill years of practice had given me. "This camp is filled with wounded and non-combatants, led by a healer and a woman in the early months of pregnancies. Yet you come at us, with an army, intending to take us hostage." My smile remained polite, but I knew it had cooled. "That is the way of Augustria, then?"

"You will be coming with us, by force if necessary!" His voice was snappy, anger bleeding through. He bristled at my quiet insults, and glowered, trying to make me cower. I faced him impassively. "Make this easy on yourself!"

"I am a healer. Healers never take the easy road. Our jobs involve fighting Death with all of our skills, every single day, when it would be far easier to give up on the wounded." I shook my head, and made my tone the tiniest bit patronizing. "I look Death in the face, every hour, and I see the faces of those I failed to save in its eyes. You're just a man, a strong man, but a man nonetheless. You are not enough to frighten me, and neither is your army strong enough to make me submit."

"Then by force, you come with us!"

"Then, by force, we refuse!" The words were accompanied by a blast of light magic, and I didn't even need to turn around to know Deirdre was glaring. "We will not let you harm our people!" she snapped, coming to stand next to me. I glanced down to see her Aura tome glowing. "You're only coming after us because you began losing anyway! How pathetic!"

"You know nothing!" Zyne snapped. He brought his lance up, and the soldiers behind him prepared their own weapons. "Capture them! Leave the three woman alive, but do what you will with the others!"

"Knights suck." Sylvia skipped to my other side, and to my surprise, she held a sword. "I'm not good at fighting," she muttered, glowering at the preparing soldiers. "But I'm decent enough at
being a distraction, especially since they're not aiming to kill. I can distract for Deirdre."

"We won't let them get anywhere near the injured," Deirdre agreed. She brought up her hand and loosed another Aura spell, blasting a horse and its rider into nothing but ash. "Alicia, what do you plan?"

"Well…" I began. I took stock of how many people were here, and though it was much more than Mackily… "I think I'll try our trick from before."

"Have fun!" Deirdre blasted another knight and Sylvia darted forward, rather boldly dancing close to a horse and slicing at the legs before jumping back. She paid for the daring with a gash to her side, but the horse reared back in shock and threw its rider.

I ducked back into the tent, smiling gently at the worried patients, and headed for where the Sleep staff rested in the corner. I snatched it up and bolted back outside, tripping a little over the hem of my skirt. Then, before I had a chance to hesitate, I brought the staff up and poured my magic into it, sending out Sleep's power as a wide blanket. I winced as pain jabbed my hand, and I teetered to one side as the light faded. But it… mostly worked. I had gotten most of the enemy soldiers, and the few I didn't stumbled and tripped, like they were carrying their horses instead of the other way around.

Unfortunately, Zyne was one of the few I missed, and even worse, he managed to shrug off Sleep's linger effect fairly quickly, even if he had to drop his lance and dismount. "You…" he breathed, staring at me. Sylvia and Deirdre weren't far away, taking care of the others I had missed. "You fight with the ferocity of a knight."

"I don't need to hear that from someone who clearly doesn't know what being a knight should mean anymore," I retorted. I brought the staff up again, my vision wavering at the edges. "You're a disgrace." I focused on Sleep again, hoping to try and cast it again. But pain lanced through my hand again, and blackness threaded my vision before I got a chance to do more than make the gem on the staff glow a bit.

But that had been enough to make him stumble back, flinching from the attack that wouldn't come, and that left him wide open for Deirdre's Aura spell to blast him, searing off one arm and making him stagger. He caught himself, his lone hand stiffly clutching his stump of an arm. He opened his mouth to say something, but Sylvia danced in close and caught him across the chest before slitting his throat. She jumped back from the spray of blood and Zyne fell with a gurgle, dying in a pool of his own blood.

As silence fell, the three of us just stared at the body and then looked at each other, a little startled by what we actually managed. Apparently, moving to simply capture instead of simply fighting to kill crippled fighters.

"We… need to tie up the rest," I pointed out. I dropped Sleep to the ground, wincing at how bloody my palm was, and then wincing again at all the cracks clearly visible in the staff. It was no wonder why it hadn't worked a second time; I wouldn't be able to use it again until someone fixed it. "Oh, gods…" I felt lightheaded and dizzy, my vision black and grey at the edges. I needed to sit down.

"People fight like this every day?" Sylvia complained. She dropped her sword and rotated her wrist as she pressed her other hand to the wound on her side. I barely noticed the other gashes she had taken across her legs and arms, mostly because they bled so sluggishly. "People are weird! Weird!"

"Let's just make sure they can't hurt us when they wake," Deirdre suggested. She looked a little
queasy. "Oh, I might faint… or vomit… or both…" She whimpered, covering her mouth. "I should not have fought so much… Aura is taxing anyway…"

"Alicia, can you do a health check on her?"

"I can force myself," I replied. I still had work to do. I couldn't pass out yet. "I need to look after you, and we need to deal with the unconscious…" This was very poorly thought out. We should've just run. "Okay, fourth wind can come very soon…"

Thankfully, some of our own soldiers returned before long, intending on 'saving us', and happily took over tying up everyone so that Deirdre could safely pass out, and I could tend to Sylvia's injuries and try not to pass out myself. Based on their looks of stunned awe, I had a sneaking suspicion that we weren't going to live down this lucky turn of events any time soon. Lovely.

"Maybe I should just let you and Deirdre do everything! You clearly are doing a better job!" Sigurd complained a little sulkily as he paced through the tent. "Just set you on the army! Sleep and Silence them all!"

"Please don't," I replied simply, watching him pace. He and I were in Chulainn's tent, actually, since Sigurd had wanted to talk, and I hadn't wanted to disturb the patients. Chulainn had volunteered it before going out on patrol. "Any more people, and I think I'd faint outright, and do some serious damage to my hand." Even now, I still felt dizzy and lightheaded, and I could move my hand very well without opening all the cuts criss-crossing my palm. I shouldn't use Sleep on so many people at once. I got reckless because how well last time went. "That's not even taking into account that the staff needs repair, badly."

"How is it, by the way?"

"The staff? I just told you."

"Your hand." He gave me an exasperated look. "I'm asking about your hand."

"Oh, that." I shrugged. "It is no different than when you asked earlier, Sigurd, before you starting your whining." I knew he was only 'complaining' because there was complete reassurance that all of us were fine, even the growing baby. "I'm more confused as to why he wanted a duel."

"Proper Augustrian thing, but I wasn't biting." He sighed heavily, finally stopping his pacing to flop down in the chair across the table from me. "So, he decided to take hostages to make me behave."

"That is certainly the knightly thing to do. I bit back a groan. Lord Eldigan really was the only 'true knight'. He was definitely going to die. I hoped not, but it was likely going to happen. "Perhaps 'knight slayer' was more appropriate than he would've ever admitted. He could slay cavalry with ease, but if he even considered that, he 'slaid' knightly code long before."

"Maybe…" Sigurd sighed, and shook his head. "Oh, but this isn't why I wanted to speak with you privately. Are you up for a lengthy conversation?"

"You might as well, while I'm still conscious." It took almost all of my energy to simply smile at him. "What is it?"

"We got a messenger from Grannvale at Anphony. They arrived shortly after your letter saying you took Mackily, so I think they hit Noldion after you left, and then came up. We talked a bit about the campaign and all, it's going well, which I'm not sure how much I like, though I'm glad to hear
my father is safe." It took me a full two seconds to remember that the 'campaign' he talked of was the Isaachian Campaign, and that he had mixed feelings because of Shanan and Ayra. "But he also told me of Arvis's mother and Prince Kurth…"

"Oh. That." I sighed and leaned back in my chair, forcing my cotton-filled head to think. "Well, never mention it to Arvis. If there is one way to make his temper burn, it's bringing that up. It's a sore spot." I sighed again, thinking about what bits I knew. "Our father was horrible. He was abusive, possessive, rapist, and womanizer. Azel and I are born from his forcing himself on others, specifically those Cigyun was close to, as 'punishment' for some imagined slight against him. He kept her locked up because he hated how she 'flirted' with other men, when really, she was just smiling politely. During all that Prince Kurth would visit Velthomer to build bonds with the nobles, and he befriended Cigyun. Given how imaginative our father was, though, I'm not so certain there was an actual affair, and neither is Arvis." I thought of how Arvis once, while visiting me, told me how he did think his mother had fallen in love with Prince Kurth, and how he'd quietly hoped that his mother could get her marriage annulled, and remarry Prince Kurth instead. He had loved how happy his mother finally was around Prince Kurth, though he admitted he had complex feelings for the prince himself. After all, Prince Kurth did play a part in why his mother left.

"I see." Sigurd fell silent, looking contemplative. "Prince Kurth seemed to love her. According to the messenger, an old retainer of the court, he refuses to marry because of that lingering love."

"That could just be guilt talking." I shrugged. Arvis and I had talked about the strangeness once, and we both thought it really was guilt. It made more sense than a supposed love that lingered for seventeen-eighteen years. "Prince Kurth had a few lovers prior to Cigyun and since her departure, according to the rumors. He just hasn't taken any within the last decade, and he doesn't marry. People come up with their own stories to justify actions."

"I see." Sigurd nodded, smiling slightly. "Thanks for explaining. I wanted to hear it from someone who would've had more knowledge about it." He laughed a bit. "I wonder what she looked like, though."

"I only know she was incredibly beautiful, her beauty catching the eyes of everyone who passed her." There were not portraits of her in Velthomer anymore, as Arvis had put most of them in storage in order to deal with his own pain, and I'd never heard a description of her. "Her kindness won people over. I suppose you can think of her like Deirdre, in that way."

"Now don't say that! Now I'm going to fret."

"Why? You're nothing like my father. Deirdre will be happy." I smiled slightly. "Stop panicking over stupid things. You have enough to worry about."

"Yes, yes, dear older sister."

"I'm younger than you." I laughed as he looked disgruntled at that. "Go on."

"Fine, fine!" He threw his hands up in defeat and stood up. "I'll talk to you later." He gave me a warm smile and walked out of the tent. I waited a moment and stood up as well, attempting to follow. But the world suddenly tilted, and I half-crashed into the table, the impact barely enough to jar me awake as my vision greyed. I leaned heavily against the table, trying to get my bearings again, but everything just spun and spun and spun…

"What the hell are you doing?" Gentle hands helped right me, and it took a few more spins for me to realize Ayra was in front of me. "You look like hell," she informed me bluntly. "Get to bed." She nudged me towards the bedroll in the corner, but I was so out of it that I actually staggered and
nearly fell on my face. She caught me before I did. "You can't be thinking of working now."

"But…" I tried to protest. The one word sounded like mush, even to my own ears. "The injured…"

"You'll be no help to anyone like this."

"But…" I wished she wasn't right. But I knew she was. If I pushed myself any more, I was going to be a patient myself. It was only my pride talking; the healer in me screamed at my idiocy. "I'm sorry."

"Just rest." She helped me to the bedroll, and actually tucked me in when I managed to crawl inside. "I'll check on you later." I wanted to say more, another apology or perhaps some polite gratitude, but unfortunately, laying down made all the exhaustion catch up, so I mumbled something incoherent even to my ears, and promptly passed out, oblivious to just about everything, though I thought I heard her laugh at me before sleep closed my ears.

I woke up only once during the evening, blinking blearily at Chulainn as he leaned over me in the fading light. I blinked a few times before realizing why he looked so awkward, even as he brushed the hair out of my face. I'd stolen his bed. I thought about getting up, but I was tired, and couldn't really move. The thing was… Chulainn looked exhausted too. He had been fighting all day, and he needed to sleep. I couldn't let him sleep on the cold ground.

So, after a long awkward moment of continued staring, I scooted to the side a bit, and held out an arm in a silent suggestion. He stared at me a long moment, face expressionless, before he nodded and slipped in with me. At first, he tried to keep his distance, but after a couple of awkward squirming, his cold feet brushing mine, he seemed to give up, and instead, caught me in a hug and pulled me close, curling around me almost protectively as he closed his eyes. I burrowed a little deeper into the hug, smiling at the warmth and 'safety' I felt, and fell back asleep. I'd have to work three times as hard to make up for sleeping on the job, but for now, I'd enjoy this.

Perhaps it was a little odd to share a bed before sharing a kiss, but somehow, I thought it fit us. I didn't mind, at least.

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**Records on Aideen:**

_Cleric, Ullur Minor, 20 years old_

The second child of House Jungby, the younger twin of the Ullur Major of this generation. A gentle and kind woman who catches the eyes of many, but only has eyes for Sir Midir

*Her Holy Mark is on her right shoulder blade.*

A very skilled healer, despite not coming from a house known for magic, a testament to how hard she studied.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Author's notes: In game, Zyne is rather one-note, while in the manga, he is a sympathetic character. I went a slightly different route. Actually using Deirdre and Sylvia in-game to kill Zyne is probably suicide, but I get to play a bit more with things
in a novelization. For emphasis, the more people Alicia uses the Sleep Staff on, the more draining it is on both her and the staff; it is best suited for single use, like in game, which she is just figuring out.

In game, the Horseslayer simply 'auto-crits' on cavalry (so, double damage) instead of three times effectiveness, ftr. The term 'Angelic Knights' shows up only in supplementary material from what I know, though the idea of each of them having a separate 'rank' within is something I threw in, using ranks from Christian angelology.

Next Chapter - Oath
Chapter 13) Oaths

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 13) Oaths

We've broken through one of the last defensive lines of Agusty, killing Zyne. The army looks at Deirdre, Sylvia, and me with awe, but I'm quick to point out how lucky we are. Thankfully, though, there's not a lot of time for them to stare. Sigurd leads his army forward, in the hopes of forcing Chagall to release Lord Eldigan.

The final battle of this campaign is nigh.

Movement beside me dragged me out of my slumber. I blinked slowly, yawning a bit as I tried to put the pieces together through my hazy, addled mind. Then I blinked slowly simply because I realized I had a shirtless Chulainn sitting next to me, and it took me a moment to remember why he'd be next to me while he slept. Then I noticed something else.

"You were hiding an injury?" I whispered. He stiffened and glanced at me over his shoulder, but I ignored his look to sit up and poke at the large gash across his back. "Ugh… I must've been really out of it last night if I didn't notice."

"Well, you weren't really looking at my back," he pointed out. He held himself still as I continued inspecting his injury. "I wasn't hiding it, though. I got it treated. Not with a staff, but Lady Aideen checked it."

"That is beside the point." I continued to frown, noticing it was deeper at his lower back than his upper. Likely, he's been struck there first and it whipped up from there. "Your armor?"

"Ripped off. I'll be wearing a different one today."

"How did that happen? Were there too many dead?"

"Not quite. Lex was knocked off his horse from that Zyne fellow, and Ayra got distracted because the two were in the middle of their flirting-arguing when it happened. I shielded her."

"That'll teach them to argue on the field." I sighed and sat back on my heels. "I should treat this…" A quick glance around, though, reminded me that I had no staves here. I had planned to return to the infirmary last night. "Dang it."

"I'm to report to a healer before the battle, which will likely be soon. You go back to sleep."

"I slept too long as is." I felt horribly guilty. "I should-EEP!" I couldn't yelp but squeak as Chulainn suddenly twisted and pinned me down onto the bedroll. "...Um…" My face heated up at his intense look. I knew, distantly, that he was just studying my face, but my emotions decided to make me embarrassed anyway. That only served to embarrass me further, and the cycle just made my blush grow darker and darker. "Chulainn?"

"You look exhausted." His eyes narrowed slightly. "Even if you're not still recovering from that staff, I insist you just go back to sleep for a bit."
"I... have work." My throat was dry. "Um... Chulainn?"

"Hmm?"

"Did... um... did you have to pin me?" My eyes darted to the side nervously. "It's a little... um... well, I can't say 'bad', but uh..."

"I somehow doubt it's much odder than someone reacting to their shirtless lover by scolding them for an injury." Chulainn smirked. I knew he did, even if I wasn't looking at him. His tone gave him away. "Well, I could be wrong. It's not as if I have much experience in that sort of thing."

"You're the one who didn't even realize he was handsome." I brought my attention back towards him and frowned. "But I believe I told you before that being without clothes does very little to me. I'm stripping people all the time to reach their injuries."

"I suppose." His smirk widened. "But it's still amusing."

"You're the one who fell in love with a healer. I'm not going to be normal."

"That's fine. Normal is scary." He laughed a little and finally got off me, sitting beside me instead. "I'm serious, though. You need to sleep."

"I'm serious in that I have my job." I made to sit up, but he simply leaned over me. "Chulainn..."

"You look ready to pass out again, even if you don't feel it." He ran his fingers over my cheek before threading them through my hair. "Just a bit more sleep, please."

"..." I reached up and caught his hand as he pulled it away, and absently started tracing the little scars I saw on it. "Do you promise to have a healer treat your injury?"

"Yes."

"Do you also promise to be extra careful?"

"Yes."

"Do you also also promise that when you go to the infirmary, if it looks like they're being overwhelmed, you'll come wake me up before marching off?"

"...Yes." He smiled slightly. "I will. I'll even go right now, if you'd like."

"Then, in the meantime, I think I will go back to sleep." On impulse, I kissed his palm before letting go and curling into the bedroll. I was already dozing. "Chulainn?"

"Yes?"

"I love you."

"...I love you too, Alicia." He leaned down to brush a kiss over my temple. "I'll be back shortly to let you know about the infirmary."

"Thank you..." I smiled at him before closing my eyes and nodding off. I barely woke up when he returned to reassure me that the infirmary could handle not having me there while I slept a little longer. I managed to extract a promise to give the others orders to wake me if something changed before passing out again.
It had better be a darn emergency for me to use the Sleep Staff like that again. This exhaustion was ridiculous.

By the time I woke up again, feeling rather refreshed, Sigurd had led his army off. I cleaned myself up and got dressed before heading over to the infirmary, worried. I was instantly greeted by Lachesis and Finn, which… confused me a lot. It confused me enough that I let them lead me to a chair and agreed to simply instruct Lachesis while I worked on mending and the like.

"So, Sigurd assigned you two as extra guards, along with some soldiers patrolling?" I asked as Lachesis tucked a blanket around me and Finn took the clothes I'd mended away. I felt like an invalid. "Also, what is with all the fussing?"

"Well, Deirdre and Sylvia are abed, so we figured you were pushing yourself," Lachesis explained cheerfully. She even smiled brightly. "Since, you know, you push yourself a lot and you were tired enough to actually sleep in today."

"That's the last time I listen to Chulainn." I felt almost sulky, and frowned as Finn brought me a mug of tea instead of more mending. "I'm fine. I think, as a healer, I am perfectly capable of determining that."

"Well, I'm a healer-in-training, sort of, so you should let me get experience since there's been no emergencies." She was, unfortunately, right. Though, this time, Sigurd sent regular messages to reassure us that the main reason was because there was barely anyone to fight. Sigurd was mostly just securing and protecting civilians, so Aideen and Ethlyn could handle the injured on the field easily. "I need to practice."

"Besides, you gave us a huge fright yesterday," Finn added. He fussed over the blanket around me, smiling. "You passed out."

"That is simply from using the Sleep Staff in an overpowered way it wasn't necessarily intended for," I replied. The staff had been sent back to Mackily for repairs. "Will you at least let me check on people here?"

"You did that five minutes ago," Finn grinned mischievously before looking at Lachesis. "Speaking of Lady Deirdre and Miss Sylvia, though, weren't you going to check on them?"

"I was," Lachesis confirmed, smile warming. "You were about to go on patrol, right? Will you walk with me part of the way?"

"Of course," Finn agreed. He headed for the entrance, picking up his lance along the way. "Shall we?"

"Yes, we shall!" She giggled and skipped out of the infirmary, with Finn falling in step beside her easily. Normally, I'd think it adorable, but today, I was just irritated. I sat there at the table for a moment, sipping my admittedly delicious tea, before deciding that there was no reason to listen to them. This was my infirmary, and I was a healer. They had no right to bar me from working!

So, I stood slowly, taking my tea with me as I checked the patients. They were all asleep, thankfully, so it was easy to change their bandages and make sure their wounds weren't infected. A couple were in the earliest stages of infection, so I jostled them awake to clean them before urging them to go back to sleep.

When I was done checking injuries, I fussied over blankets, making sure there weren't tears in them, and then went towards the back corner where the other mending was. I sipped my tea as I went,
trying to pick out what herbs they'd used to make it, and mentally plotted out everything I needed to do. Mending was the priority at the moment, but I knew we still needed some medicines, especially since Sylvia hadn't been able to make any yesterday evening. So, we had that to deal with as well, and then I wanted to check on how many staves we had. No one had properly answered me when I'd asked how many needed repairs, so now was a perfect time to determine that, and-

"Ah, Miss Alicia." An oddly familiar voice called my name, and I looked up, confused. It had been a while since anyone had called me 'Miss' Alicia in this army, even among those I called my title. "Might I ask a favor?" The speaker, whoever they were, stood hesitantly in the entrance of the infirmary, not quite inside, and the sunlight shone behind them, masking their features in shadow. "I'm sorry. I know this is odd…"

"No, it's fine," I replied, defaulting to my polite-healer smile. I moved to the table and sat back down, taking a sip from my tea. "But please don't block the entrance, just in case."

"Oh, right." The speaker stepped forward, and I dropped my mug when I saw his face, little bits of tea splashing onto my hand and table. It was an appropriate response to Lord Eldigan suddenly being in my infirmary! "Can you… get a message to Sigurd for me?" He sounded hesitant, and his eyes darted about almost in confusion. "I tried, but I couldn't get through, and ah…"

"I'll… get Finn on it." This was bizarre. This was so bizarre. How did we go from fighting to free someone to that someone appearing in camp. "We'll also get Lachesis. She's been worried." I actually felt a little dizzy from all of this, and chose to not stand. Maybe I wasn't as recovered as I'd thought. "Would… you like some tea?" I gestured to the pot on the table. "It's… it's good."

"Yes, gladly." He smiled slightly. "Thank you. I'm sorry for the trouble."

Gods, what were you doing to us?

So, it turned out that when Chagall realized he was losing, he freed Lord Eldigan to serve as his 'shield' from an 'invasion'. Lord Eldigan promptly tried to figure out what was going on, and discovered the so-called-invader was Sigurd. He was pushed back when he tried to send a message directly, so he rode the edges looking for the camp, before heading to the infirmary, rightfully thinking that I'd be there and I'd know how to get a message to Sigurd.

By the time I'd figured all that out, Sigurd had returned and practically tackled Lord Eldigan off his feet with a relieved hug. From there, Lord Quan led patrols to secure the camp, while Sigurd and Lord Eldigan traded stories to get a better idea of how we ended up in this situation in the first place. I'd been called to listen and weigh in, mostly because Lord Eldigan wanted a healer's perspective on certain events.

"So, in summary, Noldion was attacked, you went to assist, and you got dragged into what should have been a civil war," Lord Eldigan sighed. We were in Sigurd's tent, sitting at a little table set up within. "I'm so sorry, Sigurd."

"No, if anything, I should be sorry," Sigurd replied. He looked almost depressed. "The worst part is that my king can't…"

"We'll lose Agusty temporarily, much like how Verdane lost Evans. There's no way around it. King Jamke was allowed to keep his castle because he didn't attack directly, but King Chagall doesn't have that protection." Lord Eldigan shrugged. "That's not your fault, Sigurd. It's politics."
"But still, I…"

"Are you worried I'm mad at you?" Lord Eldigan smiled slightly. "Idiot. Of course I'm not. If anything, I am upset that I brought trouble to you, and could not protect my country."

"But…" Sigurd made to protest again, but Lord Eldigan gave him a look and so, he sighed instead. "Oh, fine. But I'll work as hard as I can to make sure we move out as soon as we can."

"I'll stick with King Chagall and make sure he behaves, or try to." Lord Eldigan's smile faltered. "We'll see how that goes."

"I'm sure it'll be fine." Sigurd hesitated a moment before nodding, an idea clearly blooming in his eyes. "Well, Quan should be back soon, and I think I've a lovely bottle of wine." He grinned impishly. "If you're up for it?"

"I could use a drink, yes." Lord Eldigan laughed softly, relaxing at last. "Ah, but before I forget. Thank you, Sigurd, for protecting my home."

"Always." Sigurd's grin softened into a smile. "I wish I could've done it better, but hey, my kid will be born in the land my best friend loves so dearly. That's pretty amazing."

"I suppo… wait, hold on, kid?" Lord Eldigan's jaw dropped, but Sigurd simply winked and darted out of the tent. "Sigurd, get back here!"

"Deirdre is a couple months pregnant," I explained for Sigurd. I laughed a little as he turned his shock look my way. "Yes, it's lovely timing. Quan has been plotting ways for the three to play before Altenna leaves."

"Oh, gods, a mini Sigurd…" Eldigan groaned. He leaned back in his chair, looking despairingly up at the ceiling, and I laughed again, unable to help it. "Please let him inherit Deirdre's temperament. Please."

"You're aware Deirdre was the one who came up with a plan for a bloodless takeover of Mackily, and it worked, right?" I laughed a third time as he groaned again. "He's going to cause quite a bit of trouble for poor Ares." At the mention of Ares, though, I felt my cheer falter. "Lord Eldigan-"

"Please drop the title. You saved my son's life."

"...Eldigan, then." I paused a moment, trying to think how, just a year ago, I only knew these people by rumor. Now I was on first-name-basis with them. "I have a question, if you do not mind."

"Go ahead." His demeanor became both casual, yet serious. "What is it?"

"How did Noldion inherit the Major blood?" I winced as he simply closed his eyes. "If you'd rather not answer…"

"No, it's just… honestly, that's the source of my trouble now." He leaned back in his chair, noticeably drooping. "Are you willing for a little history lesson?"

"Go ahead." I shifted to get more comfortable in my own chair. "I expected it, truthfully."

"Right…" He sighed, and nodded, opening his eyes to look at me. "The full thing would require far too much time, but the simple version should suffice, I think." He fell silent, frowning slightly as he gathered his thoughts. "It was Hezul's children who proved there were some exceptions to the
'first child of the Major inherits the Major blood' rule. He had four children, and it was his youngest, Klotho, who inherited the Major. In fact, she was the very first exception. All of the other Crusaders passed their Major Blood to their firstborns."

"...Ah."

"Yeah." He laughed bitterly. "The situation in Augustria became… tense then. Civil war tense. First born versus the Major, made all the worse because the family was close. The siblings loved each other dearly. It killed them to be put against each other, almost literally. The stories mention suicide attempts." He sighed again, his eyes unfocusing slightly. "However, Klotho had another problem. She was in love with the duke of Noldion's son. So, the day after her eighteenth birthday, she eloped with him, causing a huge stir."

"That sounds like an understatement."

"Short version." He actually grinned, but it faltered quickly. "She and her new husband were the target of people's ire, but Klotho was clever. She swore an oath that would bind all her descendants as well. An oath of eternal loyalty to house Agusty. Her brother accepted the oath, and declared that Mystletainn would go to the house."

"Thus, Noldion has the Major blood."

"Yes." He fell silent again, frowning slightly. "When I became the Duke of Noldion, I took on that same oath. I am to remain eternally loyal to the royal house, and if I do not, Noldion pays the price. You saw it here. Chagall ordered the attacked on Noldion because I 'broke' the oath and spoke out against him."

"...Oh." I tried not to squirm. It answered my second question of why Chagall thought he could've gotten away with launching the assault. "So, what will you do now?"

"I will serve. I have no choice, really." He shrugged. "This incident showed that I have no allies in Augustria. I cannot depend on Sigurd's protection forever. He will return home at some point, as will Quan. I must do what I can for my country alone. I cannot burden them any further." He smiled bitterly. "I rambled more than I intended. You're a good listener."

"Healers do a lot of listening." I smiled back, sadly. "You want me to hide this from Sigurd, don't you?"

"It'll worry him and, really, I just want to see him happy. I want him to focus on his child." His smile grew a little warmer. "So, please, let's just…"

"I understand." I still sighed, though. "I fear for you, though. Chagall will not take this lying down, and he clearly does not know how to reward loyalty."

"So long as my friends and family remain safe, I'll take whatever abuse he throws at me." His smile widened. "But that is neither here nor there. I cannot falter from this path, sadly. Can you tell me more of Ares and Grahnye's conditions? I wish to hear everything."

"Yes, I can." I spared no details about the injuries they'd suffered, and how they, and Noldion, were recovering. He ended up sharing some stories of Noldion in between my little reports, and the way his eyes shone told me he adored his home. He adored being its duke. He adored his people. But his adoration was also his shackles. His love was his chains. Chagall had his loyalty only because Eldigan loved and cared so much for his home and country.

My heart broke for him. I could only hope that there could be some sort of happy ending to this
mess. I doubted, but I hoped anyway.

Records on Dew:

'Former' thief, 13 years old

A thief captured by Jamke's brothers, who helped cheer up Aideen while she was prisoner. He is absolutely loyal to her.

He's... not much of a fighter, though he has strong potential. Really, though, he's just not suited for the battlefield.

Despite his constant protestations, everyone knows he still steals. But he gives everything to the army, so we all look the other way.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: And with this, we end Game-Chapter 2. Chagall is the final boss of the chapter, and, in-game, survives only because Eldigan pulled him from the field. In the manga, he's not fought at all, though. In-game, once you deal with Zyne's group, I think there's like... three or four opponents left (I think three ballista users and Chagall), hence the lack of fighting.

How Noldion came to be the Major Hezul holders, and the associated oath of eternal loyalty, is revealed in supplementary materials, though I did add to it a bit (the youngest daughter was never named from my understanding; I went with 'Klotho' to fit in with 'Lachesis'). It certainly adds more to why Eldigan remains loyal to Chagall, despite Chagall being a bastard.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Jungby (There will be three interludes again to showcase the timeskip)
Interlude - Jungby

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude - Jungby

With Eldigan's release, Augustria officially 'surrendered' and peace talks began. Chagall was huffy and almost bratty the whole time, but thanks to Eldigan, the talks with King Azmur's representatives went smoothly enough. Chagall was forced to cede Agusty to Sigurd and live in one of the neighboring castles. Eldigan, on orders of Chagall, moves into Silvail with his Cross Knights, which Eldigan agrees to without a fuss, though it's easy to see that he wishes he could go home to Noldion instead.

When the peace talks conclude, things settle into an uneasy peace, and, thus, Aideen, Midir, Chulainn, Deirdre, and I make a quick trip to Jungby to show Deirdre Grannvale... and Chalphy, the duchy where she will eventually live, and rule alongside Sigurd.

It was only when I arrived that I realized it had been over a year since I'd last been to Jungby. My birthday had come and gone before the trouble with Augustria, with me turning twenty. I knew it logically, of course, since I'd gotten presents, but it hadn't really hit me until I was looking at my former house, and how dusty it all was.

"It's so cute~" Deirdre cooed, happily darting from one corner to the next. She hummed a little song as she did so. "Ah, you used blankets to divide the room like I did with my little house!" She giggled and ran a hand over the patchwork thing. "It's so pretty..."

"You can have it, if you want," I replied, shrugging. It was just a blanket I had made to help divide out a work area for myself. "It's a simple thing, but..."

"I love it!" She instantly went on her tiptoes to unpin it from the walls. "Yay!"

"You get happy over the silliest things." I shook my head and headed over to the dusty vials on the shelf, moving them into a box. This was the main reason why I'd decided to visit my old house; I remembered I still had some ground herbs and the like. "You okay? It's dusty."

"I'm fine, though I can't believe they didn't at least send someone to dust for you." Deirdre huffed, annoyed on my behalf. "I bet you saved their lives lots of times, but they can't do a simple thing like dust for you?"

"Well, do you think the people of the Spirit Forest are dusting your place?"

"...They probably burned it by now, actually." She sighed, drooping a little. "I suppose I should be happy they left it alone, then." She smiled again, though. "So, we should... oh..." Deirdre suddenly brought a hand to her head and swayed. I quickly moved to help her to the bed. "Ugh... dizzy..."

"This is what happens when you're five months pregnant." I smiled gently at her as she pouted. "At least you didn't get a nosebleed this time?"

"Thankfully." She sighed, and leaned against me. "I might need to head back to the castle,
though…"

"Can you wait for me to pack up the last of my medicine?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Okay." I gave her a gentle hug. "I won't be long."

Very quickly, I packed up the rest of the medicines, tucked the blanket and some other things under my arm, and helped Deirdre back to Castle Jungby, where she could be spoiled with long baths, food, and soft pillows and blankets. After making sure she didn't need me near, I went to find Aideen to let her know we were back early. The original plan had been just to spend some time in the village, but Deirdre's health took priority.

"You're going back?" A snappish voice I didn't recognize made me bristle, and I followed the sound to the little parlor Aideen liked having tea in. I peeked inside to see she was talking with a young man who bore some resemblance to her, except I'd never known Aideen to have such an annoyed look on her face. "Seriously, sister?" the man grumbled. With a start, I realized this was Andrei, the younger half-brother of Aideen, and the 'heir-presumptive' with Briggid still missing.

"You're needed here!"

"I fail to see what more I can do, considering our steward, and I have a debt to repay to Sigurd," Aideen pointed out calmly. She even sipped her tea like a proper lady. "If not for him and King Jamke, you would have a brother-in-law by now, and one I did not choose willingly."

"...Ugh..." Andrei leaned back in his chair, glowering at some spot above the wall. "I told Father we needed to leave more people behind, but he was all like 'oh, we must do our duty, son!' and all that nonsense. And look what happened! You were kidnapped and nearly forced, and now you and Sigurd are caught up in another country's business and not able to do your duties here at home where you both belong."

"It's not all bad. I've met many wonderful people, and Sigurd even found a wife."

"Still can't believe it. I thought he had no interest in any of those things and would just adopt Ethlyn's second child as his heir, if he didn't name Oifeye as the heir instead." He sighed. "Still shouldn't have listened to the old bugger."

"Oh, Andrei..." Aideen set her cup on the table and smiled sadly. "I'm fine. It all worked out. Please try to get along with Father?"

"Bah..." He scowled, but nodded brusquely. "Fine. For you, I'll try. Maybe. Don't expect anything good, though."

"I ask for nothing more." Her smile warmed. "But, when everything calms, I would very much like to have a family dinner like we used to, instead of you eating alone as you have been."

"..." Andrei rolled his eyes, but finally smiled. It was easiest to see the family resemblance when he smiled. "Fine, sister. When things calm, I'll have dinner with you."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

"Wonderful!" Aideen stood up, and leaned over the table to give him a big hug. "I'll be away in Agusty for a while longer, but I know Jungby is safe in your hands."
"Agusty, huh?" Andrei hesitated, but slowly lifted a hand to hug her back. "Briggid disappeared north of there, right?"

"I'll write you if I find out anything." She smiled sweetly at him as she pulled away. "If I find her, maybe you can relax a bit? I know you've been overworking because everyone threw the burden of heirship on you..."

"I can handle it." He sounded a little cross. "I'm more than capable-"

"It is not your ability I doubt, Andrei. It's your happiness." She rested a hand on his cheek, and her smile saddened. "You may be grown, Andrei, but you're still my beloved baby brother. I will always worry for your happiness."

"..." He sighed, and shook his head, smiling wryly. "One day, I'll win an argument."

"I have more practice at arguments." Aideen giggled. "Ah, but you have to return to the front, don't you?"

"I do. I've delayed too long."

"Then let me see you off."

"Fine, fine. I know when to give." Andrei sighed, but this smile, his smile became teasing as he stood up. "So, dear sister, how are things with Midir going?"

"Andrei!" Aideen's face went bright red as the two exited the room. I flattened myself against the wall so that they wouldn't realize I'd been eavesdropping on their conversation, and smiled as they passed by without noticing, with Aideen blushing badly and Andrei teasing her relentlessly.

There had been rumors that Andrei's relationship with both Lord Ring and Aideen had been strained in recent years, but it seemed like they'd be able to make up in time. That made me happy for Aideen. Hopefully, they could spend more time together when peace came.

A couple of days later, Deirdre felt steady enough to visit Chalphy. We made arrangements with the servants there to overnight in the Castle, and to keep Deirdre's visit absolutely quiet, so it was just Deirdre, Chulainn, and me while Aideen and Midir dealt with some administrative things for Jungby. The story, if anyone asked, was that she and I were sisters wanting to visit, and Chulainn was my boyfriend who'd come to make sure we weren't attacked. It wasn't quite a lie, all things considered.

As we approached the town, Deirdre took my hand in a crushing grip and she leaned against me when the chatter of the market started washing over us. We actually had to stop on the edge of town since between her nerves, the shortness of breath that often came with a pregnancy, and the walk, she actually was on the edge of hyperventilating. Chulainn rubbed her back as I worked to calm her down, and reassure her that it didn't matter what they said. We, the army, adored her, and if the people of the town were wary, she would only have to win them as she had won over the soldiers. It took a couple of times to get her to nod, and a few more reassurances to help her calm down enough to get her breathing under control. Only after all of that did we enter the town.

The very first words were enough to bring Deirdre almost to tears: 'Oh, I can't wait for Lord Sigurd to bring his wife home! I want to meet her!'.

I grinned at Deirdre and she smiled back almost shyly before leading the way into the market proper. As Chulainn hovered protectively near, we wandered, listening to all the rumors. Each of
them were as encouraging as the first. 'I wish they could've gotten married here, but politics are silly!' 'I hope they come home soon! I miss them!' 'Hurry up with those decorations, child! We need to send some proper ones to our Lady Deirdre, you know!'

There were even happy rumors about the baby. 'We need to prepare for a festival to celebrate the birth of Sigurd's heir!' 'I hope Lady Deirdre is taking care of herself. Pregnancy can be hard on the body.' 'I'm sure Lord Byron will be beside himself to have another grandchild!' 'Come with me to the temple, child. I want to pray for Lady Deirdre and the baby.'

"They're so happy…" Deirdre whispered. She sniffed, and dabbed at the corners of her eyes with her sleeves. "Ah… I'm weepy…"

"They love their lord, and so, they love those he loves," Chulainn summarized. There was a small amount of pain in his eyes as he looked over the crowd, but when he caught me looking, he quietly shook his head. He wasn't ready yet, and that was fine. I smiled to reassure him. "You will still have to earn, but they are willing to give you a chance."

"I will earn it. I will." She smiled warmly, determined. I squeezed her hand. "But, for now, I would like…" She trailed off, trying to get onto her tiptoes to see something. "What's with that group there?"

"The group?" Chulainn peered over everyone's head with a little frown. "Ah, it seems like some locals are organizing a group to go pick herbs."

"Can I do that?" She looked at me entreatingly. "Can I? Please?"

"Well, you have been doing well healthwise today…" I began. Her eyes sparkled. "You can if Chulainn goes with you."

"Yay!" she cheered. Then she paused and gave me an odd look. "Wait, you're not going?"

"No, I'm going to look for premade medicines and snag some herbs that are hard to get in Agusty. It'll also do you some good to be around them without me."

"I… suppose…" She frowned a little, but nodded. "Okay." She looked up at Chulainn, whose expression locked up. "I don't think he's happy with it."

"He thinks I get in trouble all the time," I half-joked. I smiled up at him. "Please?"

"You do get into trouble all the time," he immediately pointed out. I simply shrugged. "But you'll fret if Deirdre goes alone, and clearly, Deirdre wants to go…"

"I will just pass through the market and head straight for the castle. I intend to rest my poor feet anyway."

Chulainn frowned and fell silent, clearly thinking it over. "You promise?"

"Yes." I hesitated a moment and then leaned up and brushed a kiss over his cheek. He stilled at the action, while Deirdre squealed, giggled, and blushed all at once. "Have fun, you two."

"We will!" Deirdre reassured, hooking her arm around Chulainn's and dragged him down the path. "You're completely smitten with here, aren't you?"

"Huh?" Chulainn replied, actually looking startled as she continued to pull him away. "Wait, hold on…"
"Smitten, smitten~" Deirdre's singsongy teasing joined the murmurs and laughter dancing through the market, and I started giggling, unable to help it. I rather enjoyed the thought of him being 'smitten' with me.

Shaking my head, but unable to keep the silly smile off my face, I headed to a nearby medicine stall and looked through their wares for anything I might need for the army. I found a couple of things, and tucked them safely into a little bag after purchasing them. Afterwards, I made my slow way through the market, and found myself lingering at a toy stall. Among the items was a beautiful stuffed bear made of soft browns and whites, and I just couldn't take my eyes off it.

"That caught your eye, miss?" the stall owner asked. She was an older lady with a bright smile. "My daughter made that one. Said that I needed more things in the stall for babies. Of course, you really shouldn't leave a baby alone with it until they're a year old, just in case they roll over on the thing and suffocate, but something soft to play with under supervision."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking…" I whispered. I reached out to carefully poke the bear's 'cheek', smiling at how it 'squished'. "Do… you have others like it?"

"Got two more, actually." She ducked into the back of the stall briefly and came out with two other bears, one that was black and brown and one that was brown and black. "They're actually made from the same materials."

"...I'll take them." It was an impulsive purchase, one that I almost never would've done in the past, but… but I had people I _wanted_ to buy things for. "All three."

"Triplets expected in the family?" She laughed and wrapped up the three bears in a cloth to keep it from getting dirty, and set them into a high-walled basket. "60 gold."

"Take 65." I passed it over easily, and almost laughed at how ridiculous the sentence was. A year ago, the price would've made me balk and hide behind my healer-mask. Actually, a few months ago, I even argued with Sigurd about things being too expensive. Now, I was purchasing three stuffed bears and paying extra. "No, there are no triplets, thankfully. I just know three children who will love them, and their fathers will adore the idea of a 'sibling toys'."

"I should use that as a marketing trick." The woman winked as she handed me the basket and accepted the coin. "I hope they enjoy!"

"Thank you!" It took me a moment to juggle the two baskets, but then I was off through the market again, humming a little song. I ended up stopping again at another stall, this time to pick up little trinkets for Deirdre, Ethlyn, Aideen, Lachesis, Ayra, Erinys, and Sylvia. Another stall led to more purchases for Chulainn, Azel, Finn, Oifeye, Lex, and Shanan. A third led to even more, this time for Sigurd, Lord Quan, and Eldigan. At the fourth, I snagged something for Lewyn and Sir Midir.

By that point, I decided _I finally_ understood why the others bought things for me. There was a certain amount of joy in buying things for my friends, especially since they were things I was relatively certain they'd enjoy.

At some point, though, I bumped into someone, and struggled to keep all my purchases from falling out of the baskets I had. "I'm sorry!" I yelped, stumbling back and checking the ground to make sure nothing fell. "I wasn't paying attention…"

"No, it's my fault," the someone reassured. The voice was instantly familiar, but I still had to look up to confirm it was Arvis. To be fair, he also stared at me in shock. "Alicia?"
"Arvis, what are you…?" I started laughing as I realized something. "Oh, dang it! I saw Deirdre and Chulainn off while they went with a group of locals to pick herbs."

"I… almost joined in on that." Arvis laughed too, shaking his head. "That's almost hilarious."

"Almost." I grinned, deciding today was wonderful. Deirdre was reassured that the people of Chalphy loved her. I got things for my friends. I got things for Ares, Altenna, and Seliph. Then, to top it off, I got to see Arvis. "Well, you're an unexpected sight. What brings you here?"

"I told Byron I'd check on Chalphy for him, since Sigurd was stuck in Agusty for the time being." His smile fell slightly. "I'm sorry. I tried to argue for someone else to take over, but the people of Agustria refused. Sigurd won them over so completely, and he is the dear friend of their beloved Eldigan…"

"It's fine. We all expected this." I started back for the castle again, and Arvis fell in step with me easily. "How goes everything?"

"The campaign is going well, but warn Sigurd to be careful. There have been some… rumors." He hesitated a bit, glancing around before leaning forward to whisper. "Some accuse him of treason for harboring Crown Prince Shanan."

"I warned him his kindness would get him in trouble." Still, I felt incensed on his behalf. "But you may kindly inform people that if they try anything on a sweet child who has lost much and has only recently recovered enough that he can be without his protectors for long durations… well, they'll have to deal with a Vala's wrath."

"A Vala's wrath?"

"Mine. You don't want a healer angry at you. I know how people are put together. And Shanan is adorable, and my charge."

"I look forward to when you have kids." He snickered, but then got a thoughtful look. "That does remind me. Are you planning marriage?"

"Chulainn and I are still working through courting, given our respective personalities." I smiled sheepishly. "If you are in any danger of becoming an uncle, however, I will be sure to warn you."

"It's no 'danger'. I would welcome the chance to spoil some nieces and nephews."

"Should I inform Azel?"

"Only if you give me a detailed description of how red his face goes at the implications."

"Certainly!" I giggled, in far too good of a mood. "Sigurd and Deirdre will have a child soon, though."

"I've heard. I'll be sending presents in a month or so."

"No stuffed toys! I just bought one."

"Just one?"

"I bought other things too. I finally understand why you like buying things for me now."

"So, you won't protest your next present."
"Maybe." I grinned and he rolled his eyes. "It might be force of habit…. Ah!" I almost pouted, actually, when I realized we were at the castle gates. "Darn…." I looked up at him. "Would you like to come in? I'm sure Sigurd won't mind."

"If only, but I'm due back at the capital." He shook his head and sighed. "I suppose I'll have to hope that next time I see you, I get to also meet Deirdre and Chulainn."

"I look forward to that." I stepped in front of him and smiled. "But, if you must leave, then you should head off before you give Aida trouble."

"I suppose." He still looked a little grumpy. "Both you and Azel need to write more, by the way."

"The disturbance in Augustria cut into our writing time, but I promise we will be better in the future." My smile grew, and he softened to smile back. "I love you, Lord Brother. Be safe."

"You as well, dear sister." He leaned down to kiss the top of my head. "...Don't worry. Everything will be alright." He turned away then, walking to his carriage. I watched him leave with a frown, even as he disappeared, trying to figure out just why he said that.

I hadn't been worried. But now I wondered if I should be.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Andrei is the younger half-brother of Aideen, though in-game, he doesn't make an appearance (or even get a mention, I think?) until Game-Chapter 4. Dizziness and nosebleeds are not uncommon for the 4th/5th months of pregnancy.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Seliph
Interlude - Seliph

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Interlude - Seliph

As Arvis had 'threatened', within a month of returning to Agusty, presents arrived for Sigurd and Deirdre, and not just from him. Father Claude of Edda also sent some presents and medicines, as well as many other nobles. King Azmur, amusingly, sent probably the most, along with a formal letter of congratulations, and a personal letter half-begging that Sigurd stop getting involved in other countries' politics so that he can properly present his wife and child to the court. Freege and Dozel were notable in their absence, but Lex immediately went about buying gifts to 'make up' for his father, and Azel wrote to Tailltiu, which resulted in bunches of presents from her and her sister, as well as a reassurance that they would 'properly scold' their father for focusing 'too much on work'. No one had the heart to write back that the snub had been deliberate.

Besides, it didn't matter, as a few months afterwards, almost a full month before her due date, Deirdre went into labor.

I had a thousand and one things to do, and calming Sigurd shouldn't be on that list, but unfortunately, the person whose job it should've been, Lord Quan, was out on patrol with Finn, meaning that it had fallen on me. Even though, unfortunately, I was also the only healer here with any experience with childbirth. From a healer's perspective. Ethlyn was a wonderful help, but she didn't know what a healer needed to look out for, and Lachesis had to hunt down a competent, and trustworthy, midwife in the city. I nearly cheered when Eldigan showed up early for his monthly meeting. I really did.

"Perfect timing!" I greeted, not even giving him time to tend to his horse, or give orders to his escorts, before snagging his arm and dragging him inside. "Deirdre's gone into labor early, and she's been in labor for twelve hours at this point, and gods, I need help keeping Sigurd calm."

"She's giving birth already?" Eldigan asked. It took him a few tries to keep his feet under him. "Wait, why are you calming Sigurd?"

"Because everyone is busy and not here." I could curse. I really could. "I am also the one most used to being overworked."

"Why not ask the knights?"

"They're on patrols. Oifeye went to get Lord Quan and Finn. Shanan was trying, but he needs help. Others are taking over duties that really Aideen, Ethlyn, Lachesis, and I should be doing, but we're not because the baby decided to come now." I nearly groaned as I saw Ethlyn running down the hall. "What now?"

"Well… oh, hello, Eldigan," Ethlyn greeted. She even managed a curtsey. "I'm glad you're here. She's the best of us at keeping Deirdre calm through the pain, but she's also had to run around keeping everything running smoothly. I don't know how she does it."

"I smile a proper healer smile," I deadpanned, too stressed to put the healer mask back on. It was so much easier to keep calm when I didn't actually care about the people involved, and thought of
them only as my patients. "Then I recruited Lewyn and Erinys to keep it that way." Though, that also had ulterior motives of forcing them to spend time together. "Regardless, was there anything else or can it wait until after I've delivered Eldigan?"

"It can wait. Hopefully, you won't have to leave the room again." She smiled sweetly, while Eldigan just looked so incredibly confused and amused. "Sorry, but you're going to stay a while. I hope Chagall can deal without you!" She skipped off, and I continued to drag Eldigan down the hall, heading towards where I'd last left Sigurd.

We quickly arrived, and I saw Shanan looking so bewildered while Sigurd paced the floor, looking a little disheveled. "I have a present for you," I called, shoving Eldigan inside. Eldigan stumbled a bit, before waving. "Now, rant and fuss at him. Deirdre needs me more than you, especially now. Shanan, make sure they don't go brawling in a tavern or something."

"How do I do that?!" Shanan yelped. He looked warily at Sigurd and Eldigan. "They're bigger!"

"Pout at them. You can also try guilt, and simply being adorable." I looked at Sigurd and Eldigan. "If you two make him cry, I will retaliate. Then I'll find Ayra and have her retaliate."

They yelped, while Shanan laughed. I didn't stick around for any other reactions, and just half-dashed down the hall, going to the room where we had Deirdre set up. Hopefully, Lachesis would return with a midwife before Deirdre went from 'early labor' to 'birthing'. I wanted someone with more experience around, since so many things could go wrong.

Ah, why did the baby come early? This was so incredibly stressful!

The midwife, who I never even got the name of but I was certain someone else did, arrived shortly before Deirdre actually started giving birth, and thus, I was free to focus on keeping Deirdre healthy while she handled the baby. Once everything was finished, I tended to Deirdre while the midwife did all that she had to make sure the baby would be fine, reassuring her and getting her into a clean clothes and, perhaps more importantly, a clean room. Only after getting her settled in, and checking that she was conscious, I went to get the baby from the midwife and brought him to her.

"So, from what the midwife says, we'll have to be careful, but it seems like he was simply in a hurry to meet you," I explained to Deirdre as she cuddled with her baby boy. I'd taken the time to change clothes and give myself a quick wash before coming in, mostly so that I didn't feel like I was dirtying the room. "We'll have to be careful with his breathing, and he might have difficulties feeding himself, like more premature babies, but he's a healthy enough weight, and there should be few complications."

"Aw, look at that pretty smile," Deirdre cooed. I had a feeling she wasn't paying any attention to me, but I couldn't fault her for it. She did just go through labor. "I can forgive everything with that pretty smile. You're the cutest baby ever, my little one."

"He's all swollen and his head is still a bit pointy." I made my voice teasing, and she frowned up at me. "Oh, okay, fine, yes, he's absolutely beautiful. He's the most beautiful baby ever."

"Your auntie is being mean, sweetie." Deirdre kissed the top of his head, and I flushed a little from embarrassment at being called 'auntie'. "You mentioned difficulties feeding himself?"

"Yeah, it'll likely be a workout, but she did mention that he might have a mature suck-and-swallow reflex, as well as the ability to coordinate. You'll have to feed him to be certain." I smiled slightly.
"Though, you do still have the chance to ask for a wet nurse instead."

"No, my baby." She held her baby protectively to her chest. "I understand that some people want, or need, to wet nurse their children, but since I seem to be capable, then I would like to nurse my own child."

"Well, in that case, be prepared for some messy feedings and a fussy baby." I grinned and she made a face at me before going back to cuddling her child. "Regardless, let me make sure the cradle is secure."

"Can't I just cuddle with my baby all the time?"

"Holding is good. Accidentally rolling over in your sleep and suffocating your child is bad." I fussed over the cradle by the bed, removing some hazards the midwife had warned me about, and then turned my attention to her, making sure her pillows were still fluffed and that her blankets were smooth. "You up for a check up or would you rather wait a bit longer?"

"I want to wait a bit longer, if you think I can." She smiled gently and kissed her baby's forehead. He fussed a little before curling into her. "...You know… I never thought I'd get to be a mother. No, rather, I thought I never would be a mother, thanks to the taboo and the catastrophe."

"Did you want to be?"

"A little, but that might've just been because I knew… it wouldn't be allowed." She laughed a little, but it sounded watery and sad. "If the village had its way, I would grow up and die surrounded by strangers, acquaintances. People who blamed me for my mother's transgressions." She closed her eyes and a tear slipped down her face. "I was so scared to leave, but now look. I have a loving husband and wonderful friends. I have a baby boy of my own, and people who smile at me." She lifted her head and laughed again, smiling. "Ah, why am I crying?"

"Overwhelmed." I sat next to her on the bed and used my sleeve to wipe away the tears. "It happens. You went through a lot of pain, and now you're so happy you don't know what to do."

"I suppose so." Her smile grew. "Yes, that's an appropriate summary. I wonder if I have a right to be so happy."

"You do. You're fine. I promise." A knock of the door turned my attention away from her, and I smiled. "That's probably Sigurd. Should I let him in?"

"Please?" She giggled as I stood up. "He should meet his son."

"He should also says how much he loves and respects his wife." I laughed as well, and kissed the top of her head. She silently held up her baby, and with another little laugh, I bent down to kiss his forehead too. "Puffy little thing."

"When you and Chulainn have a child, I swear I'll say the same things."

"Well, they'd be true." We shared a grin and I went to the door, opening it to find a fidgeting Sigurd fussing with the cuff of his shirt. "Come on in, Lord Papa, and greet your son."

"If he actually calls me that, I might just hurt you," Sigurd instantly joked. He walked in shyly, and practically beamed at Deirdre and the baby. "Hey, you two… how are you feeling?" I watched them for a moment, mostly just to burn the scene of Sigurd tentatively talking and cooing over his son for the very first time in my memory, before stepping out and closing the door behind me, leaving the new family to spend time together while I prepared for the next few months. There was
still a lot of work to do, to make sure Deirdre and the baby would remain healthy, and as both Chief Healer, and Deirdre's best friend, it was my job to make sure it would all work.

However, as I headed for the infirmary, a very red-faced Aideen intercepted me, looking rather… frazzled. "Help me hide!" she hissed, even ducking behind me. Her eyes darted about the hall. "I accidentally kissed Midir."

"...How do you accidentally kiss your crush?" I asked, biting back a smile. It wouldn't do to show how amused I was. "What happened?"

"I was just so happy that Deirdre's birthing went smoothly, and that her baby is healthy, and…"

"So, you were overcome with happiness and you kissed him." This time, I couldn't fight the smile or the laugh. Aideen whimpered and pouted at me. "Oh, very well. Come to the infirmary with me and you can help while you calm down. But you must talk to him about it. He'll have to be so very confused at your kiss and run."

The next few months were going to be hilarious and fun. I could already tell.

A month after Deirdre gave birth, Sigurd hosted a party to 'present' his newborn son to everyone. Unusually, Sigurd held it out in the courtyard so that the villagers could also attend, a chance to party and enjoy some good food as an 'apology' for invading. The way that the villagers threw themselves into preparations, however, proved they loved him. Eldigan still got the bigger cheer when he arrived with Lady Grahnye and Ares, but that was only to be expected.

"Ah, I'm nervous…" I whispered to myself, fidgeting with my hands as I hid in the corner of the sparkling room. I could cut out an arrow from someone's eye without a blink, dig out chain mail links without a thought, stare unflinching at a infected wound. I could glare down an enemy commander, and stand my ground against just about anyone. However, today, I was almost beyond nervous. As custom in Grannvale, today would be the first day anyone besides the parents would hear the baby's name, and Deirdre had requested I be the one to do it. It was something so simple, but I couldn't help but fret. What if I tripped over my words? What if I mispronounced his name? It was a simple name, truthfully, but I worried…

"There you are!" Azel popped up beside me, and I had to bite back a little yelp. "...Did I seriously make you squeak?" he asked, startled. He handed me a mug of apple cider, or so I guessed by the smell. "Seriously?"

"No, you didn't," I instantly replied, hiding my embarrassment behind my mug. I tried to focus on the party, but most people were just blurs of smiles and laughter. I honestly might faint from nerves. "I did not squeak."

"Yelp."

"I didn't do that either." I focused my attention on where Altenna and Ares were playing. I smiled when I saw them playing with the bears I'd given them, and my smile widened when I saw how they made sure to include the baby too, making him smile and gurgle, getting an adult if it looked like he was starting to get overwhelmed by all the people. It was easy to see that the three would be as great of friends as their fathers. I couldn't wait, really, to watch them and their friendship grow.

"If you say so, Lady Sister." Azel grinned, and I gave him a warning look. "Relax. I brought you some cider for luck."

"Oh, is that what this is?" I rolled my eyes and he snickered. "I'm fine."
"Of course." His grin faded slightly, but he mostly hid it by sipping his own drink. "So, Aideen and Midir are officially a couple."

"They are." I insisted Aideen talk to Sir Midir after she'd stopped panicking, and the result was another couple. "I suppose we'll be having another party like this before long."

"Maybe for you and Chulainn?"

"We share a room, yes, but nothing of that sort, yet." I shrugged. People seemed to be expecting, which amused me since we still had yet to 'properly' kiss, but we were both very odd people. There was simply something comforting about waking up and seeing him beside me, and that was enough. "I promise I will warn you if it changes."

"Ack!" He went red, and I started giggling, unable to help it. "Ugh, meanie."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't resist." I found myself relaxing, though, and I leaned into his side. "You know I love you, right, Azel?"

"Huh? Yeah?" He gave me a weird look before some understanding crossed his face. "Oh, you're worried because your work has been keeping you away."

"It seems like yours has as well."

"W-well, I am an important part of the army!" Azel grinned, proud of the fact. "Let's take a small trip just the two of us when things calm down? A day trip?"

"That sounds like fun." I tensed again, though, when I noticed Sigurd looking around the room for someone. I tentatively brought up my hand to wave, and he caught sight of me instantly, smiling and beckoning me forward. "I'm up."

"You'll be fine, Lady Sister." Azel gave me a hug and a bright smile. "I brought you the cider of luck, after all!"

"That you did." I took a big gulp and passed him the mug. "Hold onto the rest for me?" Then I took a deep breath and walked out of the shadows to stand in front of everyone. The crowd hushed as they noticed me, and I hid my nerves by gently moving Altenna and Ares away from the baby. They frowned, but calmed when I smiled. Perhaps they sensed my nerves, because they glanced at each other and, in silent agreement, they simultaneously pressed their bears' faces to my cheek for good luck 'kisses'. I was so touched that I almost cried, but I held onto my smile and 'slipped on' my healer's mask at the last second as I turned to the crowd.

"Allow me to thank you all on behalf of Sigurd and Deirdre for coming to celebrate the birth of their son," I declared, making sure my voice carried. I bent down to pick up the baby from the cradle, so that he could see all the people, and so that they could see him. "It is my honor and joy to present our little lord, Seliph Baldos Chalphy." The crowd cheered, and poor Seliph squirmed at the noise. He didn't like loudness. "If you would like, you may now give him your greetings."

I settled Seliph back in the cradle, and remained crouched by him as a very, very long line of people came to say hello, and even leave gifts and blessings. Deirdre and Sigurd stood near, accepting congratulations and the like, and every so often, they glanced over, worried. I made sure to smile, though, and quietly snuck Altenna and Ares back closer so that they could help me keep Seliph calm with so many strangers showing up. It was a relief when the line of people stopped, and I could leave Seliph to his parents and return to Azel's side to chat and drink cider.

My part was done, and I could finally relax. This was Seliph's day, and I intended to enjoy it.
Chapter End Notes

Author's note: Yay, babies. The average time a first-time-mother is in labor (all stages of labor iirc) is about 16 hours, though the times can vary wildly. Despite how they're depicted in most media, most newborn babies... well, those I've talked to mentioned they're like ET, but swollen! XD Seliph's full name is revealed in supplementary materials.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Reopened Scars
There is a distinct shift in the air in the weeks following Seliph's birth. Tensions with Chagall build the longer we're here, and yet, they might as well be worlds away. Even when Eldigan comes to discuss the recent troubles, there is at least an hour of just fussing over the baby. Altenna and Ares adore him, and all three cried pitifully when Altenna was finally escorted back to Leinster.

Sadly, those were only the first of tears to be shed. Not two days later, a messenger came from Grannvale.

I had never had so much of an urge to clock someone over the head. I also couldn't understand how a messenger, presumably someone who dealt with people a lot, could fail so completely in reading a room. I could only assume it was just that this messenger didn't have a single thought in their head.

...The healer in me screamed how unkind and unprofessional the thoughts were. The friend in me screamed that I was allowed to be unhappy and angry at a person who so very gleefully announced Isaach's fall, and the death of King Mariccle. The rest of me held onto my sense to grab Ayra by the arm and hold her back from hurting the messenger.

"I won't kill him," Ayra whispered. She glared at the ground so fiercely I had to checked the tiles didn't recoil from fear. The messenger was still happily explaining how King Mariccle had died, seared into oblivion by the Book of Naga, and how Isaach would be divided up and become a territory of Grannvale. "I won't."

"This makes sure that I also don't do something," I murmured, stepping a little closer. I glanced around and noticed how stiff Sigurd's smile was. He was the only one even pretending to wear one, but it wasn't as if the messenger had noticed. "Take a look at everyone."

"Why?"

"Just do it." I poked her side until she did, and then was treated with her wide-eyed shock as she saw what I did. Everyone in the army was tense and angry. Everyone here was ready to 'shoot the messenger'. Not far away, Azel was even having to hold back Lex, who looked darn ready to punch the messenger. "I do not know if that is a comfort…"

"...I am… gladdened that they do not take joy in it…" She bit her lip, and the shock began fading for tears. "I… Shanan… I need to…"

"You should deal with your own grief first." I tugged her from the room and into the hallway. Sigurd glanced at us worriedly, and subtly nodded. Deirdre gave us a sad smile, clinging to Sigurd's shirt. "Come on."

"But…" She followed me stiffly, her limbs just hanging. It was like she was a little doll, and had no idea what to do now. "Not even a body…" She bit her lip hard as we went into an alcove, her eyes filling with tears she stubbornly refused to shed. "He won't make it to the afterlife. His spirit
will be confused."

"Will he?"

"There is no body for his spirit to see and recognize his passing. He'll be trapped in the realm of the living, unable to move on." She began shaking, and pulled her arm from me to hug herself. "He didn't want a war. He didn't. He fought because the people... because our father..."

"Do you want to tell Sigurd?"

"No... no, I want him to stay out of other people's business so that his son will have his father..." Her voice cracked. "Shanan. I need to..."

Footsteps made us both look up, and I was only half-surprised to see Lex standing nearby. He did not enter the alcove. Instead, he just... stood there, meeting Ayra's tearful gaze calmly. It was a silent offer. 'What do you need?' I knew, just by looking at his calm, serious face, that he'd willingly take on any anger she needed to unleash, any insults. She surely had a lot, and Ayra was the type to lash out. So, it was a surprise to us both when Ayra took that offer... to throw herself at him and begin sobbing. He wrapped his arms around her automatically, looking a little confused, but also a little happy. He held her close as she cried bitter tears, and even when she did begin with the insults, there was no heat to them. They were just words that flailed and drowned in the tears.

I lingered for a moment, just in case I was needed, before leaving, deciding to just let Lex handle Ayra for now. I checked back into the Great Hall, where Sigurd had changed the subject to the 'safer' topic of who had survived, and then hunted for Shanan. He had run off very quickly into the message, and I had a feeling I knew exactly where he'd gone.

Two second later, I entered Seliph's play room and found Shanan there, leaning over Seliph's cradle and half-heartedly dangling the stuffed bear for him. Seliph seemed to know something was wrong, though, as while he did reach for the bear, he also reached for Shanan's hand, patting it.

"Shanan," I called softly. He stiffened and turned slowly to face me. There were no tears in his eyes. Unlike Ayra, it seemed to not be due to stubbornness, but simply too deep a grief. "Hey."

"H-hi..." he replied. His voice trembled, and was thick with the tears that would not show. "I..."

"I know." I walked inside, but waited for him to come to me. He did after a moment, taking the bear with him to make sure it didn't fall on Seliph. Seliph made a whining noise in protest, but surprisingly didn't cry. "Maybe I should've gotten you one too."

"No, I like the necklace and swords better." He leaned into me, and I gently hugged him, stroking his hair. "...He was happy. That man was happy my father was dead."

"He's a fool."

"It hurts."

"I know."

"I thought I was ready. I thought it scarred and I was getting better."

"I know."

"My home is gone."
"For now. You can get it back."

"...Yeah..." He tilted his head up to look at me. His eyes wavered, like he was about to cry, but the tears hadn't made it yet. "Yeah, when I'm older... when I'm older, I can negotiate, right? Like Jamke? To..."

"Yes, I think so." I smiled at him. "When we go back to Grannvale, I know Sigurd will help you. He'll get a personal audience with Prince Kurth, just for you."

"Because Prince Kurth... is a good person, right? Even though he killed my dad, he's a good person. War makes good people kill good people, but it doesn't mean..."

My heart broke for how wise he sounded. He was still a child... "He is, though like all people, he is prone to mistakes. But I promise that he will listen, to both you and Sigurd." I knew he'd listen to Ayra too, and there was a chance this could spark that civil war that had been brewing. But Shanan would be fine. We'd all make sure of it. "For now, though..." I poked Shanan's cheek, and smiled when he made a face. "Why not continue to play with Seliph? You were doing that earlier."

"...Yeah, he makes me smile." Shanan's smile widened, and left my side to return to the cradle. This time, though, he lifted Seliph out and sat down, settling Seliph on his lap. "Yeah, I'll do that."

"Okay." I hesitated before deciding that I couldn't hover. I could support, but hovering would be the worst thing for him. "Will you be okay while I make sure no one fought?"

"I think so." A couple of tears finally slipped down Shanan's face, but he kept up the smile. Seliph reached up and patted his cheeks, looking at the tears weirdly. "Thanks."

"Always, Shanan." I leaned down to kiss his forehead and stepped out of the room, walking down the hall as quickly as possible.

Then, to my surprise, I turned the corner to head for the Great Hall and literally ran into Sigurd. It took both of us a second to recover.

"Alicia!" Sigurd smiled, but that didn't hide the unease in his eyes. He looked drained and tired. "Do you know where Shanan is?" he asked. He ran a hand through his messy hair, and I chose not to ask about the messenger. "I've been trying to find him, but-"

"Seliph's playroom," I answered. I pointed down the hall and smiled. "He's playing with Seliph to cheer himself up."

"Oh." Sigurd's smile softened with relief. "Think it's a good idea to-"

"Go give him a darn hug, will you? He needs it."

"On it." He winked and headed down the hall, knocking on the door and waiting for Shanan's reply before going inside. I was reminded of when we first met Shanan, and knew that Sigurd's kindness would, once again, help Shanan take those first steps past his pain.

So I shook my head and went instead to find Oifeye and Finn. What Shanan would need was friends, and I'd make sure he was surrounded by them. Then, I'd do my part as Ayra's friend to ensure she was going to make it through the day.

Lachesis and I could tag-team. We'd make it fun.
We spent the day in quiet 'celebration', really just doing some fun things for Ayra and Shanan to help them not feel so alone. I spent most of the day with Ayra, even learning how to play some card games thanks to Lachesis. I ended up being rather good at it, mostly because I had a good 'poker face'. Afterwards, we had a quiet dinner with some of Ayra and Shanan's favorite dishes from Augustria, and then we all headed for bed. I offered to stay up with Ayra and Shanan, but both of them refused. Ayra was just going straight to bed, while Shanan was having a little slumber party with Oifeye and Finn. So, instead, I just went to the room I shared with Chulainn and fell asleep very quickly.

However, my rather dreamless sleep was interrupted by some movement at my side. I opened my eyes slowly and yawned, pushing myself up slightly as my groggy mind tried to register what had woken me up. It didn't take me long, however, to see Chulainn sitting up, breathing heavily as he leaned forward, his hand half-hiding his face. I reached up to touch his shoulder, bare since he slept shirtless, and noticed he was both cold and sweaty. That gave me my answer, even before he turned to look at me with pained, fearful eyes.

"Did you have another nightmare?" I asked gently, smiling softly. It wasn't uncommon for him to have nightmares, mostly of past battles and events. He always tried to keep quiet about it, but sometimes, they were just bad enough that he accidentally woke me. It didn't help that I was a light sleeper. "Would you like some tea?"

"No, I'm fine," he whispered. His voice was almost too soft to hear, but he slowly relaxed as I rested my hand on his cheek. "Just… agitated."

"Was it a particularly bad one tonight?"

"...Yeah..." He sighed and leaned into my touch. "That's one way to put it."

"I see." I shifted a little closer. He immediately snuck an arm around my waist, and practically pulled me into his lap to hug me. He shook underneath my hands when I rested them on his shoulders. "Did something happen today to make you think on… whatever it was?"

"Yeah..." He held me a little more tightly. "Yeah."

"Was it Shanan? You spent a lot of time with him today."

"I thought a sword lesson would help distract him. I was right." I knew he was. Shanan had been beaming throughout the whole thing. "But, I suppose, in a way, it did. And hearing of Mariccle's death..."

"Oh?" I glanced down at him, curious, but not quite sure how to ask. Chulainn didn't like talking of his past, and I didn't want to force him, especially since it gave him nightmares.

"Mhmm..." He let go of me slowly and let me shift to sit beside him. He took my right hand and brought it up, studying my Vala Holy Mark. His fingers actually traced over the design, following the swirls slowly and gently. It was enough to make me shiver, and a pleasant bit of warmth flood me. "Alicia?"

"Yes?" I smiled up at him, doing my best to appear as reassuring as I could. "What is it?"

He hesitated and then let go of my arm, not saying a word. Before I had time to be disappointed, he shifted to pull his left leg to his chest, and rolled up his pant leg. I almost asked what he was doing, but then I discovered it instantly. On his lower left leg, wrapping around from his ankle to his knee, was a Holy Mark, the same color as Ayra's and Shanan's.
I reached out to touch the mark, feeling where faint scars suddenly stopped short of the mark, only to 'reappear' on the other side. I felt how smooth and warmth it was, felt the slight 'buzz' of power to it, proving it was a true mark and not some fancy tattoo. The Mark of Odo... But I also knew Ayra had no other siblings. She would've said that, by now.

So, I sat back on my heels, and looked at him, waiting for his explanation. His expression was blank, but not his 'normal blank'. He was not trying to hide, and he was not trying to remember. He was simply trying to think of how to begin.

Finally, though, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and murmured, "my name... was once Holyn of Sophara."

That simple sentence broke the dam. He told me everything. He told me of the days where he'd play with Ayra and trained with Mariccle, thinking that life would never be different and being content in it. He told me of the nobleman who betrayed his family, killing his mother and younger siblings right in front of him. He told me of how his father fought, but fell when the nobleman's people used him as a hostage. He told me of how he'd been a slave to his family's killers until the Isaachian Royals came to liberate the city. He told me of how one of the nobleman's people had stolen away with him, only to discard him on the streets when he couldn't get a ransom. He told me of killing a dog over a piece of molded, stale bread, and being thrown into the arena, because a nobleman felt that dog held more worth than him. He told me of the horrible first days, years, of being a child gladiator, bound to the will of someone else. He told me of buying his freedom and becoming a mercenary. He told me of those first jobs that would always haunt him. He told me everything.

"I thought it was gone," he whispered when he got to the end. At some point, he had begun crying, and I had gathered him into my arms, and let him cry into my chest, stroking his back and hair. "I thought I didn't care about it anymore. Sophara's gone. My family is gone. Holyn of Sophara died with his family, and I was just... the boy. The slave. Chulainn. I made a new name from it..."

"But the scars throb," I murmured, kissing the top of his head. He only curled more into me and continued to sob. "They've reopened."

"I didn't think it could hurt again. I didn't think..."

"...I love you." I continued to hold him, not knowing what else to say. All I could do was hold him as he held me, trying to give him the same sense of safety and comfort that he gave me.

The slightly broken, but genuine, smile he eventually gave me, wobbling from the tears he still cried, told me I succeeded. I leaned in and kissed his cheeks, taking away the tears, and moved to wrap him up in another hug. Instead, when I pulled back, he leaned in and kissed me on the mouth, gentle and hesitant. I returned it shyly, feeling my face flush when we parted, and when we broke apart, I kissed him again.

I'd never really thought our first 'true' kiss would taste of salt and tears, but somehow, it just felt right. It felt as right as lying there in his arms, running my hand through his hair as he slowly fell back asleep, curled up so that his ear was pressed against my chest, where he could hear my heartbeat.

It was enough for me. If all my days could end like this, I would be happy until the day I died.
Author's note: 'Holyn' was the fan-translated name for Chulainn. Considering that Ayra does actually know Chulainn (but has forgotten him/his face), I figured I'd add a little more to it by also having Chulainn's 'birth name' be 'Holyn', kinda like how Cu Chulainn (Chulainn's namesake) was born Setana. Chulainn originally being the 'prince of Sophara' is only revealed in his Chapter 5 lover conversation with Ayra.

Next Chapter - Thunderclouds
Chapter 14) Thunderclouds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 14) Thunderclouds

The days after learning of Isaach's fall are quiet. No one feels much up for celebration, and there is an emphasis on making sure Ayra and Shanan are well. I fret over Chulainn before we go to bed at night, since he wants to keep who he was secret from all, even his childhood friend. He hates how much he's changed; I respect his wishes.

As we do this, though, the rumors whisper on and on. While the people of Augustria love us, they do feel as if we are staying too long. Sigurd reassures them and tells them that he is writing to urge King Azmur to let us withdraw. Unfortunately, though, the process is too slow for King Chagall, as the rumors hint that he's overtaxing to pay for mercenaries.

It's the year 759, Grann Calendar. This is the year where everything began falling apart.

I stirred awake to the feeling of a hand running through my hair, and I opened my eyes to see Chulainn not quite paying attention. He just ran his fingers through my hair again and again, eyes distant. He'd had another nightmare; he'd been having more of them lately. I thought about what I could do to jolt him out of it, and decided to be a bit mischievous. I leaned up a little and gently kissed him on the neck, right under the jaw. He hissed a bit, startled, and I laughed, unable to help it. I kept on laughing even as he shifted to lean over me, pinning me to the bed, and reached up to cup his face.

"I would've thought you'd be tired after earlier," he whispered. His voice was still a bit raspy and he leaned down to nuzzle my cheek. "How are you feeling?"

"A bit sore and tired, but I'm fine." I laughed as he moved to kiss my neck, right on some of the love bites he'd no doubt left. "And you?"

"A bit of the same, I suppose." His kissed moved a little lower. "Though…"

"Are you certain you're not trying to distract yourself?" I wrapped my arms around him, and felt my face turn a little pink when I noticed the scratches on his back. "You looked worried."

"Just a bit of a nightmare." He sighed and shifted to rest against me, his cheek against my chest. "And a bad feeling."

"Is that so?" I kissed the top of his head. "What sort of bad-?" A loud clang stopped the word shut, and both of us shot up as we realized what it was. It was the alarm bells. "Oh no."

Both of us were barely out of the bed when the door burst open and two people wearing leather armor and cloth-like-masks over their faces ran in with weapons. An arrow flew, clipping my cheek and shattering the window behind me. I went to get Chulainn's sword, but he simply punched them, throwing one out the window and actually breaking the neck of the second. He then headed for the door, but I stopped him with a hand on his arm and smiled sheepishly when he glanced at me.
"We… might want to get dressed," I pointed out. "I've little intention of healing the injured without even undergarments, and I'd rather you not fight like that either."

"Fighting naked isn't that big of a deal," he replied. He smiled slightly at my incredulous look. "Yes, I've done it. A few times, actually."

"Yes, well, I'd rather keep you to myself, thank you." I scowled as his smile grew. "Clothes on, mister."

"Yes, yes."

Both of us got dressed quickly, and I snagged a staff and his sword before we headed out into the hallway. Already, it was chaos, but thankfully, there was some control to said chaos. I was able to make my way into the infirmary with ease, and it wasn't long before I was tending to the injured and listening to the sounds of battle get further and further away. In fact, it wasn't long before they faded entirely, and Sigurd actually fetched me for a little meeting.

"It seems like it was just an initial assault, but scouts report that there are more forces in Madino," Sigurd explained as we walked down the hall. He was wearing a bloody robe that did little to actually cover him and sleeping pants. "How are the injured?"

"Nothing too bad, though I'm sure that I'll get an unexpectedly near-fatal injury before long," I replied with a little shrug. "Your guards were on top of things."

"Yes. But ah…" He frowned worriedly. "Um… did you get hit on your neck?" Sigurd pointed to his for emphasis. "There's… some bruising?"

"...I assure you that I am just fine." I knew my face was red as I tried to bring up my collar and hide it. I'd have to have a talk with him about leaving love bites where others could see. This was far too embarrassing. "R-Regardless…"

"Oh, wait, those are-"

"Finish the sentence, Sigurd, and I'll hit you in the head."

"Are you two going to wed before babies or-?" He laughed as I whacked him on the back. "Azel's going to freak!"

"I'm so pleased you're amused!"

"I hope our kids get along."

"I'm not pregnant! I'm a healer! I know contraceptives!" I groaned as he continued laughing. "Now, granted, these Augustrian ones are odd compared to what I know, but regardless, stop laughing. You're supposed to be serious! We were just ambushed!"

"I'm allowed to tease! I teased the living hell out of Ethlyn and Quan too, actually."

"You're impossible." I sighed and then noticed something ahead. Lex and Ayra were chatting in an alcove. "Look." I poked his side and pointed, and the two of us immediately ducked behind a nearby corner to continue watching. Sadly, it wasn't quite close enough to actually overhear anything, but we did see Ayra looking annoyed until Lex very casually tossed her a sword before walking off, laughing at something.

"That's a Brave Sword," Sigurd commented. He grinned. "So that's what Lex was hunting for."
"I think we should very casually talk to them," I replied. I grinned back. "I'll take Ayra."

"I'll take Lex."

It did take a little bit to 'casually' just appear next to Ayra and convince her to head to the war meeting with me, mostly to wait for Sigurd to 'conveniently not see' Ayra and catch up to Lex. It was worth her squeak, though. It was well worth the squeak.

The attack on Agusty Castle, though, was only the beginning. With even more forces, Sigurd was forced to march against King Chagall once again. We had the hope that Eldigan might be able to talk sense into things, but I quietly knew that the chances were slim. With us occupied in the north, there was no one who could protect Noldion, surrounded by territories that could've also hired mercenaries to replace the forces they'd lost. Noldion was effectively hostage, and so, Eldigan would serve. But I didn't say that. Not when Sigurd and Quan were so hopeful they could figure out a way.

"Do be careful, little brother," I whispered, hugging Azel tightly. While most of the army was marching on Madino, I would remain behind with Deirdre to maintain a stable infirmary. "Tease Lex for me."

"You know it!" Azel laughed, hugging me back. He smiled as I studied him, noting how he had gotten a little taller, though he was still lanky. "Be careful as well, Lady Sister. There's only going to be a defensive line here."

"This is why you must work quickly and then come back." I ruffled his hair and he made a face. "I love you dearly, Azel. I'll see you soon."

"See you soon." He gave me another hug and ran off into the crowd, towards where Chulainn waited. Both he and Chulainn waved before turning away, and I smiled warmly at them both. Chulainn and I had already said our own goodbyes in the privacy of our room, so there was no real point in doing it a second time. I knew I'd see them both before long.

So, instead, I meandered through the crowd, and looked for others I wanted to say goodbye to. I caught sight of Lord Quan and Oifeye saddling up their horses, and chose to mere smile and wave at them from afar because of how busy they looked. They both waved back and made no move to come closer, instead staying right where they were. Oifeye did waver a bit, but just gave me an extra warm smile. Whatever Lord Quan was teaching him, it outweighed his desire for another hug, or perhaps he was simply trying to be an adult. He was almost sixteen now, after all.

Giggling, I moved into the crowd and soon came across Erinys, standing apart from the others to check her pegasus's wings. To my surprise, Lewyn was actually with her, tucked under a wing. "Argh, I was sure there was something here," he grumbled as I approached. "The wind's all worried about something."

"And why did you think that something had anything to do with me?" Erinys asked. She had a slight smile on her face, though there was some pain and sadness in it. I took it to mean they still had a lot to talk about. But I hoped they were taking those steps. "It could be anything."

"Because it's really worried, and… the wind… likes you."

"Well, I'm glad it does. But the fact remains that my pegasus is just fine." She laughed a little, and Lewyn looked up to smile wryly at her. "Worrywart."

"Someone has to be, particularly when the wind…" He trailed off and closed his eyes, tilting his
head slightly. The wind stirred around him, lifting his scarf and hair like a playful child. Then it swirled away, catching my hair too. "Ah, Alicia!" He turned to smile at me, and winked. "What brings our precious flower of Vala here?"

"I'll remember that description when I'm scolding you for not taking medicine," I replied, laughing a little. I walked a little closer and smiled. "I'm simply wandering and checking on people before you leave."

"That's right; you're staying behind," Erinys murmured. She frowned worriedly. "Are there enough soldiers? Last time you remained behind, you were ambushed, yes?"

"That was towards the end of the campaign, when the enemy was desperate. Agusty is supposed to be quite defensible, and we have more than enough to man the walls, or so I have been reassured. Don't forget; Seliph and Shanan are staying here."

"Right, of course." She smiled sweetly then. "Be careful anyway?"

"I'll do my best. I'm not the one marching off to battle, though." I crossed my arms and gave them a playfully stern look. "You be careful as well. I would rather greet you with hugs than bandages."

"Of course."

"Can we be cheeky and get hugs now too?" Lewyn asked. He came over to my side but waited for my laugh and nod before giving me the hug. "We'll be extra careful. The wind really is bothered by something."

"We promise," Erinys added. She joined in on the hug, smiling warmly. "We'll be back before you know it!"

"Safe travels," I whispered. I waited for them to pull away before stepping back and smiling. "I'll see you soon."

I turned away then, pausing only to pet Erinys's pegasus before returning to the crowd. Laughter caught my ear, and I slowly made my way towards it, smiling as I noticed Sylvia dancing in the crowd, cheering up some soldiers. I was surprised she was heading out with them, but Sylvia's Dancer's Gift was valuable for quick operations like this, and so, she was asked to come along. She jumped on it, and I knew it was because she loved being praised. Still, she'd gotten a lot of medicines to take along, just in case, and even from where I was, I could see her pack filled with them.

Still, she caught my eye mid-twirl and blew me a kiss. I laughed and waved before leaving her be. Not far away, I saw Finn and Lachesis chatting with each other, with Finn showing her something. I thought it might be a way to draw her sword a little faster, but that was only speculation based on how he kept pointing to her belt. I watched them for a bit before deciding to leave them be when, to my surprise, Lachesis actually kissed Finn on the cheek, right by the mouth, before grinning and running off. Finn's face went bright—bright red, and I couldn't help but laugh. He whirled at the sound and went even redder before ducking over to the other side of his horse to hide.

"My, my, so that's what she was plotting." Ayra walked up then, crossing her arms and looking rather amused. "She was supposed to actually do some morning chores, but begged to switch with me," she explained, laughing softly. Her new sword all but glittered on her hip. "She must've been planning on doing that, since the mounted will ride far ahead."

"What are the foot soldiers going to do?" I asked, curious. I smiled when Finn cautiously peeked
out behind his horse and ducked back. "Normally, he'd just send out the cavalry."

"Yeah, but we're to go check the villages. There's rumors of some pirates changing their tactics recently and attacking innocent villagers."

"Who do they normally attack?"

"Wealthy ships, of course." She grinned, and I laughed, even though it probably shouldn't be amusing. "And hey, don't worry. I'll watch Chulainn and Azel for you. Promise."

"Thank you, but be certain to watch yourself as well." I grinned. "Talk to Lex too, won't you?"

"I... er..." She coughed, face going red. "I-I'm going to head to my group!"

She rushed off, actually knocking a few people off their feet, and I laughed and laughed as I walked through the crowd a bit more, hitting the center of the group. I caught Ethlyn's eye, checking on her staves, and pointed to Ayra, red all the way to the tips of her ears. She winked and grinned before chasing after Ayra, likely to reassure and tease. I managed to stifle my laughter, and looked actually for Aideen and Midir, knowing Aideen would be close to Ethlyn. I found the two, however, cuddling in the shadow of his horse, smiling in contentment. So, instead of interrupting them, I simply moved on to where I saw Sigurd and Deirdre, with little Shanan standing nearby.

"Oh, I know!" Sigurd was saying, laughing a little. His cheer seemed to do nothing to soothe Deirdre, based on her worried expression. "Shanan, why don't you guard Deirdre and Seliph for me? To make her feel better, I mean."

"Sure I can do that!" Shanan replied brightly. His eyes lit up and he tugged on Deirdre's skirt. "It'll be okay! Promise!"

"Well, with so many protectors, it definitely will," Deirdre murmured. She still didn't look convinced, but sighed and managed a smile. It was small and fragile, though. "Never mind me. I'm sure it's just lingering anxiety from the Warning."

"What warning?" Shanan frowned before shrugging. "Whatever. We'll stop whatever it is!"

"...We will, yes?"

"Yes, I promise," Sigurd whispered. He leaned in to kiss her softly. "I'll see you and Seliph again before long, and we'll go on a picnic, just the three of us." That finally made Deirdre's smile warm into her 'real' one. "Ah, Alicia!" Sigurd stepped away and waved to me. "We'll try not to give you too much work."

"You can give me all the work in the world so long as you come back," I retorted with a little shrug. "It had better be soon. If you make Deirdre or Seliph cry, I shall be most vexed." I smiled and gave him a hug. "Go on."

"Alright." He gave me a smile, ruffled Shanan's hair, and kissed Deirdre again, whispering 'I love you' in her ear to make her blush. "We're off!" He turned away, and everyone cheered and marched down the path.

Deirdre seized my hand tightly, and I squeezed it reassuringly when I noticed her worried look had not only returned, but she was close to tears. "I'm sorry," she whispered to me. "I just... I'm so afraid this..."

"It'll be okay," I replied softly. I released her hand to hug her instead, letting her hide her face in my
"Come on. Let's take a walk through the gardens."

"Okay." Her voice wavered. "Ah, why am I so scared? It's been just fine… everything will be fine…"

"That's right. You're just nervous."

It took quite a few words of reassurance and even more distractions before Deirdre finally calmed down. The two of us ended up sharing a room that night, though, as a 'slumber party' thing. She kept having nightmares.

"And that is how you change a diaper, Shanan," I laughed, tossing the soiled diaper into the trash and washed my hands. Shanan groaned and made a face. "Do you need a bath?"

"He peed on me!" Shanan complained. He gave Seliph a dirty look, but it was dampened both by how pink his face was and by Seliph's beautiful smile. "And he has the nerve to smile!"

"He loves you."

"That's why he peed on me?!"

"No, that's why he smiles." I laughed and picked up Seliph, giving him to Shanan. "Hold him while I handle clean up."

"Fiine." He huffed, but he softened as Seliph gurgled and smiled. "Is he supposed to be so squishy?"

"Baby fat is a healthy thing, Shanan." I began wiping down the changing area, humming a little. "Babies have a lot of growing to do, and so, they need energy. It's stored up in there, or so I was always taught."

"Oh, okay." Shanan giggled, and I glanced back to see him cuddling Seliph. "Why does he have to be so cute when he's so messy?"

"So that you grow attach, of course." I dropped the soiled towel with the diaper. "Now, then…” I turned to Shanan with a smile. "You think you can do that next time?"

"Um… maybe with supervision." Shanan made another face. "For now. Bath."

"Will you give Seliph one too?"

"Yeah!" He grinned and walked off, talking to some servants to get set up. I laughed softly and passed the soiled things to others for immediate washing, before washing my own hands again and going to Deirdre's 'study' to check in on her. With Sigurd off to battle, running the castle had fallen on her shoulders. It gave us a greater appreciation for what all Sigurd did, though to be fair, Sigurd had Quan helping him, and actual training for this.

"We might be able to turn diaper duty over to Shanan within a week or so," I announced, walking in. Deirdre looked up from some papers with a wan smile. "I know. You want to do it. We should make Sigurd change a diaper when he returns."

"A smelly one," she muttered. Still, her smile warmed and she sat back in the chair, rotating her wrists. "Ah, so much…"

"Think of it as good practice." I stepped behind her and started braiding her hair. "I assure you; I
washed my hands."

"Of course you did. You always do." She tilted her head back to look at me. "Which reminds. I'm giving you your birthday gift early. I found a bunch of really nice lotions for your hands while doing a market inspection this morning."

"That sounds lovely." I finished braiding her hair and pulled a purple ribbon from my pocket to tie it off. "Let that be a substitute until I can get you a proper 'early birthday gift'."

"Where did you get that?"

"I got it as a gift, but I don't like purple on me." A low rumble startled both of us, and I went to the window and noticed something else. "Wow, that's some storm rolling in." The sky was a deep grey-purple.

"Oh, ick… I hope the others are okay." Deirdre stood up and walked over too, frowning. "It's coming from the north, where Madino is. They're likely getting slammed."

"I'm sure they'll be fine." I nudged her and smiled. "But look at you, predicting weather."

"It's just watching which direction the clouds are coming from." She made a face, but laugh. "However, I do think that's a perfect excuse to make some tea, or some hot chocolate."

"Do we have chocolate?"

"We have a lot. Chagall apparently imported quite a bit." She giggled. "I want to see Shanan's face when he has some. Do you think I can give some to Seliph too?"

"Seliph is still a bit too young for something like that."

"True. I'll just have to wait for that. But let's get everything storm-ready and have that hot chocolate!"

"Okay." I laughed at her enthusiasm and made to follow her out of the room. I paused, though, and looked back at the storm, frowning deeply. Sudden bad storms… weren't all that common for this time of year.

I had… a very bad feeling. I hoped… everyone was okay…

Records on Ayra:

_Swordsman of Isaach, Princess of Isaach, Odo Minor, 17 years old_

_The lone princess of Isaach, known for her kindness and her sharp temper. Protective of those she loves._

_Her Holy Mark is on her left shoulder, wrapping a bit across her chest._

_A skilled fighter and capable of using the unique Sword Skill 'Astra', allowing her to hit up to five times with one swing. Her fighting prowess will only increase thanks to Lex's gift._

Chapter End Notes
Author's note: Welcome to Game-Chapter 3, where the game decides to stop being nice, plot wise. Claude and Tailtiu are recruited towards the end of this chapter, but they do make a cameo shortly after Sigurd captures Madino, the first Castle in the game. Either Lex or Chulainn can talk to Ayra this Chapter (providing that Ayra and Lex/Chulainn don't have a lover already) and get a hefty love point boost as well as giving her the Brave Sword.

Next Chapter - Screams
Chapter 15) Screams

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 15) Screams

The days passed without incident. We don't even have injured to deal with, since Ethlyn, Lachesis, and Aideen can handle all the injuries just fine. I feel a little useless, but Deirdre seems to sense that and comes up with all sorts of tasks for me here. Most of them involve Seliph, and to be fair, babies need a lot of tending.

Things slowly relax, and we eagerly wait when everyone can return. We even have planned out what feast we'd throw. We're a little silly sometimes.

"Ah, Shanan, be careful while measuring," I chided, reaching over to stop his hand. He instantly drooped, so I patted it and smiled. "Medicines require very precise measurements. Too much of a thing could mean poison."

"Poison?!" Shanan gasped. He set down his measuring spoon and scooted back from the table. "Really?"

"Yes. That's why you must be careful." I tried to be serious, but his worried look made me relent. "How about you switch to helping me grind the herbs and watching?"

"Okay!" He smiled, noticeably relieved, and scooted his chair closer to me while I gathered the medicinal things. "What can I do?"

"Grind these ones." I passed him the herbs and worked on the medicine. Normally, I'd do this in the infirmary, but today was actually so lovely that we were actually sitting in the gardens, not far from where Deirdre was playing with Seliph.

"Alicia!" Of course, Deirdre's breathless cry made me stiffen, and I shot to my feet, nearly knocking the table over. "Alicia, over here!" Deirdre called, waving me over. She was smiling, so my panic died a little. "Over here! Over here!"

"What's going on?" I asked, heading over. She had a blanket spread out for Seliph to safely crawl on, and I crouched down, worried. "Did he bump his head?"

"No, no!" Deirdre giggled, and looked almost starry-eyed. "Go on, Seliph! Show your auntie!"

"...Ma-ma?" Seliph replied. He was sitting down, and he looked so incredibly confused. I, however, started laughing as I realized just why Deirdre was freaking out. His first word... was 'mama'. "Mama?" He frowned a little and reached out to both Deirdre and me. He then promptly fell on his face and started tearing up.

"Oh, it's okay, sweetie!" Deirdre cooed, gathering him up quickly in her arms and rocking him. The threatened tears faded as he yawned and curled up to sleep. "Hee! He's talking!"

"I guess he is about the right age," I murmured, sitting back on my heels. I'd been told that babies started 'talking' around six months, and he was about that age, give or take. "Don't be too attached
to the word. I think he won't quite recognize you with that word until he's like a year old."

"I don't care. His first word was mama!" She giggled again, kissing Seliph's forehead. "I can't wait to tease Sigurd about it."

"Just telling you so that you don't pout when, say, he calls Shanan 'mama'."

"I'm no one's mama!" Shanan instantly protested. He was studiously grinding the herbs for me, sticking his tongue out a little as he concentrated. "Seliph, don't be silly!" He yelped as he bit his tongue. "Ow…"

"Lady Deirdre!" a soldier rushed into the garden then, beaming. Their armor was dusty, and their face was sweaty, like they'd just arrived from traveling. "I bring word from Lord Sigurd. Madino Castle has fallen!"

Well, that was some wonderful news!

Sadly, the good news was soon followed by troubling. Eldigan and his Cross Knights had marched in 'defense of Augustria', and were definitely preparing for battle. That meant Sigurd and the army would likely be meeting them on the field, possibly without returning to Agusty Castle. We tried not to be too disappointed, and Deirdre wondered if they could simply... hold talks here again. I thought King Chagall wouldn't let him, but didn't want to dampen her enthusiasm.

"So, I'm thinking we should have them in the study for business," Deirdre murmured, walking around the room while rocking Seliph. I sat in a chair, reading through a medical book I'd found in the library, and let her ramble. "There's that vintage Sigurd wanted to save… I could have it chilled…"

"Save the chilling for if Eldigan agrees to talks," I chided, flipping to another page. It was mostly on early child things, so that I could better keep an eye on Seliph's health. "Lots of things are going to go wrong first."

"Oh, hush with that pessimism." She stuck her tongue out at me and I smiled slightly before returning to my book. "Oh, Alicia, I've a question for you."

"Yes?"

"Are you and Chulainn going to get married soon?" Her eyes sparkled at the question, and I laughed at how enthusiastic she was. "And have kids?"

"Well, we have talked about it a little." I felt myself flush as I recalled what had followed our last discussion. "For now, though, contraceptives are a thing. Though, these Augustrian ones don't exactly fill me with courage."

"I see." She giggled, beaming. "Oh, I can't wait to see it!"

"…You'd be planning it." I smiled warmly at her and she stared. "That's what Maids of Honor do, right? I was involved in a lot of the planning for your wedding, remember?"

"I'd… be your Maid of Honor?"

"Of course." I shrugged, and returned to my book. "You are, after all, my very best friend-WHOA!" I yelped as I was suddenly tackled with a hug. "Deirdre, you're crushing Seliph and me!"
"Sorry!" She jumped back, laughing. Sleeping Seliph protested, but she calmed him down easily. "I was just so happy!"

"It can't be that much of a surprise." I rolled my eyes as she kept giggling. "You may also think of names for any hypothetical children I might have. You'd definitely be the one announcing it."

"Really?!" She was just all giggles now. "Hmm… name… name… Julia? No, that won't suit your daughter. Maybe mine, but not yours." She hummed a bit. "Caitriona? That sounds better…"

"I'm going to remind you that I'm not pregnant yet, nor do I plan to be."

"I'm getting a head start." She beamed at me. "So~"

"Ambush!" The one word startled us both, and poor Seliph jolted awake in tears as the yelling continued. "Ambush! Ambush! Lady Deirdre! Lady Alicia!"

"We're in here!" I called, throwing the book to the side. After Deirdre calmed Seliph, both of us headed into the hallway, where we were met with some frantically running guards. Already, we had wounded. "How did we get attacked so quickly?"

"Not sure, my lady!" One guard slid to a stop and saluted in front of us. They had Shanan in hand, and Shanan looked really confused about… everything. "We have our hands full trying to keep them off, and some have already broken through," they explained. Deirdre and I exchanged worried looks. "Orders?"

"Defend, of course," Deirdre murmured. She crouched down and passed Seliph to Shanan. "Here, sweetie, can you watch Seliph for me?"

"What? Hold on!" Shanan yelped. He took Seliph carefully, but frowned. "Sigurd said to watch out for you! And I can't watch a baby all on my own!"

"Alicia and I will be right back, Shanan." She glanced up at me, and I nodded. "We're just heading out to get a better idea of what's going on, and to see if any civilians need help getting in to safety. Not long at all."

"…Do you promise?"

"Yep~!" Deirdre held her pinky out, and Shanan hooked it around his. "There, pinky swear!"

"Okay…" Shanan sighed and cradled Seliph. Seliph was looking around in confusion at everything. "Back soon."

"Back soon." She kissed Shanan and Seliph on the forehead. "Alicia, let's go!"

She and I both raced down the hall, leaving Shanan and Seliph and the guard behind. We checked in briefly in the infirmary, to make sure I wouldn't be more needed there, and I snagged Sleep when I decided that I could wait to take over. Deirdre and I continued our mad dash outside, with Deirdre ordering a servant to get her Aura tome. Once outside, I started tending to the injured guards and civilians while she joined the fighters trying to push back the enemy.

"Oh, hey, over here!" I called, rushing over to a person wearing a dark, magenta cloak. "Easy, easy… we've got a safe place this way." I gently led them to the side, and knelt down to assess them for injuries. I quickly found none, but I worried over the bad burn scars all over their arms and neck. "Do your scars ache?"
"No, they do not," they replied. They lifted their head, revealing an older man with a strangely calculating gleam in his eye. "Not physically, at least."

"I see." I smiled at him, and noticed the burn scars extended to portions of his face. He must've been caught in a burning house or something. "Well please, let me know if they do. I have some remedies for that."

"Thank you." He smiled slowly. A strange dread crept down my spine. "You are quite kind."

He brought up his hand suddenly and black light wrapped around it. I barely managed to duck out of the way before he loosed the spell and made the back wall explode.

"Alicia?!!" Deirdre's scream caught my ear as I got to my feet. "Alicia!" she yelled again, running for me. She blasted the man with an Aura spell, and he retaliated with his own spell. They hit and canceled out, but he threw another spell. This one actually started a fire, one with black flames. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I want you, girl," the man answered easily. He was still smiling, and he casually tossed spells around. Screams filled the air as civilians and soldiers, enemy and ally, were hit. This man… he didn't care. I could see it in his eyes. He truly, truly didn't care. "Give up."

"I think not!" Deirdre blasted him with another Aura spell, and I scrambled back and snatched up my Sleep staff. I waited for her to hit him again, and then unleashed its power, intending on just doing what she and I always did.

But he laughed as the magic hit him and shrugged it off like water. Both Deirdre and I stared as we realized it didn't have an effect on him, but I unfroze when I saw him snag Deirdre by the arm and lunged forward. I wasn't quite sure what to do, so I just hit him over the head with my staff as hard as I could. He jerked back from the pain, blood trickling down his face, and Deirdre jerked herself free. She hit him with another Aura spell, and I called to the flames and gestured, throwing them at the man. He actually screamed, stumbling back further and desperately trying to pat out the fire. I thought about turning the flames further on him, but I hesitated, feeling guilty. I'd seen the burn scars. He probably had trauma associated with fire.

But as I hesitated, he recovered and he threw another spell, this time above us. I heard a window shatter, and then I heard a scream of pain. My heart stopped when I realized it was Shanan, and I wondered why he was near a window. Then I realized he'd probably been looking to see why we weren't back yet, despite our promise. And that scream… that scream meant he'd been hit, and there was a not… not insignificant chance he was dead…

"Alicia!"

I barely had time to turn before I was blasted by… by a spell. A horrible high-pitched screaming noise filled my ears and my vision filled with the sight of bloody skeletons being crushed by a cackling woman who reached out at me. Black smoke filled my lungs and I couldn't breathe. I couldn't feel. I was everything and nothing at once.

Something crashed into my back, pieces digging into the skin before I slid down. My breath escaped me in a gasp, and my vision darkened as I hit the ground with a wet splat. The smell of blood, my blood, suffocated me as I slowly pieced together that I'd been blasted into a wall, and that I was bleeding out from so many wounds that my body had gone into shock. I didn't feel any pain. I was too far gone.

Deirdre's screams were the last thing I heard as darkness took me. I'd never forget the sound, no
I woke up in stages. I'd notice the murmur of talking before falling back unconscious. The third stage was being flooded with pain and escaping into oblivion. It was the fourth time that I tried to actually open my eyes, but that was mostly because after four times, I determined that I, somehow, wasn't dead. Even though all logic dictated I should be dead, I wasn't. It was a strange feeling, really.

"You're awake!" Lewyn's voice made me turn my head, and he smiled brightly at me. "Well, welcome back to the living," he half-teased. He sniffed suddenly and rubbed at his eyes. "Ah, damn dust…"

"What are…?" I tried to ask. My voice rasped, though, and I coughed to clear it. Then I couldn't stop coughing and jerking, with pain screaming through me. "Ah…"

"Easy… you're… you nearly died." He leaned over to fix my blanket. I blinked slowly and realized I was in my room. "You seriously almost died."

"How…?"

"How did you almost die?" He frowned and I shook my head. "Oh, how am I here?" I nodded and he sighed. "Luck. Pure dumb luck. The wind started screaming suddenly, and it worried me, so I asked Erinys to head into the air. Then we saw the smoke."

"Eldigan?"

"Standstill anyway. He doesn't want to fight, and neither does Sigurd. So, when we heard Agusty was under assault…" He shrugged. "Eldigan pulled back, Sigurd sent people, and well, here we are. We had to fight our way through people. Thankfully, Chulainn can cut through armor."

"…Where is…?"

"Asleep. He tried to stay up, but all the stress got to him not too long ago. Same with Azel."

"How long…?"

"You've been out for three… no, four days. We're coming on four, I think." He frowned. "Three and a half? Sounds better."

"Shanan? Seliph?"

"Fine. They're both fine. Shanan's got a scar on his back. Seems whoever attacked him was aiming more for Seliph than him, but he twisted Seliph out of the way in time." He shrugged. "Shanan's mental state isn't the greatest. Ayra's doing what she can."

"Deirdre?" I waited, but this time, he didn't answer right away. "Deirdre?"

"…Gone. Kidnapped, we think." He sighed heavily, and reached over to fix the blankets on me. "By the time we got here, she was long gone. We looked, but there's no tracks we can find." He leaned back in the chair, sighing again. "We secured a wet nurse for Seliph. We interviewed her, and we don't let her go off with Seliph alone."

"Deirdre…" Her screams… they still echoed in my head. Deirdre, my best friend… where were you? "How am I…?"
"Alive?" He grimaced when I nodded. "Well…"

"A miracle, to be honest, Miss Alicia." There was the creak of a door opening, and then someone else was in the room. Father Claude, who… really shouldn't be near here. "Tailtiu and I were heading to the Tower of Blaggi, and wanted to talk to Sigurd," he explained, moving to the other side of my bed and sitting down. He set some medicine down on the nightstand and smiled at me. "We came here first, and it was a near thing. I found Lady Lachesis doing everything she could to hold onto you. You were hit with powerful dark magic, one that brought you to death's door."

"And, thankfully, the wind reacted, because otherwise, we weren't making it," Lewyn added. His voice was light, but his fists were clenched. When he noticed me staring, though, he relaxed slowly, and stood, smiling. "Regardless, I'm going to let everyone know the good news." He whistled a little tune as he walked out the door, and it took me a moment to recognize it as one of the ones he liked to play for the infirmary, to make people feel better.

"Certainly much more trouble than I anticipated," Father Claude murmured. He gently touched my face and smiled. "Your coloring has finally improved, though. I'm gladdened to see that."

"I'm sure…" I mumbled. I eyed the medicine on the nightstand, recognizing it by sight and smell as something given to those who lost a lot of blood. It wasn't used often because it could be dangerous in large quantities, so its presence told me a great deal of how bad off I was. "Why are…?"

"Why am I here? Or why am I heading to the Tower?" His smile fell, and he shook his head. "Prince Kurth is dead." The words felt like ice water thrown in my face. "And the leading suspect is Lord Byron."

"That's…"

"Ridiculous?" He smiled again when I nodded. "Lord Arvis thought the same. Thus, he beseeched me to go to the Tower and divine the truth."

"Of course…" I smiled, relieved. Arvis… he'd make it better. I knew he would. "Does he know…?"

"I'm afraid Azel wrote a letter to inform him you might die, yes."

"…Darn."

"I told him that he was worrying too much." That was a cheerful voice I didn't recognize, and I didn't really recognize the girl it belonged to either as she burst into room with a vase full of flowers. "Hello, Ally~!" she chirped, beaming. She set the flowers on the nightstand by the medicine, and I tried to think past my shock on the nickname. "We haven't met. I'm Tailtiu."

"Hello…?" I whispered, startled. Lord Reptor's daughter… I wouldn't have thought… "Your father…?"

"Meh, I don't get all this political nonsense." She shrugged, and some part of me was annoyed she dismissed it to easily. Another part was amused by her cheer. The rest was too tired and in pain to care. "Besides, I'm here as Claude's bodyguard!" She puffed her chest out proudly, while Father Claude facepalmed. "And Father let me sneak out."

"I see…"

"But that doesn't matter. I brought you some flowers to brighten the place up." She grinned,
strangely bright and cheerful given… everything. "And when we're back from the Tower, let's chat! You're too tired for it now, but I've been looking forward to it!"

"Okay…"

"Yay~!" She leaned down and kissed me on the forehead before skipping out of the room.

"…She's a storm."

"That she is," Father Claude agreed. He laughed, though, showing that for all the exasperation, he couldn't help but be amused either. "Here, you know what this medicine is for. Let me check you over."

The check-up went fairly quickly, given that I could barely move. It probably helped that I knew what a lot of the medicine was for, and that Father Claude was an old hand at being the healer. It felt strange being fussed over, but I knew I needed it. Even after he gave me pain medication, I still hurt, and it wasn't just mental. None of it made sense to me, though. Who was that old man? Was he associated with Chagall? Was this another case where dark magic users were ruining a country?

I didn't know. But I felt like a piece on a chipping board, and I didn't much like it.

Father Claude finished up and left me to rest, but I wasn't alone for long. Chulainn walked in, looking almost haggard, and I instinctively tried to push myself up. He shook his head and sat in the chair, taking my hand gently and kissing it. He didn't say anything for a long moment, and I let him be silent, just staring and smiling at him. He'd speak when ready. I knew that.

"Azel is still asleep," he whispered at last. I nodded, accepting that. "He was worried."

"I'm sure he was," I murmured. I didn't say anything more. I just waited.

"I was worried."

"I'm sure."

"…You…" He sighed, and dropped his head. "…When I got here, you were in a puddle of blood. Your own blood." His voice was soft, monotone. But the hand in mine shook. "Lachesis was cursing everything she could as she struggled to get her Mend staff to take. She was covered in blood. Your blood."

"Chulainn…"

"I thought you were dead. I thought you were gone. You were supposed to be safe, and this was supposed to be simple, but I went away and you…" His voice cracked then, and I saw the tears. I tried to move, to wipe them away, but even though his grip on my hand was so gentle, I didn't have the strength to break it. "I…"

"I'm alive, Chulainn." I smiled at him, feeling a little helpless. I had no real options at this point. I was too injured to hold him. It hurt to even be awake. So, all I could think of was to state the obvious. "I love you."

"I love you too, Alicia." He squeezed my hand before shifting to hold my wrist. It took me a moment to realize he was checking my pulse, reassuring himself that I really was alive. "I'm sorry. My head is a little messed up." He smiled wanly, the tears still falling down his face. "Is there anything I can get you?"
"...I want a kiss." I pouted as he stared. "Kiss me."

He stared for a long moment before laughing and leaning down to brush his mouth against mine. It was salty, but sweet. "You're too injured for a 'proper' kiss, so let that do." When he straightened, he was smiling. It was still pained, but it was real. That was enough for me. "You'll have visitors soon. Tailtiu happily told everyone you were awake. Let me know if you're overwhelmed. You're a patient now."

"Ugh..." I made a face, and he managed a laugh. "Fine."

I ended up falling asleep before I got too many visitors, but I at least got to see and talk to Azel before passing out. Some part of me was glad for it. When I slept, I didn't have to think of Sigurd and telling him what happened.

But I did have to deal with nightmares, nightmares of that man and Deirdre's screams. Over and over again, I relived that horrifying moment, and I wanted to scream. Gods, did I ever want to scream. But I couldn't. I couldn't, and it hurt. It hurt so, so much.

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**Records on Deirdre:**

*Maiden of the Spirit Forest, Lady of Chalphy, 19 years old*

A sweet girl who grew up in Verdane, with a surprising talent for light magic. She wears a circlet at all times, supposedly a 'safeguard' for the Catastrophe to come.

*Has a strange scar on the bottom of her foot that she insists is fine.*

*Though she was shy and hesitant at first, she's grown into her role as Lady of Chalphy, as a wife, and as a mother. I adore her.*

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: So this scene takes cues from the Oosawa version, mainly by making Deirdre fight her kidnapping a bit and having there be an ambush on the castle. In game... well, she's kidnapped rather quickly because she rushes towards Sigurd at Madino instead of waiting. And, hilariously, your units in-game don't react.

Manfroy hit Alica with the 'Hel' spell, a dark magic tome that drops a target to 1 HP. While in FE4 that's all it could do, in FE5 it would kill a unit at 1 HP. One of Alica's 'skills' is Miracle/Prayer, which is a 'game mechanic' way of explaining how she dodged. Manfroy having burn scars comes from the Oosawa manga as well.

Next Chapter – Interlude, Camp
Deirdre's been kidnapped. I'm recovering from a near death experience. Shanan is injured. Seliph cries and cries and no one can seem to comfort him.

This is all such a mess. Why did everything go so wrong so fast?

It hurt to move. It hurt to breath. Everything hurt. What was far worse, though, was the absence. I had no Deirdre. Deirdre was gone. My best friend was gone, kidnapped, and I felt her absence so very keenly. If she'd been here, she would've been right by my side, fussing like mad. She'd have brought flowers to cheer me up, papers to keep me busy. She'd have brought Seliph with her, so that I could play with him. She'd have made me laugh twenty times in as many minutes, and then panic when I'd start coughing because everything hurt. I wouldn't have cared, though. Because she'd be here.

I had to brace myself against the wall, breathing heavily. I'd barely pushed myself out of bed, and already, I was about to collapse. I struggled to breath, coughing a bit, and made myself take a step. My vision blurred as my legs protested. I coughed more and felt like molten daggers were sliding into my ribs. My arms trembled. My legs shook. I… was about to fall.

"Sister!" Thankfully, though, no one was in a hurry to leave me alone for long. Azel caught me before I collapsed, and helped me back into bed. "You of all people should know better than to push yourself!" he scolded, tucking me back in. I didn't even have the breath to reassure him. "Easy…"

"Sorry…" I finally managed. I also managed a smile, though it felt more like my face was cracking. "I just… I needed to try…"

"By yourself?" He glowered, even as he smoothed the blankets out. "You know better than that Alicia."

"Well, I didn't think I was that weak. The pain medicine is working better than expected." I supposed the fact that I rarely took any growing up played a large part in why that was. "So, it was good. I have a better idea of how I am healing."

"Yeah, while almost busting your chin on your nightstand." His hands shook a bit as he sat down in the nearby chair. I'd scared him. "Please, just rest. I know you want to work, and I know you're worried about the injured, but you're the worst off."

"I wasn't… planning on working…" Not exactly, at least. If I could have made it to the table, I might've tried to make some medicines.

"Then what were you wanting to do?"

"I… I wanted to see Shanan." Shanan was the only person I hadn't seen in the days since I'd first woke up. I'd even seen Seliph, when Chulainn had brought him in for me. But Shanan stayed away.
and, from my understanding, was completely reclusive. "I wanted to see Shanan. He's my charge."

"Yes, but..." Azel tried to protest, but instead sighed, and gave me a heartbrokenly wry smile. "Okay. I'll bring him here. You stay here."

"Okay..." I caught his sleeve as he left. "I love you, little brother."

"And I love you, big sister." He leaned down to kiss my forehead before walking out, leaving the door open.

I waited, resisting the urge to sigh. Pain filled me and made it so very difficult to breathe. But I laid there, keeping my breath as even as possible. Fighting for my consciousness as the pain tried to take it away. I worried over it. I worried I'd pass out before Azel returned. But thankfully, he did, though he had to physically carry Shanan into the room. That was probably why he'd left the door open.

He set Shanan down in the chair, and left, shutting the door behind him. Shanan was quiet, looking down, and I studied him, worried. He was horribly pale, and far too thin. He didn't look like he'd eaten anything. He didn't look like he'd slept. He did look like he'd bathed, but I had a feeling it was because Ayra had dropped him in a tub and washed him herself. I could see the bandages peeking out of his collar. I saw some on his wrists, and based on how he sat there, digging into his wrists, I knew... I knew that it was something he'd done to himself.

"Hey, Shanan..." I whispered. He flinched at my voice, and I tried to not react. "I'm sorry."

"F-for what?" he whimpered. He still wouldn't look up, but his voice was heavy with unshed tears. "You..."

"Deirdre and I didn't keep our promise." We had told him we'd be 'right back'. We had told him we wouldn't be long. And yet... "So, I'm sorry."

"B-b-but... that was..." His voice cracked and the threatened tears fell. "I... I..."

I managed enough strength to lift the covers and he seized the offer, curling into my side as he broke down in tears. I tried not to wince and whimper, instead just turning so that I could hold him and stroke his hair while he cried.

At some point, Ayra came to check in on us, but by that point, Shanan was fast asleep and I was half. She simply adjusted the blanket on us and let us sleep.

"Gods, these wounds are so jagged..." Lachesis murmured. She held her staff over my unbandaged leg, scooting a little closer so that I didn't quite feel the strain. It was resting in her lap as she worked. "It's like a lightning bolt in the sky, but redder. Angrier."

"And in skin," I half-joked. I winced, though, as Lewyn jostled my arm. "Ah..."

"Sorry, I was losing my grip," Lewyn explained. While Lachesis worked on treating my injuries with healing magic, Lewyn went over the injuries with some herbal medicines he'd learned on his travels. My injuries were just too extensive to focus on one type of treatment alone. "I mentioned I wasn't much of a healer, right?"

"Well, you're the only other one who has healing experience at all," Lachesis pointed out a little sourly. She wilted when Lewyn shot her a look. "I'm sorry. I'm frustrated."
"I know. I am too." He smiled kindly and went back to cleaning the injuries on my arm. "Erinys reported no unusual sightings on her patrol, by the way."

"Oh, thank all that's holy." Lachesis smiled brightly, but it only highlighted how tired she was. With me injured and on bedrest, she was the main healer for all the injured, and there were a lot. "I doubt we'd survive a second assault."

"Very true. But it also means no messengers."

"Were we expecting any? I wasn't."

"Well..." Lewyn finished disinfecting my arm and started bandaging it. He bent the wind around to cool my arm, soothing against the burning pain I felt. The wounds were jagged, red, and a bit swollen. It looked like someone had tried to flay the skin off my bones, and only just failed. "I, personally, was hoping for some ransom note for Deirdre."

"Oh..." Lachesis's smile fell, and her posture slumped. She finished with one of my legs and carefully shifted me so that she could tend to the other. I bit back a whimper as pain shrieked up anyway. My pain medicines were fading. "Yeah, I suppose... that would be good..." She fell silent before looking to me. "Who do you think it was?"

"Well, if you follow logic, Chagall is involved," I replied. Yet, at the same time, that felt... wrong. If it had been Chagall, I was certain we'd have heard something by now. He just seemed like the type to mock people when he thought he'd won. "But if you also follow that logic, then this would be just like Verdane."

"I talked to Jamke about that," Lewyn murmured. His eyes were dark and more than a little sad. I also saw the worry in them, and knew he was wondering the obvious: 'were dark mages hurting his country too?'. "And I suppose it's possible. Seems to fit the idea. Attack suddenly, cause drama, profit off something."

"But what is that something?" That seemed to be the question no one could answer. Just what were they planning. Why start two wars? Why expand Grannvale's influence? Why challenge it? Why kidnap Deirdre? Why, why, why? "There's too little information."

"The worst part is how we have to keep the whole dark magic part quiet." Lewyn tied off the bandage and then shifted to check the injuries on my neck. I tilted my head back to make it easier on him. "Otherwise, you're going to have dozens of people burned at the stake, outcasts turned into scapegoats for convenience."

"Surely not..." Lachesis half-heartedly protested. She frowned over one of my wounds and turned her attention to it. A quick look showed it was swollen and red on the edges, suggesting infection. "There would be a fair trial..."

"Since no one has any idea what dark magic does? They'll give the most ridiculous of defenses," Lewyn countered firmly. He started cleaning the ones on my neck, giving me a sympathetic smile when I winced from pain. "I remember reading about some in the past. One's accusers included things like 'oh, it was their spirit who did those things'! And that can't be disproven."

"Is it not innocent until proven guilty?"

"Mass hysteria turns it into 'guilty until proven innocent'." Lewyn sat back in his chair, smiling bitterly. There was an exhaustion to his eyes too, but it felt different, far more worried. I wondered if he ran because he was far too scared of what 'mass hysteria' his uncles would try to use. He
feared what they had done in his absence. "I think we can get away with no bandages to your neck. I think the majority of your wounds were to your torso."

"Makes sense," I replied. I lowered my head to smile at him. "We'll see how it goes."

"Seems like the name of the game for all of this," Lewyn noted. He leaned back in his chair, and smiled back. "All we have to do is wait and pray."

"I suppose." A thought occurred to me. "Did anyone ever tell Sigurd what happened here?"

"The red and green knights left to tell him."

"Has anyone reassured him that we're alive?"

"Finn left to do that."

"No wonder Lachesis is sour, then." I had to tease. It was worth her squeaking and blushing. "That does remind me. How is that relationship going?" I glanced at Lewyn. "You may also tell me how you and Erinys are making up. I'm assuming you are. You better be, at least."

"That… that is off limits!" Lewyn's face went red, but there was a conflicted look on his face. Clearly, there were still talks that needed to be done. "But, whatever. Let's talk about the beautiful golden princess and her blue knight in shining armor. I could make a song of it!"

Lachesis instantly squawked a protest, even as she continued carefully tending to my legs, but Lewyn ignored her to compose a song on the spot. I laughed for the first time since Deirdre was kidnapped, though it ended up with me having a coughing fit and struggling for breath. But I didn't care, and begged Lewyn to continue. I needed that laughter. Deirdre would've been so sad if she'd known I stopped laughing.

"Absolutely not!" Chulainn's voice didn't tilt to yelling, but the glower he wore and the intensity of his voice gave all the implications anyway. "It's far too dangerous."

"It's no more dangerous than any other time I stayed in camp while you all went fighting!" I snapped back. I glared up at him, struggling to keep on my feet. What had started as a simple walk through the gardens to gather more strength had turned into an argument I didn't have the stamina for. "Which I've done numerous times!"

"Not while this wounded!"

"As if that matters!"

"And the camp could become a battle at any moment!"

"You mean like the castle did?!" I almost said more. I had the thought. But that bit of strain was enough to tip me over. I started coughing and my knees buckled.

Chulainn caught me instantly, though, and half-picked me up to ease the strain on my legs. "… This isn't the time for arguing…" His voice was soft now, guilty. My own anger surged, though. "Come on. Let's get you back to-

"I am tired of that blasted bed!" I hated it. I hated being trapped there, suffocating. I hated having only blankets and pain. "Besides, it's cold."

"We'll get you more blankets."
"That's not what I meant!" I glared up at him again, but then looked away, realizing how childish I was being. "Wait, no, that's not-"

"...Clearly, we needed to talk a while ago." Chulainn picked me up gently and carried me to a nearby bench. But instead of setting me on it, he sat down and settled me in his lap. I instinctively leaned against him, tucking my head under his chin so that I could hear his heartbeat. "Now, then... ignoring the camp thing for now."

"Mmm..."

"I've upset you, and then upset you further by arguing." He kissed the top of my head, and held me a little tighter. The wind blew gently, carrying cold and the smell of flowers. Winter was on the way, though it was still a ways off. "So, what is it?"

"That's..." I didn't want to explain, feeling mortified, but the silence stretched on, with him clearly waiting for a response. "...Lonely..."

"Lonely?" He sounded confused, and a bit of exasperation spiked through me. "But there's always someone with you. Friends, your little brother..."

"Oh, you complete dunce!" I leaned up to kiss him before breaking away, glowering. "One, I miss Deirdre. Terribly. Two, you are never around." I settled back against him, not bothering to try and figure out his expression. "You're always out on patrols or hanging with Ayra or something. You barely see me."

"That's..."

"So, I'm dealing with injuries, I'm dealing with my best friend being kidnapped, and my lover keeps his distance. I'm lonely and cranky." I glowered up at him again. "Then I tell you that I want to move to the camp, like I normally do, to do my job, and you go yelling!"

"...Ah." For a long time, that was all he said, but my temper had cooled enough that I could see he was just trying to get his thoughts in order. He threaded his fingers through my hair and slowly ran his hand through. It was a soothing motion and I leaned into him again, still waiting. "Well, first, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for hurting your feelings."

"Mmm..." I relaxed then, and I felt myself smile. "So..."

"I've been patrolling in the hopes that I could find some sign of the attackers, or perhaps signs of Deirdre." He kept running his hand through my hair and slowly ran his hand through. It was a soothing motion and I leaned into him again, still waiting. "Well, first, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for hurting your feelings."

"Mmm..." I relaxed then, and I felt myself smile. "So..."

"I've been patrolling in the hopes that I could find some sign of the attackers, or perhaps signs of Deirdre." He kept running his hand through my hair, speaking soothingly. "I've been spending time with Ayra because... well..." His hand paused briefly before resuming. "I used Luna. To get here faster."

"You did?" Now that he mentioned it, I did vaguely recall Lewyn mentioning Chulainn 'cutting through armor'. "Oh, but that means..."

"Yeah, she figured it out. So, she's been ambushing me to try to catch up. I then distract her until I can find Lex or Lachesis to hide around."

"I see."

"And for spending time away..." He hesitated again, and this time, he tilted my head up to kiss me gently. "Part of that was selfishness. You're in so much pain and there's nothing I can do."

"Yes, you can." I sulked as he pulled away. "You can just be there. It's relaxing. Comforting." A
thought occurred to me. "Oh, but I guess I wouldn't have been very good company. I spend a lot of time…"

"Whimpering and crying out in pain, and nothing I can do." His fingers trailed down my cheek before lingering on some of the wounds on my neck. "The first night after you woke up, I did try. But even trying to hold you caused pain, so I kept my distance."

"Oh…"

"But when you started recovering, I should've asked if it would be okay."

"…And I should've told you I was lonely." I sighed and tucked myself under his chin more. "But you can't keep me from doing my job."

"…No, of course not." He tightened his hold on me, but let up when I winced from pain. "Of course not. And I shouldn't even try. I love how devoted you are to your work, even if it worries me. But I want you safe. I want you to be safe. I never want you to be so injured again."

"But nowhere is safe, really." It simply wasn't. "Oh, gods… we'd have to take Shanan and Seliph with us."

"You can't bring a baby to a war camp."

"That… that man who kidnapped Deirdre almost killed Seliph. He only didn't because Shanana turned away in time." I still remembered that scream. It haunted my nightmares just as much as Deirdre's. "We can't leave him here. There's too many injured to defend the castle."

"That's…" He tried to protest, but there wasn't really one. We knew the risks of… all of it. I was badly hurt and wouldn't really be able to defend myself if something went wrong. Shanan and Seliph would also be unable. Shanan and Seliph would be stuck amidst the chaos of a war camp. "Damn it."

"I know. Everything is a huge mess." I curled into him a little more, feeling so tired and lost. I missed Deirdre. I missed having my biggest worry just being the injured. "Stay with me. Please."

"Always." He kissed the top of my head. "But you really do need to go rest."

"Fine."

"How are you holding up?" Eriny asked me, shifting to make sure I was secure. There had been quite some debate on how I would travel, with it eventually being decided that Eriny's pegasus would be the smoothest ride. "Do you need me to stop?"

"We're almost there, right?" I asked, leaning against her. While I'd tried to look down and admire the view, it only took two seconds before I was entirely too panicky and light-headed. "I can make it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." I managed a smile for her, but I did have to admit that my pain medicine was fading. It didn't help that I'd taken less, hoping to wean myself off it. "I can make it."

"Okay." She smiled back. "When you're better, I'll take you for a proper ride."

"That sounds good." Though I was fairly certain I wouldn't take her up on it. We were just far too
high for my liking. I liked my feet on the ground. "How far ahead are we?"

"We're not bound by the road, so..." She glanced back and down, still smiling. "So, we're a good ways ahead, from the looks of it."

"I see." I briefly looked down, but I felt lightheaded again, so I just kept my eyes closed. "So, by the way, how are things with Lewyn?"

"Well, he's talking to me! As you saw when we were leaving." She laughed, delighted, but I felt so bad. She was just so happy to not be ignored. "He won't listen to my arguments to return, though, and he won't explain himself. We talk around it a lot."

"When things calm down, lock him in a room and make him talk."

"Now that is a thought." She laughed again, eyes dancing. "Okay, we're coming over the camp, so we'll descend now."

"Okay." I held onto her as tightly as I dared as we dropped from the sky, the wind rushing past us. I winced as my wounds protested the wind, but I did my best to hide it from Erinys.

She seemed to know anyway, though, as when we landed, she instantly dismounted and helped me down. "Stay here. I'll get someone." She gave me another quick smile and darted off, easily meandering through the busy camp.

Soldiers and pages were racing about, delivering messages or carrying weapons. The sounds of laughter and shouts echoed through. The smell of blood, ale, sweat, and cooking food wafted about. The sight... well, it was just a normally camp. Tents lied in a neat fashion, organized to make things easy. But I saw how they stumbled as they moved. I saw how pale they were. Tired. They were all so tired.

"Alicia!" But, of course, from the camp, Sigurd came running, waving to catch my attention. "Alicia!" Sigurd stopped just short of me, sliding a bit in the mud. He looked... a wreck. Pale, with bloodshot and puffy eyes. Disheveled. "Hi," he greeted. He shifted on his feet, strangely hesitant. "May... may I hug you?" His eyes darted to the bandages I still wore.

"Just be gentle, Sigurd," I whispered. Stiffly, I held out my arms. "I'm afraid I'm still quite injured."

"Right..." Carefully, he pulled me into a hug, holding me like he was afraid I'd break. "Gods, when we got the message... when we heard that you were... that..." He gave up talking, and just rested his head on mine. "I'm glad you're alive."

"I'm sorry about Deirdre."

"She lives. We'll find her again. I'm just grateful everyone is alive."

"Talk to Shanan when you get a chance. He's..."

"I will." I stepped away, and looked at him again. "...Seliph said his first word."

"Did he?" He laughed, but it sounded hollow. His smile was also bitter. "I'm sad I missed that."

"Well, you'll see his other 'firsts' I'm sure, and it's not like he quite knows what the word means yet." I tried to shrug, but winced instead. My injuries were keening. "It was 'mama' by the way."

"Of course." This time, I caught tears in his eyes just before he looked away. "Ah, thank you for
"You would've broken down without that warning." I reached up and patted his head. He managed another laugh, but it was still hollow. "I'm sorry. I couldn't..."

"You're alive." He repeated the words firmly, and he looked at me again. His eyes wavered with the unshed tears, but this time, his smile was genuine. "You're alive. Seliph is alive. Shanan is alive. I consider myself very blessed, truthfully. And she was only kidnapped."

"...Right." I smiled back then. "Well, I fear I must rest. I can't go scolding you about the infirmary for a while."

"I live for the day you're recovered enough to do that." He gave me another hug, still gentle, and then stepped back, his eyes darting to someone else. It took all of two seconds to realize it was Sylvia, who greeted me with a kiss to the cheek and a gentle tug to show me where I'd be resting.

As she walked me through camp, she rattled off various bits of camp gossip, likely to distract me. I didn't retain most of it, but I did note that Aideen wasn't here. She, Midir, and King Jamke were still in Madino, left behind there to keep an eye on the pirates. There had, indeed, been some attacks to villages, so they were the safeguard. After all, Sigurd would never leave anyone to fend for themselves.

She got me to a tent, the items inside implying it was Chulainn's and someone had hastily moved out to make room for me, and promptly left, leaving me alone. But not for long. Ethlyn appeared, giving me a quite little hug, before sitting down. "So, welcome to camp," she greeted, forcing cheer. "Let's get you looked at, okay?"

"Yes, that sounds good," I murmured. I shifted to try and get a little more comfortable, and instinctively reached for my pack. But it wasn't here. It, my staves, and Deirdre's Silence were all with the 'main group'. "How go things here?"

"We don't know." She shrugged, undoing my bandages to assess the wounds herself. She winced when she saw them. "Eldigan won't retreat, but no one wants to fight. So, we're in some sort of standoff while we desperately try to avoid a fight."

"Have messengers been sent to King Chagall?"

"While Eldigan let them through, the guards at the actual castle... fort... whatever..." She sighed, resting her head on my shoulder briefly. She, like everyone, was grey with exhaustion. Everyone was just so tired. "They don't. Chagall refuses."

"I see." I tried to pat her shoulder or something, but my arms protested the movement. I'd overextended for the day. So, instead, I gently bumped my head against hers. "Well, I guess we'll see what happens then."

I predicted pain, though. I saw no way for this to end without pain. But I supposed we could hope to be wrong.

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Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Technically speaking, there's pirate attacks on all the villages during
most of this map in game, but I'm limiting their range slightly for convenience. Also in game, after Madino's capture, Eldigan and his Cross Knights start marching and attacking. I'm also having them be hesitant for convenience sake. The whole 'maybe your spirit did it' thing is based off a show of *The Crucible*, a play based off the Salem Witch Trials, I'd seen.

Next Chapter – Eldigan the Lionheart
The camp is nervous. The camp is tired. The camp is on alert at all times, and it drains them bit by bit. There have been a couple of skirmishes between the Cross Knights and Sigurd's forces, but nothing more than a token effort. Eldigan doesn't want to fight. Sigurd doesn't want to fight. The only one who wants this war is Chagall, but here we are.

I missed Deirdre. She could make me laugh.

While growing up, I had often heard about the 'healing power of music and performances', but I never really paid it any mind. It had always seemed like a waste of time for me, time better spent in study. Others could enjoy it; I'd stay away. But I had to admit that there was something special and soothing about Lewyn and Sylvia's performances. The world didn't seem quite so chaotic while they played.

"Sylvia has a lovely singing voice," I murmured absently, watching them from the infirmary. While I was too injured to really tend to anyone still, I could and did supervise to free up Ethlyn. "I'm surprised she can sing while dancing, though."

"I asked her about it, and she said that it was partially breath control and partially making sure to do 'low energy' moves when she does," Oifeye happily explained. He looked up from grinding herbs to smile warmly. "She's really nice."

"She is." Still, I had to tease a bit, mostly because I noticed a slight sparkle to his eyes, and a pale blush on his face. "But you have a little crush, don't you?"

"N-no, I don't!"

"I haven't interacted with her much," Finn commented, frowning as he carefully measured out various powders. "Same with Lewyn, truthfully. But their performances are quite lovely."

"You don't really spend time with any girl besides Lady Lachesis," Oifeye instantly retorted. Finn squeaked and went bright red. "Lord Quan was wondering when you two will court."

"W-we're not… um…"

"Oifeye, save the teasing for when he's done measuring," I gently chided, laughing. I mostly only interfered because this was dangerous, and because Finn's face was red enough to be confused with an apple. "If he messes up the mixture, it could hurt someone."

"Yes, Alicia," Oifeye replied sheepishly. He smiled, though, and showed me the herbs he'd been grinding. "Is this enough, or…?"

"Make them a little finer, please."

"Got it!" He went back to work, and Finn's blush slowly cooled as he continued with the precise
measurements. Since my injuries were still great enough that everyone insisted I do absolutely no work, Finn and Oifeye had cheerfully volunteered to make medicines for me. I would complain, except both were eager learners, and teaching them did help me not feel quite as useless.

Clapping signaled the end of the song, and little cheers made me look up to see Sigurd walking through the crowd, checking in on people. Seliph was, as typical, in his arms, carefully supported with a sling. Seliph was always either with Sigurd or Shanan. Shanan cited his promise to Deirdre whenever someone tried to get him to relax. I wondered if he clung to that promise in the hopes that he'd happily tell Deirdre he kept it.

"Oifeye, the herbs are fine enough," I murmured, resting a hand on his shoulder. Another glance showed that Sigurd was actually making his way towards here, but I didn't want Seliph to see the inside of the infirmary. It might be clean, but it was still filled with people injured and bloody. "I think Sigurd needs you back, though."

"Okay," Oifeye agreed. He very carefully set everything to the side, properly labeled, and gave me a hug. "Finn, let's hang with Shanan later!" And then Oifeye was off, catching Sigurd by the arm. Sigurd laughed, and led him off.

"I wonder if there was another skirmish," Finn murmured. He continued to measure things, pausing only to make sure they were precise. "They're bleeding us out, Alicia. I'm certain that's the strategy."

"You would know better than me," I replied quietly. All I knew, really, was that every day, there were more injured. "Still, facing them in open combat seems..."

"Lord Quan once told me that only a fool would fight a Cross Knight in an open plain, which is the only safe terrain we have at this point. That isn't even going into Lord Eldigan himself, and if it turns to real battle, he'll be on the field." Finn set down his measuring spoon. "So, I mix all of these?"

"Yes, while slowly pouring in water. It needs to be a paste." I passed him the already measured out water. "I suppose the Cross Knights are to Nordion as the Lanzritter are to Leonster."

"That's my understanding. They're some of the best fighters on the continent, and they're led by Lord Eldigan, who wields Mystletainn." Finn carefully poured in the water, frowning. "You hear the stories that the wielders of the Demon Blade cannot die in battle."

"Anyone can die in battle."

"Really?"

"If you're going off stories, those same stories said Loptyr couldn't be defeated. Yet, eventually, it was." Though, I supposed you could argue that it hadn't been. Its legacy continued to claw at everything, and dark mages were now causing chaos. "I'm more worried that Sigurd will just let himself be killed, though, to avoid having to fight."

"Lord Quan worries about the same. Lady Ethlyn says that he won't leave Seliph without a father."

He glanced at me. "What do you think?"

"My worry will be that he holds back at the last possible moment, and then I have to try and hold together his insides." I smiled slightly. "I also worry that I will not be healed enough to do so. I am, after all, the strongest healer."

"That's thanks to your Vala blood, right? Lachesis mentioned that."
"Vala's bloodline is one of magic. It is said that the Vala was the most powerful magic user of the crusaders, stronger than even Heim." As a result, I simply had more power to use with my healing staves. "Considering that I can use all but the most powerful of staves as well, unlike Lachesis and Ethlyn..." I shrugged. "It's a simple accident of birth, really."

"Lord Claude mentioned you were stronger than him?"

"My magic possibly is. Blaggi's line is associated more with resistance to magic instead of magical power. But his skill in staves will automatically trump mine, especially since he is the Blaggi major." I smiled slightly, laughing. "It could also simply be him being humble."

"Oh, true." Finn laughed as well, smiling back. "Is this the right consistency?"

"Mmm..." I leaned over to frown over the bowl. "Continue mixing without adding water for now. We'll see how it is after a bit more stirring."

"Got it." He paused suddenly, and looked up with a soft smile. "Lachesis, hey."

"Hey." Lachesis did, indeed, walk up then and it took every bit of self-control to keep from teasing Finn that he'd known she was coming despite being distracted. "Can I talk to you two?" she asked softly, strangely hesitant. "Please?"

"Is everything alright?" Finn asked, frowning. "You've been quiet the past few days."

"I had a thought, and it won't leave me alone." She sat down in Oifeye's vacated seat, holding herself a little stiffly. "I'm planning on asking Sigurd if I can talk to Eldie... to Eldigan. If he approves, I'd like both of you to come with me."

"That's..." Finn frowned and glanced at me. I already knew what he was thinking. "I don't mind, of course, but..."

"But why have me come along?" I asked. Finn smiled slightly, a touch sheepish. "I'm injured, and I can't move quickly."

"True, but for one thing, Eldigan likes you," Lachesis pointed out. She fidgeted with her hands and messed with her bracelets. "For another, you have the most sense of everyone in the camp."

"I volunteered for all of this, remember." I had to fight to not wince. I remembered Deirdre saying the same thing, once, and I knew what her answer would've been. I knew what mine was. This was important to Lachesis, so the main reason she asked might only be 'because you reassure me'. "Let's bring Eriny's into this. I know you don't know her well, but she can get me out of danger very quickly."

"That's true." She smiled, tired yet hopeful. "Okay, let's... let's come up with a plan and then I'll take it to Sigurd. It'll be a lot easier to argue if I have a plan, yes?"

I had no idea how Lachesis managed to convince Sigurd and Quan both to let the four of us do this. All I knew was that she went to talk to them, and came back within the hour to happily declare that she'd gotten permission. From there, it was changing into more comfortable clothing, dealing with a fretting Chulainn, and then an even more fretful Lewyn. Honestly, the whole thing was strangely amusing to me.

"I know I agreed, but I have to admit, I expected it to at least take a couple of days," Eriny's summarized. In order to hide, she was actually walking with us, her pegasus keeping its wings
tucked against its sides. "Clearly, Lady Lachesis, you should be a diplomat."

"Nah, it only worked because it's Sigurd and Quan and I know most of their weaknesses," Lachesis instantly teased. She shifted her hood a little higher on her head, another precaution that Sigurd had insisted on, and tightened her grip on my hand. The two of us walked side-by-side, in front of Erinys and Finn. "Is your pegasus all right?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes." She petted her pegasus's neck with a small smile. "He can't keep the wings tucked for long, not like Thracia's dragons, but he'll stretch them out when you three are inside. I'll be watching your horse too, right, Finn?"

"Yes, if you don't mind," Finn replied. He gripped his brave lance tightly in one hand, and gently led his own horse with the other. "Ideally, this will just be us three walking in and he gets to much on yummy grass or whatever."

"Yes, I hope so too," Erinys murmured. Her smile became tired. "Silesse isn't quite as warring. There's tensions due to the succession dispute, but honestly, most of my job before this was dealing with the odd bandit and snow rescues."

"Silesse is the coldest country of Jugdral, right? I've heard it's always snowing."

"Depends on where you are. The highest peaks will have snow, but we still have our harvests and farmlands. Though the cold does play a large part in why Silesse tends to remain neutral in most conflicts."

"Really?"

"In the winter, we get terrible blizzards that more or less cut us off from everyone. So, we'd have difficulties getting supplies and soldiers during then."

"That… oh, that makes sense." Finn smiled, eyes lighting up. "You said a 'large part', though?"

"The other part is that Crusader-King Sety wished for peace and tolerance, not war and hatred. So, while there are always battles worth fighting, the process of actually getting the full army together and marching is very complex." Erinys giggled suddenly. "Lewyn used to complain about it. He had to memorize it."

"You've known him for a while."

"We're childhood friends. I've known him forever." Her cheer faded. "And I will be very glad when he decides to come home, if only for Queen Rahna's sake. He's all she has left, really. Her brother-in-laws are just… too cold and cruel."

"We're at the camp," I called, rather grateful. I had a feeling that more on that topic would just serve to dampen our mood, and we were already tense. "So, Erinys, you're staying here?"

"I am," Erinys confirmed. She looked around and stepped behind the nearby trees, using the foliage to hide her pegasus. "Finn, help me with your horse. We'll hide around here, and keep an eye out for trouble."

It took a moment for us to get Finn's horse to cooperate, mostly because Finn's horse didn't like being away from Finn at the moment. But Finn got him calm before long, and so, the three of us left Erinys and the mounts behind to enter the camp proper.

"State your business," someone called almost as soon as we reached the edge. They were a helmet
that covered their faces, and shining armor. A quick look around showed there were others close by, archers with arrows on the string. "This is the camp of Lord Eldigan and."

"Yes, yes, I know, Ivan," Lachesis laughed. She brought down her hood, and the guard's demeanor immediately relaxed. "It's me. I'm with two friends. You might know of Alicia?"

"I am aware that Miss Alicia is the reason why my daughter lives." The guard removed his helmet then, revealing brown hair matted down with sweat. "Jeanne."

"I remember her," I murmured. I brought my own hood down and smiled gently. "How is she doing?"

"She's doing well, Miss Alicia," Ivan replied. He bowed to me. "She likes the ribbon you left as well."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"We'd like to talk to Eldigan, Ivan," Lachesis explained, clapping her hands together. "Pretty please? We'll be good; I promise. I'm only not alone because Sigurd worried that Chagall's people might ambush me."

"...Yes, I think seeing you would do Lord Eldigan some good," Ivan murmured. Though he smiled, there was an unreadable look in his eyes. Finn and I shared a glance, both catching it. Lachesis didn't seem to. "You know how we normally set up, Lady Lachesis, yes?"

"I do!" Lachesis laughed, smiling warmly. "Thank you!" She happily led the way through, and to my surprise, the other Cross Knights greeted her just as cheerfully. At least, it was surprising until I actually thought about it. These were her brother's men. She'd told me, once, that she learned to heal to help them. Of course they knew and loved her. Of course she knew and loved them.

Yet circumstances led to her technically fighting them. Wasn't that just so hilarious?

We made it to a barely, but still noticeably, larger tent than the others, and Lachesis casually skipped inside without a word. Finn and I exchanged worried looks before following her inside, uncertain just what to do at this point. Inside the tent was... sparse. There was a cot, a desk, two chairs, a pack, and a rather exasperated Eldigan staring at an annoyed Lachesis. This was... awkward.

"Hello, you two," Eldigan greeted, not taking his eyes off his sister. He remained seated at his desk, and did not offer the spare chair. "I'm glad to see she didn't come alone."

"Of course not," Lachesis grumbled. She glowered, hands on her hips. "I've come to talk to you."

"Clearly." That was all he said. He waited, watching her.

Lachesis's glower intensified to a glare. "Why do you keep serving Chagall? By all the gods, Eldigan, you know he's an idiot."

"I am a knight."

"Is it a knight's honor to betray his friends?" Lachesis's glare deepened. Eldigan stilled. Finn and I glanced at each other worriedly and wondered if we should actually leave. "To... to rescind oaths?"

"Rescind oaths?" Eldigan's voice was deceptively calm. Finn shifted so that he could snag Lachesis
"And which oath, exactly, are you talking about? I have sworn many over the years. After all, as the lord of Nordion, I am to govern it. As a scion of House Nordion, I am to serve His Majesty. As a knight of Agustria, I am to protect it."

"Sigurd doesn't want to hurt Agustria!" She stomped her foot, almost snarling. "You of all people should know that!"

"But does Grannvale?" Eldigan's eyes were sharp and clear, his posture rigid yet regal. "You're right. I do know what Sigurd wants. Sigurd wants to give Agustria back to us. Sigurd wants to return to Chalphy. That's how he is. His desire is to protect the people and to serve them well. He is, in many ways, the ideal of a knight. He always has been, since we were young. I love it about him. I always have. But not everyone lives by those same ideals, and I am no longer convinced that King Azmur, or his advisors, want to 'give back' Agustria."

"That's…" Lachesis's anger faded for a lost look. She didn't have a response. There wasn't really one. "But, Eldigan… Eldie, you… you don't want to…"

"What I want doesn't matter. I am the heir to Hezul. I am the Lord of Nordion. I am a knight of Agustria. My wants have never mattered. I was simply blessed that I could act on so many of them anyway, and I have always known it." He fixed her with another hard look before softening, smiling gently. "With that all said, I had actually planned on talking to King Chagall within the next few days. Your dramatic arrival… well, it simply makes me think I should do it. I'll leave in the morning."

"Really?" Lachesis smiled back, relieved. "Oh, thank you!" She lunged forward and seized him in a hug fierce enough to nearly knock him over, chair and all. "Thank you, Eldie! I love you~!"

"I love you too, sister." He hugged her back, and I noticed he clung slightly. "Goodness, though, where did you get such gall? Waltzing into an enemy's camp isn't a smart thing to do."

"But you're not the enemy, Eldie. You're my brother." Lachesis pulled away, still smiling. "You'll never be my enemy."

"…No, I suppose not." He smiled gently and nodded to the entrance. "You should see the others. They've been quite worried."

"I will!" Lachesis skipped to the entrance, snagging a confused Finn by the arm. "Come on, Finn! You should meet them too!" And out they went, Lachesis beaming and Finn struggling to not get pulled off his feet.

I remained behind, and Eldigan didn't look surprised by that. Instead, he offered me the only other chair in the tent, which I took gladly. "She has a crush on Finn, by the way," I informed him as I sat down. It was a relief to no longer be standing. It was more of a relief that things hadn't turned into a fight. "Just in case you didn't notice."

"Has it turned into a full blown crush now?" he asked, laughing softly. He smiled, amused. "I should've talked with him more. Ah, well. He seems like a good lad."

"He is. They work well together, in my opinion."

"I'll trust it." He studied my face, eyes darting to the healing wounds visible on my neck. "I'm pleased to see you live, Alicia. Last I heard, you were under attack at Agusty."

"So, you haven't heard anything else?"
"No, sadly." His smile turned rueful. "A couple of letters made it to me, but they unfortunately arrived when King Chagall's people were here. If I didn't burn them, they would've killed my men."

"I see." I closed my eyes to gather my thoughts before opening them again. "Well, Seliph is alive, but Deirdre was kidnapped. As you can probably guess from the injuries, I nearly died myself."

"Deirdre was kidnapped?" Eldigan frowned, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. "I don't think it was King Chagall. I've heard nothing, and that's not something he'd keep quiet about. Though, truthfully, there's not much of anything King Chagall keeps quiet about." He laughed mirthlessly, shaking his head. "He is certainly enjoying playing at war. If Sigurd bothered with spies, he'd have discovered every plan he's come up with."

"I'm sure." I paused again, this time studying him. "I noticed you neglected to mention the other 'oaths' you swore, by the way. Marriage, blood, friendship…"

"I'm rather surprised Lachesis didn't pick up on that. Finn did, based on how his eyes narrowed." Eldigan closed his eyes, still smiling bitterly. "As Ares's father, I am to protect him. As Grahnye's husband, I am to protect her. I swore a promise to Sigurd and Quan to always help them. I swore again that I would not fight them."

"As Lachesis's brother, you are to protect her."

"Precisely." He opened his eyes, and sighed. Right now, he looked as tired as the rest of us. "It is a tangled mess, really. No matter what I do, I know I will break some of my oaths. I simply must choose the path that leads to the least regrets." He glanced up for a moment before looking back to me. "What do you do when your oaths are in conflict, Alicia?"

"…I am a healer first and foremost." I spoke slowly, picking my words with care. "It is a healer's job to be neutral. We are sworn to heal all, friend or foe."

"Just as a knight is sworn to serve his lord, as best as he can."

"Yes, I suppose that is a good analogy." I looked down briefly before meeting his eyes. "Sometimes, a healer's treatment isn't what a person wants. Few people want to have a limb chopped off, for instance, even if it was done to save their life. Some do not even want to be saved."

"But you do what you think is right for your patient, just as a knight should do what he thinks is right for his lord."

"Yes." A thought occurred to me then, and I settled back in my chair. Everything ached. "You know; you could just wait for Chagall to die and take the throne. The people won't care."

"I don't want to be king. I never wanted to be king." He smiled bitterly. "Besides, I swore an oath to never seek the throne."

"You could just say that you would care." I smiled slightly. "If you did not, you wouldn't have these issues of conflicting loyalties."

"Very true, and I do believe I hear Lachesis returning. It sounds like her singing, at least." He nodded to the entrance of his tent, and I picked up the wordless strains of music too. "Here." He passed me a couple of letters, carefully labeled with names, and a beautiful shortsword with a dull grey hilt and a gold and brown sheath. "Will you give those to Lachesis in a few days?"
"Yes, I will." I snagged a random cloth to wrap them in, to better hide them. I knew what he was doing, and I knew he wouldn't want Lachesis to know. "Is it just her?"

"Yes, she'll figure it out from there. She's my sister, after all." The singing grew louder; Lachesis wasn't far. "Alicia, can you also keep an eye on her, please?"

"Alicia. Can you keep an eye on her?"

"Of course." I smiled slightly. "I'll watch out for Sigurd too, until we find Deirdre."

"Thank you." He smiled back. It was strangely serene, and that more than anything proved he knew what he was doing. He knew what awaited him, but he would walk to that fate with his head held high. "I wish you luck in the days to come, Alicia."

"Farewell, Eldigan."

The next few days pass slowly. There is utter silence from Eldigan's camp, and by consequence, from Chagall. There were no skirmishes. No one stopped the scouts skirting near. The camp was occupied, but no one did anything. Thus, we were left in this very strange bit of hopeful anxiety, and everyone waited to see what would happen.

"It looks like they're finally starting to fade," Chulainn murmured. He carefully rubbed some balm into my remaining injuries, pausing every time I winced. "I'm glad."

"It does look like some will scar, though," I replied absently, studying the injuries. I'd need to jot down everything I remembered about the spell. It was probably safer to assume we'd fight dark mages again, at this point. It had happened twice. Why wouldn't it happen a third? "That'll be fun, I suppose."

"I could get some payback." Chulainn smiled slightly, and it took me a moment to realize what he meant. When I did, though, I flushed bright red and he managed a laugh. "Sorry, I had to tease."

"I'm sure." I glowered at him, but he continued to smile back, completely unrepentant. "Bandages."

"Yes, I know." He set the balm to the side and began bandaging me up. His touch lingered in a few places, and my blush darkened. "It's been quiet."

"It has." I scowled at him. "Seriously, you can't tease me when I'm still injured."

"No idea what you're talking about." His smile said otherwise, but he did start behaving. "Ethlyn said that she wanted to check on your injuries herself later. She mentioned that since it's been so quiet, she's going to try and just heal them up."

"That would be nice, truthfully." It would be nice for more than one reason, as Chulainn 'helpfully' reminded me. "You're quite mean."

"I'm sorry." He tied off the last bandage and kissed my still-red cheek. "Do you want to wear the dress you had on earlier or a different one?"

"I think a different one, at this point."

"All right." He moved over to where I had my clothes neatly arranged and picked one at random. Afterwards, he helped me stand up and get the darn thing on. "Anything caught?"

"No, I don't think so." I smoothed out the dress to check and then fussed with my hair to ensure no
strands had awkwardly caught. "Yes, we're good. I will enjoy being able to dress myself again."

"I suppose." Chulainn hugged me gently and I leaned into him, relaxing. "I am sorry for teasing you, by the way."

"Mmm… I'll forgive you later." I grinned up at him, and he smiled back. "Well, it's back to work with…" I trailed off as I heard a commotion outside. "That's…"

"Something happened." Chulainn led the way out of our tent, and we stood there, silently taking in the sudden spike of activity. Soldiers were rushing this way and that, but there wasn't really a purpose to it. It was just frantic movements, people who suddenly needed to do something, but they had no idea what. "I wonder what…"

Finn ran by then, looking pained and guilty and looking like the only person around with a purpose. That told me everything.

"Make sure Finn doesn't trip on his way to Lachesis," I murmured. I leaned up to kiss his cheek, and he simply nodded, not questioning anything. "I'll see you later."

I left then, striding through the camp, looking for Sigurd and Quan. I kept myself serene, my healer's mask perfectly in place. The people I passed relaxed at the sight, as it always did. A calm healer left stability in her wake, and that was just part of the job. Now that I was no longer as injured, I needed to keep up the appearance again. No matter how much I ached, or how much I hurt… this was a healer's job, and it was needed more than ever.

I finally found Sigurd and Quan near a box-turned-table. Sigurd was ashen, trembling, visibly holding onto his calm with both hands. Quan's expression was blank, his posture rigid, supporting a sobbing Ethlyn with the absent air of someone who wasn't quite sure what was happening. Ethlyn, for her part, was bawling like the world just ended.

At first, I thought they were reacting to a letter. But then I saw the bucket resting on the box, and I saw the blood that seeped out from the bottom. I approached slowly, to not startle them, and I pulled back the crimson stained cloth that covered the bucket and found a head with gold-blond hair. Two second later, Lachesis's heartbreaking scream echoed through the camp.

"Well, it seems Chagall executed Eldigan," I murmured. I kept my calm as I covered the bucket up again and looked at the others. Quan and Sigurd looked at me like I was insane, but I held onto that gentle serenity. It was needed, now more than ever. "What is the next step? What needs to be done immediately and what can wait for you to mourn?"

"Immediately, we need to…" Quan tried to say. He coughed a bit and closed his eyes. My questions had gotten him to think again, but now, he had to piece it all together. "I would love for this just to be him being stupid… well, it is him being stupid, but we need to assume some smarts or…" Quan growled, shaking his head. "Sorry, my head is a mess. But the Cross Knights won't follow Chagall now. He killed their lord. They'll go back to Noldion."

"We need…" Sigurd began. His voice was a croak, though, and he choked on the words. "Ah, sorry." He closed his eyes and clenched his fist to dig his nails into his palms. "What you're saying, Quan, is that we need to assume Chagall hired 'replacements', yes?"

"Yes, that. So, we need to strengthen the guard." Quan smiled bitterly. "I'll… I'll do that. I need something to do. Unless…"

"No, go on. I'm not sure I trust my head at the moment."
"Okay." He looked down to Ethlyn, still clinging and crying. "Dear…"

"Ethlyn?" I called, stepping up. I carefully pried her off of Quan and tipped her face up to look at me. "Ethlyn, I have a favor to ask. Can you do it?" I waited until Ethlyn nodded and I smiled. "Thank you." I used my sleeves to dab the tears off her face. Quan handed her a handkerchief before he left. "I need you to get Ayra and then both of you check on Lachesis." She nodded again and stumbled off, still silently crying, but making an effort to clean herself up some.

"Ayra?" Sigurd repeated. He coughed a bit and rubbed roughly at his face. There were no tears; he was scolding himself for even wanting to. "Why Ayra?"

"She and Lachesis are friends, and perhaps more importantly, Ayra might be the best person to know what Lachesis is going through," I reminded gently. I stepped to his side, doing my best to radiate calm, just as a proper healer should. "Remember, Ayra left her brother to die. It might have been at his behest, but she still did. Lachesis unknowingly did the same."

"Ayra would know that particular guilt better. I get it." He breathed in sharply, and breathed out slowly. I looked around, curious as to where Seliph was; I guessed that Oifeye and Shanan had him. "It's my-"

"No, it is not your fault. That statement is so false that I refuse to let you finish it." I fixed him with a stern look and he flinched. "If you need a person to blame, Sigurd, then I would blame Chagall. If you don't care about having a person, then I would go with his loyalty." I smiled sadly. "As someone of integrity, he swore quite a few oaths. They came into conflict, and took his head. He knew that. But he went anyway, because he decided it was the path he'd regret least."

"I wish I'd just… I don't even know." He groaned, hiding his face in his hand. "What am I going to tell Grahnye?"

"That he died keeping true to himself, and that Chagall killed him for it." I rested my hand on his back. "Try not to blame yourself, Sigurd. He made his choice, and he loved you dearly. He trusted you."

"I wish I could've seen him one more time." He let his hand fall and he smiled so bitterly at me. "I just realized. You know a lot about him."

"He and I had a lovely conversation. Healers are good at listening." In the end, he had needed someone to listen, one last time. He'd known Chagall wouldn't. "So believe me when I say he loved you. Believe me when I say that if you are at any fault at all, it is because he loved you."

"He was always too loyal, and too much of a knight." He began laughing, but it wasn't a 'happy' laugh. It was a laugh that skirted the edge of hysteric's and madness, and he nearly buckled from it. I rested my other hand on his shoulder to help him stay up. "I loved it about him, though. I admired it. I wouldn't have wanted him to change, because it was so much a part of him."

"You should rest, Sigurd." I started guiding him towards his tent. "You need to rest for the day. You can take up leading again tomorrow. Healer's orders."

"Are you even well enough to give those orders?"

"I am always well enough to be a healer, Sigurd, and it is my recommendation that you rest and spend time with your son."

"Okay…" He nodded slowly, still laughing bitterly. "Okay."
It didn't take long to get him to his tent, where Shanan and Seliph were. I lingered only briefly before leaving them to check in on Lachesis. I found her with Ethlyn and Ayra, and Ayra was doing what she could to comfort both of them. She caught my eye as I checked in and nodded, silently telling me that she had it under control. So, I smiled and left, going to find Finn. To my surprise, I found him with Chulainn, the two sparring. Lex lingered nearby, and gestured to a barrel when he noticed I was near.

"Finn looked ready to punch something, so Chulainn snagged him for a spar when Ethlyn and Ayra got Lachesis," he explained quietly, watching the fight. Chulainn fought more defensively than normal, while Finn was more aggressive. "I'd been with Ayra, so I tagged along to keep an eye on both of them."

"I see," I whispered. I winced a bit at the sharp 'cracks' of the practice weapons. I thought I saw Finn's splintering. "So, you had been with Ayra?"

"Yeeeees…~" He stretched the word out and smiled teasingly. "So, I might have swallowed some pride and confessed."

"Good, good." I relaxed, and my smile became more real and less 'healer'. "I'm assuming she reciprocated."

"Yep." He laughed, shaking his head. It almost hid the slight pain in his eyes. "My dad is going to disown me, but I don't give a damn, really." That pain said otherwise, but I wouldn't point it out. He wouldn't want me to. "You look a bit tired."

"I'm still recovering." I was also around people who didn't need me to be the 'healer'. "But, if you have more happy gossip…?"

"I have tons." He shifted his weight a bit, and casually tossed Finn another practice Lex and I remained on the sidelines, happily gossiping, while Finn and Chulainn sparred. Slowly, Finn's fighting settled more into his normal, more cautious, style, and the sparring session turned more into a teaching session, with Chulainn showing Finn how to defend against some dirty tactics commonly used against knights. I watched them both closely, and stopped the sparring when I noticed Finn was flagging, teasingly chiding them for working too hard. From there, I fussied over Finn while Chulainn and Lex chatted, and hovered over him to make sure he'd eat.

There were few patients in the infirmary, so it was my job to make sure their mental wounds could heal. I was, after all, a healer. It was my duty and pleasure.

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Notes on Jamke:

King of Verdane, 21 years old. Once an enemy, now one of Sigurd's most trusted allies, he freed Aideen and Dew when they were imprisoned.

Perhaps because Verdane puts an emphasis on martial prowess, he is one of the most offensively impressive soldiers we have, particularly when he is able to set up an ambush, his preferred way of fighting.

He does his best to rule Verdane while being here in Agustria, though it's obvious he wants to return home as soon as possible. However, he promised his aid to Sigurd, and so, he keeps his word.
Author's Notes: The name of Game Chapter 3 is 'Eldigan the Lionheart', hence the title. Eldigan is of the Camus archetype, and you deal with him with one of two ways: talking to him with Lachesis or you fight him. I, like most sane people, go with the former option. Despite the choice, though, since Eldigan is of the Camus archetype, there is absolutely no way to save him.

Ftr: Eldigan in Chapter 3 has a strength of 22 and wields Mystletainn which has a might of 30, meaning he is effectively coming at you with a 52 attack. Thanks to Mystletainn, he has the critical skill and Mystletainn gives a passive bonus of +20 to skill anyway, meaning he's coming at you with effectively 38 (18 +20) skill. Critical chance is based off of solely skill in game (I think that in Fe4, critical evade is always 0, though I could be wrong), so he has a 38% chance of scoring a critical hit. This is combined with a defense of 24, and a resistance of 30, thanks to Mystletainn also adding +10 to res. And he has his Cross Knights fighting alongside him, who get a passive 40% to both hit and avoid if they're within three squares of him. A passive 40% he also has, btw. So, when combined to his skill, his accuracy score is 116 (hit rate is attacker's accuracy score – enemy's avoid, btw) and his avoid is 77. Yeah, Eldigan is kinda a beast and most people tend to just sneak Lachesis into the fray to talk with him because, while he IS still killable, talking him off the field is infinitely easier. And gets you a unique weapon, the Earth Sword, which basically is the prototype to the Runesword in later Fire Emblem games.

I also wanted to highlight that Eldigan is not just being 'stupidly loyal' here, but is suffering from conflicting loyalties, which leads him to his ultimate fate. I'll fully admit to taking inspiration from Game of Thrones here (it's practically a recurring theme). In game, Eldigan gives the sword and letter to Lachesis directly, but I chose to have him try to hide, just a bit longer, that he knew he was walking to his death. The idea of Chagall sending them Eldigan's head comes from the Oosawa manga.

As for 'Vala being more powerful', having a Vala minor gives a 30% bonus to magic growth, whereas Naga and Loptyr give 20% and Blaggi gives 10% (Majors just get double bonuses). So that's where that in-universe belief comes from. (They do stack, btw; someone with Vala minor and Naga minor blood would get +50% to their magic growths.)

Next Chapter – Dark Wings
Chapter 17) Dark Wings

Eldigan is dead. He was beheaded, because his loyalties conflicted. Sigurd is heartbroken. Quan is in shock. Ethlyn is in tears. Lachesis is devastated. I worry about Grahnye's reaction. I fret over Ares. But, for now, my job is to be the healer for this army, and so, I do my job. It's a comfort to return to it, despite my own pains.

"I see you managed to leave for a bath today. That's good," I murmured as I checked over Lachesis. In the week after Eldigan's death, Lachesis had holed herself up in her tent, refusing to leave for just about anything. "You've lost a lot of weight for so short of a time, so I must insist that you eat today."

"It tastes like ash," Lachesis mumbled. I thought that was what she said, at least. Even with me here, she sat in the corner of her tent, her knees drawn to her chest and her face hiding behind them. A blanket was haphazardly thrown around her shoulders, like she'd just crawled out of bed to here. "Everything tastes like ash."

"Eat it fast, then." I stood up and went to the side where I had things set up. "It should be easy on your stomach, and I've a ginger tea for you to drink with it."

"...Alicia?" She looked up briefly. "Why don't you just force me out of here? I know the others have tried."

"Well, if Ayra and her stubbornness couldn't manage it, then could I?" I smiled teasingly and brought her the bowl and mug. "The answer is simple, Lachesis. I believe it would be more detrimental to you, for now, to force you to be out and about. You clearly need time to process what happened."

"For now."

"If you lose more weight, I'd have to recommend you at least moving to the infirmary tent so that I can keep an eye on you." I sat at her side and carefully drew her hair back into a simple ponytail. It was still damp. "Besides, you take the steps you need on your own, I think. As I mentioned, you managed a bath."

"My skin felt scratchy. I felt gross."

"So, things managed to get through your depression. That's all that happens."

"Sigurd still works."

"Sigurd is a different person and mourns differently." I chose against telling her that Sigurd was also better at pretending he was fine. "Quan needed work to keep him busy in the immediate aftermath, just so that he had time to process it. That you need quiet is nothing lesser."

"...Okay." She managed a tiny, tiny smile and shifted back to actually begin eating the soup. She
made a face when she did. "Yeah… still ash. Why does it taste like ash?"

"It's your sadness coloring the world. It's perfectly normal." I rested a gentle hand on her back. "I do want you to eat all you can, though. Your weight loss is truly worrisome."

"Which is why you're pushing now. So long as I don't hurt my health, or the health of others, you let me mourn as I think I need."

"Everyone mourns differently, Lachesis. If there is one thing a healer knows, it's that a medicine that works for one person might kill another."

"I remember that lesson." Her smile grew bitter. "Eldie… he encouraged my lessons. He'd been happy about them. But the people I'd wanted to heal are gone now, basically."

"Do you want to return to Noldion?"

"I don't know? I mean…" She ate a few more spoonfuls of the broth. "I feel a little lost, I guess. I don't want to leave the people here, but I no longer…"

"You can no longer see the destination at the end of the path?" I smiled as she nodded. "Take your time. You can find another one."

"You think so?"

"Of course. Maybe think about how you want to help Agustria, or Noldion, once Chagall is dead." I leaned forward slightly, making my voice as teasing as possible. "Maybe think of how you'll confess to Finn?"

"Alicia!" She managed a laugh at that. It was a bitter and broken one, but one nonetheless. "That's… oh, I don't even know. I do love him. I should just tell him, huh?"

"I don't see how it could hurt, really, and it gives you a short term goal."

"You… are way too good at this." She gave me a dirty look. "How?"

"Part of it is my own experience." I stood and returned to my area. "Part of it is asking Chulainn. He suffered a grievous loss as well."

"I thought so." She sounded thoughtful. She looked it too, when I glanced over from my things, checking that I had… "He's got this sadness to him that never quite goes away. Not even when he's with you, though it's definitely smallest then."

"That makes sense. Unfortunately, the pain of the spirit never quite goes away. You simply learn how to move on with those scars." I found what I was looking for in my pack and turned to face her with a small smile. "Now, I do have something for you. Are you up for it?"

"You do?" She looked a bit curious and set her bowl to the side. She immediately picked up her mug to sip. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure. I'm merely playing messenger." I hesitated, studying her, before deciding to go for it. "It's from Eldigan. It's things he wanted you to have."

"Eldie…?" Her expression blanked and she nearly dropped her mug. She did splash herself, and didn't react. "He gave…?"

"He did." I nodded, but I carefully hid them behind me. "Perhaps I should've given them to you
sooner, but it felt too cruel. If you want to wait, that is fine. It can simply become another goal to work for."

"But why would he give…?" She set her mug down and a very bitter smile crossed her face. "He knew. He knew from the start."

"He knew what the most likely outcome was, yes. But, he still picked it. It was the path where he saw the least number of oaths broken."

"Damn it. He was always so freaking noble-minded. I always wished…" Her voice cracked and tears streamed down her face. "I wanted him to be more selfish, but nope. That just wasn't him. The idiot."

"But you love him for it."

"Of course. He's my big brother. My idiot big brother that I miss… so, so much…" She hid her face in her knees again, clutching the blanket. "Hah… I didn't even tell him about Finn."

"I did. Though, he knew of your admiration of him." I sat a bit closer, still keeping my distance and keeping the things carefully hidden behind me. "He immediately regretted not talking to him more."

"He would." Her voice was thick and muffled, almost too hard to understand. "He always threatened to tell any suitor I liked ridiculous stories."

"He also thought Finn was a good man."

"Of course." She lifted her head then, and the tears still fell. But there was a slight determined light in her eyes again. "The things?"

"Here." I set them in front of me, the sword and the letters. She gasped at them. "Do you need me to take them away?"

"…No. No, I know why he gave them to me." She made to move, but she glanced at the bowl and mug. "I should… try to finish these first."

"I would prefer that, yes." I smiled warmly at her, and she tentatively smiled back through the tears. "I'll leave you to that, okay?" I was a bit hesitant to leave her alone with a weapon, but this was a symbol of trust. I had to hope it would be fine.

"Okay, and Alicia?" Her smile trembled, but widened. "Thanks."

"Always, Lachesis." I had my own promises, after all. "Always."

Checking on Lachesis was the first thing I did in the mornings before doing rounds around the camp and through the infirmary. When I was done with that, I'd always go check on Seliph and Sigurd. Sigurd and I pretended Seliph was the primary reason, but we both knew I was there to also keep an eye on him.

Sigurd had always been known for his reckless loyalty. It was killing him to lose a friend, and to not know where his wife was. If so many of his friends' lives didn't depend, he might have collapsed. Now, he simply did his best, but I could see so easily how much he faltered. So could Quan, but Quan's solution was to take some of the burden away, so I stayed close. After all, I'd promised Eldigan I'd look after him too.
"How are your injuries, Alicia?" Sigurd asked. He was pretending to read a scouting report while I checked up on Seliph. "You're moving around well."

"That's because Ethlyn decided we had enough time, and healing charges, to heal me up completely a couple of days ago," I answered. I tickled Seliph's stomach and smiled as he gurgled and laughed. "I think she needed the reassurance that some things do heal."

"I'm not surprised. Eldigan's death hit her hard, and not being able to help Lachesis..." Sigurd trailed off, and I knew it was because the words described how he felt too. "How is Lachesis?"

"She managed her morning bath, it seems, and she was eating when I left." I'd also asked Finn to check in on her after his daily spar with Chulainn. If something happened, I'd learn about it pretty quickly. I was still a bit nervous about leaving her with a weapon, truthfully. "I think she'll start coming out more. She likely just needed to be alone to process everything."

"I can understand that." Sigurd set down a report and picked up another one. It didn't escape me that he'd placed that first one in the 'have not read' pile' again, even as I continued checking, and playing, with Seliph. "You got a letter recently, right?"

"One of the few that seems to be making it out of Grannvale. But, then again, it's Arvis. He probably pulled a few strings." I'd written him to reassure him that I was alive and healing. I was just glad, with everything going on, that it made it to him. "I told him about Deirdre."

"Did you?"

"Yes. He said that he'd do what he can to help from where he is." I smiled slightly at him then. "He also said that since this attack was clearly unusual, he'll forgive you for my nearly dying."

"I still feel horrible about that." Sigurd sighed, giving up on his report to just lean back in his chair. "I should've left more people."

"Sigurd, honestly, I'm not sure more people would've helped." I tucked Seliph back into his cradle and turned to face Sigurd. "The one who kidnapped Deirdre and nearly killed me... honestly, if anyone is to blame, it's me."

"You?"

"I let him close. I thought he was a civilian." I looked down and clasped my hands. "And I had a chance to injure him with flames. But he was covered in burn scars and was panicking. I hesitated."

"You're a healer, Alica." Sigurd's voice was soft and gentle. I could tell, without looking up, that he didn't blame me in the slightest. I wasn't sure if that was the worst thing he could've done, or the best. "Your job is to tend to people. Of course you'd have difficulties hurting someone."

"I suppose." I looked up and gave him a thin, pained smile. "But, truly Sigurd, if you're going to blame someone besides that man, the most logical person is me, not you."

"That's a roundabout way of saying 'it's not your fault', you know." He laughed weakly, shaking his head. "I..." He paused suddenly, head jerking up. "What's that sound?"

"Sound?" I frowned, confused. I heard nothing. "What sound?"

"The-" A strange whistling sound, unlike an arrow flying but similar, cut him off. "Down!"

I instinctively picked up Seliph again and shielded him as I dropped down. Something managed to
clip me, but Sigurd threw himself over me then, so that was the only graze I picked up. A few
more of the things, whatever they were, thudded in the ground, and little droplets of blood pooled
together as Sigurd was grazed. But, when the deadly rain stopped, those grazes were still the worst
he had. I still only had one injury. Seliph was perfectly fine, if very confused and near tears. I
absently calmed him and looked around, trying to figure out what happened.

I froze when I saw that the things flying had been spears. They were stuck in the dirt, angled
slightly to show their trajectory, and so many that they did manage to keep the tent up despite how
ruined it was. I looked up slowly, trying not to think of just how many were around us, and caught
sight of something through one of the holes left behind. But that only led to more questions.

"Are those wings?" I whispered. Sigurd carefully shifted off of my back, a reassuring hand on my
shoulder. "They don't look like a pegasus's wings."

"Thracia's dragon knights," Sigurd growled. His eyes were hard. "Chagall must've hired them to
replace the Cross Knights. I would have most of my archers stations elsewhere, damn it."

That was when the screams either started or filtered in through my shock. Regardless, Sigurd and I
moved quickly. He ripped through the remains of the tent to get us out, pausing only long enough
to grab his sword. I followed closely, staff in one hand and Seliph in the other. The camp was in
pandemonium and there were many, many bodies pinned to the ground by those spears. Blood
trickled out, the wounds plugged up, and I winced at how many I saw still twitching. My instinct
was to run to them, but I could tell, just by where the spears had fallen, many wouldn't survive. Too
many things had been severed. So, instead, they'd die, slowly and painfully, unless someone
managed to remove the spears to hasten the process. I hated that. What a horrible way to die.

"Alicia! Sigurd!" Shanan ran up, and my heart stopped when I saw the blood on him. A quick look,
though, proved that it was likely just from running through bits of it or by those bleeding. Of
course, that was bad enough, but... "Quan has an area set up to protect Oifeye, Seliph, and me," he
explained breathlessly. He barely slid to a stop before holding his hands out for Seliph. "I'll get him
there. Quan's getting things to reinforce the infirmary the same way."

"Quan would know best. He has fought them many, many times," Sigurd murmured. He ruffled
Shanan's hair and I passed Seliph to Shanan. "Okay. I leave Seliph to you."

"Of course!" He grinned. "We'll be fine."

"Right. I know." Sigurd glanced at me as Shanan took off again. "Are you going straight to the
infirmary?"

"Yes, I think..." I began. But I trailed off as I suddenly heard my name among the shrieks. It was
away from the infirmary, but they sounded frantic. "I'm going there. I might do patrols to help
those pinned afterwards. I'll decide later."

"Stay safe."

"I'll try." I felt like I had to joke, though, so I smiled. "Well, at least we know we're near the end of
the campaign. We always get attacked at camp when that happens."

He stared for a full second before laughing hard and leaving to go find Quan. I let myself laugh a
bit as well, before running for whoever was screaming for me. I ran harder when I recognized the
voice as Lachesis's, nearly falling face first as I slipping in mud and blood. I kept on running, past
fighting and screaming soldiers. I ran and ran, and I ran even harder when Lachesis finally came
into view and I realized just why she was screaming. Finn was one of the impaled.
"Alicia!" Lachesis kept on screaming. She clung to Finn's hand, sobbing. Finn looked to be unconscious from where I was, cheek pressed against the mud. "Alicia!"

"I'm here," I called. She jerked her head up just as I slid to a stop, falling on my knees next to him. "Finn, can you hear me?" There was no reply. "That's not good."

"H-he passed out just a second ago." It was difficult to hear her through her tears. "H-he… he shielded me! They were coming down, and he shielded me and oh, gods, Alicia, please!"

"I'll do what I can." I held off checking Finn to look her in the eye. "But if I'm focusing on only one, then…"

"Th-then you need me to focus on others? R-right…" She closed her eyes and visibly steeled herself. "Okay. I'll do that. I can do that." She groped for something behind her and picked it up. I was both surprised and not surprised to see if was that sword. "Are there staves in the infirmary?"

"There should be. Go on."

"Okay." She brought Finn's hand up and kissed it. "Please survive, Finn…" Then she gently set it down and ran off, snagging a nearby soldier to help her to the infirmary.

There were more screams as something flew over us. I didn't look up, even as the shadow of wings fell over me. Instead, I checked over Finn, noticing that he was actually lucky compared to the others I'd seen impaled. The spear caught him more in the side, and didn't hit that many vital areas. It would still be a tricky heal, but unlike the ones I'd passed, it was not an impossible one. The difficulty was removing the spear in the first place. I was nowhere near strong enough for that.

"Alicia, the hell are you doing?" Thankfully, Lex appeared nearby, axe in hand, already bloody. "You need to get under some sort of shelter," he snapped, reaching for my arm. I tugged it away, shaking my head. "Alicia."

"I have a patient, and I believe he can be healed," I told him calmly. Another shadow flew over us, but I focused on Lex. "However, I need help removing the spear."

"Won't he just die… what am I saying? You're the healer. You know better than me." Lex ran a hand through his hair and set his axe down. "Keep his body stationary. This will jerk some."

"Of course." I held a hand on Finn's shoulder as Lex worked on pulling the spear out. I winced when I saw the mud move and realized that Finn was literally pinned to the ground. But even with that, Lex managed to get the spear out before long, and I immediately went to work healing. Blood spurted out and dribbled down, but I ignored it. I'd have to burn this dress anyway by this point. "Thank you."

"No worries. Can you heal him?"

"I believe so. He managed to get hit in a relatively minor spot. The pain likely knocked him out more than the actual injury."

"I wonder if that was luck or if he managed to move to make it that way. He'd have fought these guys before, right? I know about Leinster and Thracia and their…" Another shadow flew over, but this one was darker and larger than the others. "Oh, fuck everything."

A loud 'clang' rattled my hearing, and I spared just a moment to look up and see Lex had knocked aside a spear. I almost froze when I saw one of Thracia's infamous 'dragons'. It was a green reptilian with razor sharp fangs, even sharper claws, and gold eyes that glittered with keen
intelligence. Its body was easily the size of a horse, with the wingspan to match. It growled and snapped at Lex as he struggled to fend off the rider.

Then a fireball engulfed rider and dragon both. I looked away to continue focusing on saving Finn, but did glance over when I heard the loud 'thump' of something heavy hitting the ground and had a bunch of mud splatter me. The rider and wyvern were both dead, charred to brittle black ash.

"Alicia! Lex!" Azel ran up then, tome in hand. It looked like an Elfire tome. "What are you two doing here?" Azel asked, frowning. "We should…"

"Alicia is healing Finn there," Lex answered. He shifted to stand more protectively in front of me as more shadows flew overhead. "I shouldn't avoid my family, clearly. It just leads to dragons."

"You'd be screaming at your dad at this point. Besides, Ayra is here."

"That is very true. I certainly don't regret her." Lex swung as one tried to pass us. He caught the rider in the arm and snapped it off. Blood poured down. "Funny how this all started because I didn't want you fighting alone."

"Well, we're here now, and there's too many for you to protect my sister alone, so let me help."

Azel moved so that he was guarding my other side. "Chulainn and Ayra are helping guard Shanan, Oifeye, and Seliph, by the way."

"I knew that's where Ayra went. She told me. Surprised Chulainn is there."

"Something about how he's of better use guarding something and he knew Alicia would send him to guard the three anyway."

"Well, he's right," I murmured. I frowned, concentrating on the injury. I'd lost some time with that attack, but hopefully, I hadn't lost too much. "I'll have a verdict soon on him. I'm sorry for this."

"You're a healer, Lady Sister," Azel replied. He flashed me a grin over his shoulder. "We love you for it. Let us handle guarding you."

"I am in the safest hands."

There were more screams and fighting around us, but I kept my calm and focused on the wounded in front of me. Clangs of metal and the small of something burning told me that Azel and Lex had to fight off a couple more. But, before long, I smiled and closed Finn's wound up. I rolled him onto his back to better check his breathing and nodded. It was steady, as was his pulse.

"I've got him," I murmured. Both Lex and Azel smiled in relief. "I need help carrying him to the infirmary and-"

A loud shriek, inhuman and victorious, made all three of us freeze, and we all turned to see what it was. Someone with long brown hair, riding a green-gold wyvern, was flying straight towards a wounded, weaponless Quan. He wielded a strangely beautiful lance of glittering gold, and my blood pulsed and burned at the sight. I knew what it was and, therefore, who this person was. He was Travant, King of Thracia, Dain Major, wielder of Gungnir, the Holy Lance of the Skies, and he was trying to kill Quan, Noba's heir.

Everything seemed to slow as we all just watched Travant close in, helpless to intervene. But Ethlyn screamed Quan's name and threw him something, a spear from the brief look I had. Quan caught it with ease and surged to his feet, blocking Travant's attack. On impact, though, there was a very loud, very strange sound. It was the clang of metal accompanied by a much higher sound,
like a bell's chime, and a much lower sound, like the rumble of thunder or an earthquake. It was quickly followed by a horrifically painful feeling, tears pricking my eyes as I gasped, feeling like my heart was being pulled from my chest. Similar gasps told me that Lex and Azel felt the same; Azel was even outright crying.

The feeling did pass, though, and I could finally focus on just what I saw. Quan had successfully blocked Travant's attack with a spear of sparkling silvers. My blood hummed and that told me what this weapon was. This was Gae Bolg, the Holy Lance of the Lands, weapon of Noba. This was the only lance that could match Gungnir in strength. This was the one weapon that could've saved him.

Travant reeled back from it, eyeing Quan warily and silently from the air, dragon growling. Quan glared back and settled into another stance, preparing for a second attack. My focus left the two warriors for their weapons, however. They were just so similar. The only difference was the coloring, and that the crossguards were shaped differently; Gungnir's curved up, while Gae Bolg's curved down. It made me remember the little bits I knew of the Holy Lances. They were sibling weapons, just as their wielders Dain and Noba were siblings. Gungnir heightened the wielder's speed; Gae Bolg sharpened their skills. But otherwise, they were identical, their fates intertwined.

Maybe the heartbreak I felt was from the lances themselves, crying over being forced to fight another yet again. Then again, maybe I was far more tired than I thought to think weapons had any sort of sentience.

The two continued their stalemate-standoff, neither moving in the slightest, until the wind suddenly picked up. I almost paid it no mind, but then I noticed there was a 'hum' to it. Then I heard a flute's melody weaving into the wind, the song soft and low, eerie and ancient. I hunted for the source, and was unsurprised to find it to be Lewyn, eyes closed as he played his song. There was a slight green glow around him and the wind curled about him protectively. A few dragon knights tried to strike him down, but were warded away quickly by the wind. A couple even fell, dead.

I wondered what he was doing. Then he opened his eyes, a pulse of power hit me in the chest like a punch, and it quickly became all too clear what Lewyn had done. He was the Sety Major, master of wind, and he had commanded it to tear the dragon knights from the skies. And it did, with many of them. They crashed to the ground, their dragon's wings ripped to shreds, or were outright thrown into the ground. Either way, I heard the 'splat' of their bodies and the 'crunch' of their bones. I knew none would survive a fall from such a height.

Travant was among those who escaped. He studied us all closely from above with the few others who remained before disappearing behind the clouds. Quan sunk to one knee as soon as he and his were out of sight. Lewyn outright collapsed, the wind calming to a gentle breeze, like a child trying to play innocent.

Chaos erupted again, soldiers racing around and screaming, and I glanced over at Lewyn. Erinys and Sylvia fussied over his unconscious form, and Erinys caught my eye and mouthed 'please?' with a hopeful look. So I turned to Lex and Azel, and tugged their sleeves to snag their attentions. "Please get Finn into the infirmary," I ordered them. It took them a moment to look at me again. "I will be there after checking on Lewyn and Quan before heading there."

This was just… a day. This was just a day, and I would get as many people as possible through it. It was my job, after all.

I sighed as I carefully cleaned my hands, having the time to, well, take my time finally. The wave of wounded had finally slowed to a trickle, and now, it was simply watching which of them would join the dead. We lost a lot of people to the assault. We were going to lose even more. It was,
apparently, a fairly common tactic from the dragon knights, and was always effective because you only had a split-second to prepare against it. It suited their brutal, ruthless, efficient reputation.

Quan blamed himself for it, kicking himself for not considering Chagall would hire them. Thracia's dragon knights were one of the best fighting forces on the continent; that's why they could sell themselves out as mercenaries. Sigurd pointed out that Chagall had been hiring a lot of mercenaries, and that it was surprising he'd have the gold left to hire Thracia. More to the point, he apparently paid enough to bring Travant out, with his Gungnir, and that had to have cost a lot. No one knew where the gold was coming from. Even with the heightened taxes, it seemed like there was still far more being spent than Agustria could afford.

I was reminded of how Eldigan mentioned Chagall was 'playing' at war. I thought it accurate, and that Chagall wasn't thinking of what Agustria 'could afford'. He was just thinking of 'winning the game', uncaring of how many people died or starved in the process.

Drying my hands, I turned to ask Ethlyn something, and frowned when I noticed she wasn't in sight. Confused, I carefully walked through the infirmary, checking patients as I went. Most were stable, thankfully, but there were a few I worried wouldn't make it through the night. I gave them a little extra care, and then stepped outside the infirmary tent. The fading sunlight told me just how much time I'd spent tending to the injured. I'd have to give a report in the morning, and I wondered if I'd get to sleep tonight. I hoped so, but it was definitely up in the air, for now.

"How long have you had Gae Bolg, Ethlyn?" Quan's voice caught my ear and I stepped around the infirmary tent to see Ethlyn and Quan talking quietly out of the way. Quan looked pale and tired, still bloody from fighting and his healed injuries; Ethlyn looked tired and miserable, still bloody from her work in the infirmary. "It's a powerful spear," he murmured, frowning. "I could've been a lot more helpful to Sigurd if I had it earlier."

"I've had it since we first left Leinster," Ethlyn admitted. She looked down at the ground, and refused to look up. "Your father gave it to me, just in case things escalated. But, he told me to be prepared."

"For what?" Quan's frown deepened before he scoffed. "Oh, gods, that old stupid tale?"

"The curse of Gae Bolg, yes." Ethlyn hugged herself, but still refused to look up. "Those who take it up are separated from their loved ones. Now, granted, I'm not exactly afraid of dying, but I don't like the idea of not seeing you again. I don't like not seeing Sigurd again."

"Ethlyn, that's just a story. A sad story, but a story nonetheless. Just something to dress up how Noba accidentally killed her husband."

"Maybe, but your own mother died shortly after Calf took up Gae Bolg to defend Leinster." She shook her head. "And the feeling of not wanting to go away increased when we met everyone. I love everyone here. But now…"

"Ethlyn."

"R-right…" Ethlyn closed her eyes and tears started streaming down her cheeks. "Right, we need to…"

"Now why are you crying?" Quan bent down to kiss the tears away. "What is it?"

"I was just thinking how much I miss our daughter, and how much I miss…" Ethlyn started
outright sobbing. "When Altena was last here, everything was so happy. Eldigan was alive. Deirdre wasn't missing. Gods, Quan, where could she be?"

"Ethlyn…"

"Sigurd does his best, but I know his falling apart and I can't do anything for him. He loved Deirdre so much. He loved Eldigan dearly. What did my brother do to deserve this?"

"Ethlyn." Quan wrapped her up in a hug, letting her cry into his chest. Her hands reached around to cling to his back. "It's okay. We'll find her, and then we'll have a party to celebrate. Eldigan, sadly, can't come back. But everything will be fine. Sigurd will be fine."

"But… but…" Ethlyn gave up talking then, and just continued to sob. Quan kissed the top her head and whispered more reassurances.

At one point, he happened to glance up and see me. I smiled gently and mimed for quiet. He nodded and smiled back in thanks before returning his full attention to her. Ethlyn clearly couldn't return to duty for a while, not when she was so teary, so it was better to let her just cry. So, I stepped back into the infirmary tent and checked over some of the lesser injured.

Lewyn was one of them, though he had no wounds I could find. He hadn't woken up yet, however, so I'd ordered him into the infirmary for observation, just in case. Sylvia had panicked, while Erinys had carried him in. I wasn't too worried, though. He slept peacefully, and there was no sign of trauma. He likely had simply overextended, using magic as he did without a tome catalyst. So I smoothed the blankets over him and headed over to check on Finn. Lachesis was there, of course. After I'd dismissed her for a break, she'd gone right to Finn's bedside and hadn't moved since pulling up a chair. She was as still as a statue, keeping vigil with her sword in her lap and a staff by her feet. I worried she'd strain something.

"You know; I'd meant for you to go take a nap or something," I gently chided, stepping behind her and resting my hands on her shoulders. She was rigid. "You've had quite an exhaustive few days."

"I know," she mumbled. She refused to move, though. "But I can't. Not until Finn wakes up. I just…"

"I see." I glanced over her, noticing something. "I'm surprised you're not injured. You were fighting as well as healing, yes?"

"It's the sword." She held it up with a bitter smile. "The Earth Sword, a blade engraved with the runes for the light magic Resire. It functions like a weaker version of Mystletainn. It heals the wielder." She laughed softly. "He got it from his mother, and always carried it, even after he inherited Mystletainn. So, of course he made sure that I wouldn't get it until after… after we left. After he left. If he'd given it to me then, I would've known. I would've known he walked to his death, and I would've tried to stop him."

"And that was something he could not allow. He had to make one more effort to stop Chagall."

"I wish he'd just run Chagall through, but he wouldn't have been Eldigan if he had." She closed her eyes briefly and sighed. "This just sucks. Eldigan deserved better."

"Few get the deaths they 'deserve'. A healer knows that better than anyone."

"Right." She tilted her head back to look at me. "You know; there's this thing Eldigan told me about. It's something known as a 'Master Knight', named because, well, they're masters of combat."
"Are they?"

"Yeah. Swords, lances, axes, bows, fire, thunder, wind, light, and staves… they know it all. Byron, Sigurd's dad, is one, but Sigurd never wanted to pursue it. Neither did Eldigan. They both wanted to focus on caring for their people." She smiled slightly. "But, I'm thinking I'll try for it."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's a pretty lofty goal, but I think it's one that'll keep me moving. I need that now."

"Well, it'll keep you busy, that's for certain." I personally thought it a bit unrealistic, but then again, perhaps that was the point. "Talk with Sigurd to set up a training regime for it."

"I will." Her smile grew and she returned her attention back to Finn. "Ah!" Of course, Finn was stirring right then, so I had to wonder if our conversation woke him up. "Finn!"

"Ugh…" Finn groaned, wincing. He blinked slowly, looking around with bleary eyes. But he smiled when he saw Lachesis hovering over him. "Are you okay?"

"That's… that's seriously the first thing you ask?" she half-demanded. She started crying again, but she smiled brightly and took his hand, pressing it to her cheek. "Yes, I'm fine. I'm just fine."

"Good, I'm glad." Finn's smile softened and his eyes found mine. "The Thracians?"

"Warded away, thanks to Lewyn using wind magic."

"Wind magic is effective against fliers. Magic in general is, since their resistance to magic is so low."

"I gathered." I smiled and his own became sheepish. "You gave us quite a scare, but you'll make a full recovery. For now, you're to rest."

"But…" he began to protest. However, he also tried to push himself up and fell back against the cot, hissing in pain. "Ah…"

"No, no moving," Lachesis ordered. She leaned over to fix his blankets. "You have to recover. I am very tired of losing people I love, Finn."

"Yes, but…" Finn paused suddenly, and stared at Lachesis, who smiled. "You… huh?"

"Love you, silly. So, you need to get better."

"But… um…" Finn's face began turning pink. "Um…"

"Keep things quiet in the infirmary," I gently teased. Finn's face went bright red, while Lachesis grinned, unrepentant. "Lachesis, I'm going to step out for a moment. Finn, you two are the only ones awake, so feel free to confess back."

Lachesis laughed and Finn stammered out something, but I ignored both, giggling too much to really serve as a proper healer at the moment. So, instead, I walked through the camp, smiling reassuringly at soldiers as I passed them. I was not at a run, and I was out. That did wonders to help them relax. Their friends would be fine. That's what they thought, as I walked, and I did my best to help the impression. They would need it, when the nightmares and anxiety came.

I walked over to the practice area, and my smile softened when I saw Chulainn and Shanan having another sword lesson, with Chulainn focusing on helping Shanan with his dodging. I knew it was to
help him move; Shanan would've been crammed into the safe area for quite some time. I knew Oifeye was likely with Sigurd now, as was Seliph. So, instead, I simply watched and smiled.

After one dodge, Shanan noticed me and smiled brightly. "Alicia!" he called, waving. Chulainn stepped back as Shanan ran over to me and gave me a huge hug. "Hiya!"

"Hello there," I greeted, laughing. His smile wasn't quite to his normal, but it was the brightest I'd seen since Deirdre was kidnapped. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine. Chulainn says I'm getting better every day!"

"That's because you practice every day."

"Yep, in the morning while you're checking Seliph!" He grinned, but it faded slightly. "How is Finn?"

"He'll be fine, providing Lachesis doesn't kill him with embarrassment. She confessed, you see."

"Oh, good. Oifeye and I were drowning in… what did Lex call it?" He frowned, looking up at the clouds. "Sexual tension? I'm not quite sure what that meant exactly. I'm assuming the longing looks he and Lachesis gave each other?"

"We'll go with that, for now." I almost told him that we'd explain when he was older, but he was getting to be about that age now. It had been two years since I'd met him. "But you're doing well?"

"Yep!" He smiled again, but it faded for a curious look. "Hey, when Chagall dies, are we going to look for Deirdre?"

"That is the hope, yes." I looked to the distant horizon, where Silvail hid. Chagall was still there. "But first, we must heal."

"Well, that'll be fast. You're the best."

"Thank you, sweetie." I rested a hand on his shoulder. "You should get back to your lesson."

"Okay!" He grinned and raced back to Chulainn. Chulainn gave me a small, warm smile and I returned it before turning away to head back to the infirmary.

I still had work to do, after all.

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Notes on Chulainn:

*Once Holyn on Sophara, now called Chulainn, a 21 year old gladiator-turned-mercenary, lover of Alicia. His experiences left him traumatized, quiet, and kind.*

*His Holy Mark is on his lower left leg.*

*Strong, skilled, and fast, his Luna ability lets him bypass armor entirely, making him a very reliable frontline unit. He typically sticks with guarding, though.*

*Childhood friend of Ayra, and soft on Shanan, teaching him swords. Ayra doesn't mind, and you get the sense that with everything falling apart, both she and Chulainn are glad to 'fix' something broken. If Sophara hadn't fallen, he likely would've taught Shanan in Isaach.*
Author's note: So, in-game, Travant just shows up but leaves someone else to fight, but in the Oosawa manga, he fights directly, so I threw that in. Also in-game, Quan gets the Gae Bolg after Silvail's fall, but it felt more right to have it here with the dragon knights instead. The Earth Sword is a very nifty weapon, though in FE4, it's limited by very low usage (only 10, and a bit expensive to repair), though it appeared in FE5 with 50 uses (with no way to repair outside of the hammerme) as an exclusive weapon for Nanna, Lachesis's daughter. Lewyn conjuring up so many bits of wind magic is solely for coolness and to help differentiate him as the Sety Major. The looks for Gungnir and Gae Bolg are based off their Awakening iterations. Both lances give a +10 to strength and defense, but Gungnir adds a +10 to speed while Gae Bolg adds a +10 to skill (more useful on Altena than Quan since Altena inherits the critical skill from Ethlyn).

Quan's parents aren't mentioned much (if at all) in game, with their names revealed in supplement materials for Thracia 776. I can't remember if Quan's mother (Alfiona) is still alive or not at this point, but I figured I'd have her deceased to better highlight Ethlyn's own fears here. Noba accidentally killing her husband is also revealed in supplement material. Her husband and her brother, Dain, got into a huge argument over something, possibly to the point of dueling, and Noba tried to stop them, but ended up skewering her husband on Gae Bolg instead. She committed suicide shortly afterwards, while Dain himself died under mysterious circumstances not long after that. Their lands never got along after that. Ethlyn and Quan's conversation is based off their in-game convo.

Appearing only in FE4, and with a weapon repertoire that has not been even matched by any other class across the all games, Master Knights are broken as all hell, but are offset by how rare they are. Lachesis is one of two playable ones, and she starts off relatively weak and has relatively bad growths to compensate for it. But they have high stat caps and an automatic 'A' rank in most of their weapons (the highest aside from the Major Holy Blood locked holy weapons). The only exception is light magic, which is only C. The only weapon they cannot use is dark magic. It's also a mounted class, which is needed in FE4, and thus, it is an incredibly versatile class. (FE4 is so hilariously unbalanced gameplay wise.)

Oh, because this got asked. Ages listed in the notes are their ages upon recruitment, so their current age 'in-story' will be different once you get past the first few chapters.

Next Chapter – Healer
Chapter 18) Healer

Chagall hired Thracia's dragon knights to offset the loss of Eldigan and his Cross Knights. Their single attack was brutal and devastating, but our own counterattack must've spooked them as, after a couple of days, there were no signs of them. Erinys flew many patrols to make sure, even flying to the Tower of Blaggi in the very north to ask Father Claude and Tailtiu if they'd seen anything. They hadn't, but did speak of returning to Sigurd soon.

When Erinys returned from that patrol, Sigurd announced that we'd push forward to Silvail. It was time for Chagall to answer for his actions, once and for all.

When Sigurd made his announcement, Lachesis and Ethlyn insisted on doing infirmary inventory for me. Both had, mostly, finished their own preparations and needed something to do. I had protested at first, but gave in when I realized just why they wanted to keep working. They were on pins and needles. They were going to confront Chagall, who destroyed Agustria, harmed thousands, and killed Eldigan.

So, instead, I visited a nearby village to help them out instead. From them, I learned that while some of Eldigan's Cross Knights were killed while escaping Silvail, others managed to make it. I hoped they were safe. It would be impossible to know until we got the north settled again. But I hoped they made it to Noldion. I hoped they made it to Grahnye and Ares, so that they could be safe.

"Miss?" someone called. I held up a hand to tell them to wait as I bandaged up a little girl's arm. She'd cut herself on a jagged rock and it had gotten infected. "I'm sorry."

"Let me just finish," I reassured, still not looking at whoever it was. My attention was all on the girl, and I smiled when I tied off the bandage. "Now, next time you fall and get an owie, you let your mother know right away so that she can clean it." The little girl giggled and actually gave me a kiss on the cheek before running over to said mother. I smiled warmly at them both before turning to the person. "Yes?"

"My apologies for bothering you." They looked young, not much older than Finn or Oifeye, and spoke with an accent I couldn't place. "But my friend was injured a few days back and we can't seem to get the injury to stop bleeding?"

"Is that so?" I picked up my staff and stood slowly. "That sounds serious. Where is your friend?"

"I… well…" They bowed their head, and I noticed they were careful to keep the hood of their cloak up. "In the woods?"

"You're in the woods?"

"We're not locals, as I'm sure you've figured already, ma'am. We swung this way to avoid the trouble in east Grannvale." They looked up tentatively. "I know this sounds suspicious, but we were really trying not to bother the people here, so we camped instead, but that wound is…"
"I see." I frowned slightly. They wasn't kidding that this was suspicious, but there was an earnestness in their eyes that made me think they were sincere. "Let me post word to someone, if you do not mind, and wash my hands."

"Of course." They lifted their head and smiled brightly. "Thank you!"

I told a few villagers that I was heading out of the village to treat someone, and they reassured me that they'd let people in the army know. So, still uneasy but a little more reassured, I followed the earnest messenger into the woods. I snapped branches on the way, doing my best to mark my way. The messenger didn't stop me, even helping me over some particularly large roots and fallen logs.

"Thank you so much, ma'am," they babbled as we continued through the woods. We weren't on a path, and we were heading quite deep. "Like I said, we tried tending to it, but it's cut all weirdly and-"

"How did your friend get injured?" I asked, mostly to keep focused. "Do you know the weapon?"

"Not off hand, ma'am. He got it while protecting one of the others, and everything was pretty chaotic when we were attacked." Their eyes went dark with pain. "We lost a few."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm used to it, ma'am. At least they went quick, not like my older brother."

"May I ask what happened?"

"He starved himself so that my sister and I could eat instead."

"Oh." My heart panged in sympathy. Thanks to the church, and Arvis, I never went hungry, but I had many patients who had been near death because of starvation. Some made it; others hadn't. "How is your sister?"

"She's married now with kids of her own!" Their face lit up at that. "I work hard to help her out. Her husband is recovering from a bad leg injury. Hopefully it won't cripple him."

"Do you know how he was injured?"

"He's a lumberjack, but the pile shifted and, well… his axe got him instead."

"Did it crack bone or was it just surface?"

"Just surface."

"Keep a close eye on infections. It can sometimes form a pocket underneath the skin." A strange growl caught my ear, but when I looked, I saw nothing. "You'd also have to make sure the wound gets aired out a bit. When he's cleaning it would be a good time."

"I'll let them know when I'm back home." They smiled brightly. "Thank you!"

"It's nothing." I heard another growl, but this time, I caught sight of a large green thing moving in the distance. I felt myself grow cold, a very bad feeling creeping over me. "It's just simple advice."

"Still, though." They continued to smile and lead me. Another growl, though, made me look around again. This time, I caught sight of a winged thing, and knew my feeling was correct. "We're here."

They led me into a quiet camp. There were no signs of dragons, but the bits of armor I picked out
reminded me of the dead Thracians. A few looked up from the campfire before looking down, continuing whatever they were doing. They were careful that smoke wouldn't escape the trees. They were careful to keep a small camp. I wondered how they dealt with their dragons, but there was no way I could ask that right now. The messenger led me into a tent set slightly apart from the others, a bit larger as well. Inside was... well, it was Travant. His face was more ashen, and he was propped up on makeshift pillows. The left side of his shirt was a sticky crimson, and he held something loosely in his right hand. I had a feeling I knew what caused that wound now.

"Sir, I found a healer!" the messenger brightly told him. Travant opened his eyes and smiled slightly. It faded when he looked at me. "She's really nice."

"Is she?" Travant asked. His eyes narrowed as he studied me, and then he nodded a dismissal to the messenger. "Continue with your chores then." When they left, Travant sighed, chuckling. "The lad is enthusiastic, but not the brightest." He shifted a little higher against the 'pillows'. "Healing staves are expensive to own and maintain, the same as any good weapon. A simple village healer wouldn't have one unless there happened to be a church attached to it. But there isn't here."

"No, there's not," I murmured. I didn't see a reason to hide it. He already knew. He'd known as soon as I walked in. "Is that what let you put it together so quickly?"

"Partly. I saw you in the camp, tending to a boy wearing Leinster clothes, while the Neir boy and the Vala mage killed some of mine." He smiled slightly. I was more surprised he'd spotted me at all, but the mention of Lex and Azel made me wonder if it was just happenstance. "Even if I hadn't, though... well, you can hide your Mark, but you can't hide the Vala-red hair and the presence of Holy Blood. You must be one of Victor of Velthomer's bastards, and if that's the case, then you'd have to be with Sigurd."

"You're quite clever."

"I have to be." He leaned back against the pillows. Blood seeped out of his side and into the blankets. I wondered if the soldiers had given him all they had, to try and make him comfortable. "Well, you just tell them that there's no helping me."

"...I can't make that assumption until I've actually assessed the injuries." I felt cold. I felt sick. I wondered if this was what Eldigan felt, when he realized just what was happening in Agustria. But I was a healer. I'd told him that. I'd told him what I'd do, so I felt that additional weight on me. "Shirt off so that I can see it better."

"You can't be serious." He frowned. "I'm your enemy."

"I am a healer. I am sworn to tend to everyone's injuries, friend or foe." I glared right back, annoyed at all of this. "If it makes you feel better, yes, I do hate you. I've still got people healing from your spears. I've held the hands of those you've killed. You nearly killed a boy I consider my little brother. Your first assault might've killed a baby, not even a year old yet." I paused when I saw him flinch. "You don't normally go after children, do you?"

"Why the hell do you guys have children in your camp anyway?" He rolled his eyes. It was enough of an answer. "Seems stupid."

"Unfortunately, we were assaulted in the castle, and all of us who remained behind in 'safety' nearly died, including that baby boy. The camp, believe it or not, is actually safer." I sighed, forcing myself to relax. "Regardless, yes, I hate you. Yes, I'm certain I'll regret this later. But I am a healer. I heal people. That is the oath I swore." That is the oath I told Eldigan I would follow, if things ever came into conflict. "So, let me see your injuries before I regret letting you talk long
enough to bleed out."

He gave me an unreadable look, but did slowly get his shirt off. I winced when I saw how jagged the injury on his side was. "That wind mage. He's Prince Lewyn, isn't he?"

"Are you wanting an answer or a confirmation?" I knelt beside him and flipped open my pack before studying the wound. The edges of the wound were even worse up close, and while someone had tried their best to clean it, I could see and smell signs of infection. "Regardless, I'm guessing this is from that?"

"Confirmation, mainly. I'd heard the prince was the Forseti Major and I can't think of anyone else who could control the wind that easily." He winced as I prodded around the injury. "But yes, from that. Quan didn't get close enough to tear through me."

"That will explain a lot of the injury." It was gaping, with serious deep damage, and minor superficial spiraling out. It was almost like a tornado had erupted in his side. "I need you to keep your arm up. I have to clean this, and then numb it up."

"For stitching?" He settled his arm on the pillows behind him. "You're going to stitch it?"

"Yes. Though, if you really want, I can attempt to simply use a healing staff, but that could lead to sealing pockets of infection, and you getting a very twisted scar as the skin tried to mend every which way." I gave him my most innocent look before shifting back to the healer mask. "So, I need to stitch the pieces together."

He looked at me skeptically, but didn't fight me as I began cleaning the injury and numbing the area up. The worst was a slight hiss of pain as the infection burned out and he tightened his grip on whatever he was holding.

I thought to ignore it as I prepared my needles and threads for stitching, but his hand loosened as the numbing took effect and I caught sight of what looked to be a clumsily made charm. "What's that?" I asked, nodding to it before settling beside him again and carefully moving the wound so that I stitched this correctly. "Is it a charm?"

"It is," he confirmed. He opened his hand so that I could see it fully. I thought it was meant to be a pair of dragon wings, but honestly, it looked mostly like a lump of wood to me. "Arion just learned how to carve trinkets, and insisted I take it."

"Arion?"

"My son." He smiled softly, rolling the charm in his hand. I found where the edges should line up and began stitching very slowly to keep everything together. "I think Leinster has a little princess about the same age, now that I think about it."

"Altena. She's adorable."

"Most children are, in one way or another." His smile faded as he continued studying the charm. "I hope he's all right in the castle. They better not be letting him getting into everything."

"Would not your wife…?" I trailed off as he tensed. "My apologies for the question, but I do need you to relax." I waited until he did, and set my needle in my lap to clean the injury again and numb it up a little more. "May I ask what happened?"

"A Leinster noble decided to raid a village while she was visiting." He ground his teeth, and again, I had to wait before he relaxed to continue my stitching. "Sorry, a 'rogue knight formerly of
"Leinster."

"You don't like Leinster."

"Would you like someone who keeps tariffs on food stuff so high that you have to pick between food or medicine?" He laughed bitterly. "Oh, I'm sorry. You're friends with them."

"I am friends with Quan and Ethlyn, yes. That does not mean I know anything about their policies." I did feel the instinctive urge to defend them, of course. But, honestly, I really didn't know the politics there besides the absolute basics. "Besides, Quan's father is the ruler. I don't know a thing about him."

"That's a very neutral response."

"It's a truthful one. I never expected to leave my little village, so I only paid particular attention to Grannvale's policies. The rest is simply basics that came to me from biased accounts." I frowned as I noticed the skin slipping, and paused to readjust. After a moment of studying, though, I decided to just tie off the thread and begin again with a fresh needle. "I'm used to filtering out gossip."

"Why would a healer be used to that?"

"You would be surprised how many people try to play off beatings with a simple trip or a fall down the stairs." I began stitching again. I was hitting the worst of the wound by now. "You would also be surprised how many people try to play off that no, they didn't follow their grandmother's 'secret' medicine which somehow involved rubbing cow dung into the wound."

"Ha!" He actually shook a bit from the laughter. I had to pause for him to calm down before stitching again. "We had one like that in our infirmary not long ago. Luckily, his sister had the sense to not lie."

"My point is proven." I shifted so that I could try to piece together the skin again. It slipped a lot. "So, what brings you all the way out here, with Gungnir at that, for Chagall? Was the pay that good?"

"It was, and he was idiotic enough to pay most of it up front." He chuckled, shaking his head. I had to move his hair back over his shoulder. "Sorry."

"So, he paid for most of it up front?" I had to fight to keep calm. Gods, I hated Chagall even more. "He truly is playing at war."

"Rather accurate summation. You talk to him?"

"I was friends with Eldigan as well."

"Ah." He fell silent and, surprisingly, actually did look… not quite remorseful. 'Respectful' was closer. "Have to admire his bravery. He walked into that throne room knowing exactly what happened, and he did it with his head held high. He even gave advice to the kid who cut off his head, and removed his cloak to give a better target."

"Strangely, I'm unsurprised." I was also unsurprised by the fact that Chagall hadn't killed Eldigan himself. "I would've thought you'd hate him."

"I didn't know him, and I think the knightly types with honor and the like are hypocrites. But if there was a knight who wasn't, I'd believe it to be him. At the least, being able to accept your death gracefully, getting the last laugh even… that's a rare thing."
"...What were his last words?"

"That Agustria was entering its twilight, the land of knights has lost all its knights." He smirked. "And that Chagall would send Agustria into ruins, but it would rise again, and he'd be completely forgotten as nothing more than a footnote in its history. And that Chagall was going to die soon, so he'd wait for a proper lecture until the afterlife."

"That..." I had to laugh a bit, shaking my head even as I kept my hands steady. "He was definitely Sigurd's friend." I finished the last of the stitching and tied off my thread. "Hold still while I clean and bandage this."

"All right." He brought his other arm up to make it easier on me, and brought both arms down when I tied them off. "Thank you. What do I owe you?"

"Owe?" I frowned heavily. "I do not charge for healing."

"You should. It's a skill."

"I prefer people to worry about their injuries, not how they're going to 'pay' a healer for whatever herbs and charges I use." I sat back on my heels, and used some cloth to wipe the worst of the blood off my hands. "For one thing, I collect everything myself. For another thing, all of my necessities are taken care of, and there are very little things of monetary value I want."

"That so?" His hand slipped under my chin and tilted my face up towards his. I tensed, but maintained my healer mask, staring back as he studied me. "Huh. I didn't think there were 'real' healers anymore. But you actually walk the talk." His hand left my face, but he held my gaze. "That said, it would be untoward to not repay someone for a service."

"Is that so?" My eyes narrowed as a thought occurred to me. I thought of all those that died, all those still injured, from his attack. A second ambush like that... "How much do you have left on that payment Chagall owes you? You won't get it from him. Chagall is going to die fairly soon."

"Not a lot, truthfully. As I said, Chagall was an idiot. I just had to see who he was fighting to make him so very desperate. And, well, the money will set my country well for the next year or so."

"Well, why don't we take that supposed fee from that?" I reached up and took out my hair ornament. I felt a pang of regret, since it was the one Arvis had bought for me before all this trouble in Agustria began. But if I knew Arvis, I knew it was expensive. "We can add whatever this will sell for. I figured it's expensive."

"Now that is a very nice piece." He took it from me and studied it closely. "Real gold. Fine craftsmanship. It probably costs as much as a very good sword."

"So, take it, and the healer fee."

"You're hiring us?" He smiled very slightly, respect in his eyes. "And for what job?"

"It's simple. You stay out of the battle. You don't lose more of your soldiers. I don't lose more of mine. That injury..." I pointed to his bandages. "That will actually heal. I do highly recommend you just rest for that, by the way. Too much stress on that wound will rip it all open again. But so long as you rest, it should heal up with a scar."

"I see." He laughed, soft and low, and he leaned forward just slightly to look me better in the eye. "Very well. I think I'll accept that job." He shifted back and rested against the pillows again. "Ask for Donald. That's the boy. He'll escort you back."
"Thank you." I gathered my things and stood up, stepping out of the tent. Every single soldier's attention focused on me as I did, and I made sure to smile. Most smiled back in relief, and a few actually took my hands and kissed them in thanks. The messenger boy, Donald, happily escorted me back, thanking me a thousand and one times. I smiled and reassured him, though inside, I was hurting.

I knew I'd have a lot of things to apologize for in the future. But, at the same time, I was a healer. Just walking away… I couldn't do it. When I saw someone hurt, I tended to them. I had always been that way. That was why I was a healer in the first place. A healer made an oath to always be neutral, while on the job. That's just what happened here. Walking away would've broken my heart just as much.

But I still felt horrible. This was not a situation where I could've won.

When I returned to camp, I said I was tired and rested for the remainder of the day. Chulainn could tell something was wrong, but didn't push; instead, he simply let me cling to him and sleep. Sigurd asked about what happened to my hair ornament; I lied and said I must've lost it. Ethlyn asked about the blood; I told her I had to stitch a messy wound. It was almost a relief when, a few days later, Sigurd launched his assault on Silvail because, then, I was simply too busy to think.

"Shanan and Seliph are still in their section, Alicia," Finn reassured me once the first couple of waves of injured calmed. I smiled at him in return and continued to scrub my hands. "He was wondering if he could roll bandages or something?"

"He can cut down some of the clothes, actually." I murmured. He'd been near often enough to see how it was done. "I think he can set up a boiling station safely there too."

"I'll help him set up." Finn left, still limping slightly from his previous injury, and I turned my attention to the wounded. A few had died, but most were holding steady. There were lower numbers than usual, but that was apparently because Chagall simply didn't have a lot of soldiers anymore.

Based on the reports, it was only the fragments of Agustria's army that remained once of the Cross Knights were gone. There had been no sign of Travant or his knights. I wondered if that would continue, or if he was preparing for an ambush.

"Seliph is being particularly playful today," Finn noted as he returned. He shifted his weight, favoring his non-injured side. He was still recovering from his impalement, which is why he stayed with me in the infirmary. "But I think he'll settle down for his nap soon."

"I hope so," I replied. It wasn't the best of circumstances, but really, there wasn't really a safer place for Seliph at the moment. "How are you doing, Finn?"

"I'm a bit worried, but nothing substantial. The battle seems to be going well, and easier than expected."

"Indeed." I smiled, though. "But that wasn't exactly what I meant. How are you doing with Lachesis, Finn?"

"Th-that's…!" Finn went bright red, and I laughed, unable to help it. "We… um…"

"You lent her your horse when she headed off."

"I did. I knew she'd have difficulties keeping up, and she's a good rider." He shrugged. "We're…"
"Have you kissed?"

"Alicia!" His face went even redder. "That's…"

"Right, right, a gentleman does not kiss and tell." I giggled and he sulked. "I'm sorry. I'm happy for you two."

"Lord Quan laughed for three straight minutes, while Lady Ethlyn gushed and cooed." Finn switched his lance to his other hand to rotate his wrist. "Then I had Lex asking if I needed tips."

"Oh, goodness." I kept on giggling, and he kept on sulking. "Well, we're all simply happy for you and-"

A loud thump-clang noise startled us both and we stepped out of the tent to inspect. I snatched a staff on the way, thinking it was someone injured. While that was true, I certainly didn't expect to come face to face with Chagall. I knew it was him; I remembered him from the 'peace talks' that felt forever ago.

"You, healer girl!" he declared, pointing at me. He had some minor cuts on him, and some blood seeping out of the joints of his armor. He carried two weapons: a silver blade and a fire magic tome. "I demand that you heal me!"

"Pardon?" I replied, not quite processing. But then it did, and I closed my eyes to resist groaning. It seemed life was very determined to test my oath lately. This was twice now. "Let me get my things."

"Alicia, what are you doing?" Finn hissed. He snagged my arm as I stepped back inside to gather my bandages and medicines. Chagall, meanwhile, was smirking. "This is-"

"The first promise I ever made, the first oath I ever swore, was to heal people, Finn. Friend or foe, an injured is an injured. Healers are neutral." I gave him the most stoic look I could. "Please, guard me?"

"As if I'd leave you alone with this psychopath." He glared at Chagall; Chagall promptly squeaked. "But-!"

"At the moment, he is my patient." I felt horrible, but I couldn't… I couldn't break this oath. It was like how Eldigan swore to never take the throne. I understood his pain all too well, now. "Please." Finn didn't say a word, but he did nod curtly. I stepped inside and returned quickly, healer's mask in place. "Drop your weapons, Chagall."

"What?!" Chagall yelped. He glared at me. "You make demands of me?"

"I do not heal anyone while they hold a weapon in hand. I am a healer, not a field medic," I explained calmly. "I need you to remove your armor as well. I cannot tend to your injuries through your armor."

"Tch… ordering a king…" Still, Chagall did as I bade, and sat on a nearby barrel while I took stock of his injuries. "Stupid mongrel. Pretty, though."

"I am of Crusader descent the same as you, Chagall." I kept perfectly stoic as he glared. "If you would rather I not treat your injuries, though-"
"No, treat them!" His glare deepened, and I continued my check. I almost laughed at how superficial they were. It was as if he'd gotten a taste of a real battle, and ran away. "Well? Heal me up!"

"That is what I'm doing." Deciding that a healing staff would be far too much for these, I began cleaning and bandaging the injuries. Chagall muttered more things, but I ignored him. A couple of growls from Finn hinted they were not anything I'd want to hear anyway.

At some point, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and saw Finn shift protectively in front of me. I glanced over and saw it was a trio of familiar people. Lachesis all-but-snarled at us, eyes burning with untamed fury. Quan, for his part, frowned, looking horribly confused. Both, however, were held back by Sigurd, who actually caught my eye and smiled. His eyes held only trust and understanding, and I had to admit, that did wonders to soothe my nerves.

Since Chagall's injuries were so minor, though, I was done quickly and so, stepped back. "That is the last of them," I informed him with a polite smile. He still glared at me. "I would recommend that you rest for the day, and do not put your armor back on. You will stress the wound, and make my work for naught."

"I… what?" Chagall asked. His eyes widened when he saw me walking away. "What are you…?"

"You asked to be healed. I have treated you, and now, I am releasing you. You are no longer my patient. Is that not a good thing?" I sweetened my smile and gathered my things. "Most are happy to no longer need a healer's services."

"I… you…!" He gestured at the bandages. "Staff!"

"Your injuries were not harsh enough for me to use a staff, nor are they bad enough that I would put you under observation." I bent down to take the tome and blade he'd dropped. The blade was heavy, so I let it drag on the ground as I returned to the infirmary tent. "Finn, if you can confiscate his armor like we do with the others? I truly don't want him wearing it on those injuries."

"You can't do this!" Chagall's voice went rather high. The look on his face was some combination of disgust, pride, and very real fear. "You're-!"

"I cannot stay out here. I have others to tend to, and surely, you cannot expect me to let you inside the tent." I glanced at Finn, curious as to what he was doing. He was obeying me with the biggest grin I'd ever seen him wear. "The soldiers inside want you dead, so it would be very bad for your health. It would be bad for them as well, to stress their healing wounds."

"You bitch! You tricked me!"

"You asked for healing. I gave it to you, because that is my duty." I set the tome and blade just inside the infirmary tent's entrance, and then snagged one of the staves resting there. "I do not know what else you were expecting. I have no place of sanctuary, of course. You could try a proper church for that." I turned slightly to face him. His face was turning purple with anger. But I kept my mask on. "I am a simple healer attached to an army, and I tend to all who come to me to the best of my abilities. You are treated."

"Bitch!" Chagall snarled and tried to lunge for me. He stumbled and slipped in the mud, though. "I should-"

"Silence." I brought Deirdre's Silence up and focused its magic onto Chagall. His voice left him instantly and he stumbled, clawing at his throat. "You are being too noisy. You are disturbing my
patients, patients I must return to now that you are no longer in need of my skills." I set Silence back in the corner and walked inside. "Finn, drop the armor with the others, will you? I need you to check on Shanan and Seliph for me."

I looked back only once, just as Finn got the armor inside. Chagall had collapsed, tears of fear streaming down his face as he desperately tried to say something. But Lachesis advanced on him with a vicious smirk, bloody sword in hand, and there was no mercy in her eyes, even as he tried to push himself away. Sigurd and Quan followed her with their own weapons, and their intentions were very clear.

I let the tent flap flutter shut and started tending the worst wounded again. I felt bad, leaving him to his fate as I did. But it was not the first time a patient had died shortly after I’d healed them, and it would not be the last. That was what it meant, being a healer during a war.

"Did you really have to rip him apart, Sigurd?" I scolded as I tied a bandage around his bicep. With Chagall’s death, Silvail happily let us 'conquer' it, and so, we had all moved within. Lachesis and Ethlyn took up my infirmary duty, so I went to tend to Sigurd in his study. "Seriously?"

"It was unintentional?" Sigurd half-defended sheepishly. He sat perfectly still in his chair while I worked. "It was more of 'Lachesis gets the first strike, while Quan and I follow', but we put more force into it than expected? Lachesis and Quan were just as surprised as I was."

"I wonder if they were as surprised as me. I was not expecting to step onto someone's intestines when I checked on you three." The smell alone had caused a few of my patients to start vomiting. A few had ripped stitches because of it. "But I shall forgive you this time, I suppose. I'm sure you three couldn't hold back your anger."

"No. I mean; I was doing a good job, until he ran away." Sigurd made a face and I moved to the injury he had on his lower arm. "I did lose it a little when I noticed he was running for the camp again."

"I wonder how he knew I would've treated him." I thought Travant might've told him, but I wasn't sure why he would. I did appreciate that he'd kept his word and stayed out of the battle. Erinys had, in fact, reported seeing them fly to the south, out of Agustria. "Thank you, by the way."

"Huh?" He tilted his head curiously. "For what?"

"You were the only one of you three not angry." I tied off his last of his bandages and rested my hands in my lap. "Thank you for that."

"You're a healer. You heal people. That's the first thing I learned about you, Alicia." He smiled sweetly and shrugged his shirt back on. "You answered my questions with frank honesty, was as calm as a still lake, and despite being absolutely exhausted, offered your help to heal my injured. After spending who the hell knows how long tending to the survivors of Jungby castle. Healing people is what you do."

"Even if you hate them, Sigurd?"

"Well, there's nothing that says I couldn't kill him after you healed him?" His smile became a little darker, but I could not blame him. "I mean; I figured you'd stop us if there was."

"I suppose." I found myself laughing, relaxing finally. "His wounds were minor. Did he truly run?"

"He did. The coward couldn't even die like a king." His smile faded and he looked out the window,
to the sun setting on the horizon. "Agustria… it has lost its royal line. There's no one to take over. I suppose you could say it fell."

"But it can rise again. I'm sure that's what Eldigan believed, in the end. Perhaps that's why he chose the path that would take his life. Perhaps he felt he had to fall with Agustria, so that someone better, more qualified, could help it rise again." I rested a hand on his shoulder. "There is always some sort of light in the dark, Sigurd. It might take us a while to find it, but that doesn't mean it's not there."

"True." He laughed suddenly. "Didn't you used to lecture me on being too optimistic?"

"I can see that." I shrugged. "You're not yourself if you're not looking forward, Sigurd. You are a reckless one sometimes, but that's just who you are. You cannot turn your back on those who need your help, and you are a light for them."

"Thank you." He smiled again. It was softer and sadder than his 'normal' one, and I wished Deirdre were here to cheer him up. But she wasn't, so my words would have to due until then. "Am I cleared?"

"Light duty, and I will be vexed if you stress this arm." I stood up and brushed off my skirt. "Go play with Shanan. He was very helpful today."

"I will, as soon as I go through these reports." He grinned and I laughed. "Go rest, Alicia. You need it."

"I'll try." I shut the door behind me and walked down the hall, smile fading as I saw a few soldiers give me dirty looks as I passed. I expected that. Words spread quickly. But it did still hurt.

I did my best to ignore them, though, and made it to my room, marked by a ribbon, just as Deirdre always did. I smiled tiredly at it, feeling the urge to weep. If Deirdre was here, she'd make me laugh. She might not have understood, but she would've trusted me, just as Sigurd did. But she wasn't here, so I closed my eyes to stave off the tears and walked inside. To my surprise, though, Chulainn wasn't here, and I almost panicked before realizing he likely just went on patrol or something. I tried to not feel disappointed. I'd hoped to have a comforting hug or something, so I wondered if I should head to the infirmary and work until I no longer need a hug.

But Lachesis and Ethlyn had made it clear they wanted me to rest for the night, and I wasn't certain they weren't a little mad at me either. So, instead, I decided to indulge my self-pity and take a very long bath instead. I wasn't one for long baths typically, mostly just long enough to scrub down, but this time, I just let myself relax in the tub, letting the warm water take away my aches little by little. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, glad that all of this was finally over. It was probably not a very long campaign, compared to our last two, but it felt like it had taken years.

The door opening made me sit up and, after scrubbing the last bit of dirt, I got out and wrapped a towel around myself, using a second one to try and dry my hair. "Welcome back," I murmured when I saw Chulainn. He was unbuckling his armor, but he paused long enough to smile. That smile made everything feel better. "Is everything clear?"

"Seems so," he replied. He got the last of his armor off and came over to kiss me. "I would've thought you'd be in the infirmary."

"Lachesis and Ethlyn are handling it for the night, so I opted for a bath instead."

"I guess letting you rest so that you can explain in the morning why you tended to Chagall's
injuries.” He gave me a fondly exasperated look, taking the towel I was using to dry my hair from me so that he could play with the strands. "I have had no few people demanding me for answers on that one."

"I'm sorry, Chulainn." I snagged his hand to kiss his palm. His fingers twitched on my cheek. "But, I had to. I feel horrible enough walking away and leaving him to die when he was tended to. I'd sent soldiers with worse injures to fight. So, I mean..."

"I know." He leaned down and pressed his forehead against mine. I closed my eyes and let myself relax again. He knew. He understood enough. That was enough for me, especially now. "It's just who you are. It's your job."

"I'll be trying to explain this for a very long while, I'm sure." I smiled warmly at him, giving him my silent thanks, before shyly slipping my fingers under his shirt. "But at the moment, I am really hoping to relax."

"Really?" He smiled back. His breath quickened as my hands traveled up his abdomen. "What were you thinking, exactly?"

"I suppose that depends. Should I bother getting dressed?"

"Mmm, no." He closed the distance between us and kissed me fiercely. "Not yet, anyway." He leaned down and kissed my neck. I gasped, already breathless. "Maybe later."

I was rather grateful Ethlyn healed me up. I was very, very grateful.

Notes on Lachesis:

The 16-year-old princess of Noldion, skilled in swords and staves. Wanted to learn how to heal to assist her brother.

Her Holy Mark is on her lower back.

Not the most experienced fighter, but gains more with each battle. She seeks the title of Master Knight now.

Courting Finn and enjoys teasing him silly. Healing from her brother's death.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: Chagall is dead, Chagall is dead. Though FE4 doesn't bring it up, FE5 makes some mentions that the Leinster-Thracia conflict is a lot greyer than originally thought. Thracia is like Ilia in FE6/FE7, Jehanna in Fe8, and like Nohr in FE14, being a nation that finds it hard to grow food and thus has a focus on combat (mercenaries and/or conquest). Travant's wife is never mentioned in game. Chagall is a 'baron' in game, an armored-looking class, and wields a Bolganone and a droppable Silver Blade. He's a rather mediocre boss, with only high HP and defense to make him any sort of threat. Eldigan's last words are based a bit on his in-game dialogue and the Oosawa manga.
Interlude - Silvail

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude – Silvail

Chagall is dead. Agustria, technically, has fallen. The last of the royal family died, after all. But all hope isn't lost. Lachesis, for instance, could take the throne. She had the blood of Hezul in her veins, his Holy Blood. Eldigan might've been the better choice, but his oaths took his head. Maybe, when Ares is older, he could take over? Perhaps he could rule, and return the Major Blood to Agustria's throne. Well, that's too much to suddenly put on a child. I'm sure Grahnye has enough trouble trying to explain to him why his father won't return. I hope we can see them soon. I'm sure she'll need the help.

We learned that Chagall sent Mystletainn back to Noldion, though not Eldigan's body. It's here, left to rot in some dungeon and so, we prepare a coffin and have our own private memorial. We'll send the body to Noldion soon, as we have to ensure the north is truly settled. We owe it to Eldigan, after all. We owe it to the people of Agustria, for overstaying.

Ah, there is so much going on. I look forward to when we can leave.

"Ugh, you'd think the spasms would stop by now!" Lewyn groaned. He glared at the ceiling, resting in one of the infirmary beds. "It's been days!"

"You performed magic using your own blood as a catalyst," I reminded him. I carefully mixed up some medicine at the table next to the bed. I ran out of my muscle relaxers at some point. I hoped no one had stolen them for their sedative properties. "If you weren't Sety's heir, you'd probably be dead, channeling that much magic through you."

"But it's been days!" He rolled onto his side to sulk at me, but hissed as his body seized up again. "Gods, damn it."

"Try to not stress yourself out. You need rest, in addition to the medicine," I paused briefly and leaned over to brush the hair out of his face. "You saved a lot of lives, doing that."

"Not all."

"No one can save anyone. Not even a god."

"...Isn't that blasphemous?" He smiled incredulously. "I mean; aren't you a priest?"

"I'm trained by the church, because the church has a monopoly on healing arts but I am a healer first and foremost. As such, my job involves looking the god of death in the face and telling him, 'not today!' I leaned back and shifted to settle myself better in my chair before returning to mixing up the medicine. "Well, at least, that is a dramatic way to put it, but I suppose it's the truth nonetheless."

"It's quite a bardic way to put it, and I am stealing that line for a song."

"Why would you write of a healer?"
"Some people need to. That way they can appreciate what a healer does." He grinned, eyes sparking with mischief. "Though, specifically, I'm composing songs about lots of people in the army. You're one of them."

"You're joking."

"Nope! It's fun!" He laughed, perfectly pleased with himself. "I'm also working actively on one about Lachesis and Finn. It needs some different lyrics to fit some of the rhythms."

"You truly love songs, huh?"

"...Yeah. My father did as well." His cheer faded, but not quite for sadness. 'Nostalgia' was closer, but there was a sense of pain in it still. "He taught me, actually. He taught me the flute, the harp, and how to sing. It was a game, and he used the music to teach me how to listen to the wind and the sylphs. He taught me how to use music to bond with them, so that I was not simply ordering them about."

"I'm surprised he knew so much, truth be told."

"Crusader-King Sety had been a bard prior to being a crusader. That's where I got the idea." He fell silent for a while, so I went back to concentrating on the medicine. "You're very strong, you know."

"Me?"

"Yeah. Not many people could hold onto an oath of neutrality when looking at someone they hated. Not many people could hold onto an oath of anything when faced with trauma and what-ifs." He laughed bitterly. "I mean; I couldn't do it. I ran. I was called to fulfill my oath to the people, the price to being born to such privilege, and I ran."

"I don't think it's very fair to compare a healer's job to a king's. A healer has only one job, mending the wounded. A king has many, many jobs if he wants to rule efficiently." I finished mixing the medicine and spooned out the dosage. "If a healer fails, only one person dies. If a king fails, many people die."

"I still ran from my oath. I find you strong for not running from yours."

"Then you won't run the second time. You know the price of regret." I mixed the medicine with water and passed it to him. "This will taste horrible, fair warning."

"Do any medicines taste good?" Lewyn sat up and downed the glass in one gulp. He promptly started coughing and half-gagging. "Oh, gods, that's vile even for medicine. No offense meant, but..."

"Muscle relaxers, like pain medications, are very easy to become reliant on and addicted to. I try to make them taste horrible to lessen the chances of it." I smiled slightly and took the glass from him. "I think it's working. I've not had to deal with a medicine addiction yet during the three years I've been with this army."

"Makes sense." He looked up at me pitifully, with watering eyes. "Can I have normal water to try and get the taste out of my mouth?"

"Of course."

I'd just gotten him a new glass of water when Erinys poked her head in. "Sorry to bother," she
began, bowing slightly to me. "I wondered if Lewyn…" She looked over at him and grimaced. "I thought I saw you wince earlier. Are you truly recovering?"

"I am," Lewyn grumbled. He nursed the water, scowling. "I'm just still recovering."

"It's been days."

"I am well aware, Erinys." He sighed, brushing his hair over his shoulder. "Sorry, I shouldn't be growling at you for that. It was my decision, and I don't regret it. I don't want to think of how many others would've died if I hadn't." He rolled his wrist, frowning. "Is lightheadedness normal after taking the medicine?"

"It's a common side-effect, yes," I reassured him. I carefully covered and put away the medicine. "Any others you feel?"

"My hand has a… not quite pins and needles? Tingling?" Lewyn reported. He set his glass down, still frowning. "Maybe a bit of weakness."

"Less common, but still a known one. Not one I'd consider 'serious' for the time being." I returned to him and gave him a careful check over. "No rashes, and no yellowing to your skin or eyes… any ringing in your ears?"

"No?"

"Ah, good. Let me know if you experience anything besides what you told me. Particularly fainting, unsteadiness, trouble breathing…" I smiled reassuringly as Lewyn paled more with each list. "Medicines. They're wonderful and useful, but you do have to watch for side-effects. The ones I mentioned are very rare ones, or ones associated with an overdose, so I have to check."

"Got it. I'll take care. And I'll think more carefully about doing this again, even though I still don't regret it."

"Good."

"He is getting better, right?" Erinys asked. She hesitated before brushing Lewyn's hair out of his face. She didn't notice Lewyn unconsciously lean into her touch, but I did. "I mean…"

"He is," I reassured. I smiled and straightened, smoothing the front of my skirt. "It wasn't a Final Strike, after all, but the process is similar. So, it'll likely be a little longer before he fully recovers."

"I see." Erinys looked at him sadly, hand hovering awkwardly over his shoulder. "Thank you, Alicia. I'm sorry for the trouble."

"It's my job, and this sort of thing is much calmer to work with than wounds. It's much cleaner too." I giggled, and brightened my smile. "I don't need to keep him for observation, but I do want him to keep resting, so if you could?"

"Certainly." Erinys smiled in relief and let herself touch his shoulder. Lewyn automatically leaned towards her. "Come on, you. Let me help you, okay?"

Lewyn pretended to protest, but he went along easily, letting her support him. They passed Ayra on the way out, and she gave them a worried look before turning back to me. "Is everything okay?" she asked. She rubbed her wrist, hinting to why she was here. "He's recovering, right?"

"He is," I reassured. I sat down again and gestured to her arm. "Bruise?"
"It's a bit stiff, but I think that's just be overstressing it. I should be fine, but if it gets worse, or doesn't get better, I'll let you know." She sat down as well, peering at me. "Honestly, though, I was coming to check on you. Lex thought you looked very tired earlier, but he had to go out on patrol with Azel and Beowulf."

"Did he?" I smiled ruefully, laughing bitterly. "Ah, I was up early explaining to some of the soldiers why I tended to Chagall." Thankfully, all the people I was actually friends with understood, eventually. It was everyone else, the ones who only knew me as the one who patched them up, that questioned me. "So, what's your opinion? Full honesty, I am quite curious."

"I think they're idiots for wondering why you did your job. One of the first things you ever said to me, Alicia, was that you were a healer and that you healed people, that you leave the politics to the politicians, and the fighting to the soldiers. And then you tended to Shanan, not only focusing on the wounds to his body, but to his soul." She smiled gently, laughing. "I find it far more confusing that soldiers are confused."

"I suppose they're not used to it. They're used to having to pay for a healer, among other things." I thought of what Travant had said, about how I actually 'walked the talk'. I'd never heard that phrase before, but I assumed it meant 'living up to what I said'. "But I take my oaths seriously."

"I'm just glad you didn't get taken advantaged of. I hate the idea of what Chagall would've tried if Finn hadn't been there."

"Considering some of the things Finn still grumbles about, something tells me I wouldn't have liked it much. But I'd rather not talk about Chagall. Instead…" I grinned at her and she fidgeted, guessing already that I was about to tease. "Speaking of Lex, do you want some contraceptives?"

"I… actually, no, yes." Her face went red, but she nodded, grinning back. "We haven't gone farther than kissing, but I'd like the option. Better to have and not need, right? Need to be safe about it."

"Certainly." I laughed, amused. "Why don't I make some tea, and we'll go through your options?"

"Yes, sure, let's have tea to toast my death by embarrassment." Her face went even redder.
"Actually, why don't I make the tea?"

"That sounds marvelous." I giggled, having too much fun. "They're in the back corner there."

"I intend to tease you about Chulainn, by the way."

"You may try."

In the end, she blushed far more than I did, so I won that little 'competition'. But we were both laughing, so I figured it didn't matter.

The sounds of wood clacking against wood caught my ear as I walked down the hall. I smiled when I looked out the nearby window and saw the sources. This window overlooked the practice area of the fort, where quite a few groups trained. Shanan and Chulainn practiced in one corner, with Chulainn focusing on helping Shanan adding kicks and punches to his fighting style. Not far away, Sigurd taught Oifiey a more honorable way to fight, with an emphasis on defense and guarding the legs. On the other side, Quan drilled both Finn and Lachesis in lances, taking care to fix Lachesis's grip and stance every once in a while and giving Finn more complex things to practice.

On the edges of the practice area, I actually saw Erinys. I wondered why she wasn't participating,
but then I saw that she was sitting with Sylvia, and the two were playing with Seliph. My smile grew when I noticed how happy the three of them were, and how the two women frequently called out encouragement to the students. I still wondered how they got the job, but it was clear that they enjoyed it. Maybe they'd simply been at the practice yard prior, and they volunteered so that everyone could practice together. I'd find out later.

"Lady Alicia?" a quiet voice called. I looked away from the window to see one of the local villagers, one we temporarily employed as a messenger, run up for me. "This is for you!" they chirped, passing me a strangely heavy envelope. "Have a good day~!" They ran off then, clearly not expecting any sort of response.

"Be careful not to trip!" I called after them. They waved before disappearing behind a corner, and only then did I turn my attention to the envelope.

It wasn't from Arvis. I could tell that much simply by the handwriting on the front, and the fact that it didn't have my name on it. It was addressed to the 'Healer of Vala', with a small note mentioning 'healer with dark red hair' just to make sure it made it to me. I frowned over it, wondering who would call me that, but then I shrugged and actually opened it up to find the answers. My eyes instantly found a thin bronze bracelet. I picked it up curiously, and noticed it had a very simple design of two wings curled around a vibrant, yet subdued, blue-green stone. When I slipped it on over my glove, it was a little loose, but it fit well enough. I wasn't in danger of losing it, at least.

Confused as to who would get me a bracelet, particularly one of such simplistic beauty, I tugged the actual letter out of the envelope and carefully unfolded it. My eyes darted to the end, and I frowned when I saw the name: Travant.

'Quite the healer, to heal even someone you hate but to maintain enough will to leave them to his fate once you were done. I have to admit that I didn't think you'd hold onto that oath when dealing with Chagall. I simply ambushed and almost killed a few of your friends, but he has more or less ruined your lives over the past couple of years and did kill a friend. But you tended to him anyway, because that's what your oath says to do. Rare, that.

The bracelet inside has a special meaning to Thracians. The gem is called a 'dragon eye' and it's the one thing Thracia never sells. Thracians only give the gem to those who impress them or to those they owe their lives to, so any Thracian who sees the gem will help the wearer as best as they are able. Wear it yourself or give it to someone you want to keep safe from Thracia's dragon knights. We're all taught to watch for the gleam. It's bad luck to kill an owner, after all.

I wish you well in the wars to come, healer. Bad times are coming, and no doubt you'll be in the middle of it. Your oath will require it, and you clearly walk that path with your head held high. Try to make sure no one stabs you for it.

-Travant'

I read the letter a few times, mostly because I couldn't believe Travant actually wrote me letter and gave me a gift. And not only did he give me a gift, but it was one specifically to protect someone, either myself or someone I chose. It really made me wonder if Travant had been the one to tell Chagall that I held fast to my healer's oath, as a test for me. I didn't see why he would do that, though. But, then again, I could be completely off and Chagall simply couldn't comprehend that anyone would refuse the direct order of a king, even an enemy. Chagall had been stupid enough for it.

"I think I'm simply overthinking everything," I finally whispered. I folded the letter up small and tucked it into a pocket. "I should just take it at face-value. I impressed him and saved his life, and
so, he returns the favor." I held up my arm, looking at the bracelet. It really was beautiful, and it was simple enough to fit the rest of my preferred look. "Besides, how many can say they impressed the King of Thracia?" Of course, I couldn't explain that to anyone here. Well, I likely could, but I didn't want to. I had enough trouble with just Chagall.

I shook my head, smiling slightly, and tugged sleeve to fall over the bracelet. Then I continued my walk down the hall, carefully shredding the envelope into tiny pieces. I concentrated so much on that task that I didn't pay attention, and I managed to somehow bump my shoulder against one of the portraits on the wall. Tucking the shreds of paper in a different pocket, to throw away later, I reached up to straighten the portrait and found myself studying it.

Unlike most of the other portraits on the wall, this was of two people, a man and a woman. The man had a stern look about him, gold eyes narrowed slightly like he wasn't sure if he trusted the person he looked at or not. His hair was a similar gold, cut short and held back by a black headband. It matched his shirt and pants, simple and practical. It complimented the woman's dress, a pale blue dress with a silver, underbust corset as the only 'ornamentation'. Unlike the man, she had a kind smile on her face, lighting up grey eyes. White hair, or perhaps simply a particularly pale platinum blonde, tumbled down her back, even when pulled up into a ponytail. Both looked close, though. They leaned into each other, and the man had an arm around the woman's waist, while the woman rested a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Crusader-King Hezul and his wife, Queen Gwyneth." Footsteps signaled someone's approach, and I turned to see it was Lachesis. "In the picture," she clarified, toweling her hair. She wore different clothes than she had in the practice area, hinting she'd finished and taken a bath. "It's of Crusader-King Hezul and Queen Gwyneth, the founders of Agustria."

"I see," I murmured. I returned my attention to the painting, paying attention to Hezul. It was hard to see, but at the collar of his shirt you could see some gold markings peeking above, his Holy Mark. "They look happy, mostly."

"Hezul was said to be a stern and stoic man, but there was always a softer side when Gwyneth was near. By all accounts, they were very happily married." Lachesis looked up at the painting too, with a tired expression. "They say the Holy War lasted three years. Or as it four? Five? I can't remember."

"I can't either. I think every story had a different length." I shrugged. "Some even say it lasted fifteen, but I think the Miracle of Darna was four or five years before the end."

"And from the ashes that remained, the Jugdral of today was born. It's been only a hundred years since then. Hezul and Gwyneth have only been dead for about fifty years, roughly. And yet…" Her hand came up to touch the painting, and her eyes wavered. "Agustria has fallen. Their country has fallen. Agustria has…"

"It can rise again." I rested a hand on her back, and smiled when she looked at me. "It's just injured and needs to heal. It can be done. Trust the healer when it comes to wounds. It can mend, in time."

"...Yeah, you're right." She smiled back, relieved. "Thanks, Alicia. Really, that does make me feel better."

"I'm glad." I started nudging her down the hall, deciding that we desperately needed a subject change. "Now, then, you're clearly on break, and so am I unless an emergency comes up, because Ethlyn insisted on taking the afternoon shift at the infirmary. Do you want to talk about your relationship with Finn?"
"Among other things to bug a big sister about, sure!" She grinned, and I stared for a moment before smiling back, incredibly touched she'd even jokingly call me that. "Careful, though. I have bunches of questions!"

"I'll do my best."

"Thanks so much for helping me make medicines, Sylvia," I told her sincerely as I set up the tea and cakes. We were in a very sunny room somewhere on the second floor of the fortress, a parlor strangely out of place given the rest of the fort. "I'm also grateful you're helping me get through all of these."

"It's so hilarious that the villagers gave you and Sigurd so many sweets!" Sylvia giggled. She'd already devoured three of the tiny cakes, with the crumbs sticking to her cheek. "And all because they wanted to match your sweetness."

"I'm trying to figure out where they got all the sugar." I grumbled to hide my embarrassment. That had been the villagers exact reasoning, after Sigurd had sent his soldiers to help with repairs and I had tended to their injuries. "But thank you. I've never been one for too much sugar. The very thought makes me nauseous."

"It's no trouble. I like sweets. I rarely had them." She stuffed another little cake in her mouth, humming brightly. "And these are so, so good~"

"I'm glad for that." I sat down finally and sipped my tea, ginger and lemon for my stomach. "Have all that you want."

"Shouldn't the healer be warning against so much sugar at once?"

"If you were at health risks, then I would. But you're very healthy, exercise regularly, and generally take care of yourself, so I see no reason for you not to indulge." Given the amount of sweets we all had now, though, I'd definitely have to watch everyone's health closely for the next few days.

"Yay!" Sylvia giggled again and returned to eating the cakes. "Oh, wait, which ones do you want?"

"You pick first. I really can't handle this much sugar." I smiled, watching her cheer and continue to enjoy herself. "I'm glad you're happy, Sylvia. Your mood has been down the past few days. If I'd known sweet would cheer you up this fast, I would've found a way to get you some sooner."

"Everything is better with sugar. If I could afford to eat something sweet like this, it meant I had extra money for once." She said the words lightly, but she did let her smile fade. "But drat, someone noticed."

"You come by every day to help me with medicine making, Sylvia. You let your cheer fade when you're concentrating on measurements."

"Well, measurements are important." Sylvia picked up a napkin and wiped her mouth. "It's nothing big, though. I'm really just moping about Lewyn."

"Is it because his recovery his slow?"

"Partly, but I know he's getting better. The spasms aren't as long, and they're not as frequent." She shrugged. "No, I'm mostly moping because of the simplest of reasons. I love him, but he doesn't love me back. Romantically, anyway. He loves Erinys. He won't admit it, but I can see it."
"Ah." I wasn't sure what else to say. "Are you okay?"

"I'm... I don't know." She smiled bitterly. "He's the first person to be kind to me. I want to stay with him. I want him to love me back. But I know I can't force it. And, I mean, Erinys is cool. She's nice. She took me flying yesterday, actually, and it was fun. She's fun. I like her lots. Hell, if I wasn't in love with Lewyn already, then I'd probably fall for her." She sighed gustily. "And he's happy with her. Mostly. There's some weird kingly, throny, whatever stuff going on, but you know, he's happy. His smile is brightest when she's around. And I'm glad for that. More than anything, I want him to smile and be happy, because he's kind and kindness should be rewarded." She groaned, dropping her head. "It's confusing."

"I think that's normal." I smiled sheepishly, though, feeling quite out of my depth. "I'm good at listening, but I am probably the worst person to go to for relationship advice. I had to get someone else to tell me I was in love with Chulainn."

"Really?" She looked up, surprised. "But you two are..."

"We make it work for us. But, the fact does remain that I needed my older brother to tell me, through a letter at that, that I was in love with Chulainn."

"That's ridiculous." She burst into giggles, and while part of me was miffed she was laughing at me, I did have to admit it was a relief to see her smile again. "I didn't think you could be so ridiculous."

"Oh, don't let anyone in this army hear that. You'll be regaled with all the ways they think I'm an idiot. They're just polite enough to not say it to my face."

"Nah, they just don't want the healer angry at them!" She giggled even more until she was breathless. "Ah, I needed that. Thanks, Alicia."

"I'm pleased to be entertaining."

"Not just that, though I did enjoy the laugh." She smiled warmly at me. "Thank you for listening, and thank you for letting me help you. I like making medicines. It's calming."

"Thank you for being willing to help. It frees me up." I smiled back and tapped my cheek. "You've crumbs here, by the way."

"Oh, seriously?" She rubbed at it, face going red. "All that serious talk, and I had cake crumbs on my face? Total mood kill."

"Alicia? Sylvia? Are you two still in here?" Azel poked his head into the room, looking strangely confused by something. "Hi, sorry to interrupt fun time," he continued. He sounded like he just couldn't process anything. "But we just got word that Madino is under siege from pirates, so we're having a meeting?"

"Pirates?" I repeated. I glanced at Sylvia, who shrugged in response. "You mean to tell me that, after everything we've gone through, we now have to deal with darn pirates?"

This was the absolutely ridiculous.

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Chapter End Notes
Author's note: Okay, full disclosure, while there is an official timeline for the backstory, I am going to play a little loose with it for my own (eventual) sanity. In canon, the Holy War of the backstory lasted sixteen years from the Miracle of Darna. Since I do plan on writing it (Gwyneth will be the POV char) and I don't want to try and write that long of a war, we're going with a much shorter timespan. As I said, for my eventual sanity. I'll be expanding the timeline for game-chapters 6-fina slightly as well, but that's just for pacing purposes. In-game-canon, those six chapters all happen in the space of a year, year and a half.

And now we go into the last part of Chapter 3. Pirates. Because every fire emblem needs pirates.

Next Chapter - Exile
Chapter 19) Exile

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 19) Exile

It's the strangest of things. We'd gone through hell. We were ambushed in the castle, where I nearly died and Deirde was kidnapped and Shanan was re-traumatized. We lost Eldigan in a heartbreaking fashion. We were nearly slaughtered by Travant and his dragon knights. We fought and killed Chagall. On a personal level, I had my oath tested, twice. Yet now after all of this, we're dealing with pirates. Some of us don't think it's something to take seriously, but we're all paranoid, remembering how unexpectedly horrible everything has gone. So, we pack up and ride for Madino, hoping that we're just jumping at shadows.

After all, if we weren't, then things were going to get horrifically worse, and I wasn't sure any of us could bear that weight.

It was almost hilarious, really. Despite our hopes, our fears long outstripped them, and all of us were next-to-convinced that we'd arrive in the middle of a siege, or ruins. So, there was something… almost anti-climatic when we arrived and everything seemed just fine. It was relieving, certainly, but anti-climatic.

"Sigurd!" Still, there was something cheering about how quickly Aideen raced out of the castle and tackled Sigurd with a hug. "Welcome!" she greeted, giving him her best smile. Sigurd was a little blinded by it, and the tackle-hug, and thus didn't respond. The rest of us dismounted and milled about, slowly relaxing as it became obvious that everything was okay. "Goodness, you haven't been sleeping, have you?" She took his face in her hands, and frowned worriedly. "And you've definitely lost weight."

"Hi to you too, Aideen," Sigurd finally replied. He closed his eyes and let her fuss. "So, everything is okay here? We heard about the ambush."

"Yes, everything is fine. We got advance warning, so we had a lovely plan. Is that why you were rushing here? I'm sorry, Sigurd. We should've sent you a message saying everything was okay."

"Yeah, well..." He opened his eyes and hugged her back. "I'm glad you're okay. I was more than a little worried that whoever attacked Agusty would come up to here."

"Nope, never did. We've been keeping an eye and ear out for any information." She hugged him again. "I'm so sorry, Sigurd. But we'll find Deirdre. I promise we will."

"Thanks, Aideen."

"So that's why she ran outside." King Jamke walked out then, flanked by Midir. "We were in the middle of a meeting, and then she looked out the window and ran," he teased. Aideen pulled away from Sigurd and stuck out her tongue childishy. "Welcome to Madino... looks like everyone. Was that safe to do?"

"Chagall is dead, and all his forces surrendered," Sigurd explained. He smiled warmly at them both. "Bit of a surprise to hear of an ambush after that."
"I imagine." King Jamke laughed, smiling in return. Midir bowed politely and began actually ushering everyone inside to rest. I lingered back, mostly to try and snag Aideen to ask about wounded. But she was busy greeting everyone, so I waited. "But it's all taken care of. I'm sorry we worried you."

"So Aideen said. Mind if I ask how?"

"Classic lure and ambush strategy. The courtyard is very well set up for that sort of thing, almost too much so for my comfort." King Jamke shrugged. "Between the advanced warning we had and that, they weren't hard. We are still cleaning a bit, though, so I can't invite you to the gardens or whatever."

"That's fine. I was just…" Sigurd sighed and hugged King Jamke. King Jamke stiffened, startled, but awkwardly returned it. "Sorry. Things have been weird."

"Yeah, we've heard." King Jamke pulled away, blushing and desperately trying to ignore that fact. "Well, I can't say things haven't been weird on our end either."

"Really?" Sigurd frowned. "You've mentioned 'advanced warning'. Does it have something to do with that?"

"Well…"

"Aideen?" Another person walked out, and I wasn't the only one who just stared. If not for the fact that I had literally just seen Aideen, wearing her normal white clothing, I would've asked why she changed to an orange. "Oh, hello," the woman whispered, eyes narrowed. Immediately, I hunted for differences, finding them fairly quickly once the initial shock passed. Her hair was much longer than Aideen's, partially tied back. Her shirt was sleeveless, showcasing long gloves and muscled arms. Her face was leaner, sterner. "Who are you people?"

"Perfectly timing," King Jamke sighed. He shrugged and gestured at Sigurd. "We told you we had a leader, right?"

"You did." Her eyes narrowed further, but then she frowned and got a quizzical look on her face. "A little boy with blue hair who taught me swords because bows were weak in close combat. You…"

"My name is Sigurd," Sigurd said slowly. He smiled softly, and a tear slipped down his face. "Hi, Brigid. I'm honestly surprised you remembered that. We were children, young children. You were five when I last saw you."

"I don't remember much," Brigid admitted. She reached up to touch the back of her shoulder, likely where her Holy mark was. "Yewfelle seems rather determined to make me remember as much as possible, though. I'm still reeling a bit over everything, truthfully."

"Makes sense." His smiled grew. "So, you were the 'advanced warning',."

"Partly. I was raised by these pirates, but the old leader, who raised me, died and… well, they wanted to just pillage. I stopped them, so they tried to kill me." She sighed gustily. "Then I ran into a priest of all people, along with a hurricane in human form."

"A… hurricane?"

"Aly, you're here!" And just like that, Tailtiu popped out of the castle and raced straight for me, nearly knocking over Brigid in the process. "Hi!" she chirped, wrapping her arms around mine and
tugging me inside. Brigid gave me a sympathetic look. "I already checked with Aideen and Father Claude and they said there's no one who needs your immediate attention, so let's have tea and talk, okay?"

"Be that as it may, Tailtiu." Claude appeared to rescue me. "I do need to speak with her, and with Sigurd," he explained. Tailtiu sulked. "I'm sorry, Tailtiu. But I do want her to hear this."

"Fiiiine…" She grumbled a bit before giving me a hug and, surprisingly, a kiss on the cheek. "Tea later, okay!" She skipped off and actually jumped onto Azel's back, making him yelp and Lex laugh.

"I hope she can hold onto that cheer." Claude smiled at me. "I'm pleased to see you've recovered. If you can follow me inside?"

Quickly yet quietly, Claude led the way to what likely was the 'receiving room'. Apparently, he'd given the others the same instructions, as Sigurd, Aideen, Brigid, King Jamke, Ayra, Lewyn, and Quan soon joined us. "My apologies for calling you all here," Claude began. He held himself calmly, but I recognized it quickly as a healer's mask. I made sure my own was 'on'. "I wanted to talk to you all, first, about what I saw at Blaggi Tower."

"I remember you telling me you were on your way," I murmured. I clasped my hands in front of me, and did my best to project serene confidence. "So, what is it that you learned? I assume little good, give the subject matter."

"No, it's little good indeed." Claude looked everyone in the eyes, and everyone appropriately stiffened. "Lord Langbalt and Lord Reptor conspired together and plotted against Lord Byron, Lord Ring, and Prince Kurth." His gaze lingered on Aideen and Brigid. Brigid silently glared back; Aideen paled. "Lord Ring, unfortunately, did not survive the initial assault. He fought valiantly, but Lord Andrei shot him as a traitor."

"N-no…" Aideen whimpered. She staggered back, like the words had physically slapped her, and Sigurd caught her before she collapsed. "No, he wouldn't. They haven't gotten along, certainly, but he promised he'd try, and he promised we'd all have a dinner together. He…"

"I do not know if he's part of the conspiracy or simply shown enough falsified evidence. But that is what I was shown."

"W-what of Byron?" Aideen's voice cracked and she began crying. Sigurd hugged her and Brigid awkwardly tried to wipe away the tears. "What of…?"

"He lives, barely. He holds Tyrfing and the Book of Naga, entrusted to him by Prince Kurth in his last moments." Claude closed his eyes. I knew it was to gather his thoughts and calm. "Prince Kurth's final words… I did not hear all of them, but I know he begged Byron to return to his father and let the truth be known."

"Then, let me ask the obvious question," Ayra murmured. She held herself very stiffly, but she moved to take over hugging Aideen from Sigurd. She knew the pain of losing a father, after all. "Who killed Prince Kurth?"

"I'm not certain if it was the axe wound across the back, or the lightning that hit him soon after," Claude replied with a touch of dryness. Lewyn closed his eyes and tilted his head like he was listening to something. "But it was either Langbalt or Reptor. That much is certain."

"Wind stirred more at the name 'Langbalt'," Lewyn commented. He opened his eyes again, eyes
"So, my best guess is the axe, but that makes sense. Those of Naga's blood are good at resisting magic, but like other magic users, don't wear a lot of armor. The Book of Naga is said to create a shield, but gods know how that works."

"The wind sees much."

"The wind sees everything, but few things hold the sylphs attention, and the sylphs are detached enough from humanity that they simply can't think 'oh, hey, this might be important to the silly humans.'" Lewyn shrugged. "I can ask them, but honestly, it's better suited for quick immediate things. Like 'why is the wind freaking out, oh hells, the castle that should have been safe is under attack'."

"Was there anything else?" King Jamke asked, turning the conversation back to the original subject. He frowned heavily, and there was very real worry in his eyes. "If not, I'll need to get word to my own people to prepare. I certainly don't regret coming to help, but I worry Grannvale will turn this against my own people."

"Oh, gods, that's a possibility…" Sigurd breathed. His whole demeanor fell, from his expression to his posture. "I'm so—"

"I literally just said I don't regret coming." King Jamke smiled reassuringly. "I just need to warn my people. So, was there anything else, Father Claude?"

"No, I did not see much else," Claude replied. His tone, however, reminded me of when I held back information to patient's loved ones, to tell the patient in private. "Mostly, I saw dark shadows behind all these events. Shadows that reminded me of the magic that inflicted Alicia twice."

"Then did they arrange for Deirdre's kidnapping to lure Sigurd out?" I asked softly. I clasped my hands in front of me, keeping my healer-calm. "That sounds plausible to me, at least. Sigurd is known for his loyalty."

"Could be, but then we have to wonder why these dark mages are working with Reptor and Langbalt," Quan pointed out. He wrapped a reassuring arm around Sigurd's shoulders. "Both are known for their hunts. Reptor is infamous for them."

"That's true. We've been away for so long that I have forgotten." I thought about the feeling I'd had earlier, of being a piece of a cracking board. "Maybe they're manipulating things?"

"But why?" Quan sighed heavily. "We're running on so little information. It might be best to just think of what to do with the current problem. Sigurd is falsely accused, and Prince Kurth's true killers are trying to hide their crime."

"We also have to tend to Agustria. We can't simply leave it as is."

"What a mess," Ayra murmured. Aideen was still crying silently on Ayra's shoulder. "For now, we should let everyone know."

"Maybe not everyone," Brigid suggested softly. She held herself firm as all eyes turned to her. "I mean; who here wants to tell Tailtiu that her dad is guilty of regicide or whatever the proper term is? And I think someone told me that you've a Dozel son here?"

"…Oh, gods, I have to tell Lex this." Ayra groaned. "This is a huge mess. Let's just sleep on it. We're all tired anyway."

"Here, I'll show you rooms. I think I can remember where Aideen had people set up. If not, we'll
have a lovely tour of the place." The others filed out, each in varying states of shock and worried. I lingered behind though, as did Claude.

His slight smile told me he'd expected me to remain. "Both you and I are far too skilled with a healer's mask to fool each other," he commented. I smiled slightly, but studied his expression. "Do you think the others saw how worried I am?"

"I doubt it," I reassured. "They haven't seen through mine yet, at least, and they've worked with me longer. But it also means I know the tone you used. What else did you see?"

"Nothing they need to know, in my opinion. One future among many possibilities." He shrugged, shaking his head. "I already had to give them news that broke their hearts and shook their spirits after a set of grueling battles. It would just be cruel to give them something else to worry about when there are so many different outcomes."

"I see." I didn't agree, but I couldn't force him to tell. Different healers had different opinions on what was best. "Did you see Arvis in your visions?"

"I saw him tending to King Azmur, and I saw him frowning worriedly over something." He smiled slightly. "I am uncertain if he is involved. It's possible he's pretending, to find the right opportunity to strike."

"That would be like him." I smiled back, relieved. "Thank you. It's enough to know that they've not hurt him."

"Of course." He gestured to the door. "Now, Tailtiu was correct in that no one requires your immediate attention in my opinion, so I think you can take the opportunity to rest, for once."

"A rare thing for this army." I laughed, amused. "But I'll take it. We'll talk later about the injured."

Claude and I parted then, with him going down one hall and me going down the other. A small sniffle caught my attention and I peered behind a nearby pillar. To my surprise, I found a silently sobbing Tailtiu, and her despairing eyes told me everything. She'd overheard. She overheard what her father had done. Despite Brigid's worries, Tailtiu already knew.

"...Why don't we have that tea now?" I suggested, gathering her up in a hug. She leaned into me, still crying. "Come on. All we can do right now is walk forward, so let's have some tea and sweets."

Ayra was right. This was such a complete mess.

With Claude's news weighing heavily on us all, we thought about returning to Grannvale immediately. But there were still pirates to deal with and there were still damages to the surrounding villages to be mended and healed. So, instead, we decided to focus on 'smaller things', things we could definitely accomplish to help us feel more in control of everything as our lives spiraled into madness. Still, there were many talks of just how to get a message out or how to arrange safe travels, since we had no idea who could be trusted. I didn't contribute much to them, though. I spent most of my time tending to the wounded, listening to grievances, and helping Tailtiu cheer up. Since the full details hadn't been revealed to everyone yet, only those in the room plus Lex and Ethlyn, she tried to hide that she also knew, but those that knew her knew something was off about the act. Azel in particular worried, and often took her out on walks to help her calm down.

However, even that fragile peace shattered in an instance. Erinys had flown a patrol, and found
Grannvale soldiers on the horizon demanding one thing: Sigurd's head.

"This is absolutely ridiculous!" Ethlyn snapped. Her eyes filled with frustrated tears as she voiced what all of us in the room were thinking. Well, Sigurd might not have. Sigurd had completely frozen up and had all but fallen into his chair. I stayed at his side, checking for signs of outright fainting. "They can't do that without a trial! How can they even think they can get away with this?!"

"It seems his harboring the last members of Isaach's royal family has made people question his loyalty," Erinys reported to the small little group in Sigurd's study. Ayra, Quan, Ethlyn, Sigurd, Erinys, and me had been called in. Others had been invited, but they opted to help people calm down instead. "So, he could have been judged guilty in his absence. It could also simply be that they plan on killing him before going to trial to hide their crimes."

"This is… argh!" Ethlyn threw up her hands, the threatened tears falling. "Let me guess! It's Langbalt and Reptor, isn't it? Leading them, I mean!"

"I don't know those people. But one leader wielded an axe that sparkled much like Gae Bolg and Mystletainn. The other held a tome that crackled with power, reminding me of Forseti."

"Yeah, that's them then. Helswath and Mjonir." Ethlyn rubbed at her face to try and get rid of the tears. But more simply joined them. "Ugh, I hate them! They've always had it out for Father and Sigurd! Gods, how are Lex and Taitiu related to those vile-?!"

"Now isn't the time to shout, Ethlyn," Quan cut in gently. He gently rubbed Sigurd's back, but Sigurd didn't react. He was in far too much shock. I was surprised he hadn't fainted, truthfully. "I understand, of course, but we should think of what to do. I am the prince of Leonster, and they can't get away with killing me easily. Maybe I could reason with them?"

"You could give me over to them as a sign of good faith," Ayra added. She flinched as everyone's immediate response was 'no way in all the heavens and hells!'. "It was just a suggestion? They're specifically using Sigurd's kindness against him, the same kindness that saved Shanan's life. I don't mind risking mine if it gives him a chance."

"We really can't guarantee they won't kill you on sight, Ayra. I have a minor shield due to my position and rank." Quan stepped away from Sigurd and crossed his arms. Ethlyn quickly took his place, hugging Sigurd, but Sigurd was still in too much shock to return it. She didn't mind, simply kissing his cheek and continuing to hold him. "My home would never believe Sigurd involved with my death, and my death would lead to… well, increased taxation on needed goods at the very least of things."

"Your people can't afford a second war."

"Neither can Grannvale. It's a gamble, but my odds would be better than most in the army."

"Sigurd," I whispered then, deciding that Sigurd simply shouldn't remain for the rest. He didn't react to me, but I half-expected that. He really was in total shock. "Sigurd, it's Alicia." I tilted his head up to face me and waited for his eyes to finally slowly focus on me. "Come on. Let's head outside." Sigurd blinked a few times and glanced to the others. Ethlyn smiled warmly at him and helped him out of the chair. "Let them work out a plan to protect you. You need fresh air and movement. Healer's orders." Slowly, I got Sigurd to move. Ethlyn almost followed, but she paused and simply gave Sigurd another great big hug before returning to the conversation. Erinys remained as well, reporting all the information she had again, to help them find some sort of escape route.
Once he was out of the chair, it was simple to usher Sigurd out onto the battlements, where the crisp wind could help him ground himself back in reality. I caught sight of Lewyn lounging on the walls and worried, but Lewyn winked as soon as he caught sight of eyes and carefully hid himself from Sigurd's sight. I had no idea just why he was out here, but I was grateful he knew to keep quiet. Sigurd needed it.

"What have I been fighting for?" Sigurd whispered after a long moment of simply staring blankly to the horizon. He leaned against the walls and peered over. "Long drop."

"It is, so I do hope you don't accidentally fall," I replied. I glanced over as well, doing some mental calculations. "A fall from here wouldn't kill you immediately, and I'd have to get my pretty dress quite bloody."

"You never care about blood."

"I care about ruining a dress with your blood, Sigurd." I rested a hand on his arm, and smiled sadly. "As for what you've bee fighting for… well, you've fought for your friends and country. The Verdane campaign was because Aideen got kidnapped, and King Jamke's brothers would not let Grannvale be. The first Agustrian campaign was because Noldion was attacked, and the southern lords would not stop fighting. This one we just finished up was because they attacked us."

"And yet, here I am, on the verge of being executed as a traitor for a false crime."

"Yes, I'm surprised King Azmur would let them do this without Claude's return. My best guess is that he's given up from grief." King Azmur was well known for doting on his son and, politically speaking, this was an absolute nightmare. Unless Prince Kurth had a secret child somewhere, the royal line would die with him. We had a succession crisis on our hands, and no doubt people were exploiting that. "Reptor and Langbalt must be taking advantage of that grief, enough that even Arvis couldn't stop them." But I knew he must've tried. Arvis adored Sigurd, and Azel and I were here. I knew he must've tried. "But that is neither here nor there."

"Yes, what's here and now is that I'm in quite a bit of trouble." He laughed mirthlessly. "I think you warned me, once, that my kindness would get me in trouble."

"I did. And I believe your response was that you'd rather risk death than kill a little boy." I had to fight my own urge to laugh. That conversation felt so long ago, not just a mere two years ago. "I replied that life wasn't very fair, and you demanded why it shouldn't be, why you shouldn't make it fair."

"I think I'm getting a first hand look on why."

"Now, now, what did I say about you losing your optimism?" I desperately wished Deirdre were here. She'd have him laughing by now, easily. "You need to look forward. Chin up."

"Chin up, huh?" He smiled wryly and pointedly looked up. Then he frowned at something. "I thought Erinys was inside."

"She is, though it's possible she left for another patrol. Why?"

"There's a pegasus knight in the sky."

"Pardon?" I jerked my head up, startled, and I gasped when I realized he was right. My eyes widened when I realized something else. "That's… not Erinys. Erinys wears different armor."

"Then who is-"
"That's Annand!" Lewyn appeared behind us. Sigurd yelped, but I kept my calm and simply turned my attention to Lewyn. "She's the commander of Silesse's pegasus knights, and my mother's right hand," he explained. "I'll signal her down, if…"

"Yes, go ahead," Sigurd replied. He pressed a hand to his chest, groaning. "Also, thank you for the heart attack."

"You're oblivious to your surroundings." Lewyn whistled sharply and waved. The pegasus knight above waved back and began a long, arcing descent. "She's doing that to not kick as much wind and feathers into our faces."

"That's kind of her." Sigurd smiled slightly, watching her descent. "I wonder if she's here to make sure you and Erinys can get out of here safely."

"If I wanted to just save my own skin, I could've left with Erinys already. However, this is such bullshit that I'm having to convince the sylphs that, no, unleashing a tornado isn't a viable option, and they're normally incredibly peaceful." Lewyn gave Sigurd the sternest look I'd ever seen him wear. "Don't be so quick to believe your friends will leave you."

"That's… I'm sorry. That's not what I meant to imply."

"Though I imagine given the sudden kidnapping of Deirdre and Eldigan's equally sudden death, you might be falsely thinking that it's safer for your friends to be away," I murmured. Sigurd's slight wince hinted the thought had crossed his mind. "In which case, I will remind you that the healer's recommendation for dealing with this spiel of self-pity will be a sharp blow to the head. Sadly, I do not have convenient branches to snap off this time, but I'm sure I can find something else to get through your hard skull."

"That's…" Sigurd began, frowning in confusion. But then he remembered and laughed instead. "Right, right. You said that last time I was moping."

"I did. You're not yourself if you're not looking forward."

"You also told me that before, and not that long ago."

"Clearly, you needed the reminder already."

"Ah, it's heartwarming watching you bicker," Lewyn teased. He smiled warmly and nodded up to the skies. "She's about to land. Might want to stand back a bit."

We did as he asked, and soon, the pegasus did land quietly on the battlements, with barely any wind. The rider dismounted quickly and bowed to us, and at first, I was startled by her resemblance to Erinys. Then I remembered Erinys told me her sister was named 'Annand' and realized this was her. She was shorter than Erinys, and she held herself with a confidence Erinys was still growing into.

But her smile was the same. It lit up her whole face as she straightened. "Good, I made it," she murmured. "I worried I wouldn't when… well, that doesn't matter. Prince Lewyn, it pleases me to see you in good health."

"Good to see you too, Annand, and I've no doubt you'll give me a lecture when things aren't serious," Lewyn retorted. He smiled, though. "Annand, this is Alicia, the Chief Healer for the army, and Lord Sigurd, our illustrious leader who has gotten himself in a spot of trouble. Please tell me this is what I think it is."
"Possibly." Annand let her smile fade to bow again. "Lord Sigurd, I bear a message from my queen. Will you seek sanctuary in Silesse?"

"Will I… what?" Sigurd repeated, staring. I had to default to my healer-calm to keep my own surprise from showing. Lewyn simply grinned, smug. "Queen Rahna is…"

"Queen Rahna heard of the accusations and she thinks they are absurd. You have always had a good reputation and have treated Prince Lewyn with such kindness according to Erinys's letters." Annand lifted her head and smiled encouragingly. "We have ships ready and waiting to take you and yours to our home, Silesse. My queen is offering you sanctuary until your name is cleared. That's her message."

"Your queen has heard…?"

"Yes, a message was sent to her weeks ago, detailing the accusations against her. I understand they were sent prior to Father Claude of Edda's departure and were meant to simply be a 'warning' for her, but she rightfully called it nonsense. Knowing the political situation, she ordered our ships to head south, just in case." Annand's smile warmed. "They wait only for my order, Lord Sigurd. We can have you and yours away by sundown."

"You should take it up," Lewyn encouraged, resting a hand on Sigurd's shoulder. It took a few blinks for Sigurd to turn his attention to him. "It'll be winter soon, meaning Grannvale can't follow. Silesse is isolated once the snows hits, and Silesse has always been a neutral country. We can recover there."

"But…" Sigurd tried to protest. He couldn't think of the words, though. "I…"

"Truthfully, I was wondering if I should offer, but the problem was getting you there. But Mother thinks of everything, as always." Lewyn smiled warmly. "It's a good answer to our problem."

"It would also be a good place for Seliph," I added helpfully. I made sure my own smile was gentle. "It's very peaceful according to Erinys. There are tensions, certainly, but nothing overt yet. He's been living in a war camp for the past few weeks, so it'll be a nice change of pace."

"That's mean," Sigurd complained. I knew it was only because he had to focus on something. "Using my son against me."

"Then let it be the healer's recommendation again. We do need a quieter place to recover from everything. It'll be good for Lachesis, for instance."

"Fine, fine, I give." Sigurd sighed, but he gave Annand a thankful look. "We'll accept Queen Rahna's most gracious offer. Thank you dearly for it."

It took a lot of rapid, almost frantic, juggling to get everything and everyone we could onto the ships. Too many times we had to triple check if we'd left something important behind, and most of the time, we had. But as the sun began to set on the horizon, we were sailing away from Agustria, long before the soldiers arrived. By the time it set entirely, Agustria had faded in the distance and we were safe.

"It's so tiny," Sigurd whispered. The wind whipped about, pushing us northward, and both Sigurd and I tugged our cloaks a little closer. "Agustria, I mean."

"In an hour or so, we won't see it at all," I agreed. It felt a little… I had no idea. Our two campaigns in Agustria had been filled with pain, but there was a great deal of happiness hiding there too. For
instance, Seliph had been born there. Chulainn and I started our relationship there. In fact, many of us had started our relationships there. Ares and Grahnye still lived there. There were such lovely memories I'd forever hold dear. "I really hope we didn't leave anything important behind."

"At this point, there's no getting it back." Sigurd nodded to my bracelet, to change the subject. "That's pretty, by the way. I didn't notice it before."

"It's a recent thing." I looked to the bracelet Travant had given to me. No one had mentioned anything about it. Even Chulainn had simply called it 'pretty'. It made it a lot easier on me. "A patient gave it to me in thanks."

"I see." Sigurd leaned against the railing, watching the moonlight dance on the waves. "So, quick question."

"Is it why you and I are up above instead of below deck like the others? That's a good question, but perhaps its because it can get a bit cramped below." I smiled slightly. "I feel horrible for the horses, by the way."

"They have roomy stalls on this boat! It's made to house pegasi, after all, with the wings!" He grinned, but shook his head. "No, it's not that. Besides, we're up here because I wanted to mope and you're not letting me."

"Deirdre would be saddened if I let you, not to mention Quan and Ethlyn and literally everyone." I shrugged, not feeling the least bit guilty. "So, what is your question?"

"I'm grateful, but why did you, Azel, Lex, and Tailtiu stay with us? I know why everyone else did, but…"

"Ah, yes, I imagine that'll be the question everyone will ask once the shock of having to escape wears off." I looked up at the sparkling stars, like they had all the answers for why this was all happening. They didn't, of course, but they were still pretty. "Well, Lex didn't place high hopes on his survival. He and his father haven't gotten along in years, after all. Azel thought Langbalt would've let him live, since he apparently favors Lex over his elder son, but even Azel agreed that he doubted he'd let Ayra and Shanan live. Then there is also how Lex simply didn't want to live his love and his friends."

"That makes sense. Tailtiu?"

"Well, I know you tried, but Tailtiu did actually overhear what happened."

"Damn it. I knew her cheer was off."

"Yes, so she's in shock over it. She's scared her father used her rebelliousness to hurt you all, but she's also scared of having it confirmed via confronting him. When you add in the reason why she snuck off to start with…"

"You mean there was a reason besides following, sorry, guarding Claude?"

"Yes." I returned my attention to him, and his cheer faded when he saw how serious I was. "Apparently, her brother married recently. It seems to be a happy marriage, but she feels uncomfortable around her sister-in-law, Hilda. So did Ethnia, but Ethnia recently married and thus moved out. So, Tailtiu felt trapped in her own home, and seized the first chance to escape that she could."

"I see." Sigurd sighed. "Ah, I feel so sorry for her. Everything is messed up and she got caught up
"I'd argue that applies to all of us, Sigurd." But I did agree. It was painful watching her try to be cheerful. "As for Azel and me, we stayed for the same reason. We're very certain that if they caught us, we'd either be killed to ensure Arvis turned against you or we'd be used as hostages for the same purpose. Neither of us wants that." I smiled warmly at him, to hide my own fear. I was desperately afraid of being used against anyone I cared about, but especially Arvis. "I'm certain Arvis is doing what he can to help you. I don't want that support to fade away."

"I see." He smiled again and rested a hand on my shoulder. "Thanks, Alicia. All this support makes me feel better about everything. I feel like we can make it through."

"I'm sure, but it'll likely take a while." I might've said more, but a wave of nausea hit me, and I groaned, covering my mouth. "Ugh…"

"Seasick already?" Sigurd grinned, and it widened when I glowered. "Sorry, but for some reason, I find it hilarious."

"I've never been on a boat before. Actually, this is the first time I've gotten a good look at the ocean in general."

"Well, I'm no healer, but I think the recommendation here is to go rest." He bounced a little, incredibly smug about the temporary role reversal. I would've been far madder if he hadn't been just so darn cheerful. "Let me help you down, and I'll get Claude for you."

"I don't think I need Claude for simple seasickness." I didn't ask why he didn't, say, get Aideen or Ethlyn. Aideen was still reeling from learning her little brother killed her father, and Ethlyn was helping keep everyone's spirits up. "I really don't."

"And just what would you be doing if you weren't the patient?" He waited, still perfectly smug, and I groaned again because I knew he was right. "Come on, Alicia. Let me help you."

"Fine, you may, as soon as you stop being smug!"

Despite the teasing, Sigurd was very careful in helping me down, checking in case I got dizzy or fatigues, since those symptoms also accompanied seasickness sometimes. He got me settled quickly in my room, perched on the bed, and went to get Claude. I debated sticking around or not, but another wave of nausea did make me decide to be a good patient and wait. Claude arrived not long after, a slight smile hinting he knew I'd debated just leaving, and proceeded to give me a very quick check up. However, his diagnosis for my nausea was surprising, to say the least.

"I'm pregnant?" I repeated, startled. Of all the things I thought it might be, that hadn't been on my list. "Really?"

"Well, we'll have to keep an eye on things to be certain, since I think you're only a couple weeks in, at most," Claude answered. He set his staff down and nodded. "But, yes, that's my best guess for now, given what else I sensed."

"That's odd. Chulainn and I…" I trailed off, thinking. It took only a moment to remember that the past couple of times we'd had sex, neither of us had actually taken the normal contraceptives. "Oops."

"Ah, yes, getting so caught up in the moment that you forgot important things. A fairly typical cause for unexpected pregnancy." Claude smiled sympathetically. "Thus, I do need to ask. Do you want to keep the child?"
"Mmm…" I closed my eyes to think about it. I hadn't planned on this, certainly. Chulainn and I hadn't talked about children. Hell, we hadn't even talked marriage and, typically, that was the first thing that came up. But it did feel 'right' that we kept going out of order, and I couldn't deny how happy I was at the news. It was inconvenient, certainly, but I was happy. "No, I think I'll keep it." I opened my eyes and smiled. "I'm afraid I'll be giving you more work."

"The best of work, really." His smile warmed. "In that case, we'll have to change your diet a bit. You know the drill, of course."

"Do I ever." I grimaced. "Oh, hell, I won't be able to help in the infirmary as much."

"Well, not once you're further into the pregnancy. But we're going to a relatively peaceful area, you can still supervise, and I am here to assist as well." He laughed warmly, and I smiled back. "Ah, but first… I do think I should let Chulainn know, yes? Should we keep it secret from the others?"

"With this group, things don't stay secret long." I shrugged. "Just keep them from stampeding me."

"I'll be certain to tell… hmm… Sigurd and Azel. After that, I'll let the gossip handle the rest."

"So, the whole ship will know by the morning, and somehow, the rest of the ships will know by tomorrow night."

Claude laughed warmly and left me alone. I shifted so that I was sitting a little more securely on the bed, and pressed a hand to my stomach. It surprised me, really. I'd never thought about becoming a mother. I never thought about falling in love. I'd been alone in the village, respected but not loved, tolerated at best. This sort of thing never occurred to me. Now, here I was. It was a strange feeling, and sadness crept in as I thought of how Deirdre had these same thoughts. I wished she were here for this. She'd been excited at the thought, and I wished I could tell her. I wished I could hear her squeal in delight. I wished we could discuss names. I wished… I wished for a lot of things.

Still, all the sadness in the world couldn't keep me from smiling at the half-nervous, half-stunned Chulainn that walked inside and shut the door behind him. "So, if it's a girl, I already have a name," I informed him. "Deirdre suggested one and I'm keeping it. I told her she could help name my children, after all."

"Of course," he whispered. He smiled slightly, that boyish smile I loved so very dearly. "Whatever you want." He hesitated a brief moment before shyly, shyly, sitting down next to me and pulling me into his lap. "A baby, huh?"

"Yep. I'm pregnant. We're going to be parents."

"That's a terrifying thought." But his smile was still happy, telling me that he felt the same as I did. It was unexpected, but it was a happy bit of news. "Well, now Ayra's really going to push us marrying." He made a face and I laughed. "She's been on my back about it for the past couple of weeks."

"Has she? That's amusing." I leaned against him, and sighed. "However, I want to wait. I promised Deirdre that she'd be my Maid of Honor, you see, and that she'd help plan it. Plus, I'd want Arvis to be there, and you haven't even met him yet." I smiled up at him. "You don't mind, right?"

"Honestly, I don't see the point of weddings by this point in my life. Why do we need some ceremony to say 'I am yours and you are mine'?" He kissed me gently. "I'm just fine with that. Whatever wedding we have, it'll just be what you want."
"Honestly, if I thought we could get away with it, I'd just rather elope."

"That's a thought. Could we?"

"As I said, I don't think we'd get away with it, not with this group."

"True." He kissed me again, and tucked me against his chest. "I love you."

"I love you too."

We sat in happy silence for a while, before Azel knocked on the door and peeked inside, looking both panicked and excited. He chatted with us for a while, playfully telling Chulainn they needed to duel or something, and then he stepped to the side to let Sigurd congratulate me, and to organize the stream of well-wishers so that I really wasn't stampeded.

I couldn't help but smile at it all, though. Here we were in exile, yet strangely, I was incredibly happy. I was still with my friends. I had an unexpected surprise, but one I found happiness with. Honestly the only way things could be better was… well, Sigurd to have his name cleared, for Arvis to celebrate with me, and for Deirdre to return.

It was almost perfect, all things considered. I was content with that.

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**Notes on Lewyn:**

The 20 year old Prince of Silesse, who ran away to try and avoid a civil war due to his uncles' opposing his inheritance. He feels horrible guilt over this, but at the same time, is terrified over the deaths said civil war might've brought.

Definitely one of the more powerful units, having a full mastery of wind magic thanks to his Major Sety blood. He's incredibly fast, sometimes able to fire off two spells in the time it normally takes to cast one.

His Holy Mark wraps entirely up his left leg, from his ankle to his hip.

Perhaps the one person in the world whose kindness rivals Sigurd's. This kindness attracts many people's eyes, specifically Sylvia's, but he has strong feelings for Erinys that he tries to hide for whatever reason. He does very poorly at it, but Erinys is oblivious.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Author's Note: And thus we end Game-Chapter 3, with Sigurd going into exile because politics. Considering the timing of things, to give fair warning, expect a lot of pregnancies and babies to start showing up during these next few interludes for the established couples. Also have the last recruits of the first generation, Brigid, Claude, and Taïtiti. Taïtiti learning about what all is going on via eavesdropping is from the Oosawa manga. Claude's telling of events is based off his optional with Sigurd, though the fact that he saw more than what he said comes from his lover-talk with Aideen in Chapter 5. Yewfelle 'forcing' Brigid to remember is based off her talk with Aideen, as is the fact that she was five years old when she was kidnapped by pirates. Langbalt favoring Lex over his elder son, Danann, comes from the Oosawa manga.
Next Chapter – Interlude, Sanctuary
Interlude – Sanctuary

Everything has changed. Deirdre is missing, Eldigan is dead, and here we are, off in exile in Silesse because Gramval has declared Sigurd a traitor, conspirator to Prince Kurth's murder. By the luck of everything, though, Queen Rahna has offered us sanctuary and welcomes us with open arms. We have an entire castle to ourselves even, and she makes sure we have all we need, including tailors to make winter clothing. It's cold here, after all, and all of our wardrobes were designed for Agustria's much milder weather.

Our new home is one I never expected to visit. Silesse, the country of winds and snows, was founded by the crusader Sety one hundred years ago. Between the weather, their mastery of wind magic, and their taming of the native pegasus, Silesse has actually maintained neutrality for its entire history. In fact, the first major conflict is its own civil war, brewing in the shadows. Queen Rahna worries we'll be dragged into it, but we reassure her that we'll be fine if that does happen. We're no strangers to being dragged into things, and Lewyn is one of ours.

I just hope Lewyn's uncles have the tact to wait until after all the babies are born. The last thing any of us needs is a pregnant woman stressing over battles.

The gardens of the castle were absolutely beautiful, though it was surprising to already see a little snow on the ground since we were still in the autumn. I understood now why there had been such a rush to get the harvests in, and why the nearby villages had been so grateful that we pitched in. That all said, I wasn't actually thinking of any of that. Instead, I was laughing and laughing as I walked through said gardens with Ayra.

"I'm pleased you're so amused at my predicament," Ayra grumbled. She still linked her arm around mine, though, showing me she wasn't all that mad at me. "Gods damn it, Lex and I took the contraceptives. We even double-checked to make sure in the morning!"

"I did warn you that none were one hundred percent effective," I pointed out, desperately trying to muffle my laughter to be 'the healer'. I couldn't manage it, though. It was just so incredibly amusing to me. "I also warned you and Lex that your preferred ones weren't the most effective, but they were the easiest to take."

"You did, and we both acknowledged that and decided that the 'easier' was preferable." Ayra's face went red. "Then again, we... ah... gave it plenty of chances?"

"Rabbits, then?"

"Not that bad!" She scowled, and I was back to giggles. "Oh, whatever. Here we are, the pregnant two!"

"Yes, it seems that way. Though, Aideen might join our little 'group' before long."

"She and Midir were talking about having a quiet ceremony here with the army."
"She asked Claude and me if there were any medicines that help with fertility." I grinned and Ayra burst into laughter. It was louder than mine, and warmer. "There is, by the way, so I wouldn't be surprised if she announces a pregnancy soon."

"Of course, it's not like you and I needed that help." Ayra made a face, and I laughed, distinctly amused still. I wasn't sure why it was so funny to me, but it was. "Ah well. Despite all my griping, I am rather excited about becoming a mother. Nervous, but excited."

"That sums up my feelings as well." I shivered as a cold wind blew through and I leaned into Ayra for a little more warmth. The new clothes were lovely, but often, we underestimated just how cold things were. "It's so different from Jungby here. It doesn't get this cold until the new year."

"It does in Isaach." Ayra's eyes softened with nostalgic sadness. "Silesse might be famous for its snow and winters, but Issach is just as north. There's more open space in Issach, though, so perhaps that's why most don't associate us with snow. Silesse more or less weaponizes their weather."

"That could be it. I've noticed that we had to do a lot of climbing before we reached the cities, so maybe that plays a part too?"

"Oh, true." Ayra's smile faded for a frown and she narrowed her eyes. "I hear whispers."

"Really?" I strained to hear what she was talking about, but heard nothing but the wind. "Where?"

"This way." She pulled me down one path, moving quickly yet quietly. She made sure we kept to the shadows, and part of me wanted to tell her to go ahead without me. It was clear she expected danger, but I wasn't really one for a fight. But she kept a tight grip on my hand, so I did my best to keep up.

We rounded a corner before ducking back instantly, catching sight of figures. When we peered out to look, though, both of us nearly laughed when we realized that the figures were friends and we were very paranoid people. We only didn't because it was Azel and Tailtiu and both seemed to be in the middle of a conversation, an argument, in fact.

"Yeah, I guess I've been acting funny…" Tailtiu grumbled. She glared at Azel with tears in her eyes, posture rigid. "But what's wrong with that? It's not like everyone else isn't acting funny around me."

"That's just because you're the new one," Azel sighed. He was more relaxed, but he looked mostly exasperated. I wondered how long this conversation had been going on. "You'll notice that people are awkward around Brigid too. Or, well, you would, but you keep to yourself. Which, by the way, is so unlike you that I had Aideen asking if you were ill and needed medicine."

"I bet you enjoyed that."

"She's a nice lady, yes, and yes, my feelings for her were unrequited, which is fine." Azel shrugged, unbothered. Tailtiu squirmed, looking away. "They've cooled over the past couple of years, and I'm having fun helping her plan her wedding."

"W-well…"

"Anyway, is that the big issue? I mean; I can't fix what's up with your dad, but is that why you can't relax?"

"Look, it's not like with Lex. I actually do get along with my father." Tailtiu glared again. "But yes, I can't relax because everyone is weird around me and I don't know if my own father used me to
"Well, even if he did, that's not your fault." Azel said the words easily, and Tailtiu glared more.
"What? It's not. I know that a parent's crimes isn't the child's fault better than just about anyone. Everyone knows about my father." Azel's voice became very dry and he rolled his eyes. "Victor of Velthomer, the rapist. The womanizer. The drunk. The partier. Only good thing he ever gave me was my life and my siblings. But his crimes aren't my fault. They aren't Arvis's. They aren't Alicia's. They're his, and his alone. Just like your own dad's crimes are his and his alone."

"That's…"

"You're not the reason why we had to run. Your father's manipulations don't mean you're guilty by association. I know there's an emphasis on blood ties, particularly among those of Crusader descent, but no one in this army will judge you for it."

"Azel…" Tailtiu's anger faded, though the tears remained. "Oh, freaking hell, what happened to the Bratzel who couldn't string two words together?"

"He went to war, and grew up, but seriously, you're going with that old insult?" Azel glowered, but Tailtiu smiled, relaxing finally. "I'm trying to cheer you up, you know! It's unnatural, not seeing you running about with more energy than a storm."

"I know." Tailtiu giggled, and Azel's own annoyance disappeared for a relieved smile. "And I do feel better. Do you really think that it's just the newness?"

"Yes, I'm certain. After all, it's not like you're not likable." Azel shrugged, glancing up thoughtfully. He missed Tailtiu's sudden faint blush. "Like I said, Brigid is the same. You should see her when she's around… well, anyone. There's a reason she frequently hides at the archery range, practicing her shooting with Jamke."

"Claude's not. Uncomfortable, I mean."

"Claude has a pretty easy role to fall into, though. He's a healer, a healer-healer like Alicia, and he joined right when Alicia has to work less because of her pregnancy. If nothing else, you know to be polite to the one who is helping you feel better." Azel grinned. "Even then, there's awkwardness because everyone expects Alicia there instead. I promise; I help out there so that Alicia doesn't have to worry." He snapped his fingers suddenly, gasping. "Oh, shoot, I needed to run an errand for her!"

"Here, I'll come with and help. As thanks for cheering me up." Tailtiu grinned, snatched his hand, and dragged him off. "Come on; come on!"

"H-hey! You don't even know what the errand is!" Azel continued protesting, but Tailtiu continued dragging him down the path, and before long, the echoes of their 'arguing' faded. Only then did Ayra and I step out from behind the corner and exchanged an amused look.

"We should set them up," Ayra declared, grinning. I grinned back, since it had been what I'd been thinking too. "It'll be fun."

"We should let Lex lead that particular 'operation', since he's their childhood friend," I suggested. I linked my arm around hers again and started down a path. "It'll be more fun if we get more people involved, yes?"

"Absolutely." Ayra laughed. "You know; maybe coming here was a blessing in disguise. We needed the break after Agustria."
"That we do." Silesse's tranquility was exactly what everyone needed, really. I just wish we had come here under better circumstances. "That we do.

"Ugh... this dizziness business is getting old," I groaned, facepalming. I should be grateful that I wasn't beset by the nausea that Aideen and Ayra suffered, but I couldn't even walk some days because of how lightheaded and dizzy I was. I'd even had to spend a night in my own infirmary because of it. "Ugh..."

"Here, snack on this," Quan suggested, passing me some sort of candied fruit. I nibbled on it, barely resisting the urge to sulk. "You probably overdid it again on your walk, though maybe we should see about loosening your dresses. Ethlyn felt better when we did that, back when she was pregnant with Altena."

"I'll consider just about anything at this point." I sighed, but did maintain enough grace to smile up at him as soon as the dizziness passed. "Thanks, by the way. I thought for certain I was going to fall on my face when I slipped on that ice."

"I'm glad I happened to be outside." Quan shrugged and leaned against the tree I was sitting under. It had a convenient bench for me to rest on. "Stay still for a while, just in case."

"Yes, I know." I finished the fruit and gave him a knowing look. "Besides, I know you didn't 'happen' to be outside and you didn't 'happen' to just have that fruit."

"Well..." Quan looked ready to protest before shrugging. "Meh, you're right. I was coming to check on you. Lightheadedness has been your most prominent symptom in these early months."

"You also fret."

"I also fret, yes." He made a face, and I laughed. "So... oh, the sky is darkening again."

"Is it?" I looked up as well and saw the storm clouds rolling in. "I suppose that means we'll get more snow." It would get even colder. I was wrapped up fairly well, but my breath fogged up in front of my face already. "Well, it looks pretty?"

"Once all the paths are cleared, at least." Quan frowned and glowered at the stone path. "Though, clearly we didn't do a good enough job since you slipped on a patch of ice. I'll need to triple check."

"You're worse than a mother-hen." I laughed, amused, but it faded as I remembered something I'd been meaning to ask him. "Quan, there's been something bothering me."

"Just one thing?"

"Well, just one thing involving you." I looked up at him curiously, and he turned slightly to better listen to me. "All your fretting reminded me. Why were you so dismissive of Finn's injuries?"

"From... oh, Noldion." He smiled sheepishly. "Well, partially pride and partially misinformation. From what I was told, I assumed he had a minor stomach injury, not a full on gut wound. So, between that, my knowledge of your skills, my knowledge of Finn, and, again, my own pride... yeah, big mess."

"No one informed you that I was desperately trying to piece together his internal organs?"

"Nope! And I hadn't been near enough to see him before he was whisked away to the infirmary."
Quan grinned, though, showing no hard feelings for any of it. "Finn's gotten stronger, but I clearly need to get him better armor if he's going to keep throwing himself into weapons to protect people."

"You could just tell him to not do that."

"I think it's a personality thing. Like Eldigan and Sigurd, Finn is a knight in the truest sense and so, I don't think he'd ever stop protecting with everything he has. Not and still be 'him'." His voice grew softer with each word, and he looked up at the sky, smiling sadly. "Ah, Eldigan would've laughed at that. I can even hear it on the wind."

"Perhaps that is his spirit laughing. I do know that he thought Finn was a good man."

"Perhaps." He closed his eyes briefly, and I knew it was to hold back tears. "What a mess we left in Agustria thanks to everything. I wish we could've had a better goodbye with Grahnye and Ares."

"What do you think Grannvale is doing to Agustria?"

"Probably taking over, truthfully. I hope Grahnye and Ares are safe with all that going on." His smile grew, but only sadder and a touch bitter. "Maybe they made it to Leonster. Grahnye is from there, you see. I'm sure Altena would adore seeing Ares again."

"True. They were so sad to part. Maybe they can play with their stuffed bears." I hoped Ares still had his, at least. But the thought of Altena, and Leonster, made me think of something else. "But Quan?"

"Hmm?"

"This probably isn't something I have a right to ask…"

"Slight, minor, insignificant reminder that you've saved our lives, a lot, and you support us, a lot." The sadness finally faded from his smile. "So?"

"Well..." I hesitated before deciding to go for it. "Quan, can you really afford to be here with us? You're the crown prince of Leonster, and it's been over two years since you've been there."

Honestly, it might've been closer to three at this point.

"Ah." Quan's smile faded entirely and he remained silent for a long while. The wind picked up, hinting to the coming storm, but I waited for him to gather his thoughts. "Honestly, no, I can't. I do need to head back. I needed to a while ago, but I couldn't leave Eldigan. But it's… complicated."

"You don't want to leave Sigurd."

"No, I don't." He looked to me, expression serious. "We lost Eldigan. It hurts. We lost Deirdre. It hurts. I hate hurting, but I hate my friends hurting even more. And that's not even going into Sigurd trying to deal with the Grannvale betraying him, and trying to raise his son, and leading the army, and desperately trying to somehow repay Silesse for the sanctuary."

"I'm sure Ethlyn agrees."

"She does. Which complicates things further." Quan sighed. "She doesn't want to leave Sigurd, but she wants to return to Leonster, to do her part as princess and future queen. Plus, there's Altena."

"It's been… oh, goodness…" I had to pause to think about it. "It's been a almost year since you've seen her?"
"She's walking now. Talking. We've missed a lot of firsts, and she barely remembers our faces."
Quan glanced down, grimacing. That hurt him more than he could ever say, and it pained me to see just what his dilemma was. It wasn't merely 'love versus duty'. It was also his family pulling him in different directions. It was conflicting loyalty, just like Eldigan, and I honestly was terrified it would kill him too. "Ethlyn also doesn't want to leave until you and Aideen have given birth. You'll already be down a healer, technically."

"We will in battle too."

"Lachesis can takeover Ethlyn's fighting duties, easily, so thankfully, that's not weighing on her. Much." Laughter caught both of our attentions and we looked up to see Finn and Lachesis were walking through the snow. It took a moment to remember that they'd been out on a walk too. Both looked incredibly happy, smiling at each other adoringly. "Gods, that's some timing."

"Is it?" I didn't catch his meaning at first, but then I did and I looked at him in… well, it wasn't quite 'horror', but it was too much for sheer 'worry'. "Wait, when you leave…"

"Finn would have to come with me, yes." Quan leaned more against the tree, closing his eyes. "He's my squire. By Leonster law, he can't stay here without me. Not and remain a knight." Quan opened his eyes and watched the oh-so-happy couple enjoying themselves. "I might be able to swing him back up after he's knighted, but honestly, Leonster will need his skill."

"I… I see." I watched them laugh and laugh, and almost felt like crying. "Oh, Lachesis…"

"Yeah." He closed his eyes again. "Yeah. When I leave, Lachesis will lose three people she's depending upon to recover from Eldigan's death. Including the person she loves. While I have no doubts about her strength, I do worry she's more fragile than she lets on."

"She is recovering nicely." Though I did have that worry too, but for a slightly different reason. It wouldn't just be friends and love leaving. It would be them leaving to do their duty, much like Eldigan. I worried the similarities would rip open those healing wounds. "That said; it'll be a while. The roads are too treacherous with the snows."

"And, like I said, Ethlyn really doesn't want to leave until after you and Aideen have safely given birth. So, hopefully by then, Lachesis will be steady enough, as will their relationship." He shook his head and offered me his arm. I took it gladly. "Let's get you inside for a checkup, shall we?"

"I maintain that you are a worse fusser than me, and I am a healer." I made my voice as teasing as possible, and he laughed before helping me walk inside. We passed Lachesis and Finn on the way, but they were in their own little world, so we pretended to not see them and just continued on.

I worried. But, strangely, I also had faith that they'd be okay. I wasn't sure why. Perhaps it was just... I didn't know.

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Queen Rahna didn't just give us sanctuary, a home, and everything we could possibly need to be comfortable here. She even sent messenger birds to Grannvale, petitioning King Azmur to reconsider Sigurd's supposed crime. She admitted that there might be no response, but she figured she'd at least try, and when she decided to try the indirect route of asking Arvis to look into things... well, she made sure Azel and I knew so that we could send our own little messages. Even better, though, is that Arvis was able to reply with messages to Azel, Sigurd, Queen Rahna, and myself.

'I really must find a way to thank Queen Rahna. When I heard you had left with Sigurd, I thought I
would not be able to speak with you until things were resolved. I apologize for jumps in topic during this letter as it's far too small to tell you everything I want.

I'm saddened you're caught up in all of this, Alicia, but it seems like you're safe and happy enough, all things considered. Words can't express how saddened I am by Eldigan's death. We were not close, but I did know him as a good man and it breaks my heart to think of everything Sigurd is going through. I can, however, reassure you that Grahnye and Ares are fine, though they have left Agustria for Leonster. They should be safe from all this... chaos.

But that is far too sad of a topic. I am not ashamed to admit my utter glee at hearing of your pregnancy, Alicia. I know you will be a wonderful mother (no, don't frown; I know you're worried, but I assure you, you will be amazing) and I can't deny being excited over (eventually) spoiling your child silly. Or children, rather. Your letter mentioned the possibility of twins, though Azel's didn't (yes, he told me too), so I'm guessing you haven't spread the word quite yet. I must admit, though, that I wish I could be there for you, though I am certain you are in the best of care (you are, yes?). Aida sends her well-wishes and prayers for you. Ah, and I am thankful you're waiting to get 'properly' married until I can see it. Please pass my gratitude to Chulainn as well. I really cannot wait to meet him.

Things have been a strange mix of 'quiet' and 'tense' here in Grannvale. Suspicion falls on many of us, and considering we know that someone did assassinate Prince Kurth, I have to guard King Azmur myself. Still, not everything is bad, save that I wish you and Azel were safe in Velthomer with me. But I've recently taken in a... that sounds off. One of my servants found a young woman collapsed not far from Velthomer's gardens and we brought her in for medical attention. Though there were no wounds, she has developed amnesia from whatever occurred. Thankfully, she had a few items on hand to help us piece together her name: Diadora. She's a quiet woman, but very kind. I think you'd adore her, Alicia. I hope you can meet with her soon.

Drat, I'm running out of paper, and I can't risk more lest I weigh down the messenger bird. I told this to Sigurd as well in my letter to him, but encourage him to wait in Silesse until things calm down. His loyalty is his greatest trait, but I believe his enemies are using that loyalty to trick Sigurd into riding straight for a trap. We'll figure things out and, if you can, do at least write after you give birth. To reassure me that nothing went wrong, and to let me know your child's (children's) names.

With all my love, Arvis'

I read through Arvis's letter many, many times in a little parlor room, away from the main activity of the castle. Azel was with me, reading his own letter at the table while I lounged by the window, but we were silent, too enthralled in our reading. It was incredibly reassuring to hear from him, and it was even better to see that despite everything, he was the same and he was in a good mood. I did frown in confusion, though, as I noticed that, despite Arvis's letter having a clear end, there was a second sheet of paper. The frown deepened when I didn't recognize the writing. But the name at the end read 'Diadora', and I put a few pieces together from there and began reading.

'Hi, I am sorry to bother. I asked on a whim if I could write a letter to you, and Arvis indulged me. I'm sure it must be odd getting a message from a complete stranger, but I couldn't help it. Arvis talks often of you and Azel. He tells me you are a bit of a secret, which I do not quite understand, but I suppose he is trying to protect you? Like a knight! A knight in... well, he doesn't wear armor. But the concept is the same? I'm not sure.

Ah, this is already a bit of a mess. I'm sorry. I'm nervous. But Arvis's stories about you resonated with me. Perhaps there was someone like you in my past, and it's an echo of a memory. Did Arvis
mention me in his letter? Goodness, I hope so, as otherwise this is even more awkward. But he found me and is taking care of me. He's very nice, though there's something sad about him. I try to make him smile as thanks for everything he's doing for me, especially since I've lost my memories, memories I knew were once important. I've even succeeded a few times, I am proud to declare!

Oh, I should just get to the point, especially since I'm running out of paper. Arvis is certain that you'll return to Grannvale one day, and I'll get to meet you then, but I wanted to get a jump on it? I know it's selfish, but I couldn't help it. If it's okay, and if you can, I'd enjoy reading letters from you. What's it like in Silesse, for instance? I heard you went there for safety, but I don't know anything about it, except that it's apparently cold. The servants were saying it was frozen all year round, but that seems so silly to me. Ah, sorry, went on a tangent. Anyway, if you'd like, please reply?

-Diadora

I read through that letter a couple of times too, torn between smiling and crying. This Diadora was certainly endearing, even just through the paper, but there was something about her writing and Arvis's brief description that reminded me of Deirdre. It reminded me of how desperately I missed her, especially since I knew she would've been rushing about helping me prep for the baby or babies. Claude noted that some signs hinted I might be carrying twins, but it was too early to tell. I hadn't told anyone save Chulainn and Arvis, but I would've told Deirdre. She would've laughed in delight and then fuss over me. She would've had me smiling in seconds, and tease me as I had teased her.

But she wasn't here. We still had no idea where she was, and with us in exile, it was going to be hard to look for her.

Still, Diadora had certainly taken a leap of faith to reach out to me, especially since she only knew me from stories. So, despite my sadness, I did promise myself that I would reply, as soon as Queen Rahna sent another message off towards Arvis. It wouldn't be fair, to both her and myself, to close myself off to potential friendship just because I was reminded of my missing best friend.

"Oh, you finished reading?" Azel asked. He smiled at me, looking as relieved as I'd felt after finishing reading Arvis's letter to me. "I'm so glad he understood. I was a bit afraid he'd be hurt."

"I think he is, but he is more relieved to hear that we are well," I replied. I made to stand up, to sit at the table with him, but a bit of lightheadedness told me that would be a bad idea. "Seems he's excited about being an uncle, though."

"He is! He and I are going to plot ways to spoil your kid rotten!" Azel's smile morphed to a mischievous grin and I rolled my eyes. "Oh, hey, did he mention Diadora in your letter?"

"He did." I carefully tucked Diadora's own letter away. I wanted to keep it to myself for now. "Why?"

"Well, he didn't say anything, but based on descriptors and how he wrote about her, I'm wondering if he fancies her!" Azel's grin widened and I looked through my own letter, curious. "What do you think?"

"Hmm…" I studied the words, noticing that there was little, but I did notice a key thing. He hoped I could meet with her, and he'd told her about me. "Well, she knows about me, so at the least, he trusts her. He hopes I can meet her, which is… odd. The only other ones he hoped I'd get to meet were you, Aida, and Cyas." If he had more room, perhaps he might've talked about her more. "I wouldn't get my hopes up, but I also wouldn't dismiss it outright." I smiled at the thought, though.
"Try not to tease him too much until we have something a little more certain."

"Yeah, probably a good idea." He made a face. "I wonder if we'll get to meet her before anything happens, though. I mean…"

"Well, Arvis still hasn't met Chulainn yet."

"He hasn't?" Azel's expression blanked. "Really?"

"Chulainn has only been to Grannvale once since we got together, Azel."

"Oh, right." We were quiet for a brief second before bursting into laughter. For some reason, there was just something absolutely hilarious about all of it.

"Hey, what's so funny?" Of course, the laughter summoned a concerned person, in this case, Tailtiu. "Did you get good news?" she asked, smiling softly. "Looks like it."

"We got some, yes," Azel confirmed. He quieted his laughing and smiled softly at her. "Hey, Queen Rahna said she'd let us send replies. I'm sure Arvis wouldn't mind passing on a message for you. It has to be a small thing, but…"

"I'll… think on it." Tailtiu smiled back, clapping her hands behind her back and bouncing on her toes. "I would like to check in on Ethnia. Maybe Bloom. I might not get along with his wife, but he is my big brother. He's always doted on me."

"Then maybe a little note to tell him you're okay."

"Maybe. We'll see." Tailtiu's smile grew and she darted behind me, as well as she could since I was on the windowseat still. "Aly! Aideen mentioned your back was hurting!"

"Just a little," I replied. I folded up the letters and tucked them to the side. "Why?"

"Here, I'll rub your shoulders for you." Tailtiu slipped behind me, and giggled, carefully massaging my shoulders. "Oh, hey! Did Azel tell you about the time Lex, him, and me accidentally adopted a wolf?"

"Coyote," Azel corrected. He scowled. "It was very dirty and we thought it was a dog, but it was a coyote, not a wolf."

"Regardless, I only heard a little about it," I answered. I couldn't help but smile. "Perhaps you two can tell me the full story?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, sure." Azel smiled again. "Now, it all started with Lex insisting we run through the woods…"

Eventually, Claude put his foot down on my working. I was too dizzy and too tired to really do much of anything safely in the infirmary and he firmly believed quite a bit of my lightheadedness was due to working too hard. So, he barred me from my own infirmary, citing that he and Sylvia could handle everything until after I had safely given birth. Aideen was similarly barred, and Ethlyn had made it her duty to ensure that Aideen and I didn't get close. When I'd protested, and insisted I could make medicine, I had Finn, Oifeye, Shanan, and Sylvia all point out that I'd taught them how, and could just take over. At least they didn't stop me from mending. Gods knew I'd go insane if they took even that from me.
"Lady Alicia?" A young girl from the village, one we hired to help us run the castle, waved at me as she ran up. "You got a letter!" she informed me brightly, handing it to me. "Here! There doesn't seem to be a reply expected."

"Is that so?" I asked, studying the envelope. I stilled when I noticed that it didn't actually have my name on it. It was addressed to 'the Lady Healer of Vala', very similar to how Travant's letter had been addressed. "I think it's from an old patient."

"Probably a thanks then!" She grinned, showing missing teeth. "Do you need anything?"

"No, I'm good. But thank you."

"K!" She ran off and I let myself look around. It was still cold, but spring was here, heralded by the thousands of snowdrops blooming here in the gardens where I rested and mended. Their arrival brought about lots of stories, because snowdrops apparently had very different meanings depending on where you lived.

In Silesse, for instance, snowdrops were a sign of hope and rebirth, that spring had won against winter to bless them. In Grannvale, snowdrops were symbols of pure love and lucky fortunes. Isaach gave them a sadder meaning, given in sympathy or consolation, a way of saying 'you are not alone'. As for Leonster… well, Quan and Finn refused, refused, to let anyone bring snowdrops into the castle, as they were omens of death and bad luck in Leonster. That had resulted in quite a few hilarious events, since it was just so… different.

Laughing at the memory, I shook my head and set aside my mending to open the envelope. Some sort of object slid around as I did, and when I turned the envelope upside down, two things dropped out. One was a crudely carved wooden dragon, and the other was a very beautiful necklace with a bronze square pendant. Embedded into the pendant was a gem I recognized instantly; after all, I wore a bracelet with it.

Frowning, I set both to the side and wiggled out the letter. It turned out to be two pieces of paper, and the outermost one was a child's drawing of a mountain landscape and 'dragons' flying through the sky. Under the smiling sun, because whoever drew this had a smiley face on the sun, were the words 'thank you for healing my daddy!'. The other letter, thankfully, had more of an explanation.

'Dear Lady Healer, since my king showed his usual grasp of tact and politeness and did not actually ask your name, I am certain this letter is unexpected and may cause some confusion. My name is Hannibal, a general of Thracia, Travant's childhood friend, and Arion's preferred babysitter. When my king returned, wounded, Arion was in tears and insisted on thanking you himself. He loves his father dearly, and eventually, I have up trying to point out how difficult that might be. Still, word has reached us that Lord Sigurd's army is in Silesse, so it at least is not as hard as I originally feared to get this to you.

Enclosed is a drawing Arion made, as well as a carving (he insisted; I swear he's improving). I added the necklace as both his thanks and mine. Travant told me he gave you a dragon's eye bracelet already, and this is, perhaps, very dangerous to do. To own a dragon's eye is to have their protection, and those who kill them are fated to fall. A bad thing, for a mercenary, where too often, it is killed or be killed. But from what I have heard, and from what I know you have done, I feel it is a disservice to not give you one myself. Travant is my king and friend, the only reason Thracia hasn't starved yet. The people would've lost their hope with him, and Arion would not have been allowed to simply be a child.

I am also very aware that there might be a day you regret your choice to stand by your oath. From what I understand, you are friends with Prince Quan of Leonster, as well as his wife, Princess
Ethlyn, and squire. There may come a day when Travant hurts, or even kills, one of them. But even knowing that possibility, you still healed him. Words cannot express how admirable that is, but giving you a second dragon's eye hopefully will convey enough. I also hope it, and Arion's thanks, might serve to soothe that potential sting. Regardless of what happens, you helped Thracia with your action, and you saved a little boy from becoming king far too young. I thank you for it, and always will.

-Hannibal'

I had to read through the letter a few times, just to process all of it, and when I did, I sighed and folded up the letters. Hannibal's words hit keenly on just why I knew I'd regret healing Travant one day. It was entirely possible he'd hurt my loved ones, my family, but at the same time, I couldn't have walked away. I had my oath and my job. It was kind of Hannibal to anticipate that, and send things to help with that eventual pain. I might've condemned Altena to losing a parent, but I did save another's. I might've condemned Leonster, but I did help Thracia. It was a choice with no good answer, but there was some good with it. He wanted to remind me of that, knowing that if the worst happened, I'd likely be overwhelmed by grief and guilt. It was a cold comfort, but a comfort nonetheless.

I picked up the necklace, studying it, and slipped it on after a moment, because there was no reason to refuse it. Then I unfolded the drawing and smiled at the simple message while fiddling with the carved dragon. Regardless of politics, this was a child thanking me for saving their parent. There was something absolutely, almost ridiculously, sincere about that. Perhaps that really would be enough.

A song called me from my thoughts and I looked around the gardens, hunting for the source. I found Lewyn not far away, playing the flute while lounging in a tree. I thought about calling out, but instead, I chose to just listen and return to my mending. It was a cheerful song, with a lot of fast notes, but there was something strangely sad about it at the same time. I couldn't place how or why, but it was.

Lewyn finished playing before long and brought the flute down. He sighed, looked around, and smiled when he saw me, climbing down and skipping over. "Well, goodness, if I saw you before playing, I would've come over here to serenade you," he teased. I rolled my eyes and gestured for him to sit next to me on the bench. He instead sat down on the ground at my feet. "Looks like you've been settled in for a while?"

"I've been forbidden to do anything but mend, including going on my walks," I pointed out, unable to keep my exasperation from creeping in. "So, here I am. Mending."

"I think making you rest is an important thing since you're… what? Six months in? Roughly?" Lewyn shrugged, grinning. "I'm afraid that I'll be on the side of 'against the workaholic healer' when it comes to matters with her own health. Same as most people."

"Grr…" I sulked and he laughed again. "What song was that, by the way?"

"The one I was playing?" Lewyn's cheer faded slightly. "It's called 'Hope on the Wind'. It's a song traditionally played with the coming of spring. You'll hear it a lot when the spring festivals get underway." He hesitated before looking down. "It was my father's favorite song. I grew up with him singing it randomly. Drove Mother up the way."

"I see." I thought about continuing my mending, but I decided against it, and set it to the side, carefully hiding the letters and carved dragon. "Lewyn, have you talked with your mother at all since you arrived?"
"A couple of times, mostly when she visits and I can't hide. It tends to end in an argument of some kind." He smiled bitterly, shaking his head. "Annand insists that she is happy I'm back, but I'm going purely on her word. Typically when I know she's coming, I dart to the villages and see how things have been." He shrugged. "In short, I run away. Again. Even though I know it's stupid."

"Clearly, it's a coping mechanism."

"A bad one." He groaned and facepalmed. "How do you stop running? How do you stay your ground? I don't get how Sigurd can do it."

"He does it because he's the type to look forward, which is a blessing and a curse. We're in this situation because he doesn't stop and see the shadows, but at the same time, he wouldn't be him if he did, and there are many civilians who would be dead if we hadn't intervened." I gently touched his cheek and tilted his face up. "You, however, are different. You know how petty people can be. You know how entitled they can get. You can see the shadows along the path, and see how they might snatch up innocents. That makes you hesitate, but it also means you've a better understanding of the consequences. Though, to be fair, I'm fairly certain no one saw 'rescuing a kidnapped childhood friend' would escalate into 'fleeing into exile because we were framed'."

"Saving a kidnapped friend?"

"Did no one tell you about the Verdane Campaign?" I smiled when he shook his head. "Really?"

"Well, I know some basic things, like that's where Sigurd met Deirdre, and their king was being manipulated by dark mages, and that's where the army picked up Ayra and Shanan, but no one told me how it started."

"I see." I fell silent, thinking almost nostalgically about all of it. It was three years ago, give or take. It was just three years ago, yet it felt like a lifetime away. "Someone should really write it all down. Everything about this is so insane."

"Why not you?"

"Who would read a healer's perspective of a war?"

"I would. You don't get stories like that. You get the soldiers, but not the healer who is putting them together." He grinned again. "You should totally write it down, and then I get more material for that song!"

"Ah, so there's an alternative motive! How political."

"Hey!" He pouted childishly and I snickered. "Anyway… oh, hey, Erinys. What the hell are you carrying?"

"Flowers?" Erinys walked up carefully and Lewyn jumped to his feet to help her with the massive amount of pale blue flowers she carried. A small trail behind her marked her path. "I was flying, and I found a good patch of these!" she explained excitedly. Then she paused and looked behind her. "Though I may have gone overboard?"

"Maybe a little?" Lewyn replied dryly. He smiled at the flowers, though. "Oh, iodrie."

"Yep!" She dumped most of the pile into Lewyn's arms, some tumbling down to the ground, and she quickly made a bouquet, tying it off with a beautiful grey ribbon. "There!" She presented it to me with a smile and I took it automatically. "In Silesse, we give these flowers to expecting mothers. They're a good luck charm! And I realized we hadn't given you, Ayra, or Aideen any, so I
"And apparently plan to start a flower shop with the rest!" Lewyn gave her a fondly exasperated look. "Well, whatever. Here, I'll carry the rest while we find Ayra and Aideen, and then we can use them to color up the halls. Normally it's snowdrops, but Quan might kill me if I try."

"Thanks, Lewyn!" Erinys smiled brightly, and I caught a little blush on her face when she leaned down to hug me. "It's okay if I steal him, right?"

"Of course," I reassured. A thought occurred to me, and I whispered in her ear. "You know; we're in Silesse and things are quiet. You should try to confess to him." Erinys went bright red, and Lewyn made a questioning noise. "That's my advice, for now."

"W-we'll see!" Erinys squeaked. She shook her head when Lewyn looked at her. "Oh, Alicia is just teasing me! Let's go!" She quickly walked away, and Lewyn gave me the same 'what the hell' look. I simply smiled and took back up my mending. "She's right. I was simply teasing. And, given earlier, I shall do the same with you." My smile widened. "I know you have quite a bit going on, but considering her obliviousness, you might want to start planning a confession sooner rather than later." Lewyn went an equally bright red and skipped off after Erinys with only a yelp. I laughed and laughed perfectly amused.

Spring was a fun season, really.

"Thank you so much for sending a midwife, Queen Rahna," I murmured, fussing over my little girl. The phrase sat strangely in my head, as strange as 'my little boy', but both were applicable down. "Having someone so experienced was a relief for all of us."

"I thought so," Queen Rahna replied, smiling warmly. As always, I was struck by her quiet beauty and dignity, and how her smile was exactly like Lewyn's. "Adelaide is more than willing to come back when Ayra and Aideen give birth, by the way."

"Thank you. It's appreciated." I looked up from fussing and smiled at her, and tried to not let my own discomfort show. "Really, everything you've down for us is…"

"In my opinion, it is equal to what you have done for my son, and Silesse has very strict rules when it comes to hospitality." Queen Rahna giggled and looked around the room Chulainn and I shared. It was wonderfully simple, with warm colored curtains and rugs to soften the stone, and a soft bed piled high with blankets and pillows. "I'm sorry that I cannot give you a castle with a proper nursery."

"The cradle fits very nicely here, and honestly, Chulainn and I prefer to have them near anyway." I looked down to my daughter and son, curled up asleep together. "Besides, there's an old room that no one uses that we've been thinking of converting to a playroom anyway for Seliph."

"He'll be a year old soon, won't he? I must think of a present."

"You give so many things!" I had to laugh, though, and wonder if this is how everyone felt when talking to me whenever I deflected their gratitude. "But yes, he'll be a year old soon." It took a lot of effort to keep up my cheer. I knew Deirdre would've been super excited about her son turning a year old.

"Will you require a wet nurse? I know you had one for Seliph, but he's been weaned?"
"He's preferring solid foods now, yes." I shook my head, though, quietly refusing the offer of a wetnurse. "For the moment, I'll be nursing them." I thought of Deirdre shortly after she'd given birth to Seliph, and how she insisted on nursing him, and my heart panged. "Once Ayra and Aideen give birth, though, I might ask them to wet nurse them, since I really do need to get back to work." The sooner I learned how to balance being a mother and a healer, the better for all of us. I was the Chief Healer, and I didn't want to leave everything to Claude and Sylvia, no matter how well they worked together.

"Already thinking of work?" Queen Rahna laughed again, smiling softly. I did wish she wouldn't just linger in the doorway and at least sit, but she'd refused, simply staying there, not quite inside and not quite outside. It didn't help with my discomfort. "You're just as Erinys described."

"Erinys sent a lot of letter, huh?"

"Of course, since it was the only way I heard anything about my son." Her smile dropped for an annoyed, angry look. "No letters at all from him, for so long…"

"He's still searching for his answer, I think."

"Mmm… yes, I know." Her anger faded for melancholy, and I had a feeling that most of her 'anger' was born from that sorrow and worry. "My husband's death… it hurt Lewyn deeply. They were very close. Then he had everything thrown on him. The throne, the civil war… in retrospect, I really should've watched him more closely. I should be grateful he only ran away."

"It still hurts, though."

"Oh, yes. He's my only son, my pride, and when he ran, I lost both him and my husband. I had no idea if he lived or not until we caught a brief rumor from a merchant who talked of a master bard who could hear the wind."

"Oh, dear, are you complaining about Lewyn again, my queen?" Annand poked her head in and, unlike Queen Rahna, she skipped over to me and gave me a quick hug before peering in the cradle. "Aw, they're so cute~!" Annand cooed, poking their squishy cheeks. "So, a blonde and a redhead. Do you know the eye color yet?"

"Right now, they've both a light blue, but they could darken. Seliph's turned from a light blue to a darker one these past few months," I replied, amused at how she continued cooing over them. "So, we'll see what happens."

"Seems like they've a good chance of them staying blue, considering Chulainn, but hey, maybe you'll have one with green eyes like yours!" Annand grinned, and I laughed. "Anyway, Queen Rahna, I was coming to get you to return, but if you talked only of serious things instead of just congratulating Alicia for making it through the birthing and cuddling with the cuties, then maybe I should pretend to still be looking for you?"

"No, no, I have to return to my own work," Queen Rahna laughed. She smiled warmly at me. "Unless you need anything else, Alicia? Any health issues this past week?"

"No, I've been recovering very well," I reassured. Though there had been a couple of worries a few days ago, since I'd developed an infection from everything. Thankfully, we caught it quickly enough that I'd have no long-term effects save for a slightly longer recovery. "Now, we're panicking over Ayra. She's likely going to be next to give birth."

"She's expecting twins as well, yes?"
"She is." Ayra and I had a good laugh about that, and we blamed the Odo blood for it. "Thank you for your concern, though."

"Of course." Her smile grew. "Let me know if you need anything."

"We will." I waved as she left with Annand, and sighed as soon as I was certain she was out of earshot. I adored and respected Queen Rahna for everything she'd done for us, but there was this... presence about her that made me uncomfortable. It might've simply be how mothering she could be, since I'd heard Sigurd and Ethlyn comment on that trait. I never knew my mother, because she had abandoned me. It was one thing to be fussied over by friends, family, but by a 'mother'... it made my skin crawl. It also made me a bit worried that...

"I see a frown." Sigurd was suddenly in my vision and I yelped and stumbled back, nearly tripping over the darn cradle! He caught me though. "Wow, you were really out of it," he commented, helping me regain my balance. "Sorry. I knocked, but you didn't answer, so I came in to make sure you were okay, consider a few days ago."

"I've been cleared, twice, but I do appreciate the concern," I replied, doing my best to gather what little dignity I had. He smiled slightly, though, and I decided to not even bother. I'd only succeed if I put on my healer mask, and he'd see through it too easily in this sort of circumstance. "What brings you here? You missed Queen Rahna."

"I already gave my thanks and farewells. I was coming to check on you." He poked my cheek and I made a face. "But you were frowning, and it didn't look like a thinking frown. What's wrong?"

"It's nothing really." I glanced away, eyes darting for anything to look at but him. "I'm just a little-"

"It's funny how you switch from being a good liar and a bad depending on the circumstances." He grinned and I rolled my eyes. "So?"

"...I was thinking of my mother." I looked down to my children, fast asleep still. They looked so very peaceful, but I... "I was also worrying on whether or not I'd be a good mother for them."

"I think you told me, once, that your mother abandoned you?"

"Yes. As soon as my Holy Mark appeared, much earlier than typical for a minor, I was given away." I glanced down to my right arm and instinctively tugged my sleeve over my glove, making sure it was completely hidden, even though he already knew. "As soon as I became inconvenient, she left me."

"Could it have been to protect you?"

"Maybe, but it doesn't change what she did." It didn't change how I grew up only tolerated, surrounded by people who barely cared. It didn't change that until I met Arvis, I had never seen anyone smile at me, really smile. "So, I have no real basis to compare to, and then there is my job."

"Claude doesn't mind splitting." "I do appreciate that, but it's how I am. I am a healer, and I work to heal people." The past few months where I couldn't do anything in the infirmary or for the injured who trickled in nearly drove me mad. "I can't exactly carry them about an infirmary, but I can't just leave the work to someone else, especially now."

"So, basically, you're worried because your mother left you with some complexes and you're scared you'll give your own children similar complexes because of how devoted you are to your work?"
He smiled when I glowered. "I have the benefit of hearing it all at once, and not as it came."

"I suppose." It did still make me feel grouchy. "So, that's what I was frowning about."

"I see." He fell silent, and he closed his eyes. "Well, I won't say those aren't concerns to have or that they're silly. But at the same time, I don't think you have that much to worry about."

"You do?"

"Yes." He opened his eyes and smiled warmly. "At least, not based off of how you've acted with others in the army. Shanan, Ifeye, Finn, Seliph, Lachesis, Deirdre… your kindness and concern for others leads so many to look up to you, and rely on you."

"That's…” I felt a blush prickle over my face. "Um…"

"Of course, you don't notice because a lot of it is just how you are. They are traits that led you to become a healer in the first place, much like how Eldigan's own reliability and loyalty led to him being a knight. So, because of that, I think you'll be an excellent mother to them. And you'll have something your mother didn't."

"Yes?"

"Help." Sigurd took my hands and squeezed them reassuringly. "I don't know your mother's circumstances, but I'd bet she didn't have a lot of support. You do, though. As you work on balancing being a mother and a healer, we'll be there to support you, just as you and everyone have helped me with Seliph." He grinned. "This army is a strange mash of people, but we're also a pretty extensive family, or so I think. Family sticks together."

"That's… you…” I growled wordlessly and sulked. "How can you say such cheesy things with a straight face?"

"It's a gift~!" He laughed and let go of my hands to lean over the cradle. I knew he knew how grateful I actually was. "So, do you want to do a naming ceremony for them? Like we did for Seliph?"

"No, I really don't like fuss and neither does Chulainn." I smiled sadly, my annoyance and blush fading. "I'd suffer it for Deirdre, but honestly, only her."

"I figured, but I wanted to check." He reached down and gently took their hands. "Have you two decided on names yet, then? We'll just spread it quietly."

"We have. Chulainn left to tell Ayra, as he promised her she'd be among the first to learn to get her to stop badgering him about properly marrying me." I looked down at my twins and smiled. "The older one, my daughter, is named Caitriona. It's a name Deirdre picked out, the one time we talked about it."

"I see." He squeezed her hand and she mumbled, curling towards him in her sleep. "And your son?"

"Conall." I laughed as Conall actually woke up and blinked blearily at me, red hair falling into his eyes. "His name is Conall."

"Good names." He grinned at me, eyes sparkling. "I can't wait until Seliph meets them. He'll adore them."

"I'm sure he'll adore having more playmates!" Still, the mental image was a heartwarming one.
"Ah, but I'm still recovering. Can you…?"

"I'll start spreading the word." He reached over and hugged me. "You just rest. For once."

"Yes, yes." I made a face, and he laughed, led me to a nearby chair to sit down. "I'll be good."

He laughed and left, a definite skip to his step. I laughed and relaxed in the chair, closing my eyes to briefly rest. However, I apparently just fell fast asleep as when I woke, there was a blanket draped over me and night had clearly fallen. I blinked slowly, eyes trying to adjust to both being awake and the lack of light, and I smiled when I saw Chulainn by the window, holding one of our children. The faint bit of gold hair, the same shade as Chulainn's, showed it was Caitriona. She gurgled and reached up for his face and he smiled softly and kissed her forehead.

"Chulainn?" I called quietly. He looked up at me. "You could've woken me up, you know."

"You looked like you were having a good dream," he defended. He walked over and set Caitriona down in the cradle, next to the sleeping Conall. "Unlike our daughter. She woke up fussing."

"She might've been hungry." I held out my hands and he picked her up again to bring her over. "They need a lot of feedings during the first month, and they really shouldn't go more than four hours."

"Ah, I'm sorry." He picked up Conall too and Conall woke up with a whimper. "Sorry, little one, but your mother says you need to eat."

"After his sister, since she had the sense to wake up first." I laughed and looked up at them. "I love you."

"I love you too." He leaned down and kissed my forehead. "Anything I need to do?"

"Just keep Conall awake and busy while I feed Caitriona, okay?"

The coming days were going to be trying, for many reasons, but right now, I was happy. I was very, very happy.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: For the record, I am aware that we got more localized names, specifically of four crusaders (or three and a rename of one because I can't remember). For the time being, I will continue to use the names that I've been using, and not purposely switch (though, I might accidentally, since I do double-check spellings of names and the like, and likely the newer ones will show up). Just going ahead and leaving that here.

Azel and Tailtiu's conversation is based off their Chapter 4 lover talk. If you look at a map of Jugdral, you'll see that Silesse and Isaach are the most northern countries, separated from the rest by mountains and the Yied desert. 'Bratzel' comes from the Oosawa manga. Hannibal is a character that shows in later in FE4, and in FE5.

Iodrie is a made up flower, but the meanings associated with snowdrops (a real flower) are based off of different stories associated with them. Typically, a baby drinks
exclusively breast milk for about six months and then a combination of solids and breast milk until about a year old, after which, they're more interested in the solid foods. Newborns tend to feed about 8-12 times a day during the first month, and gradually lessen the number of times they need to feed.

Next Chapter – Interlude, Farewells
Life in Silesse is almost timeless. It's quiet, peaceful. Even though we hear of the tensions slowly building, even though we know there's a civil war on the horizon, everything remains still and calm. So, we just... rest. We rest. We heal. We tease each other silly. We raise the children. We pretend that there is no fighting, and that there won't be any fighting again. Honestly, it was almost complete bliss. I missed Deirdre. I missed Arvis. But their absence was the only 'bad' part of life here. I could spend the rest of my days like this, and I'd die happy and content.

It was very strange. I'd never been quite so happy before. But I enjoyed it.

I smiled as I read the latest letter from Arvis, taking comfort from the familiar writing. Communication was limited, and on so small of letters, but Queen Rahna thought it sad that we couldn't contact our families and did what she could. The result was somewhat regular letters, thankfully, and thus, my lord brother's reassurance that things would be fine. I wasn't the only one. Not only did I continue getting letters from Diadora, but Arvis also wrote semi-regularly to Azel and Sigurd as well, and Tailtiu actually got letters from her siblings, though Bloom had urged her to be careful sending more, since he did live in the same estate as their father. But we had contact, and hope. It was as good as anything could be, and I loved it.

"What's got you amused?" Ayra asked, smiling at me from her plush chair. She was breastfeeding Conall, while Caitriona curled up for a nap with Ulster and Larcei in the nearby cradle. It was easier on everyone when the children napped at the same time, though Lester was likely curled up with Aideen, since Aideen was still recovering. We nearly lost her, and her baby, but thank everything for Adelaide, the midwife Queen Rahna recommended to us. "Good news from home?"

"I think it's more 'silliness',' I corrected, laughing softly. I blinked a few times as my mind dragged itself out of the letter and back into the small study where Ayra and I were resting. Morning sunshine streamed in through the windows, gently warming everything. Silesse's summers were still cool by my standards, but there was something 'warm' about them nonetheless. "He's begging for information about Caitriona and Conall. I think he's already got gifts for them, and he's trying to hide it."

"Such a doting big brother. Reminds me of Mariccle."

"Ah, I'm sorry..." I knew it had to hurt that she couldn't show her twins to her brother, or that they likely wouldn't see Isaach for a long while. "I shouldn't have..."

"No, no. I asked. Mariccle would scold me if I let his death dampen my own happiness, and the happiness around me." She wiped Conall's mouth as he finished eating and tucked him into the pile of twins. Caitriona and Ulster immediately curled into Conall, sleepily making sure he had hugs too. "Aw, it's so cute."

"It is." I glanced through Arvis's letter again, smiling at how he admitted he was falling for Diadora, just as Azel suspected. He asked if I'd be mad if he courted her, since I'd only written to
her. I planned on reminding him that he still had not met Chulainn. "Thanks a lot for nursing them, Ayra."

"Hey, you handle my portion of diaper duty in exchange. I think I got the better deal, personally."

"My twins woke you up this morning."

"Larcei was fussing already. It's fine." She smiled reassuringly at me before carefully rocking the cradle. The four children squirmed a bit at the movement, but fell back to sleep before long. "Though, I do say Lex and Chulainn can handle more of the diapers."

"Neither try to run or anything. You and I just tend to be closer, because you nurse them and I check their health." I folded my letters very small and tucked them into my pocket, deciding to read the one from Diadora later. I knew it would have more questions, and I wanted to take my time with reading and answering them. "Besides, Lex is helping us set up Azel and Tailtiu, remember?"

"That's very true. And Chulainn teaches Shanan." She still made a face, and I found myself laughing again. "Oh, whatever. Do you mind if we open the window?"

"We can see if the kids agree." I stood up and went to the window, but I paused instead when I saw Lachesis and Finn walking through the gardens. While both were smiling and laughing, I could see the sadness and nervousness hanging over them, and I knew why. I hated it.

Since Aideen had given birth, and was confirmed to be recovered, Quan had no more excuses to avoid leaving. He had to leave within the next couple of weeks to make sure he didn't get caught by the weather, and Ethlyn and Finn would leave with him. It had been announced a few days ago, but I knew Finn had told Lachesis himself. I also knew that neither really wanted to leave each other, but Finn had to return and Lachesis didn't want to leave the army right now. She was making progress with her 'Master Knight' training, and she could only really continue it here, since the army was filled with so many people who could teach her.

"She was just getting her smile back when Quan revealed they'd have to leave." Ayra came up behind me, and rested a hand on my shoulder, looking at the young couple too. "I worry for her," she whispered. "I've been trying to support her, but I don't know what to do. I don't think she knows what she wants. All I can do is hug her and help distract her."

"It's a sad situation," I murmured. Though, at least she had warning with this parting. Deirdre's disappearance still weighed heavily on my heart. "My main worry is that they'll part with all this hanging over them, though."

"I'm not sure they've talked much about it."

"They need to." Fussing caught both of our attentions, and we turned to see Larcei had woken up, and was beginning to cry. "Oh, dear."

"Never a dull day when you have a one year old, and five babies in the army." Ayra grinned and I laughed. Neither quite chased away the sadness or worry, but it was close enough that we could pretend. We couldn't do anything, after all. "Well, let's see what's bothering my girl this time, yes?"

"You say that like she's always complaining."

"She is! Girl knows what she wants in life and knows she's not getting it!"

"Yes, yes. Let's check her out."
After Chulainn finished with teaching Shanan, he insisted on watching the twins. Shanan and Oifeye always ended up helping him, and Lex joined in before long along with Azel and whoever else they snagged. Despite Ayra's 'complaints', Lex and Chulainn were very devoted to their children and were determined to not leave the full burden of raising them on Ayra and me. The few times a parent wasn't available, someone else in the army was more than happy to watch them. I half-thought about staying with them today, as today was when we were introducing Seliph to Caitriona, Conall, Ulster, and Larcei, but I'd decided that if someone needed a healer, they'd know where to find me. In the mean time, there were many medicines we needed to replenish.

"Ah, so we've taken over tending to the nearby villages?" I asked Claude, checking inventory. That certainly explained why we were suddenly so low on a lot of essentials. "You're heading out now for that, yes?"

"Yes, Lewyn is accompanying me, as usual," Claude answered. He fussied with his coat and gloves, frowning a bit as he tried to get them on over his robes. Silessian clothing was made much heavier than Edda ones. "Unless you wish to go?"

"Sadly, I'm not sure I'm quite recovered for that sort of exercise." I began setting out herbs on the table to prep to make medicine. "If you can gather some of the local remedies, though?"

"I was planning on that, certainly." He smiled, laughing. "It's so refreshing working with someone who actually knows what they're doing."

"It's weird in my eyes. I'm used to teaching!"

"Ah, yes, speaking of teaching…" His cheer faded for a serious look. "Aideen is learning how to use tomes from Azel. I already know a little bit from my own studies, before deciding that the path of a healer suited me. Would you like to learn as well?"

"Now, when would I have the time to do that?" I said the words like a joke, but truly, my stomach turned a bit at the thought of hurting something. "Perhaps it is silly, but…"

"I understand." His smile told me he really did. He, like me, was a healer. He might know how to use tomes, but he disliked hurting people, just like me. "I was asking mostly for your protection."

"I have a couple of offensive staves." Though, it did remind me of the one who had kidnapped Deirdre. He had resisted it. It did make me terrified to try to use them again, but Silence had worked on Chagall, at least. "Besides, the only ones I'm afraid of… I don't think magic is all that effective against them."

"The dark mages…" Claude's smile faded again for a dark look. "There's been nothing from them here. They don't seem to be involved."

"Are you certain?"

"Fairly. There is no feeling of darkness here. Only war."

"I see." I wasn't so certain, but those of Blaggi's blood were blessed, or cursed, with 'truer' sight, perhaps to 'balance' how the Valkyrie Staff held so many caveats for being used. That was why they could see the future. "Well, I shall take your word for it. I only really know how to heal."

"And how skilled you are at it!" He smiled again, this time proudly. "A shame we are not in Grannvale. I'd have you officially registered as a 'high priestess' at this point."

"You're too kind, Claude."
"It's no kindness. It's a representation of your skill." He paused and then laughed a bit. "Goodness, I keep going off on tangents. I brought up the teaching thing not only because I was curious if you wanted to learn tomes. Tailliu and Erinys have mentioned wanting to learn staves. Do you want to teach them?"

"That does sound like fun." It would give me more opportunities to tease them as well. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all." He grinned, a distinctive mischievous light in his eyes. He knew exactly why I thought I'd find it fun, and for all his calm maturity, he enjoyed a good prank now and then. "It lets me have more excuses to visit the nearby villages."

"You're much happier as a simple village healer, aren't you?"

"Well, I do like not having to worry about politics." His smile softened. "But, well, I am of Crusader descent. We have a duty to defend the people, particularly those who inherited the Major Blood."

"Arvis said something like that once, I think." I couldn't remember the exact phrase, but it was something like 'crusader blood means we must champion the people'. He used it as a means of encouraging me on my path as a healer. "Still, I'm content with my healing."

"As am I. There is something fulfilling in being able to see someone get better."

"Very."

"Claude, you in here?" Sylvia poked her head inside then, and seeing us, she skipped over to me to give me a hug. "Hi, Alicia~!" she half-sang before focusing on Claude again. "Anyway, Claude, we need to get going. We're going to be late!"

"Ah, are you accompanying us as well, Sylvia?" Claude asked. He paused and looked at her clothing. "Do… you need to steal change?"

"Hmm?"

"Forgive me, but aren't you dressed in only your underwear?"

"It's my dancer's outfit!" Sylvia huffed, pouting. I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. I was so used to her outfits now that I didn't even think about it, but she did still show a lot of skin despite the chill. "It's like you wearing your robe's as a priest. Lewyn and I are going to perform for the villagers to help cheer them up!"

"And… you're not cold…?"

"Nope! My heart burns with passion!" She giggled, all annoyance forgotten, and she took his hand. "Come on! Lewyn is waiting!" She dragged him out then, with him yelping and protesting while she sang a little song.

Giving in to my amusement, I laughed as they left and went back through the inventory. Carefully, I picked through and set everything up to make some of the more important medicines, like headache remedies and muscle relaxants. I had just settled down to start actually making them when the infirmary door opened again. I looked up, expecting someone with a minor injury, and saw Lachesis hesitantly walking in, and knew that something was wrong. She was far too pale, and it was not like her to be so tentative around me.
"Um… I don't…" she began. She spoke quietly, almost too soft to hear, and she looked down at the floor. "I don't suppose you have work for me to do?"

"Well, there is always something to do here," I replied. I studied her, though, and shook my head. "However, it is my opinion that you don't need the work. You need to talk." I gestured for her to sit down at the table with me. "Come on. I think you're thinking yourself in a knot."

"That… sounds about right." She sighed and sat down, not even pretending to protest. She immediately rested her face on the table and groaned. "I'm so exhausted."

"That's what happens when you think too much." I pushed the medicine-making things to the side, to make sure I didn't accidentally knock anything over. "Now, what are you feeling? Fear? Anxiety? Sadness?"

"All of the above?" She lifted her head just enough to rest her chin on the table instead. "I guess I should start with the simplest. I'm sad that he's leaving. I'll miss him terribly. But, I'm also terrified. He's leaving to do his duty. That's what Eldie did. And Eldie died. And, you know, I have the same thing going on with Quan and Ethlyn, who are leaving for the same reasons…" She sat up in her chair and pulled a bit at her hair. I watched to make sure she wasn't trying to yank it out. "I also feel a bit… it's like anticipated loneliness? Finn has been by my side ever since I joined the army. Ethlyn and Quan are practically my family. I feel lonely, even though they're not gone yet."

"I suppose it's harder because we've all been together for two straight years now." It felt unnatural to have someone just leave, even though we knew it had to happen. Quan had seriously stayed too long, and though he professed loyalty and devotion to Sigurd, it had to be bad for Leonster to associate itself with a 'traitor'. It would give Thracia an excuse, for instance, to ask for aid in their war. "Those are the simple things, you said. Is it the anxiety that gets you tied up, then?"

"…Yes…" She squirmed, a pale blush mottling her face now. She wasn't exactly proud of this part. "I mean; what if he stops loving me while he's away? Finds a prettier girl? A nicer one? It's not that I don't trust him. I do. But… I mean…"

"I don't think it's an unreasonable fear. You don't fear, say, him cheating on you. You fear he'll fall out of love. You fear that absence will make the heart go yonder, not grow founder."

"Yes." She drooped, dropping her head. "Which is pathetic."

"No, as I just said, I think it's a reasonable one. You're near the beginning of your relationship. You haven't been courting for…" I trailed off as I tried to piece it all together. "I don't think it has been even a year since you've confessed, and now, he has to leave for who knows how long. You'll only have infrequent contact from here on out." I had a little more to say, but I stopped when I noticed how she flinched at every other word. "Have you talking to Finn about any of this?"

"We… tried, but both of us got tongue-tied, and so we just…"

"You should." I reached across the table and squeezed her hands reassuringly. "Communication is key to relationships, Lachesis. I'm certain he's got many of the same fears."

"Well, maybe not the anxiety thing…"

"Lachesis, you are a very beautiful, very strong, and very kind girl." I gave her the best skeptical look I could. "You have many admirers. I can guarantee you that Finn is likely just as worried."

"Oh." She smiled sheepishly, but there was a light in her eyes now. "So, talk to him and… and keep at it until we managed it. Instead of stopping because of awkwardness."
"Yes." I let go of her hands and sat back in my chair. "I won't let you work here until you do, by the way."

"That's… fair. I needed… I need to not run away." She took a deep breath and nodded before standing. "Okay. I can do this."

"Yes, you can."

"Right… right." She nodded again, and then came over to hug me. "Thanks, Alicia."

"Always, Lachesis." I hugged her back before nudging her towards the door. "Go on, while you have your momentum."

"Right!" She ran out the door, nearly tripping as she turned down the hallway.

I watched her leave, waited to make sure she didn't come back in, and then settled back in to make medicines. There wasn't much more I could do at this point. I'd given what advice I could. Now, I just had to hope.

"Oh, so that's how you change the diaper," Aideen murmured. She picked up Lester from the changing table and kissed his nose while I finished cleaning up the changing area of the nursery. It was naptime for everyone and Aideen had been watching, but I'd walked in on her attempting to figure out how to do... most of it. "Midir always does it for me, but he's out on patrol."

"Well, you have been resting," I pointed out. I took Lester from her briefly to double check he was clean before handing him back to Aideen. "You suffered postpartum bleeding, after all."

"I am so glad Adelaide insisted on having you double-check."

"So am I." I would've done it anyway, of course, but discovering that sooner was only a good thing. "Are you fully healed? You were well when I checked, but I don't think I gave you a clear?"

"You didn't, no. Adelaide came back to check in on me earlier this morning, and said I should be fine, but to continue being checked, just in case." Aideen shuddered. "I should've been more careful. My own mother died from postpartum bleeding."

"It's fine, Aideen. You're alive and will be fine. That's all that matters." It was a relief that Ayra didn't suffer from any post-birth complications, thus far. We were all keeping an eye out for postpartum depression, of course, but so far, none of us suffered it. "Regardless, we're talking of serious things while we have cute children around."

"Too true!" Aideen laughed and went to settle Lester among the other sleeping children. Though they'd been set up in their own spaces, at some point during their nap, the children all crawled together to cuddle together for some reason. It amused me that Seliph curled protectively around the others, being the bigger one. Today, he was closest to Ulster and Conall. "They're so adorable."

"They are." I began lighting incense to help clear the air of the smell, and opened a window to further clear up the room. The sound of arrows flying caught my attention and I leaned out to see Brigid practicing archery, as usual. Also as usual, King Jamke was with her.

"I'm half-tempted to set them up." Aideen joined me by the window, leaning out too. "Of course, I first want to make sure he's Brigid's type." She smiled and glanced at me. "You're still awkward around Jamke, aren't you? Despite it being... two years? Three?"
"I… suppose I still can't quite forgive him for nearly killing you, Shanan, Oifeye, and Finn."
Though it could also just be habit. King Jamke and I had long since set up our schedules so that we didn't have to interact, save for the few times he got wounded enough to be treated in my infirmary. "But they could be a good couple. Brigid would have to weigh being queen of Verdane in that relationship, though."

"Oh, true." Aideen hummed a bit, tapping the windowsill. "Grannvale might object to Verdane gaining one of their Major Blooded, especially in light of the political situation. Then again, the political situation of… everything is complicated." Her eyes turned sad and she looked up at the clouding sky. "Father… I still can't believe Andrei killed him. I had wanted them to repair their relationship, not…”

"Maybe he simply believed the lies, Aideen." I had no idea how to reply. I might've lived in Jungby, but I didn't know much about Andrei. I only knew the rumors. So, I shifted the discussion slightly. "I must admit to being worried about the succession."

"That's true." Aideen closed her eyes briefly before returning her attention to me. "I have heard of a branch family living in Tahra, a city in the Manster District, but they'd have to do a lot of hunting to see if the Holy Blood remains."

"I didn't know there was a branch family."

"They were disinherited… oh, I believe seventy years ago? One of Heim's grandchildren eloped, and then tried to vie for the throne, so they were permanently barred from the line of succession. So, it would be a political mess to even bring them back."

"It's all a political mess now." I smiled wryly. "It would be convenient if Prince Kurth had a secret child born from one of those lovers he took in the past."

"True." She began giggling. "Oh, maybe Arvis has a half-sister who could become the queen?"

"Yeah, please never mention that in his presence. The whole thing with Cigyun and Prince Kurth is a sore spot." I sighed, hoping that those rumors weren't coming back. I wasn't around to help Arvis with it. "Arvis and I both believe that while Prince Kurth and Cigyun might've fallen in love, there was nothing sexual. It would've been incredibly dangerous, given how our father was."

"Your father committed suicide over it."

"My father was a hypocrite and he burns in hell where he belongs." My voice became tarter than I liked and I winced when I realized it. "I'm sorry. But, truly, my father would've been stupid enough to have killed Prince Kurth if he caught them. They would've had to have been very lucky, and luck was not a common thing in that household."

"Ah, I see." Aideen nodded, and she smiled gently, silently telling me to not worry about how terse I'd been. "I was more thinking that maybe Arvis could've used that to get a little more leverage to help us out."

"True, but even then, that would take time, perhaps more than the coup d'état is willing to give us." I knew Arvis kept pushing for Sigurd to wait, but I also knew Sigurd was growing antsy. Then again, just as Arvis said, the masterminds behind all of this were definitely counting on that reckless loyalty to hurt him. "Ah, we got serious again."

"We did. That's not fun."

"No, it isn't."
"Aideen? Lady Alicia?" Midir's voice made us both turn, and we smiled as he walked in. "Is everything all right?" he asked gently, setting his bow down. It was a Brave Bow, a birthday gift from Aideen, and it seemed to suit him well. It certainly let him keep up with the rest of our mounted forces. "You're both half-leaning out the window."

"We're debating whether or not to set up Brigid and King Jamke," I half-lied easily. Aideen giggled, winking to me. Our serious discussion... we'd keep that secret. "Did you need anything?"

"No, I just finished my patrol, and came to check in on my son." He flushed slightly at the words 'my son', and smiled gently. "Looks like he's fast asleep."

"He is, my love," Aideen replied with a laugh. She walked over to kiss his cheek and leaned into him. "Alicia had to help me change his diaper. How are you so good at that?"

"I have lots of practice," I pointed out easily. It amused me how easily Aideen showed affection, and how Midir still looked at her like he thought he was dreaming. "It's a convenient time to check their health, so I end up changing a lot of diapers. If you have trouble, ask Shanan for help. I taught him, and he's handled Seliph."

"I think I will." Aideen giggled, but then suddenly leaned back, looking at the door. "Ah, Lachesis! What brings you here?"

"Ah, sorry?" Lachesis poked her head in, smiling shyly. Her eyes sparkled, though, and her old spirit definitely shone through. "I was hoping to talk to Alicia," she explained. "Is she here?"

"I am," I replied, already heading to the door. I was a bit worried, considering our earlier talk. "Aideen, Midir, I leave watching the nappers to you!" I walked out and took Lachesis's hand before walking down the hall. "Did you have that talk with Finn?"

"I did!" She grinned at me, pleased, and squeaked when I playfully reached up to ruffle her hair. "It was awkward at first, but I kept at it, and he kept at it, and we managed to talk out most of the issues."

"That's good." I smiled in relief. "Did you come to report then?"

"Well... sort of?" She stopped walking, clasped her hands together, and looked at me pleadingly. "Favor?"

"What is it?"

"Basically, Finn and I both had similar fears, as you suspected, and after laughing, we were like 'well, why not do a promise thing' and Claude agreed, he was really into it actually, but he does say that we will need a witness?" She spoke very quickly, and it took me a few seconds to process it. "So, um..."

"You and Finn are going to marry right before he leaves?"

"Sort of. Like... it's proper, but we'll have a 'real' one when things settle down? It's probably closer to eloping than anything." She gave me an even more pleading look. "And I know it's weird, really weird, but Finn and I would really like it, and we'd also really like it if you-"

"Let's see about fancying up one of your dresses." I wrapped an arm around her shoulder and led her down the hall. She beamed at me, practically bouncing on her toes. "And it's short notice, but I might be able to make you a little veil as well."
"Oh, thank you!" She gave me a giant hug, nearly knocking me off my feet. "Thank you!"

"Yes, yes, we have to hurry, silly." This was going to be a testament to my sewing skills certainly. "Let's let Claude and Finn know, and then we'll work on the dress."

The ceremony had been simple, but rather pretty, considering everything. It had been close, but I had managed to get the dress and veil done, just as I said, and even managed to braid some flowers into her hair and get her a bouquet. Claude had managed to get the small church decorated with flowers and scented candles to make it seem warm and special, and Finn, most surprisingly, had actually managed to secure rings, though we would have to resize Lachesis's a little, later. All in all, it was a lovely little memory and it was enough to warm my heart, even when it came time for Quan, Ethlyn, and Fin to leave at last.

"You had best be careful on the road," I warned, hugging Quan goodbye. While we had the 'official' farewells last night, Sigurd and I had woken up especially early to see them off. At the moment, he was saying goodbye to Ethlyn, so I talked to Quan. Finn was checking the horses. "It's barely dawn."

"I'm not sure it is even dawn yet," Quan corrected, hugging me back. "Seriously, this is why we had all the goodbyes last night."

"I was up early because of Catriona and Conall anyway. I might not nurse them, but I do make sure they're okay. Chulainn is with them now." I pulled away and straightened his collar. "But seriously, be careful. You'll have to travel through part of Grannvale."

"No, we'll just be going around Grannvale. The Yied Desert is neutral territory. Targetting us within it will be a declaration of war."

"I suppose." Still, I worried, but perhaps more importantly, the fact that he was finally leaving made me remember something. It made me remember what Travant had said. "Quan, do you mind looking into something for me?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"It's something I heard from a patient, but it was something about Leonster nobles raiding Thracian villages and cutting down civilians?" I shrugged as he frowned. "There was also something about the tariffs being so high that people have to choose between food or medicine. I won't pretend to understand the politics or anything, but as a healer, the rumor is troubling."

"The tariffs are likely high because of the constant war, but that raiding… that's not something I know anything about." His frown deepened, troubled. "You're certain?"

"That is what my patient mentioned." I had to talk around the fact that Travant had been the patient, of course, so I hoped he didn't push more. "So, will you?"

"Certainly. I can't condone involving civilians in matters of war." He gave me another hug. "When I get a chance, I will look into it. I can't promise immediately, considering… everything, but I will. I promise."

"Thank you." I smiled apologetically as I pulled away. "I'm sorry to give you more to worry about."

"No, this is something I need to know." He glanced to the side, and smiled slightly. "Ah, looks like Ethlyn wants to switch now."
"Hmm?"

"Alicia!" Ethlyn caught me in a hug right then and I hugged her back instantly. Quan, for his part, left to say his goodbyes to Sigurd. "I'm going to miss you so much," she murmured, pulling away to smile at me. Her eyes shone with unshed tears. "Ah, asking you to help us was definitely the best decision I ever made."

"I'm glad you asked me," I whispered, struck by a sudden urge to cry. I hugged her again, and she returned it. "Be careful, okay? Don't do anything too reckless."

"I will. I promise." She let go again, but leaned up to whisper in my ear, cupping her hand around her mouth to make it extra secret. "Also, don't tell anyone, but I think I'm pregnant again?"

"You are?" I smiled, delighted, even as that made me worry even more. "Then please, be extra careful. I won't be there to help you."

"I'll be fine. Leonster has almost as good of healers." She giggled and winked. "But don't tell anyone, okay? I'm not certain. I just feel off and it's similar to how I felt when I was first pregnant with Altena."

"Of course." I took her hands and squeezed them. "If you can, please try to get a letter to me?"

"I will. Promise." A tear slipped down her cheek and she began laughing as she swiped at it. "Oh, shoot… I wanted to leave with a smile."

"I'm going to miss you too." I hugged her again. "Give my love to Altena?"

"Of course. I'll probably need to remind her where her favorite stuffed bear came from." She sniffed, and rubbed at her eyes as more tears fell. "Hopefully soon, things will be calm enough that I can bring her with me. I'm sure she'd love to see you again."

"I can't wait to see her too." I smiled at her. It took a surprisingly amount of control to not start crying too. "Ah, I can introduce her to Caitriona and Conall. Won't that be fun?"

"It would! I'm sure she'd adore them!" She giggled, though she did still cry a little. "Ah, I can't wait! It'll be fun!"

"It will." I noticed Finn was done getting the horses ready, and with a sinking feeling, I realized it was almost time for them to go. "Ah, I still need to say goodbye to Finn."

"Go on, go on! I'm just here being sappy!" She laughed, and gave me the most sincere smile I'd ever seen. "I mean it, though. Asking you to join us was one of the best decisions I've ever made."

"I meant my reply too. I'm glad you asked. Agreeing was one of the best choices I've made." Not quite sure what else to say, I simply gave her another hug and then walked over to Finn. I waited until he stepped out from behind the horses before moving to his side, though, mostly so that I could speak quietly to him. "So, Finn, did you enjoy your little honeymoon? I had to cover my mouth to muffle my laughter when he instantly blushed. 'I'm sorry. But I won't get to tease you for a while.'"

"A sad feeling, even if I don't like being embarrassed so much," he muttered, sulking. However, he hugged me tightly and I hugged him back. "Thank you. I know it was probably foolish, but it meant a lot to Lachesis and me, and to see you throw so much effort into it… that meant everything."
"Of course. Don't you remember?" I pulled away and poked his cheek. "You are my 'little brother'. I want you to be safe and happy. So be careful, okay?"

"I will. I promise." He smiled warmly at me. "I'm not sure when I'll be able to return, but I'll look forward to seeing you again, Alicia. You, Shanan, Oifeye, Lachesis... everyone. I'm sure it will be fine, and that we will all meet again."

"That's right. All we have to do is hold on until then." I hesitated a bit and decided to go with a whim that suddenly came to mind. "Here." Carefully, I took off the necklace I'd gotten from Hannibal's letter, the dragon's eye necklace, and slipped it on. "Wear this."

"Okay?" He studied it curiously, holding it up so that the light caught the gem. "It's pretty, but..."

"Think of it as a good luck charm, for now." I smiled up at him, just now noticing that he was taller than me now. When we met, he'd been shorter than me. "Think of it also as a reminder of your 'big sister', since I wear a bracelet that matches." I held up my arm for emphasis, so that he could see the bracelet I had gotten from Travant. "I'll explain more when I see you again, okay?"

"I'll wear it proudly, then." He looked down, smiling sheepishly. "I'm... not good with goodbyes, it seems."

"Haha, I don't think any of us are." I hugged him again, though, and he hugged me back. "Be safe. Be good. Have some confidence in your skills. All the standard farewell things."

"All the standard things." He laughed and nodded. "Until I see you again, Alicia."

"Until we meet again, Finn."

It was a bit of an awkward note to end, but somehow, that just felt 'right'. None of us were particularly eager to say goodbye or anything, and if not for duty, the three of them would be staying, and it was something we all knew. It was something that hovered over all of us as the three of them double-checked their packs and supplies, and double-checked that their horses were fine. Sigurd and I made sure to stay back, both to make sure we didn't spook the horses and to set the 'divide'. We were staying. They were leaving. That was just how it was for now.

"Ah, you'd better get going, or we'll never let you leave," Sigurd joked once they were all settled. His smile faltered, though, and he looked down, showing that he wished they didn't have to leave. "Please be careful, you three."

"Sigurd..." Quan began. He smiled softly at him. "Come on. You know me. I was always the careful one of us three, and I'll be extra cautious." He hugged Sigurd tightly, and Sigurd returned it, clinging. "As soon as I can, I will return to help, along with some of the Lanzritte. It'll be okay. I'll see you again."

"Yes, I know. I just..."

"Gods, we were just discussing this," Ethlyn laughed. She poked Quan away before hugging Sigurd. "Silly brother! It'll be fine. We'll be back before you know it."

"Right, sorry," Sigurd murmured. He clung to her tightly. "I'm just..."

"I know. I wish we didn't have to leave so soon after Deirdre's disappearance, and Eldigan's death. But we'll come back. And when we do, I'm going to tease you silly." She got on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "I love you, big brother."
"I love you too, my precious baby sister." He let go of her and stepped back. "Okay, seriously, leave now or I will not let you leave." There was a bit of laughter at that, but then they mounted up and, with one last wave, began riding away. Sigurd and I stood side by side in the courtyard, watching them disappear down the path and, before long, I found myself crying.

"Oh, this is ridiculous," I muttered as soon as I realized it. I wanted to cover my face to try and hide, but I also wanted to watch them until they were completely out of sight. "I can hold onto my calm through… anything. Yet here I am, crying."

"There's no shame in crying," Sigurd reassured. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and tugged me into a one-armed hug. "It just means you're sad to see them leave."

"I'm more annoyed that I can't stop crying." I rubbed roughly at my eyes, and Sigurd passed me a handkerchief. "A healer needs to control her emotions, you know."

"Well, you're not the healer right now, yeah? You're a friend saying goodbye… no, you're family saying goodbye to family."

"…Yes, I suppose I am." I was reminded, a bit, of the sadness I felt whenever Arvis left. But in this case, I had been with them for three straight years, roughly, so of course, the pain was greater. "Ah, I feel ridiculous." I looked up at him, and noticed her was crying. "Oh, you idiot. You could've mentioned you were crying too."

"Surprised you only just now noticed!" He grinned and I rolled my eyes before we both just started laughing at how ridiculous we were. "Ah, I do wish Lachesis had been here to say goodbye though."

"Oh, she already had her goodbye." Noticing that the three were out of sight, I walked away, smiling even as I wiped away my tears. I did need to check in on her. Mostly, I needed to make sure those two properly took those contraceptives I'd given them. I was a little worried they might not have. "Now then…"

"Why are you smiling?" Sigurd followed me into the castle, frowning. I passed him back his handkerchief, and he refolded it before drying his own eyes. "What do you know that I don't?"

"Many things, Sigurd. Would you like to know how to heal a person whose ribs have punctured their lungs?"

"That's not what I meant!" He sulked as I laughed. "Come on! Tell me!"

Sigurd continued trying to get the information out of me, but I didn't say a word. It was Lachesis and Finn's secret. She'd tell them when she had to.

Author's notes: Yeah, so at the beginning of Game-Chapter 4, Quan, Ethlyn, and Finn all leave the party. If Aideen talks to Midir (or Jamke) while married to him, she gifts her husband with the Brave Bow. (She has a similar talk with Azel, but I believe she receives a staff from it, maybe a Rescue staff?) Sylvia and Claude's talk is based a bit on their lovers talk in the same chapter. Arvis mentioning 'our crusader blood means we must champion the people' comes from one of his lines in FE: Heroes. Tahra, and
the fact that the ruling family apparently has Naga Minor blood, is mentioned in FE5.

The Valkyrie Staff is the Holy Weapon of Blaggi, and it has the ability to resurrect a fallen unit, once, before breaking. While it can be repaired, it's quite expensive to do so. The Valkyrie staff's property of being able to resurrect a unit is shared by the Aum staff of Archanea and the Bifrost of Fates. However, it doesn't have as many restrictions as the Bifrost, though slightly more than the Aum staff.

(Fun fact: When Claude is trying to explain how the staff works to Tailtiu in game, he brings up quintessence, which isn't elaborated on in this game, but later played a large part in Fe7’s plot)

Next Chapter – Interlude, First Snow
Interlude – First Snow

It's strange, adapting to life without Quan, Ethlyn, and Finn. For instance, Shanan and Oifeye will often look for Finn to read or play some game before remembering he left. Sigurd will ask for Quan's opinion on some defensive tactic, to find only silence. Aideen will look for Ethlyn to go shopping, but then remember that Ethlyn isn't here. It's lonely, and we all feel their absence keenly.

For my part, I miss them terribly. I miss my 'little brother', Finn, who always made sure to help me clean the infirmary and was always ready to help me make medicines. I miss Ethlyn and her bright laughter as she helped me with the kids. I miss Quan and his quiet fussing, always checking to make sure everyone is okay.

I hope things calm down soon so that I can see them again. I look forward to that day, as eagerly as I look forward to when I can see Arvis again and, hopefully, to whenever we find Deirdre. That will be a very good day, indeed. Those will all be wonderful days. I can barely wait for them.

In the early morning, after dropping Caitriona and Conall off with Ayra for their morning feeding but before breakfast was ready for everyone, I decided to answer my two letters while Chulainn left to give Shanan his morning sword lessons. I thought about sitting at the lone desk, but decided it was too cold for that, so instead I curled up in front of the fireplace, curled up under some blankets, and read through Arvis's and Diadora's most recent letters. I'd waited to reply for one simple reason; Diadora was revealed to be Prince Kurth's previously unknown daughter. And I wanted to make sure I could write the letters with a clear head, after my initial 'you have got to be kidding me' reaction. What were the odds?

"That is such a horrible way to learn," I murmured, reading through Arvis's letter. He had simply brought Diadora to court for a ball, both to help her get acclimated to the political climate and to have her meet King Azmur, since she was his lover and intended fiancé. However, during the meeting, King Azmur had sensed something about her and had asked her to remove her circlet, revealing the Holy Mark of Naga, mostly hidden by her hair. "She must've been overwhelmed, and poor Arvis…"

My eyes fell to the sentences that made most of the letter seem a little frantic. 'King Azmur is happily planning the wedding already. It will be some time, to account for legal things and to help Diadora become accustomed to the new life, perhaps mid-summer. I wish you were here to help. I could use your good sense, and I know you could support and reassure Diadora far better than I could. I wish… ah, well, wishes are simply wishes. I'll do what I can from here to get you home, and then we can talk… you don't mind this, right? I know you don't want to be near the center of attention or in the public eye, but… ah, so much of this is probably better in person. I wish you were here. I miss you terribly.'

"Arvis, you worrier." Though, I did admit, even though my heart hurt, I noticed there was something 'odd' about words. There was nothing wrong with the phrasing, and they were simply genuine. It was just a feeling, because I knew him so well. It was like he was writing around something, so that he didn't have to lie. He hated lying to me. Others, he didn't mind so much, but
he hated lying to me. We were family. But, then again, it could have simply been him trying to cram everything he wanted to say on such a small letter. Quite a bit happened in such a short amount of time, and it was obvious other things were missing. This was the first letter that didn't give me an update on how Cyas was doing, for instance. "Well, I do love that he worries for me. I know it's how he shows his affection."

After reading through a couple more times, I got out my pen and paper and began writing my reply. I made sure the first sentences were reassuring him that everything would be fine. I was saddened that I likely would not make it to his wedding, but I made sure to specifically tell him that if he put off the wedding, to someone he loved, just for me, then I would be very, very vexed. I did ask that he wait for anything 'official' regarding me until he and I could talk in person about it, but I gave him my permission to inform King Azmur about me. After that, I added little stories to hopefully making him smile, such as how Caitriona and Conall were grabbing at everything and almost pulled Lachesis's earrings out of her ear or how Caitriona had great fun dropping things to watch us pick them up and Conall absolutely adored shaking his rattle to the point of frowning whenever we tried to make him stop. They were stories to reassure him that things were fine here, and that I was happy. Things would be fine.

When I finished writing the reply, writing increasingly getting smaller as I reached the end of the page to hopefully write everything I wanted, I set it to the side and picked up Diadora's letter to read through again. Her letter was definitely frantic, filled with excitement of having family and the terror of having no memories but now having to be princess. She jumped from mood to mood, sometimes in the middle of a sentence, and I could easily see her struggling to hold back tears, even though I had never met her.

"Thank goodness for Arvis. Without him, I would definitely be lost. I am so incredibly glad I fell in love with him. Ah, but... please don't tell this to Arvis. But every time I think of the wedding, I get this horrible, but strange, pang in my heart. It makes me worry. I have no memories, but what if I was married before? Did I have a husband? A child? It gnaws at my mind, but I don't want to worry Arvis. I love it when he smiles, and he's already fretting about what all I have to deal with. I'm happy, and I know I will be happy, but I feel guilty being so happy when I know nothing. Who did I leave behind me? It scares me. Ah, I'm sorry... I probably shouldn't have said, or written, anything. But it's so easy to talk to you, even though we only know each other through letters. I don't know what to do..."

The first thing I made sure to write in my reply to her was 'you deserve to be happy'. I did my best to reassure her that she should seize the happiness she had now. Yes, she had lost her memories, but that was no reason to deny herself a life that she knew she wanted now. If her past came to haunt her, then everyone could deal with it then, together. I did encourage her to speak to Arvis about her worries, emphasizing that communication was key for a healthy relationship, and then instructed her to drink a few different herbal teas to help her keep calm in all the chaos. I then decided to try and get her excited by helping her with the wedding preparations. Laughing a bit when I noticed her letter fretting over how expensive things were, I gently teased her about being a princess, before recommending cheaper but beautiful flowers, like ranunculus.

"Lady Sister, are you in here?" Azel walked in without knocking, smiling when he saw me. "Oh, you're replying to the letters too," he observed, holding up his own letters, and then he smiled brightly. "Arvis is getting married!"

"He is," I laughed. I finished up my reply and set it to the side. "I'm glad. He's always been so lonely, and we're not there."

"No, we're not." Azel sat next to me, resting his head on my shoulder. "A bit sad, though. I want to
go. But I don't want to leave everyone."

"I know. Though, maybe Queen Rahna will send a gift?" I warmed to the idea immediately. "Oh! She likely will! Maybe…"

"Maybe we can sneak our own gifts in!" Azel grinned, already eager at the thought. "That would be amazing! I'm sure it would reassure Diadora if we managed to get a gift to her."

"Yes, I agree. It would also comfort Arvis. I'm sure he's deathly worried for us, no matter how much we reassure him."

"I got a feeling that when we return, Arvis is going to make us stay near him for a couple of weeks."

"I have little doubts, but we can use the two weeks to properly meet and befriend Diadora."

"And Arvis can finally meet Chulainn! And we can plan your wedding."

"He can tease you about Tailtiu as well."

"Yeah, he caaaa… HEY!" Azel went red, and I giggled, amused. "Th-there's nothing! Nothing at all!"

"Do you want advice, little brother?"

"…Please?"

"Of course." I stood up, still laughing. "Let me make some tea for us."

"Okay. I love you."

"I love you too."

"Ugh! Nausea sucks!" Lachesis complained, nursing the medicine I'd made for her. As I had feared, she and Finn hadn't properly taken the contraceptives and she had ended up pregnant, because that was just how our luck worked. After careful discussion with Aideen, Ayra, and me, Lachesis decided to keep the baby, since there were multiple healers and helpers here. "It really sucks."

"If you had taken the contraceptives as I had instructed, you wouldn't have to deal with this," I gently chided, brushing her hair. Unfortunately, she was hit with both nausea and lightheadedness, and she was hit hard, meaning she found it difficult to do even basic tasks some mornings. I'd taken to coming to her room after breakfast to make sure she safely got dressed and bathed. "I am absolutely certain on this, though. While you are pregnant, you are forbidden from weapons and other sharp objects."

"Aw… I was making such good progress in my Master Knight training!"

"You can focus on your magical training." I set down the brush on the vanity and began braiding her hair so that she had less tangles to worry about later. "You struggle with it anyway."

"Yeah, I'm not very magically inclined." She sighed gustily, but smiled. "Oh well. I can pretend I'm Queen Gwyneth again. I used to play make-believe, pretending I was her battling against the evil deadlords of the Loptyrian empire!"
"Was Queen Gwyneth a magic user?"

"Actually, according to the stories, Queen Gwyneth was the first 'official' Master Knight!" She tilted her head back to grin at me, and I pushed it forward to finish the braid. "But she was more inclined towards magic, unlike me. I doubt I could be as good as her, especially since…” She trailed off suddenly, eyes downcast. "We don't really have a light magic user to teach me."

"…No, we don't." Though Lewyn did know a little bit, as well as a bit of fire and thunder magic, it was more of a theoretical study to help him understand magic better. In terms of actually using it to attack, he didn't. Only Deirdre had. "We still have her tome, don't we?"

"Her Aura tome and her Silence staff." The Silence staff was with my things, alongside my Sleep staff. "Aura's just tucked away with her dresses, which we also still keep. We have so many of her things, and yet…” Her hands began to shake and she set her mug down on the vanity to keep from dropping it. "It's been over a year. We still have no idea where she is."

"No, we don't." It was painful, really, but I knew Deirdre. She'd want us to smile. "But that just means we'll have to have a lot of happy stories to share when we find her."

"You really think we'll find her?"

"Yes." I had to believe that. It was the only way to keep from breaking down. I missed her horribly. I wanted my best friend back. I wanted to show her my children, and watch her coo and spoil them. I wanted to laugh with her and tease her silly. I wanted... I wanted her home. "There is nothing wrong with holding on to a bit of hope."

"You sound like Sigurd."

"Now that's terrifying." I tied off her braid and leaned down to hug her. "But everything will be fine. We'll find her. We'll return to Grannvale. You'll return to Agustria. Sigurd's name will be cleared. We'll reunite with Quan, Ethlyn, and Finn. It'll be fine."

"…Right." Her voice still sounded small, but she reached up to grip my arm. "I hope I can figure out a way to write him. Finn, I mean. I'd like to at least warn him that he's a dad, or going to be a dad. Hopefully, he won't be mad."

"I think Finn will only be upset because he's not here to help you. But that's just another thing to look forward to, right? Won't it be fun, seeing him be a father?"

"Yeah." She began laughing. "Oh, he's going to freak out so much. If we do figure out a way, please write him too. He'll believe your reassurances over mine easily."

"Of course." I kissed the top of her head and smiled. "But his reaction can't be worse than everyone else's."

"Sigurd was so indignant!" She laughed harder, leaning back in the chair. "And Aideen was panicking, and Ayra was just laughing and laughing."

"Like I said, his reaction can't be worse." I let go of her and patted her shoulders. "For now, though, I'd like you to finish that medicine and to just rest today. We'll figure out a new training schedule involving magic starting tomorrow."

"Okay." She tilted her head up to look at me again. "Do you mind… ah… helping me? I don't trust my dizziness."
"Of course not."

I got Lachesis tucked into bed with her mug of medicine and a couple of books before leaving her to rest. Mentally, I went through what I needed to do today. I needed to check on the children, certainly. I needed to talk to Sigurd and make sure he was doing okay. I needed to make my rounds in the infirmary, and set up a medicine-making list for Sylvia, Oifeye, and Shanah. I needed to talk to Claude about the local remedies and which ones we should add. I needed…

In the middle of the mental list, I turned a corner and found a very curious sight. Annand was here, hinting that Queen Rahna had come to talk to Sigurd again, and she was smiling like a cat stalking a bird at an increasingly panicked looking Lewyn. I had no idea what was going on, but I could take a bit of a guess, and I decided to go ahead and get involved.

"Ah, Lewyn, are you busy?" I called. Annand and Lewyn both looked at me, but while Annand simply bowed and let her smile soften, Lewyn gave me a look that screamed 'HELP ME!'. "I needed to talk to Claude about something. Do you mind telling him to come to the infirmary to meet me? He doesn't have to hurry over, since I still have a few things to do, but I would appreciate it."

"Sure, I can do that!" Lewyn replied quickly. He smiled gratefully, and tried to not yelp as Annand leveled a stern and knowing look at him. "So, Annand, great to see you, you look wonderful as always, got to go, bye!" And he ran. He ran rather fast, actually. I didn't think I had ever seen him run so quickly.

"Now, what was that?" I turned my attention to Annand and she sighed, shaking her head. "Though, hello again, Annand. I wasn't aware Queen Rahna was visiting this morning."

"She's not, surprisingly. She forced me to take a day off, because the queen of workaholics believes I'm working too much, so I decided to come over here and bully a certain prince into a panic for revenge," Annand explained. She sighed again, but this time, it seemed more playful. "Aw, and I was having so much fun too!"

"Do you mind if I ask about what you were getting revenge for?" I asked. I did have to smile a bit, but I made sure not to let it show too much. If I had to pick sides, I would side with Lewyn every time, even if I was a bit amused. "Is it his leaving?"

"Yep. Well, it's more about how deathly worried Queen Rahna and Erinys were because of said leaving. No one makes my cute little sister cry and gets away with it!" She puffed herself up proudly and I couldn't help but laugh. "And how he delayed my biggest dream. I had to get revenge for that too. But, anyway, now that I got that out of the way, can I play with the kids? Please? I promise I'll be super nice to them."

"I see no problem with that, providing it's not their nap time. You can follow me; I was just going to check in on them before heading to the infirmary." I gestured down the hallway, away from where Lewyn had gone. It was a longer route to the nursery, but there were less chances of catching up to Lewyn. Of course, given his speed, I doubted we would anyway. "What do you mean by biggest dream, though? If you don't mind my asking."

"Well, I have lots of dreams, you see." She fell in step with me easily, giggling. It was such a contrast to the earlier calm, confidence from our first meeting, but it was genuine and more than a little endearing. "I'm a bit of a dreamer. Always got my head in the clouds."

"That sounds fitting for a knight of Silesse."
"Isn't it?" She grinned, eyes dancing with mirth. "So, I have lots of dreams. But my biggest involve Lewyn being responsible."

"He is trying."

"I know. I suppose it's simply frustration. Everyone can see what a good king he'll be but him. But I think he is slowly finding his way." She huffed, crossing her arms. "But it still does delay things. Grr..."

"What is that dream?"

"Seeing him take the throne." She smiled proudly, linking her fingers and stretching her arms above her head. "He'll make mistakes, and I know he's terrified about it, but he'll learn and lead Silesse to prosperity. He'll lay the groundwork for a golden age, if not rule it through one. I'm certain of it. So, I long to see him be crowned, and to serve as his knight to help him as much as I can." Her smile became a smirk and she winked. "And, on a more personal level, I want Lewyn and Erinys to stop dancing around each other and marry, damn it!"

"Ah, so they have been this way for a while?"

"Over ten years! Ten! Years!" She groaned, facepalming, and I laughed. I had to. She sounded so frustrated. "She's had a crush on him for forever! And, well, he used to have a precocious crush on me, but he's long since been in love with her, and gods of wind and snow, give me a blizzard that leaves the two trapped alone with each other so that they have to work through things!"

"There have been talks of locking them in a closet. Sylvia is very into it, actually."

"I love Sylvia." She grinned again, back to her cheer. "Anyway, I hope Lewyn and Erinys work through things soon. The new year is coming up."

"Is that important here in Silesse?"

"I know that in other countries, mid-summer weddings are more common, but in Silesse, we consider it good luck to marry with the turning of the year." She sighed happily, stars in her eyes. "Oh, I really do hope they marry soon. The anemones have been growing beautifully. I could braid them into Erinys's hair. She has really good hair for that. I used to braid feathers and the like, before she decided she had to be all serious-pegasus-knight and that super-serious-pegasus-knights don't wear flower crowns. Which sucks, because flower crowns are amazing." She made a face suddenly. "One of these days, I will figure out a way to convey to her that she's amazing just as she is."

"I believe she looks up to you. Perhaps she wants to emulate you while you're on the job."

"I know she does, and I work hard because of it. I have to meet my adorable baby sister's expectations!" She brought her fists up in a show of determination and I laughed again. She was a very dynamic speaker when she wasn't being serious. "But I don't want her to feel like she has to be in my shadow. She shines on her own, and there's many things about her that I'm envious of. Her kind heart, for instance, and the way that she stands her ground no matter what." She groaned, shaking her head. "Figures that my two most precious people don't see their own light."

"I think that is something most people share, if they have a light to shine at all." I nodded to a door coming up. "Here's the nursery, though."

"Yay! I get to play with the cuties!" She giggled, clapping her hands, but she let the cheer drop for a more serious smile. "I know there's danger ahead. I'm sure you're aware of it too. But I'm sure
we'll all persevere and make it through. So...

"If you're asking me to continue looking after Lewyn and Erinys, don't fret. I do." I smiled back at her reassuring, and her own smile brightened. "We all do our best. We're a very odd little family."

"I know. Thank you for the reassurance." Her cheer returned with a vengeance and a laugh. "But enough of seriousness! I have the day off! Besides, I don't think I met Lady Aideen's son?"

"Lester? No, I don't think you have." I laughed again and stepped into the room. All of the children were awake, and to my amusement, Seliph was playing with Conall and Ulster. "Can you keep them busy while I check them over?"

"Of course!"

"I think her eyes are going to be red," Chulainn observed randomly as we walked through the gardens with our children. We both had unexpected free time before dinner, so we decided to simply have a little family time. "In fact, I'd bet on it."

"It's a little early for their eyes to show their final coloring," I replied, shifting Conall a little higher against my shoulder. He smiled, laughed, and then tried to grab at the fog his breath caused. "It'll probably be another couple of months."

"And yet, I'm certain I can already tell." He grinned at me before kissing Caitriona's nose to make her giggle. "See? She agrees with me."

"She'll giggle at anything." I rolled my eyes and he laughed. "Well, if you're making predictions, what do you think Conall's eye color will be?"

"Hmm..." He leaned over my shoulder to study Conall's face. Caitriona tried to grab at my hair, but he held her just out of reach. "I think he might have heterochromia, actually."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I can tell they're two different colors already." He pointed to Conall's left eye, and I had to admit he was right. They were still close enough in color to not notice at a glance, but when you really looked, you could see the difference. His left eye was already darker than his right. "And, again, I think he'll have one red eye. Almost a shame."

"What is?"

"They don't get your pretty green eyes."

"Flirt."

"Does it count as flirting when we've been together for two years and have kids?"

"Always." I looked to the side, mostly to try and hide my blush. He kissed my reddening cheek, telling me I shouldn't have bothered. "Still, red eyes..."

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh, it's not..." I paused, mostly to try and gather my thoughts. I also stopped because Conall really wanted to grab some of the roses, and I had to deter him from the thorns. "My father had red eyes. It's part of the coloring. Vala-red hair and Vala-red eyes."
"Your brothers do too." He shifted Caitriona to one arm to free up a hand and touch my cheek. "I see no problems with them sharing coloring with their uncles. At least, I assume Arvis has red eyes, since I've never met him."

"He does. Azel looks like a younger him, with shorter hair." I smiled softly at him, silently thanking him for the reassurance, before pointing to where Caitriona was half falling out of his arms because she really wanted to touch one of the flowers. He yelped and caught her, before whispering and humming to hold off a crying fit. "I should tell Arvis their 'predicted' eye colors. It will make him laugh."

"You should." He smiled at me, before his eyes darted up suddenly. I wondered why, but he held out his hand and a tiny snowflake fell into it. More soon joined and I had to smile. It was the first snow of the year, and the first snow Caitriona and Conall had ever seen. "We've been in Silesse for a year now, huh? We got here shortly before the first snows last year, didn't we?"

"We have." It had been a good year for all of us. There were some hardships still, but ultimately, we all finally healed from that last campaign. Laughter was common, and no one was weighed down by exhaustion. We still bore scars, but they didn't ache as much. "I'm glad we came, even if the reason makes me sad. It's a very nice country."

"It is." He smiled as Caitriona and Conall attempted to grab the snowflakes and we began walking again, slowly making our way back inside. "When things calm down, why don't we live here? In Silesse, I mean."

"That is a tempting thought, truthfully." I loved how quiet it was. I loved how peaceful it was. "I imagine Arvis would be saddened, though."

"Well, it wouldn't have to be immediate. Maybe we'll split the year. Or maybe we'll just wander about."

"I am not that fond of traveling. I would want a home." I smiled at him. "With that said, I wouldn't mind a visit to Sophara."

"Sophara?" He became thoughtful, nodding. "Might be nice. I haven't been there since everything happened. I haven't even visited the graves."

"Then we should do that. I do want our children to see your childhood home."

"In that case, we'll also have to visit Jungby."

"Well, we would have to anyway. Aideen will return there eventually, and I'm sure Caitriona and Conall will want to visit Lester. Chalphy is near, so they can visit Seliph too."

"And wherever Lex and Ayra settle down to visit Ulster and Larcei." He smiled back. "Then Silesse."

"You must really like it here." I laughed and reached up to brush the snow out of his hair. I knew my own was already covered; Caitriona and Conall's little hats were. "Well, where would we live? Would it be a castle?"

"Could be a village. I wouldn't mind a village."

"I see. I wouldn't mind being a simple village healer again." I'd be a healer no matter where we were. It was just too much of a part of me. "What about you? What would you do?"
"I would be the house-husband, of course." He grinned and I laughed again. "I'll cook and clean, raise the kids while you're out saving lives. Maybe do some odd jobs if we need more money to make ends meet, but not having to fight would be very appealing."

"I'm sure." I knew how little he liked fighting, for all that he was good at it. "That does sound nice, though."

"I think so too." He got a very serious look on his face suddenly. "Ah, but we have to have a dog."

"Pardon?"

"Dog. We have to have at least one. Maybe two." He smiled brightly, with that boyish smile I adored so much. "Can we have two?"

I thought about putting up an argument, but I knew I'd lose. I always lost when he smiled like that. "Providing that you keep them away from my medicines, and clean up after them, fine. But if they mess up any of my mending or medicines, they are out the door."

"Of course." His smile grew and I rolled my eyes. "I'll make sure they're perfectly well-behaved."

"And if the children are allergic, they are also out the door."

"They're my kids. They won't be allergic to dogs. Cats, maybe, but not dogs."

"I'm not sure allergies work that way."

"Of course they do."

"Now, now, set a good example for the children."

"Kids, here's how you make sure to get things you want from Mommy."

"Chulainn!"

He laughed and continued teasing. I rolled my eyes and continued scolding. Caitriona and Conall, not having a full idea of what was going on, simply laughed and tried to grab everything. This led to a panic when Caitriona tried to eat a flower, because babies wanted to put everything in their mouths, but it was fun, and full of laughter. I hoped these days could last forever.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Arvis's marriage to the royal heir is mentioned in the opening of Game-Chapter 4, revealed by Queen Rahna during a visit to Sigurd. And yes, Lachesis is pregnant, b/c pacing and timing. Gwyneth, as mentioned a few chapters ago, is the POV char for Memoirs of the Crusaders.

Lewyn's class, Bard, is technically capable of wielding all non-dark magic, but since FE4 is hilariously unbalanced, wind is the best magic (all tomes of the same level have equal might, but differ in weight. Guess which one is the lightest.), and the only light tome you can get in the first Gen is
Deirdre's Aura tome, you likely won't have someone using light magic once Deirdre leaves. Master Knights, in game, notably only have a C rank in Light, instead of an A rank like everything else (save Dark, which they cannot use). I'm taking this to be because there just wasn't someone to really teach her.

At around 4 months, babies tend to work out that people react to the world (i.e. parents will fuss when they cry, people will pick up things when dropped) and they like grabbing things and put it in their mouth because that's a way they explore the world. This is why you have those 'choking hazard' warnings around small toys. (quick tip: if something is small enough to fit into a paper towel tube, it is too small to be near a baby.)

Next Chapter – Winter's Winds (Game-Chapter 4 start)
Chapter 20) Winter's Winds

It's rather fun, talking about the future. Chulainn and I are far from the only ones making plans for 'when things are better'. Sigurd, for instance, talks happily of teaching Seliph how to ride when he's older. Lex teases Ayra that he'll teach their twins axes, and she rolls her eyes, but smiles and retorts that she'll teach the swords first. Aideen and Midir plan on teaching Lester how to shoot a bow, and maybe ride a horse. Ayra and Chulainn actually plan on teaching Caitriona and Conall swords. I 'threaten' to teach them all how to make medicine, if they must talk about what weapons and the exercise they'll teach the children, when they're older.

Of course, it's not all we talk about. We talk about weddings, about possible pairings in our group. We talk of teaching the children how to read and write. We talk about sharing stories from our homes, sharing special treats from those homes with each other. Ayra, for instance, has taken to making warm milk with honey in it whenever it looks like one of us needs a pick-me-up, the only 'dish' she knows how to make, because it's a traditional Isaachian drink for comfort.

It was fun. It was peaceful. It was heartwarming and made us all smile. We all should've known how it all would've ended, just based on that.

"Ugh… this is so confusing sometimes," Lachesis grumbled. She was glaring her tomes and books on spell theory that Lewyn and Azel had assigned to her, and complaining because, for the first time in a while, she couldn't immediately grasp something. "Pixies, sprites, sylphs… why?"

"Anima magic is the magic of the world, and the elemental spirits are the ones who lend their power so that spells can be cast," I explained, brushing her hair. We were sitting in front of her fireplace among many blankets and pillows, while I helped her get ready for the day and she studied. "Pixies are fire spirits, sprites are thunder spirits, and sylphs are wind spirits."

"And mages are those who bond to all three, but not too closely. Fire mages bond only to pixies in exchange for greater power, thunder mages bond only to sprites for greater accuracy, and wind mages bond only to sylphs for faster casting. The tighter bond also allows them to use higher level spells in a shorter time. Specialization versus versatility." She sighed gustily. "Then you have people like Lewyn, who went 'screw all that!'".

"Lewyn had a head start due to being the Forseti Major of our generation. You'll also notice that he doesn't really use fire, thunder, or light magic at all. He mostly just knows the theory, and to have them as a backup."

"Yes, yes." She growled under her breath again. "Elemental magic makes some sense. But how does light and dark magic figure into this? They don't seem to have convenient little spirits helping them out."

"That is a question for Claude, I am afraid. We're about at the end of my knowledge of magic." I set down my brush and started braiding her hair again. "Though I am of Vala's blood, I've never actually seen or sensed a pixie, unlike Arvis and Azel." Arvis thought it was because they sensed
how unwilling I was to hurt people, and like it or not, fire magic was a magic that harmed people. He also claimed he sensed them near me, but I always just smiled and chose against commenting. "Now, healing magic, I can tell you more about, but that's a lesson for later in the day."

"And I'm making way better progress there."

"To be fair, you're not starting at the very beginning."

"Why can't I just jump into throwing spells? Why do I need to learn the theory?"

"The beginning is a very good place to start." I found a tangle in her hair and carefully undid it before continuing to braid her hair. "When you read, you begin with?"

"A, b, c…" Lachesis sighed. "I know; I know. I'm just…"

"Frustrated. I know."

"Yeah." She whimpered a bit, and pressed a hand to her breast. They were paining her again. "Hey, Alicia, why didn't you breastfeed your own children again?"

"That's a rather odd thing to ask after so much time." I finished braiding her hair and tied it off. "The answer is simple, though. I wanted to get back to work more quickly. If Ayra or Aideen hadn't given birth so soon after me, I might've nursed them myself, but as it was…" I shrugged, though I knew she couldn't see it since I was sitting behind her. "It's nothing else, really. I chose against it, because there were other options that I liked better. Why ask?"

"Just wondering. I mean; I'll have to make that decision myself eventually."

"You're around three and a half months into your pregnancy, Lachesis. You still have quite a bit of time left." The words sounded so odd to me. It had been three and a half months since Finn, Ethlyn, and Quan had left. Conall and Caithrina were going to be sixth months soon, and Ulster, Larcei, and Lester were already five months. Seliph was eighteen months. Deirdre… Deirdre had been missing for over a year. "But that's neither here nor there. You're too frustrated to concentrate properly. Why don't you look at the letters we got from Leonster again to calm down?"

"Oh, yes!" Her face lit up, just as I had expected, and she scrambled up to run for where she'd tucked away the letter from Finn, humming all the while.

Queen Rahna, bless her, had managed to send a messenger bird to Leonster for us, both to make sure they had made it there safely and because she knew how dreadfully we missed Finn, Ethlyn, and Quan. To our surprise, and laughter, Leonster had sent an actual messenger back, bags heavy with gifts and letters for us. Included among them was, of course, letters from Finn, who was now well aware that Lachesis was pregnant and he was sad he couldn't be here to help her. More amusingly, though, was that Quan and Ethlyn had no idea, still, about how Finn and Lachesis technically eloped, so their own letters had mentioned being a bit worried because Finn had appeared a little frantic, but desperately insisted he was just fine. I decided to keep the secret still in my replies, just for fun.

"He mentioned that he talked to someone named Dorias, yes?" I asked her when she found her letter. She smiled happily at it, and lovingly smoothed it out. "He wanted advice?"

"He did," Lachesis laughed. She giggled, fiddling with her earrings. They were new, gifts from Finn, simpler than the ones I had seen her wear before. She proudly proclaimed that these ones were her new favorites. "He's apparently a duke or count or something in Leonster, and had been away on duty while his wife had been pregnant with his daughter, Selfina. Finn's friends with her
"Breathe, Lachesis."

"Right, right." She giggled, though. It had improved her mood significantly, hearing back from Finn, and learning that Finn was rather excited about the baby. "Anyway, the point is that while he was visiting Selfina, he talked to Dorias about it. It's why he made sure to send sketches he made of Leonster. Dorias suggested it."

"I see." I smiled, laughing softly. Those sketches really were lovely; Finn had sent a few to me as well. "You asked Finn to think of names, right?"

"Yeah, I couldn't really think of any." She rested a hand on her stomach, still smiling. "He's not sure for a girl's name, but 'Diarmuid' stood out for a boy. It's apparently the name of a folk hero in the Manster District."

"I see. Well, you still have time for a girl's name."

"True." She went back to giggling, and reading over the letter. As she did, I pulled out the small metal token I always kept in my pocket now, something else Finn had sent me.

Apparently, the tokens were sent to the family members of Leonster knights, as a sort of 'look what your family member is' thing, but also as a means of getting help if needed. Each one had the crest of Leonster carved into it, while the back proudly proclaimed that this was Finn's 'token'. Finn's parents had died when he was small, so when asked, he had wanted one to be sent to me, as his 'big sister'. Lachesis, Oifeye, and Shanan all got one as well, and all of us were ridiculously proud. It was now one of my most precious treasures, and looking at it reminded me of the letter I had gotten from Ethlyn, and so, my smile grew. Apparently, she'd been right in that she was pregnant again, though she was much further along than she had originally thought. She'd likely given birth before the end of the year, and promised to send me a letter after the birthing. She was excited about it, though apparently Altena was already jealous of her eventual sibling. Altena clung to Quan and Finn as much as possible in 'retaliation'. It sounded adorable, really.

A suddenly chill startled me out of my happy remembering, though, so I tucked the token back into my pocket and I went over to the window to make sure it was closed. When I did, though, I frowned, noticing something odd. "Why are there so many pegasus knights outside?" I murmured, pressing a hand to the glass as I tried to see who they were. The only pegasus knight we had was Erinys, and when Queen Rahna visited, she only had Annand with her. So to see so many flitting about outside was very, very odd. "Hmm? What's that shadow…?"

Noticing the shadow was heading straight for me, I ducked instinctively, just as a javelin crashed through the window and sailed over my head, embedding itself in the far wall. After a moment of staring, Lachesis and I made sure to grab a tome and healing staff, respectively, and race out of the room, bolting down the hall to the nursery, to make sure it was secure. Others, of course, had heard the shattering glass, or had suffered their own attacks, so people were running this way and that, preparing to answer this ambush.

I swung into the nursery, and smiled when I saw others were there. So, I quickly looked around, making sure everything was as it should be, and froze when I realized something horrible. I couldn't see Caitriona. I couldn't see Seliph. Where were they? They should've been in here. It was around their nap time. They should've been… where were they?

I hadn't realized I said the words aloud until Oifeye replied, "Oh, Shanan has them." He stood in front of me, making sure that he had my attention, and smiled reassuringly. "They weren't settling
down for their nap, so Shanan took them…” However, that smile dropped and his eyes went wide. My dread only grew. "He took them... outside... for a walk... to tire them out..."

A thousand thoughts shrieked through my head at that. A small part of me screamed that I needed to get to the infirmary, to make sure it was prepared, because others far more skilled could handle... that problem. I was the Chief Healer, and I had my own job. However, the rest of it was drowned out by sheer, desperate terror, and I was out the door and running down the hall before I could think twice. Of course, I couldn't really think at all. I couldn't. Caitriona, my daughter, was missing, last seen heading outside, just minutes before this ambush. Seliph, Sigurd and Deidre's son, was missing, last seen heading outside, just minutes before this ambush. Shanan, my charge, the little boy I adored, was missing, last seen heading outside, just minutes before this ambush.

So, I ran. I desperately ran through the halls, yelling for Shanan, Caitriona, and Seliph. Quite a few times, I ran into people, knocking Naoise and Alec over in my haste, for instance, and nearly bloodying my nose because I crashed into Arden. But I barely said even token apologies before I was running again, trying to find my missing three children.

It was the sound of metal clanging that finally let me find them, but the reason nearly made my heart stop, despite how hard it had been pounding. Shanan was in the gardens, desperately fighting off pegasus knights with a metal rod he'd happened to find, somewhere. Worse, he was backed into a corner and tucked behind him were Seliph and Caitriona, wailing from fright.

"Shanan!" I yelled, voice cracking because of how loud I was. Shanan briefly glanced over at me, and smiled before returning to fighting the pegasus knights. He was bleeding badly, which made heartbreaking sense. He didn't wear armor and Isaachian fighting styles emphasized dodging, instead of blocking, but he couldn't dodge without risking the children. So, he took the injuries he couldn't parry, and stood only through sheer determination. "Shanan, hang on!"

A pegasus knight broke off from the group to head for me, probably because I'd been yelling. But before I had time to even pretend to worry about that, a silver sword flashed twice above my head, and down the pegasus and its rider fell, both nearly decapitated. I glanced back to see a furious Sigurd, bloody silver sword in hand, snarling at the pegasus knights. I knew, right then, that they were dead. It didn't matter that they were mounted and he wasn't. It didn't matter that they had lances and he only had a sword. It didn't matter that he was only one person, and they were many. They had targeted Shanan, Seliph, and Caitriona. They tried to kill them. So, Sigurd was going to kill them instead. It was just that simple.

Therefore, I ignored them all, letting Sigurd cut a way through the pegasus knights so that I could reach Shanan. As soon as I did, Shanan collapsed, probably because he processed that everything would be okay, and I caught him, hugging him tightly. "Hey, Shanan," I murmured, kissing his hair. Thankful that I'd thought to hold onto my staff, I began healing up his numerous injuries, feeling like crying. "Hey, I'm here. Sigurd's here."

"Yay," Shanan replied, too tired to really emote. But he wasn't too tired to smile up at me. It was a bloody smile, and it scared me briefly, before I noticed that most of it had to be because of his facial injuries dripping blood inside his mouth, and him biting his lip. "They're safe, though. Seliph and Caitriona. I protected them. I kept them safe."

"Th-they are…” Biting back a sob, I made sure to smile at him. He deserved all the smiles, at least for right now. If he was to be scolded, I would leave that to someone else. "You did wonderfully. Thank you. Now, let me heal you, okay? That's what warriors do. They protect and then they sit still for the healers."

"K…” However, he did wriggle out of my hug so that he could work on calming Seliph and
Caitriona. "Easy, easy. Sigurd and Alicia are here. It'll be okay."

"You are…" Seriously, it was a struggle to keeping from crying. Shanan was… he was only eleven, yet here he was… "Shanan?"

"Yes?"

"I love you dearly. Move closer so that I can heal you."

"Oh, right!" He smiled sheepishly at me and did scooted closer, with Seliph and Caitriona tucked near him. "Sorry! I love you too, Alicia!" He looked behind me as I began healing him up again. "Wow, Sigurd's awesome. I mean; he's always awesome, but…"

"Well, I imagine he's very angry. They made a poor mistake, going after the three of you." I glanced back too, noticing how easily Sigurd was cleaving through them. However, I also saw one smart pegasus knight fly over Sigurd, out of reach, to head straight for us, and automatically threw myself over Shanan, Caitriona, and Seliph and closed my eyes as the lance came down.

However, it never hit. There was a strange choking sound, the feeling of something flying over us, and the clattering of something metallic. I opened my eyes slowly and saw the pegasus knight on the ground, spewing out blood as she desperately tried to claw at the arrow in her neck. She died quickly, in utter agony, and it was only afterwards that I thought to look up. There, kneeling on the roof, was King Jamke. Next to him, Brigid and Midir fired their own shots, knocking pegasus knights out of the skies with ease. The knights and pegasi hit the ground with horrifying 'thwumps', blood and feathers spiraling from corpses. The snow made the blood stand out all the more, and the gardens, normally so peaceful, were now a horribly gruesome sight.

"Sigurd, we've got it out here!" King Jamke called. He smiled when Sigurd looked up at him. "Get the kids inside! We're good!"

Sigurd and I did just that, and Sigurd took Seliph and Caitriona to the nursery, after I covered their faces with kisses and hugged them. I took Shanan to the infirmary to be better treated, and I winced when I noticed that it still wasn't quite prepared for the coming battle. I could see where Claude and Aideen had tried, but they'd been swamped by the initial wave of injured. So, when I finished with healing Shanan, I turned to Claude and tried to apologize.

However, he shook his head and smiled. "Alicia, your daughter was in danger," he chided. "Two children you adored were in danger. Of course you would run to them. Being a healer does not mean never being a little 'selfish', you know." He patted my shoulders, and I smiled back, relaxing slightly. I still felt horribly guilty, but it wasn't quite as bad. "Let's prepare the infirmary. We've a battle, it seems."

It was only a bit later that I realized that this was probably the first time we had a 'campaign' start with an attack on our home base. I wondered if the change meant good things, bad things, or nothing at all.

After dealing with the initial ambush, we interrogated some of the few survivors and learned what had happened. Duke Maios, the younger of Lewyn's uncles, decided to launch an assault on us, in the hopes of having a better base to attack the castle. That was why, actually, that there had been so many pegasus knights. As a member of the royal family, Maios had his own battalion, or whatever the proper term was, of pegasus knights. He also had his own healers and wind mages, and they were all coming at us for another assault.
"They're led by Archangel Deet'var, one of the four Angelic Knights of Silesse," Erinys explaining, finishing up her report. She'd gone on patrol and had also rattled off anything and everything she could think of. "I'm rather surprised she's fighting, truthfully. She recently gave birth to her daughter, Misha, and is supposed to be on leave."

"I see," Sigurd murmured. The 'war meeting' at the moment was very small, simply Sigurd, Erinys, Lewyn, and myself. The others, for now, were securing the defenses. There would be a larger meeting much later. "Anything else you can remember about her, Erinys?"

"Well, she wears something called a 'prayer bracelet', which was a wedding gift from Annand."

Erinys had to pause, and I wondered what she was thinking, fighting one of her former comrades. I wondered what Lewyn thought, but the dark expression and his silence spoke a lot. "It can make it difficult to kill her. It blurs the air around her, and the more wounded she gets, the more it blurs, making it much harder to aim."

"I see." Sigurd closed his eyes, nodded, and then opened them to look at his papers. "Well, everyone's been training and getting stronger, so it opens up all sorts of new strategies, really. That's a good thing."

"I also know the terrain fairly well," Lewyn murmured. He tried to smile, but it was tight and pained. "However, I must admit to being worried about the villages. There's quite a few between here and Thove, and it would not surprise me if my dear uncle Maios conscripted them or worse."

"We can use your knowledge to assist in making it there quickly, once we fight off this next wave," Sigurd replied softly. He looked down at the maps again, and then up at Lewyn. "Well, we might send a few ahead. It depends on how many attack us."

"Thank you."

"Of course." Sigurd glanced at me. "Anyone absolutely staying here? I know Ayra is, by her own request, but medically speaking?"

"Lachie will remain here with me," I informed him. I crossed my arms and tried to think of anyone else who might need to stay back for health reasons and nodded when I couldn't think of any. "While her nausea and dizziness have thankfully lessened, there's too much of a risk. That isn't even going into the problems of making sure she's getting enough to eat, and enough proper care. Besides, she has been making very good progress with her magic training, and…" I trailed off, not sure of how to word the other reason why I wanted her near.

But Sigurd, thankfully, saw it easily. "Of course. She can guard here as well, just in case there's an assault. I'd rather… I'd rather not have a second Agusty." Sigurd closed his eyes again, this time to hold back tears. I rubbed his back reassuring, and Lewyn's dark look faded for a sympathetic smile. Erinys looked down to hide her own tears, also from sympathy. "We're definitely going to have more guards here."

"Thank you. I do appreciate it."

"Of course." Sigurd opened his eyes again, and none of us commented on the tears we could still see. "So, how will the healers…?"

"We're going to try a new set-up, where Claude will set up a field infirmary while Aideen will continue to operate as an on-the-field healer as she has been, since she's done well with her tome training. The ones particularly bad will be Warped or Returned here to the main infirmary with me, since Ethlyn was kind enough to leave her Return staff with us."
"So, Aideen heals those who can still fight, Claude tends to those who need rest but can fight in an emergency, and you take care of the ones who are out of the fight entirely. Whereas Erinys, Tailltiu, and Lewyn will pitch in where they can, but primarily focus on fighting." Sigurd glanced up at Lewyn and Erinys, who both nodded in return. They'd been doing well in their lessons, but they weren't trained to be *healers*, like Aideen. "And, thankfully, we managed to buy a Physic staff, so that will ease the problem of her not being able to keep up with the mounted units. She adamantly doesn't want to be on a horse during a battle."

"I don't blame her." I smiled serenely, making sure my healer's mask was in place. I wanted to be as calm and reassuring as possible, no matter how uneasy I felt. "We'll try this out with these battles, since you're not going very far for now, to see how well it works. If it does, then the burden will be divided between the three of us, and we should hopefully not be too overwhelmed."

"A much needed thing, since you'll be watching the kids here with Oifeye and Shanan." Sigurd paused and looked up. "We'll need to get some wet nurses, won't we?"

"Actually, we might not. Ayra is staying here with me, remember?"

"We'll ask her, then, if she wants us to find a wet nurse. Since Aideen is definitely coming with us, she'd be nursing Lester too. Five kids are a lot."

"True, and it will be on top of whatever guarding and patrolling she'll want to do."

"I do know a few in the nearby village who definitely wouldn't mind," Lewyn added, with a smile. "I'd actually want to go ahead and move them inside the castle anyway, truthfully. At Agusty, it was during civilian evacuation that Deirdre and you were attacked, right, Alicia?"

"It was," I confirmed. I winced as I remembered letting that man inside, letting that man close, because I had thought he was someone who needed shelter. If I hadn't done that, maybe Deirdre would still be with us. "It would save us future trouble, just in case. We're already going to have trouble due to the windows."

"Right, first time really fighting fliers." Lewyn made a face. "I mean; we fought the Thracians, but they did that one attack and then just… disappeared, for some reason. An ambush that nearly killed all of us, and then nothing."

"I suppose Chagall only paid enough for one attack." I tugged my sleeve over the dragon's eye bracelet, even though I knew there was no way anyone knew what it meant. Healing Travant would be my secret, always. I hadn't even told Chulainn. "Regardless, this will be the first time we face fliers in proper combat and, unfortunately, we set up the infirmary on one of the higher floors."

"Why was that done again?"

"We decided to turn the largest room we had into the infirmary, just in case."

"Oh. Right. Shit."

"Yep." I shrugged. "At least we made sure the nursery didn't have easily exploited windows?"

"We can fret about that later," Sigurd sighed. He rubbed at his temples, and I made a mental note to send him a headache remedy, one with ginger since I knew his stomach would also be turning with all this stress. Glancing at Erinys and Lewyn, I added 'make sure they got some calming teas' to the note. I was certain they'd need it. "For now, Erinys, I would like you to do another patrol. Lewyn, start evacuations. Talk Sylvia and Claude with you." He looked up at me. "Or do you need
"Lachesis and Aideen will be more than enough help," I reassured. "There weren't too many injured. Shanan was the worst." I had to fight off another wince. Poor Shanan... Ayra, Chulainn, and Lex had fusssed over him so much, but he was just so proud of having protected Seliph and Caitriona. He was a child, yet... "Sigurd, do you mind talking to Shanan later? I fear the attack on Agusty might've had a traumatizing effect that I did not foresee."

"After the fight, I will. Let me know what to look for?"

"Of course."

We all split off then, and I headed towards the infirmary. On the way, I passed by King Jamke, likely heading to give Sigurd a report, and I paused, thinking of something. Closing my eyes, I took a breath to settle my nerves and turned. "Ki... Jamke!" I called. He stopped and carefully turned, looking a little confused. I didn't blame him. I had never called him by simply his name before. I had always used a title, the one person I still did that with. "Thank you, for saving us earlier."

"It's no trouble," Ki... Jamke replied. He smiled kindly and laughed a little. "I figured I should make up a little for nearly killing Shanan."

"I suppose." I hesitated before gathering up a little courage. "I... I doubt I'll ever quite forgive you for that. But, if you do not mind, I would... like to try and befriend you."

"That... yeah, that sounds good." Jamke grinned, and I tentatively smiled back. "But first, defense."

"Yes. So, be careful out there, Jamke."

"Be careful here, Alicia."

I enjoyed our new setup. Yes, I only saw the absolutely worst of the wounded, but because I only saw them, I had more time to devote to them. That meant we actually had a lower than normal death rate, at least of the very badly injured, especially since I did have help. Oifeye had insisted on staying with me instead of going to the battle, so he assisted me, and Lachesis helped whenever her health permitted. Shanan and Ayra mostly watched the children.

"Hey, how's it going in here?" With that said, Ayra frequently checked in, both because she also did patrols and because she knew I liked hearing that the children were okay. "It looks bloody and it smells horrible, so I'm guessing normal?" she teased, grinning. It was odd being in a 'battle' situation and not seeing her in her normal armor. One of the older ladies said something about the armor being too heavy and impacting lactation, and while I wasn't certain that was actually true, Ayra had decided to not risk it until we were certain. She was, after all, nursing all five, refusing the nursemaid, because she was stubborn and prideful, and a little too attached to the children to 'give' them to anyone else. "Though, maybe not. Alicia?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," I replied, smiling. I brushed my hair behind my ear, hands damp from the scrubbing I'd given them. "A wave of injured just finished up. I was about to do secondary treatment, but decided to catch my breath."

"And finally let your mind wander." Ayra slipped behind me and braided my hair back for me. It was a lot longer than I had ever worn it, almost as long as hers. "Where are Oifeye and Lachesis?"

"In the back. The blood and other smells made her nauseous. So, she and Oifeye are redoing
"Aw, poor Lachesis…" Ayra whimpered in sympathy and I smiled. "Say, odd question."

"Yes?"

"Do you know what Diadora looks like? Your brother's fiancé, I mean."

"No?" I twisted to frown at her. "Of course not. The papers are too small for something as pointless as that, and it's not like the messenger birds can carry a portrait." Well, I supposed it could wear a little locket or something, but what was the point of that? I didn't need to know what she looked like, especially to the point of having her sit for a portrait just to indulge a minor curiosity. "Arvis doesn't know what Chulainn looks like either. He only knows that Chulainn has blue eyes, and that's just because Conall might end up with a blue right eye." His heterochromia was becoming more and more pronounced as the weeks passed. If they did end up with the eye colors Chulainn predicted, I knew I'd have to deal with at least a day of smugness. "I only told Arvis my twins' predicted eye colors to make him laugh. I knew he'd need it, given everything."

"That's what I figured." She smiled and turned my head forward to continue braiding my hair. "Sorry, Shanan asked if you did."

"Why would Shanan want to know?"

"Not sure. He even mentioned it was just a random thought." She patted my shoulders to let me know she was done, and I began doing my secondary checks. "I suppose he's just trying to mentally picture your family."

"Well, he's family too." I smiled at her, and she beamed back at me. "I mean; you all have to be at this point. How long have we all basically lived together?"

"Three years. Coming up on four. Far better years than I ever would've thought, running from Isaach as I had to."

"Certainly." Noticing that one of the unconscious patients had bled through their bandages on their torso, I undid the bandages and noticed that it was a much rougher wound that I had originally thought. So, I gathered up my stitching supplies and sat down to sew it up. Even with that, it wasn't bad enough for a healing staff. At least, it wasn't when I had this much time to work. "But, regardless, no, I don't, and I don't need to know. I'll learn when I meet her, just as Arvis will learn what Chulainn looks like when he meets him."

"Makes sense to me, all things considered. It'll be like a surprise!"

"Precisely." I smiled up at her before focusing on my attention back on my stitching. "Now, if he asked, I'd let him know, of course. But, honestly, I think that he finds it too hilarious to ask at this point. Though, as I said, the papers are just so small. We can barely fit all the things we want on them, without going into things like that."

"True."

"I thought I heard talking." Lachesis popped out of the back and hugged Ayra. "Hiya~!" she cheered, beaming. She was still pale and a little green, but at least she was cheerful. "How is everything?"

"Going well, going well," Ayra replied. She hugged Lachesis back and peered over my shoulder to see just what I was doing. "Need help, Alicia? I'm guessing Oifeye is still doing inventory?"
"He's doing a double check. Since we heard noise, I came out to make sure it's not another wave of injured. But here, help me do the rest of the secondary checks, Ayra. We'll need to watch for bleeding through bandages mainly."

"I see. Sounds grim." Still, Ayra walked and checked the patients alongside Lachesis. "We should talk of fun stuff. For instance, has anyone else noticed how close Claude and Sylvia seem to be getting, or is that just me?"

"It's not just you," I laughed, continuing my stitching. I could do this in my sleep at this point, so gossiping wasn't a problem at all. "I work with them often, you know. Sylvia has started seizing any chance she can get to stay close to Claude, and Claude certainly doesn't mind. We're into longing gaze stages, so no teasing quite yet."

"Oh, that's so adorable!" Lachesis giggled. She paused by one patient, and undid the bandages on their arm, coughing at the smell wafting from it. "Ugh, this one is infected. Let's get the cleaning herbs, and… Alicia, should I use a healing staff for it?"

"No, just clean and bandage it, for now. We don't want to risk accidentally sealing the infection inside and generating an abscess." I finished stitching up the torso and bandaged it back up before moving on to the next patient. Ayra fetched some of the disinfecting concoctions for Lachesis. "But speaking of potential couples, Aideen is fond of Brigid and Jamke marrying."

"I can see that," Ayra commented. She actually handled cleaning the injury, letting Lachesis move on to the next one. "They spend a lot of time with each other, and they've already settled into friendship. That's always important. You have to be friends."

"Does that really count with you, Ayra?" Lachesis asked, innocently. She changed another set of bandages for a different patient, smiling in relief when there was nothing unexpected with it. "You and Lex were always bickering."

"Bickering is how we show our affection. We enjoy it too much. But that's how we work. It's how our friendship works, and it's how our relationship works."

"I see." Lachesis glanced over at me. "Hey, I just realized. I don't think I ever heard just how you and Chulainn got together. Just that you were."

"That's… wait, you're right." Ayra pouted at me, and I kept up my healer's mask to keep from laughing. "I know I know more than most people in the army, but you never told me exactly how. Yet here you are, knowing how practically everyone else in the group paired up."

"No, I'm afraid I don't. I don't know how Ethlyn and Quan became a couple," I protested. I really did have to fight to keep from smiling. "I'm afraid that story never reached the gossips."

"Um… why are you three talking about this?" Oifeye, however, saved me from 'having' to answer, mostly by stepping out from the back. "There's people wounded?" he continued, adorably confused. "And you're changing bandages and stitching wounds?"

"You have to have a little bit of cheerfulness in your life, and the dead have already been moved out thanks to Beowolf and Arden, yes?" Lachesis pointed out, smiling. "Oh, hey, we should actually give you relationship advice. Has anyone caught your eye?"

"I-is this a conversation to be having right now!?"

"What? You're seventeen, and only two years younger than Finn and Ethlyn." That, of course, meant he was only a year younger than her, but she chose against pointing that out. "I think.
"Yes, Oifeye is five years younger than me," I murmured. I paused, realizing something. "Wait, am I the oldest of our little group here?"

"I… think so, actually. You're two years older than me, at least," Ayra replied after a moment. She thought a bit, nodding. "Yes, you're twenty-two, and I'm twenty. You're the old lady."

"Oh, how wonderful." I made my voice as dry as possible. "Well, the old lady says give the youngster proper romance advice, in case he's into that. He might find a nice person who catches his fancy, and if he does, he should have good advice."

While Lachesis and I continued our secondary checks, with Ayra and Oifeye's assistance, the three of us teased Oifeye terribly, and then teased each other to make it fair. They didn't get the story of my confession out of me, of course, but other things were fair game, and Oifeye and Lachesis did learn from Ayra that I had needed Arvis to tell me that I was in love before I knew it. That had made them all laugh, and I had 'chased' Ayra out of the infirmary afterwards to pretend we had some sort of seriousness.

However, it was hard to hold onto that 'seriousness'. Either the battle was going very well, or very poorly, but only a handful more injured arrived, and we dealt with them easily. Some died, of course. You always had those who died. But with fewer patients, and more time and medicine to devote to them, it was less, and we had more free time to replace the medicines we had used. I made sure extras were made, just in case. Of course, I probably should've just had someone watching the windows, because one shattered, again, due to a thrown javelin.

"Well, you're quite rude," I informed the pegasus knight climbing through the broken window, a woman wearing white armor and with green hair falling to her chin. Lachesis had darted into the back to snag a tome, while Oifeye followed to help her. "Surely, there were more polite ways to let yourself in."

"War isn't about politeness," the woman scoffed. She held herself with a surprisingly amount of dignity, considering she was bleeding from the broken glass and her pegasus hovered awkwardly behind her outside. "This is simple tactics. They'll be demoralized if their healers die."

"You're an idiot if you think I'm the only healer in the group, and shame on you for letting the cold in while there are injured." I decided the best way to deal with this was just to treat her as a nuisance, and to maintain my healer's mask. If nothing else, it annoyed her. "Also, why would you climb in through the window? You've already gouged your hands and limbs, and you're bleeding without me having to do a thing."

"As if you know how to fight. You'd be on the battlefield if you did."

"But this is a battlefield, where I battle death. My patients here are those who death did not claim, and thus, those you failed to kill." I shrugged, still nonchalant. Honestly, given Travant, Zyne, and Sadima, she wasn't quite measuring up. "I do not claim it is easier or harder than your job, but I am certain it is harder than cutting down an unarmed woman."

"Ugh… are you trying to talk me to death?"

"I am a healer. I do not kill anyone." I noticed Lachesis finally step out of the back, fire tome in hand. "That's why Sigurd makes sure to leave guards."

"What?" The woman screamed as Lachesis released a fire spell, stumbling back towards the
"Argh…" She snarled over at Lachesis, and Lachesis glared back. However, I did notice she looked a little green and winced. This was exactly why I forbade her from going out into 'proper' battle. Her nausea was surging back. "Little brat! I should-"

However, to my surprise, Oifeye darted out from behind Lachesis and struck the woman's arm, carving a deep gash down her arm. I stared, startled, before vaguely remembering that Sigurd did teach Oifeye how to fight. I'd known that, on an intellectual level, but he never went out to fight, even as he grew older, always hanging back to work more on strategy. So, I had never truly made the connection, until now. Now, Oifeye stood protectively in front of me with a bloody sword, glaring at the woman, and I couldn't help but stare a bit. The little boy I had taught to sew was protecting me. It was an odd feeling, truly.

Lachesis threw another fireball and Oifeye struck at the woman again, making her stumble back. She snarled and retaliated, catching Oifeye in the side. Oifeye stumbled, but he ducked down under a second strike and snatched the bracelet on her wrist, tugging it off for some strange reason, and Lachesis covered him with a third fire spell. The woman maneuvered back towards the broken window, scooping up some broken glass and throwing it into Oifeye's face. He flinched, but struck her across the stomach, as Lachesis managed a fourth fireball, but faltered, covering her mouth. I grabbed my healing staff, preparing to heal them both.

Then another javelin appeared, straight through the woman's head, and down she fell in a mess of blood. As the collapsed, another person climbed through the broken window: a bloody, exhausted Erinys. She stared at us for a long moment before collapsing in tears. "You're okay…" she sobbed. I checked worriedly on Oifeye and Lachesis, but Lachesis took my healing staff to heal him up, so instead, I focused on hugging and calming Erinys. "Oh, thank the gods…" She clung to me tightly and I stroked her hair. "W-when I saw that Deet'var was heading here, I thought… I thought…"

"This is why I insisted on guards," I murmured. I smiled at her before letting her cry into my chest. "So, that was Deet'var. Oifeye, is that why you went after the bracelet?"

"Yep!" Oifeye proudly declared. He grinned at me, even as Lachesis carefully picked glass out of the wounds on his face. "It was hard to notice unless you were close, but I saw the slight bending of air. around here So, now we've got the bracelet to use however we want, and… well…"

"I see." I smiled at him, more than a little proud. Strange as it was, I was proud of how well he had grown up. "When you two are healed up, check the injured, just in case, and then let's get a blanket to block the cold."

It did take a little longer to calm Erinys down, mostly because she had been absolutely terrified that she'd fly back to seeing someone in a pool of blood, much like Agusty, and a bit to reassure the other guards that everything was fine, and that this was far more unexpected. We made notes to better the patrols, just in case, and to request an archer or two to remain behind as guards, before seeing Erinys off with a reassurance and then settling in for the next wave of injured. The battle didn't stop just because the infirmary had been attacked by a very cocky someone, after all.

The battle continued with ease, and our group gained a total victory, thanks to Lewyn's knowledge of the area and Erinys's knowledge of the typical tactics used. Since it was late, though, and because Sigurd wanted to reorganize the defenses, it was decided that they'd push on to Thove, and the villages, in the morning. This led to very amusing things when it was time to go to bed, though. At least, I found it amusing, though I desperately tried to not let that show. I was scolding, after all.

"Chulainn, you are going to battle in the morning," I chided, trying to get him to go to bed. He
dodged my attempts, though, happily playing and cuddling with the children, particularly Caitriona. I knew it was because she had been in so much danger earlier. "You will not be marching tired!"

"I can handle less sleep," Chulainn protested, ducking as I tried to snag his collar. He kissed me quickly before darting out of range, holding both Conall and Caitriona. The two of them, of course, were laughing at the 'game'. "However, I won't be able to spend time with the two of them for days. Days!"

"You will spend less time if you die because you were too tired, you know."

"You say that like I haven't fought exhausted before. I'm a former gladiator, you know." He stuck his tongue out at me childishly and I rolled my eyes, doing my best to give him a stern look and to not laugh. "You're smiling."

"It's your imagination, dear." I sighed and crossed my arms, fixing him with the sternest look I could. "The twins need to sleep. They can't stay up. It's bad for them."

"Aw, come on." He sulked and, amusingly, the children mimicked him. "I'll be leaving in the morning."

"You'll see them when you come back. It's not like you're going to actually die on me, are you?"

"Not before meeting your brother, at least." He grinned, but panicked when I scowled. "Just a joke, Alicia. I don't plan on dying for quite some time."

"Good. I'd rather our children got to know their father, even if he's being childish." I finally softened for a smile. "I hope they don't get your stubbornness, though."

"You're the stubborn one of us two." He did finally tuck Caitriona and Conall into their crib, shaking the rattles for them. I couldn't help but smile at the sight. "You refuse to learn how to fight."

"I am a healer."

"A healer doesn't mean letting people kill you."

"I don't let anyone kill me." My smile dropped, annoyance creeping in. "It goes against my oaths, and it goes against me. It's better to devote my attention to healing people. We have guards."

"And there were guards at Agusty! There were guards here, and yet Shanan and Caitriona almost...!" It was hard to say who was more surprised by his shouting: him or me. He wasn't one for shouting. "That's..." He paused because the children started crying, also startled by the sudden noise and letting their displeasure be known. "Ah, I'm sorry. Easy, easy..."

I waited for him to calm down the twins before even trying to continue the conversation. "Chulainn?" He didn't look up. He just fussed over them with shaking hands. "Chulainn." When he didn't react again, I went to him, wrapping my arms around him and pressing my cheek to his back. "I love you."

"I love you too. And I'd wished you'd learn to fight back, so that you can get away if someone comes again." He sighed and turned to hug me tightly. "I don't want you to be that injured again. I don't... I don't..."

"I'm sorry." I leaned up to kiss him and he kissed me back almost desperately. "But, I hesitate..."
"I know. I know." He kissed me again and then rested his forehead against mine. "I just…"

"I'll be fine. There are more guards this time. We did have a scare with the ambush, and with Deet'var, but that was just a mistake. Midir is staying with some other archers to help."

"One mistake is all that it takes." He laughed bitterly and hugged me tightly, again. "I'm sorry. I'm scared of losing everything again. It happened once. It almost happened twice. It almost happened three times. And now there's so much more to lose." He held me even tighter, almost to the point of hurting. "I don't want to lose everything again. I'd rather die."

"It will be okay, Chulainn." I pushed away slightly, just so that I could cup his face and smile up at him. It was almost painful, just because of how anguished and terrified he looked. "There are more guards this time, as I said, and we already have the civilians evacuated here, so we can afford to look at travelers with suspicion. We'll be more careful, and the nursery is the most defensible room in this whole fort. No one is going to venture outside for random walks."

"Logically, I know all that, but…" He sighed and let go of me to cling to my hands. "I'm being an idiot."

"Agusty scarred all of us, and you, my dearest love, have lost everything before. Of course you're scared. I'm sorry I didn't consider that sooner." I smiled sadly. "But I can't…"

"You can't hurt people. You hesitate. Your natural inclination is to save them." He smiled slightly, but it was bitter enough to make my heart ache. "I find it hilarious that I, who have killed so many, fell in love with one of the few people in the world who finds it hard to even hurt others."

"I think it makes sense, you and I. After all, I am a healer, and I fell in love with the gentlest man, who always makes sure everyone, especially me, is taken care of." I kissed him again, and this time, almost like he was unconsciously trying to prove my words right, it was a gentle kiss. "But, if I may, I am more worried for you than I am for us here. All the unknowns for defending our home here apply to the battlefield. Normally, you and Ayra fight together, and she's with me. Azel can't watch over you either."

"Tailtiu and I will stay near each other, and I will tease her about Azel for you." He kissed my nose and I giggled, amused and touched. "We'll also be near Brigid and Jamke, since the archers will be our enemies' priority targets and will need extra guards." He kissed my cheek and used that as a distraction to tickle me and make me yelp. He found it fun, even if he never let me retaliate. "Besides, the smiths here have made me better armor, and we've all have been training quite a bit."

"I'm aware of that." I tried to tickle him back, but he caught my hands and spun me around before catching me in a hug. "Darn it. Let me tickle you for once."

"No." He grinned and actually picked me up. I squeaked, and flailed a bit before settling my hands on his shoulders. "We should probably go to bed, though."

"We should. I want you to be perfectly rested for the coming battles." I leaned down to kiss his forehead. It was a very odd angle, looking down at him. "The twins and I will be waiting for you, Chulainn. Try not to be long."

"I'll try."

The inevitable civil war had begun, and here we were, trapped into fighting it. What else could we do, though? We owed far too much to Silesse, and Queen Rahna, to simply let Duke Maios do as
he pleased. I had a bad feeling about this. I could only hope I was just being paranoid, because so many things went 'wrong' during our last campaign.

Notes on Sylvia:

A 17 year old dancer, who has lived on her own for quite some time. Used to cling to anyone who showed her kindness, but has eased off ever since 'kindness' became far more normal than 'cruelty' in her life

Though she is capable of using swords, her greatest asset in battle is her Dancer's Gift, which helps rejuvenate the weary to fight harder

She is very talented at making medicines, and has a rather odd interest in healing. It's almost as odd as that spot on her back she never lets anyone see, having it always hidden by her shirt no matter what.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: And here starts Game-Chapter 4. Aka, the chapter where most, if not all, of your units are going to promote at the very beginning of the chapter, though some might've promoted sooner (Lex with his Elite skill, for instance, and it's generally considered a good idea to promote Finn and Ethlyn before they leave). Promotions in FE4 work a bit differently than the later games. Basically, you can only promote at level 20, but your level doesn't reset back to 0. Instead, all units have a max level cap of 30. So, there's no potential loss of promoting your units ASAP, particularly since some get Pursuit (the skill you need to actually attack twice in game) upon promotion (Lachesis and Dew, for instance). I tried to make nods to most of them. Also, have Alicia and Jamke finally mending that bridge, sort of (remember this scene for later).

Deet'var (that is her most recently translated name based on what I could find, yes) wears a Prayer Ring, which gives a unit the prayer skill, which in this game, ups avoid if you're under 10 HP (to the point that you have a guaranteed 100% dodge if you're at 1HP). It's basically there to punish you if you don't kill her in one hit (okay, not quite that bad, but still). Her daughter, Misha, is actually a potential playable character in FE5 (depends on which route you went on during the route split). Dorias, briefly mentioned here, is an important NPC from FE5. Selfina, his daughter, is a playable char from FE5.

Also, yes, there is a reference to 'Do-re-mi' from 'Sound of Music'. I love it, and I couldn't resist. As a reminder, the ages mentioned in the bios are their ages upon recruitment, not necessarily their age at the 'current' point in the story. To use Sylvia's as an example, she was 17 in Game-Chapter 2, her recruitment chapter, and she is 19 at this current point in the story.

Next Chapter – Dance in the Skies
Chapter 21) Dance in the Skies

The others march off in the morning, heading for the nearby villages and Thove castle. I spent most of that morning apologizing and reassuring Chulainn before seeing everyone off, making sure to do so with a smile. Afterwards, things are quiet. No battles come near. No real emergencies. About once a day, we get a rush of badly injured, but never enough to really overwhelm. Those that die are buried with as much ceremony as we can give, and all the flowers we can find with the snows.

It's quiet enough that, if not for the absence of everyone, it would've been easy to forget there was a battle going on. I'm not sure how much I like it. It makes me nervous, like something is stalking us. But it's good for the children, at least. They're getting a lot of extra attention.

"Thanks for handling the diapers, Lachesis," Ayra laughed, picking up Larcei from the changing table and gently tossing her up in the air. Larcei laughed and wiggled as Ayra caught her, hands going to Ayra's earrings, but Ayra tilted her head back to make sure she couldn't. "You're rather good at it."

"Well, I do have practice from Ares, Ayra," Lachesis pointed out with a grin and a wink. She winced, though, and rested her hand on her stomach. "Though, I think the smell did make my stomach turn."

"I'm sure Alicia's already got some medicine for that."

"Probably. Alicia?"

"Oh, no, I don't keep a supply of medicines to help ease your nausea despite how nauseous you get," I deadpanned, not even looking up from my mending. I heard them both giggle, and smiled slightly. "It's on the back table."

"Thank you, Alicia~!" Lachesis giggled. She caught me in a quick hug as she passed and skipped to the back. "Ugh, I'll be so glad when this nausea ends!"

"Based on Ayra and Aideen, that'll be after you've given birth."

"Ugh!"

Laughing softly, I focused on my mending again, enjoying the fun here in the nursery. Normally, I'd be in the infirmary, or at least making medicine, but considering the low number of injured and how the worst of their injuries were already tended to, Oifeye and Shanan had volunteered to watch the infirmary for me and to make medicines, since they've done both often. I'd been a bit hesitant, but I did relent, wanting to spend a little bit of time with Caitriona and Conall. I trusted them to know what they were doing, and I knew that at the first sign of something they didn't know, they'd immediately come find me.

A tugging on the end of the pants I was mending made me look down, and I laughed when I saw
Caitriona batting at it, frowning and lifting herself up a little. I set my mending to the side and scooped her up, setting her on my lap to play and tickle her. She was starting to be able to sit up without support, so she'd probably be crawling soon, based on how it had been with Seliph. Conall didn't show any inclination, far more easy going than Caitriona who wanted to get into everything, but I was fairly certain he'd follow before long. Though, currently, he was content with relaxing with his rattle, particularly when Ayra dropped Larcei off with him and started playing with them both. I worried a bit about Seliph, Ulster, and Lester, but Lachesis had the latter two and Seliph looked very content in stacking up his blocks. His bear, the one I'd bought him, was tucked in his lap.

He looked up suddenly, like he knew I was watching, and pushed himself up to toddle over, carrying his bear with him. "Licia," he declared, pointing at me. Then he climbed up in my lap, almost knocking Caitriona off, but I caught her before she fell. When she scrunched up her face to cry, Seliph made his bear 'dance', really just moved it up and down, to make her giggle. "Story please?"

"Oh, you want a story?" I asked, smiling. He nodded, and I laughed. "Okay, let's pick a book for you and Caitriona, then."

Once I finished telling them the story, Seliph played with, or beside rather, Caitriona while she tried to eat one of his blocks. We had to deal with Seliph throwing a little tantrum, and Ayra took over playing with Seliph while I fusssed over Caitriona and then Conall. I'd just settled down to mend again when Midir appeared, back from whatever patrol he had done to play with the children with us. The four of us chatted happily about whatever, from the birds Midir saw on his patrol to how cleanup and repairing the damages from the battles was going.

However, all the cheer paused when Midir suddenly frowned and said, "Alicia, I think Ulster might have a bruise?"

"Really?" I asked, startled. I put my mending to the side and shot to my feet, wondering how I could've missed a bruise during my last checkup. I must've been very distracted. "Let me see."

"Here." He picked up Ulster and set him on my little 'examination table' tucked in one of the corners. Ayra immediately began hovering over my shoulder worriedly, shifting from one foot to the other. "He's not bothered by it, but I did notice."

"Understood." I first checked over him with my staff and, finding nothing, I began simply prodding Ulster. All he did was giggle and babble, apparently thinking it was a game. "Where did you think you saw the bruise, Midir?"

"On his right wrist."

"Ah." I focused all my attention there and did finally see the discoloration, blacks and pale bruise implying a bruise. However, when I touched Ulster's wrist, I felt a slight 'buzz' of power that I knew far too well. "Is that... a Holy Mark?" I couldn't believe my eyes, really. I, of course, couldn't really talk about getting a Holy Mark at so young age. I'd been only a few months older, or so I'd always been told. But still, it was a bit startling. "I... I think it is." Carefully, I brought up Ulster's hand to study his wrist far more closely. Because he was small, it was hard to really see the exact designs, but I could see the black marks of Odo and the blue-grey, like steel, of Neir twining about each other, almost like a bracelet. "That's..."

Ayra leaned against my back to look too and sighed. "Wow, so his appeared early, huh?" she murmured. She didn't seem too surprised. "I wonder if it's because both Lex and I got ours early."
"You did?" I asked, curious. "Really?"

"Yep." Ayra smiled wryly. "And hey, he's older than me when I got mine. I was two months old. Lex said his appeared when he was a year and a half."

"That's… odd," Midir whispered. He frowned thoughtfully, looking down at the floor. "La… Aideen's appeared when she was five years old, or so she told me. The same age Lady Brigid's Major Mark appeared, actually. I think she said they appeared the same day."

"I got mine early too," Lachesis revealed. She scooped up the other children and set them up on my 'examination' table, for some reason. "I was about four. Ethlyn got hers at the 'normal' ten. Of course, that normal is only really an average."

"Five years old for a Major, and ten for a Minor, yes?"

"Yeah." Lachesis shrugged, but there was a dark and worried look in her eyes. "I mean; Tailtiu's appeared early too. She told me when that letter from Bloom arrived just before everyone left. Apparently her niece, Ishtar, is already showing her Major mark. She's the same age as our kids, not including Seliph of course."

"Wait, hold on, we had that many early showers?" Ayra asked, frowning. She glanced to the side briefly before looking to me. "You mentioned yours appeared very early. Do you know when Azel's appeared?"

"I'm afraid not," I replied, finishing up my check on Ulster. At the least, I couldn't remember when it was. "I haven't asked Chulainn, so I don't know his either."

"I do. His appeared when he was a year old." Ayra's expression became incredibly serious. "That's… odd. Average though it may be, to have so many minors show early, and not just early, but significantly earlier…"

"Oh, I don't like that," Lachesis muttered. She'd clasped her hands in front of her, and looked down, strangely tense. "In Agustria, it was always said that the Holy Blood would tell and make itself known if there was darkness on the horizon. Or something. I can't remember the exact warning. I only remember it at all because there were people who fretted that something bad was coming when mine showed so early."

"In Isaach, we had a similar warning, but it was decided that only two didn't mean much," Ayra whispered. Her eyes were dark now, and both Midir and I began shifting uncomfortably as the tension in the air grew. "I'd dismissed Lex's as just another coincidence, but… honestly, based on this, almost every single Minor Blood of our generation had their Mark appear early? Ethlyn, and possibly Azel, are the only exceptions? Maybe Oifeye, depending on which 'generation' he falls in, and when his appeared. But at most three out of… how many?"

"Well, Tailtiu has a younger sister that we'll need to ask about, and I don't know about Andrei, Aideen's younger brother…"

"His appeared early," Midir revealed. He frowned as well, and I desperately tried to ignore the heaviness in the air. "I remember hearing the story in Jungby, of how his appeared shortly after Lady Brigid disappeared. What about the Major Blooded? Did any of theirs appear early?"

"In our generation, I don't think there was anything unusual," Ayra commented. She leaned against the wall, sighing. "Mariccle's appeared around his fifth birthday, the normal. Shanan, though… his appeared when he was three."
"Ares's hadn't shown when I last saw him, but he's only three or four now, so I don't know if that changed," Lachesis sighed. She began wringing her hands and, morbidly curious, I decided to check over Seliph once I was done with Ulster. "We can ask about Altena in our next letters to Leonster, whenever that happens."

"But we do still have a confirmation that two of the majors of the next generation, of Shanan's generation, appeared early and."

"Make that three," I interrupted, feeling a little ill. There, on Seliph's back, was a Holy Mark, one so defined that I couldn't believe I'd missed it earlier. It was a major Baldur mark, based on how it took up all of the left side of his back and the blue. I frowned when I thought I saw something silver among the blue, but shook my head. It had to be a trick of the eyes. Deirdre had no Holy Blood. "Seliph's is showing."

In silence, I checked all the others and discovered that Ulster and Seliph weren't 'odd' cases. All of the children were showing their Holy Marks already. Larcei's wrapped around her upper left arm, like armlets, black and blue like Ulster's. Lester's, a pale gold and only just beginning to show, stretched across her left collarbone and chest, right around her heart, a place I didn't see much since Ayra or Lachesis typically were the ones who dressed her in the morning since Chulainn was away. Conall's was the faintest, only noticeable when actively looking, but it settled on his right shoulder, curving towards his back, the same colors as Caitriona's. It was a bit startling, really, and unease settled over me. Surely, of course, the stories Ayra and Lachesis mentioned were just that, stories, yet I couldn't shake the thought that they weren't. Deirdre, after all, had mentioned a 'catastrophe', more than mentioned it, in fact. Even now, I was still very certain that she and Sigurd had been 'bound' to each other, no matter how happy they had been, because of that 'catastrophe'.

It all made me sick, truly, and the worst part was that I didn't know how to explain any of this to anyone. I could only hope I was just… being paranoid. But I feared I wasn't.

With those unsettling thoughts, we tried to just go about our day as normal. The others seemed to manage it well enough, but for me, I couldn't shake that unease, no matter how hard I tried. I could push it to the side for certain tasks, thanks to long years of practice, but it inevitably came looming back. By the time evening fell, it was near impossible to ignore. Of course, I did still try. I was stubborn like that.

I watched Oifeye and Shanan spar for a while mostly making sure that they weren't overdoing it, before walking through the halls, checking that everything was still running smoothly. The injured were sleeping peaceful, with Lachesis watching over them, while Ayra was feeding the children and Midir patrolled. Things were quiet and running smoothly, all good things. However, as I stepped outside, wandering the ramparts, I found myself wishing... well, something minor would make me feel less like horrible things were coming and this was the calm before the storm. Something minor would also help distract me from my thoughts, and memories.

I remembered the last day Deirdre had seen Sigurd. She'd been so nervous because of the 'warning', because of the 'catastrophe'. We'd had a little 'slumber party' to help distract her from her nightmares.

I remembered the last day I had seen her. I thought of that dark mage I had stupidly let close, the one who had taken Deirdre away. Her screams as I fell unconscious... I still remembered them. I always would.

I remembered the day I first met Deirdre. She'd been so hesitant, because of that catastrophe. I
remembered how uncomfortable I'd been at the love at first sight thing with her and Sigurd, but how I'd forgotten that uneasiness, because of how happy they were with each other.

I remembered the second time I'd met her, after Sadima's long range assault with dark magic. I remembered how I'd been convinced the 'catastrophe' would happen no matter what, and that she was just being used as a scapegoat. I remembered encouraging her, befriending her…

"Gods, if I was right, then am I responsible?" I whispered to the wind, knowing there was no answer. If it was inevitable, then there was nothing to stop it. Yet there were many times things seemed 'impossible' to change, and yet they did anyway. You saw it often with healing. "Ugh, why am I adding more things that I'm responsible for? I could be wrong." It wasn't like, say, with Travant where I knew, without a doubt, I'd pay for that. I was a healer, of course, and I knew that if I'd broken my oath, I could have never forgiven myself. But Travant was the king of Thracia, a nation at war with Leonster, Quan's home. There was a good chance that Travant could kill Quan. "I should've given Quan or Ethlyn my bracelet too. Why did I hold onto it?" Quan might not have accepted the bracelet, but Ethlyn would've. It could've protected her. Why did I hold onto it? Why did I only give the necklace away? "At least Finn should be safe?" But would that be enough?

Saving Travant undoubtedly meant that he'd kill people Quan, Ethlyn, and Finn wanted to protect and people that they fought alongside of. Since Quan and Ethlyn didn't wear stones that had cultural significance to Thracia, they could easily be killed in one of the coming battles. Saving Travant meant there was a not-insignificant chance that he'd kill them. Yet, I knew there was no other choice for me.

I was a healer. I healed people. I healed people until they had no more need of me, and then I let them walk away to meet their fate, however that may happen, whatever it may be. Letting Travant simply die, when I had been specifically brought to him as a healer, when he became my patient… I couldn't do that. That went against my oaths. There were many I had treated over the years that were not 'kind', but who had come to me as individuals who had needed help, and so I treated them as best as I could, because that was my job. I was only bothered a bit by it now because I was selfish. It was because this particular patient could hurt people I loved. Yet, that didn't mean I could just walk away from my job.

"I'm thinking myself into circles, darn it," I muttered, rubbing my temples and leaning against the outer walls. Normally by this point, I'd just cuddle with Chulainn and let his hugs relax me until the thoughts were no longer quite so overwhelming. But he wasn't here, and I had no one I could confide to in this. I had enough trouble with healing Chagall, and I was well aware that if I hadn't just 'left him to his fate' afterwards, I would've caught even more trouble. Explaining Travant as well would just… "Argh… I miss Deirdre." She'd have me laughing, even without knowing what was wrong. "I miss Arvis." I could actually tell Arvis this. It's how the two of us were, really. It wasn't like we never kept secrets from each other, but things like this, he understood. "Ugh, this is pathetic. Inside. Apple cider. That's this healer's recommendation for her own bout of self-pity."

I pushed off the wall and turned to head back inside. However, I paused, looking out over the snowy landscape, and noticed something strange. In the distance, there were shadows flitting out in the skies, graceful enough to almost be a dance. I watched it for a long while, entranced, and wondered just what it was. Eventually, though, I noticed some shadows 'falling', humanoid and winged creatures with feathers trailing, and only then did I realize just what was going on.

It was a battle. It was a battle between pegasus knights, and Silesse Castle was in that direction.

"I see I wasn't the only one who thought something was off." Midir appeared next to me, eyes narrowed. "I noticed the movement," he whispered, clutching his bow. He was fully armored and
armed, a stark contrast to me. "What caught your attention?"

"Truthfully, being outside was a coincidence," I replied. I looked back to the shadows, fingers digging into the stone of the outer wall. How many were dead? What was going on? Those questions bounced through my skull without a single answer. "I wanted to clear my head a bit, and then I saw the shadows."

"I see." His eyes suddenly darted downwards and he stiffened. "That's…"

"Hmm?"

"Below, Alicia." He pointed to the shadows below the pegasus knights, a collection of what might've been horses. They all wielded bows, or so I guessed by the outlines. I really couldn't see much. "Jungby."

"Pardon?"

"Jungby. Those are Jungby's knights. I recognize the formation."

"That's…" I didn't like that implication. I didn't like it at all. "We should check for any injured making their way towards us."

"…No." He shook his head and it was my turn to stiffen. "No, we're going to strengthen our defenses first."

"But…"

"We don't have enough people to fight them. Guard against them, yes, but not go out and fight. Not go out and bring their injured in." He shot me a serious look and I flinched. "And we only have two healers on hand. Lachesis, who battles nausea and lightheadedness at random intervals, and you, Alicia, who does not know how to fight. The best you have is your offensive staves, but using them on a large group of people isn't efficient. It damages the staff faster and your hands. We've discovered this."

"I… no, you're right." There was no point in arguing. I knew he was. I also knew that no one could save everyone. There were people dying to the north, outside of Thove, just due to happenstance. I knew that. "I'm sorry. I panicked."

"I figured. But this is a time, more than ever, we need you to…"

"Be the healer." This was rather pathetic, being reminded of one of the central teachings of my job. "I'm sorry."

"It's been an odd day, and you mentioned you were out here to clear your head. I can't imagine that helped with assessing things, so you defaulted to your most basic teaching, 'Heal the injured'."

Midir looked out to the horizon again, to the shadows. More and more knights fell. It was impossible to know if the fallen were 'friends' or 'foes'. "Thove was a diversion. Their true target was the castle, and they wanted to make sure Sigurd couldn't send reinforcements."

"We fell for the trap." Panic seized me again. Queen Rahna… Annand… I hoped… I hoped they were okay, for Lewyn and Erinys's sakes. But I had to try and keep calm. "We need to at least get a message out to them, don't we?"

"We do. Sigurd needs to know, and we have no idea what their secondary target will be. Thove or here." Midir frowned and suddenly leaned over the edged, eyes narrowed. "That… I think that is
"Pardon?" I looked out as well, but only saw shadows. I almost asked what he meant, but then realized the obvious. He was an archer. His eyesight was much better than mine. He was used to picking out details from a distance. He likely could just see enough of him to know. "What is he doing here? What are they doing here?"

"Questions for another time."

"Of course." I closed my eyes and made myself relax. "I'll see about getting a messenger before double-checking that the infirmary is prepared."

"I'll get the defenses ready, and I'll inform Ayra and Lachesis."

We parted and I quickly tried to think of who would be the best messenger, someone who could ride a horse, and realized that it was probably Oifeye. My first instinct was to protest, 'he is just a child', but then I remembered he was seventeen. In Grannvale, he'd be considered an adult. I really did need to think of him more in those terms. So, I found him and told him the situation, and he volunteered before I finished explaining. I helped him gather what things he needed, and packed him some medicines, just in case.

"You know what most of these medicines do, of course," I commented, passing it to him after he checked his saddle. I had thought about trying to buckle it onto the saddle directly, but I discarded that idea quickly. I had next to no experience with horses still, still avoided them whenever I could no matter how many times Chulainn tried to teach me, and I knew next to nothing about how to work the saddle. "I did label them anyway, though, just in case. Some do look similar enough."

"Thanks, Alicia," he replied, more focused on the saddle than me. But that was how it should be, really. "Should I tell Sigurd to send people back?"

"That's at his discretion. At the moment, though, we're not in danger. But do tell him that Jungby's knights were spotted."

"Understood." He swung up and adjusted the sword on his belt. He was a bit more awkward than, say, Sigurd, but he sat there more easily than I expected. I really did need to stop thinking of him as a child. "I'll get there as soon as I can."

"Just be careful, Oifeye."

"I will." He smiled and then clicked his tongue, ordering his horse out at a gallop.

I stepped back and watched him ride off, brushing my hair back as the wind seized it. As I watched him disappear, questions bombarded my thoughts again. Would Oifeye be okay? Would he make it? When dawn came, would Lewyn be an orphan? Would Erinys no longer have a sister? The questions haunted me, but I did my best to not let it show. Midir was right. This was a time where you needed someone to be the calm and reassuring one, and that was just part of a healer's job.

So, when Oifeye was out of sight, I returned to the infirmary and made sure it was ready for whatever wounded might appear. We had to prepare for the worst, after all.

The battle on the horizon stayed in the distance. No injured hobbled their way to us from Silesse. No injured were sent back via Return or Warp from Thove. Everything stayed in a very odd stability, with nothing changing. It was almost as if we had been separated from the world, cut out of reality by the gods themselves, stuck watching the world pass us by. I spent most of the time in
the infirmary, doing chores. I did things like checking that the patched up window, covered by a thick blanket, wasn't letting too much cold in. I double-checked inventory, did laundry, mended clothes, changed the sheets on the beds, including the empty ones. The injured themselves slept and relaxed as I checked them over, changing their bandages, removing stitches, etc. Lachesis split her time between the infirmary and the nursery. Ayra split her time between the nursery and patrolling. Shanan stayed in the nursery to guard and take care of the children. Midir focused entirely on patrolling and defenses.

"I hope Oifeye is okay," I whispered, peering out one of the intact windows. It was horribly dark, and exhaustion made my eyelids heavy, but I dared not go to sleep. I was too nery to even nap, stupid as it was. "It's starting to snow again." It wasn't a blizzard, thankfully, but the clouds did block what little light the stairs and moon would've given. So, Oifeye was riding, at a gallop, in the dark, through the snow. "I'm not treating him like a child worrying about this, right?" I was going to be paranoid about that for a while.

"Alicia?" Midir's voice made me turn, and I walked to the door just as he poked his head in. "Has any injured appeared from the Thove group?" he asked me, resting against the doorframe. He was a bit grey from exhaustion and he held himself stiffly, but the stubbornness in his eyes screamed how he wouldn't be resting any time soon. "It doesn't look it."

"No, things have been quiet," I confirmed, clasping my hands in front of me. I stepped out of the infirmary and sighed. "A healer having nothing to do is either a very good thing or a very bad thing. I am hoping for the former."

"I'm sure it is. Aideen and Father Claude are there." He smiled proudly when speaking about his wife, and I had to smile back. "Ah, but that's not why I'm here. It seems like the battle between the pegasus knights has ended. They've dispersed, and there's no sign of the Jungby knights anymore."

"That's good." But, of course, you had questions. Who won? Who lost? Who lived? Who died? What was going on? We knew next to nothing. "I am assuming, since you aren't very frantic, that they have not come our way?"

"Not yet, at least." Midir smiled tiredly. I was sure he'd rather be cuddling with Lester right now, but we all had our jobs, sadly. "I was thinking about getting some soldiers and grabbing some sleds to see if we can find survivors."

"That's a wonderful idea! I'll…" I trailed off as I thought of the obvious problem. "Though, maybe I shouldn't come along. It's not as if you all don't know field medicine, and since I do not fight…" I could be a liability. That was why I handled the 'main' infirmary, with the worst wounded, while Claude handled the field infirmary. A field infirmary required more experience anyway, just because of how fast and hectic it could get, and even if I was still the 'Chief Healer' of the army, we all knew that Claude had more experience.

"Ayra is coming with us, and there will be a group. So long as the Jungby knights do not return, I believe it will be safe. Certainly safe enough to go with the risk, and with you, we might be able to save more." Midir's smile grew, but there was a seriousness to it. He'd actively weighed it all out. "Though, I would recommend bringing the Sleep staff."

"Of course." I smiled back and bowed my head. "Thank you."

I got Lachesis and had her take over the infirmary temporarily. We had a worry that badly injured from Thove would be Returned or Warped in, but considering the hour, we decided it was unlikely, and if it did happen, Lachesis did have enough experience to hold them while Shanan ran to get me. When that was settled, all of us bundled up as best as we could, and Shanan saw us off with little
Seliph holding his hand, waving goodbye with him.

Of course, I quickly discovered a slight problem. Hiking through the snow was a rather difficult thing and I wasn't the most athletic person. Ayra, of course, had fun teasing me for it.

"Hold onto my arm, oh hapless one," she giggled as I nearly fell flat on my face for the fourth time. At this rate, it would be faster for everyone if I just rode on one of the sleds. Midir's own smile, somewhat amused but mostly exasperated, hinted he was tempted to 'order' it. "I can see why you stay in the infirmary."

"Pardon me for learning more about how to save lives," I huffed, breath clouding up in front of me. It was horridly cold, even with the heavy coat, scarf, and gloves I wore. "I didn't think I'd need to learn how to walk through snow, only that I might need to cure frostbite at some point."

"This isn't really through snow. Not heavy, at least. It's mostly the ice making everything slippery."

"Oh, how lovely." I juggled my Sleep and Recover staves so that I could hold onto her without dropping them. "I think Chulainn and I will avoid visiting Sophara in the winter, then."

"Aw, but the snowball fights are so much fun."

"Fun as your banter is, I will remind you both that we are technically sneaking into unknown territory," Midir chided. His smile was a little more amused now, but it quickly fell for a serious look. "We're close."

"Of course," Ayra agreed, her own cheer fading. I switched back to my 'healer mask' and nodded, even as I clung to Ayra's arm. She paused just long enough to go ahead and draw her sword, probably so that she could still help me while being prepared. "Sorry. I've picked up Lex's habit of bantering to lessen the tensions."

"It's fine, especially since neither of you knew just how close we were. But for now…"

"Of course."

We all fell silent then, the only sound being the crunching of ice and the cold wind swirling around us. The wind made me think of Lewyn, and how he so frequently listened to it. Was it screaming to him now? Was it crying to him? I was very worried about that, and what things were like with the others. But then we found the first fallen pegasus knight, lying face first in the muddy snow and bloody slush, and all my worries focused on what was in front of me.

Very quickly, we all decided a system. For convenience and safety, I stayed in one place, by the sleds, while the others actually hunted for survivors. Those that appeared to be breathing and-or have a pulse were brought to me for confirmation. I then determined which ones had a chance, and which ones didn't. I tended to those who did. Midir ordered the ones who didn't mercy-killed. We searched through the snows carefully, and then only when we were certain we had found all those in our immediate vicinity did we move. Some soldiers moved those stable back to the castle for treatment. More returned with empty sleds, prepared to bring more survivors back, if any.

Eventually during our search, we started finding pegasi as well as pegasus knights. Most were dead. The still living pegasi we found… we managed to convince some to come with us. Others just laid down next to their dead riders and refused to move for anything. Still others actually brought their broken riders to us, silently begging us to save them. Thankfully, most of those ones could actually be saved.

After what felt like a long while, another pegasus slowly made its way to me, past the soldiers still
searching, its rider draped over us. I checked over the one survivor we had found in this 'section', before standing to look over at the pegasus. But then I noticed something. The rider wasn't just… She clung. She clung tightly to something covered by a cloth, and to her pegasus's mane. The pegasus bore most of her weight, but she was walking, and when she lifted her head slightly, just slightly, I realized I knew her.

"Annand?" I called. She lifted her had a bit more, revealing blood trickling down her face and a nasty gash twisting up her cheek. "Annand!" I stepped closer to her and held out my hand. I didn't want to move too far, for safety reasons among others, but I couldn't just simply wait. "Over here!"

"Thank… the gods…" she managed to gasp out. Her pegasus got her all the way to me and she stumbled a bit forward before collapsing on me. I caught her and immediately started healing her up. "I wasn't sure… I'd make it…"

"You'll be fine." I sat in the snow with her and pushed her bloody and matted hair out of her face. To my surprise, despite how slowly she spoke, she wasn't even 'vaguely' conscious. Her eyes were sharp and focused on me instantly. "Midir and Ayra are leading a search for other survivors."

"Are there any?"

"Yes." I nodded to the sled, and spared a bit of time to check on the pegasus knight on there. She still breathed, and she was still stable. "There aren't many. But we have some."

"Thank the gods. Again." She managed a smile, Her teeth were bloody. She was missing a tooth, actually, maybe more. "Maybe this can get to him… after all…"

"Are you talking about whatever you're holding?" I glanced down at it briefly, barely paying attention. Then I looked at it again, realizing I knew the cloth. I recognized it, even as bloody as it was. "That's… Queen Rahna's shawl." She always wore a shawl when she came to visit. I knew that much, even if I didn't interact with her much.

"Yes, a birthday gift from her husband. The last one, actually." Annand looked down, smiling bitterly. "The blood is just mine, though. She's fine. Queen Rahna is fine."

"Is she still in the castle?"

"Yes. She was evacuating civilians when I last saw her. They… they'll be on the way soon. Or, no, they'll be here soon. Be. Sorry, I can't…" She gestured vaguely, and I worked on her head injuries, frowning. If she suffered significant brain damage, I'd have to send for Claude, somehow. "She told them to run to Sigurd. Are you all okay?" She gripped my sleeve. Blood seeped through her gloves. "Are you all safe?"

"We're fine, but we're undermanned a little." I glanced around, to see if anyone was bringing more injured. There were none, so I continued tending to her. "Thove attacked us, so Sigurd went off to make sure the villages were safe."

"We saw. We saw Deet'var and her group, I mean. We were going to assist when Pamela got us. And then… then the archers…" She started coughing suddenly, hacking really. I was startled to see blood hit my shoulder. She was worse off than I had originally thought. She… she must've been standing, and conscious, through sheer determination. "Please…"

"I'll heal you up." I'd try, at least. I honestly wasn't so certain if I could. But all those near were stable, so I could try a little longer.

"No. No, that's not what I want." She sat up and handed me the object. It was some sort of book,
and my blood thrummed when I took it. "That needs to get to Lewyn. Tell him I'm sorry. Tell Erinys I'm sorry. Tell them that I love them, that I believe in them, and that… that I'll be watching over them."

"Annand…!" I shook my head and set the book in my lap. "I can still tend to you."

"Just make it enough for me to continue my fight, please. I have to fight a little longer, to buy time for the civilians."

"That is-"

"That is my wish. As soon as I am healed to that point, I wish to no longer be your patient." She spoke slowly, and I flinched. I couldn't agree to this, and yet, I knew I had to. I was her healer until she said I wasn't. It was not the first time I had healed someone, only to send them off to their deaths. Just because it was someone I knew… that didn't mean I was suddenly allowed to… "I already know the consequence. I won't survive."

"If you come with me, you will." But we both knew she couldn't. She was a knight. Coming with me might condemn the civilians running towards us. "Hold still. I'll heal you as well as I can, so that you can buy them the most time."

"Thank you." She coughed again, but not from blood. Instead, it was tears. She was crying. "Ha… I'm scared. I'm really scared, truth be told. I don't want to die. I really, really don't want to die." She tried to laugh, but it didn't sound anything like a laugh. I had no idea what the sound actually was. "I want to see Lewyn become king. I want to hear him play a song again. I want to see Erinys married. I want to see her rise through the ranks. I want to tease her and make flower crowns again. I want…" Her voice cracked and more tears fell. "I want so many things."

"I can shield you. As a healer, I can say you were too injured. You are, really."

"I know. But I'd have to live with that. And I can't do that. I am a knight. This is the only… the only life I know, and the only path I can walk." Even more tears fell. "The book to Lewyn. The messages to them."

"I will."

"Thank you. Thank you so much." She managed a smile. It almost hid how terrified she looked. "Hey, can I… can I get a hug?"

"Of course." I hugged her tightly and she trembled as she leaned into me. She really was afraid. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You did your job. And now… now I'll do mine." She pulled away and slowly climbed onto her pegasus, who bent down to help her. "Good girl… good girl… I'm sorry." Her pegasus tossed its head and flapped its wings once, stirring up some of the snow. It was like it was saying 'I go where you go, always'. "Good girl. I love you."

"Sit there for a while longer." I brought my staff up and some bandages from my pack. "I told you. I will heal you as well as I am able."

"Thank you." She smiled gently, and rubbed at her face, wiping away the tears. She then took off her circlet and passed it to me. "Please, give that to Erinys."

"I will." I tucked it into my pocket, and tucked the shawl wrapped book into my pack. When I looked up, Annand wasn't crying anymore. She sat tall in her saddle, silver lance in hand, the
picture of dignity. "I'll make sure they both get... everything."

"Thank you." Annand nodded and she looked at the sled, where the pegasus knight rested. Desperately needing something to do, I bent down to check her over, and found her still stable. There were signs that the cold was starting to set in, though, so I took off my coat and draped it over her. "I'm off, then."

"Goodbye." I watched her take off into the skies, and watched her slowly get smaller and smaller. Just before she was out of sight, I turned away and worked on my patient.

"Wait, that's Erinys's sister, isn't it?" Ayra appeared before long, carrying another pegasus knight. I could tell already that the knight's right leg would probably be lost, just based on how badly it was mangled. Someone had put a tourniquet on it. "Why is she flying off?" she demanded, even as she set her knight on another sled. I checked the tourniquet, making sure it was set correctly since it could be tricky, and then checked the rest of her. "We're leaving her?!

"That's what she wanted," I whispered. My voice threatened to shake, but I held onto the healer-calm. I was on the job. I was the healer. "I offered to let her stay, due to her injuries, but she refused." I looked up and saw Midir walking up with another potential survivor. He was watching the skies, looking right where Annand had been. I couldn't see her now, but I did think I saw a shadow flitting about in the distance. "Midir, there are civilians on the way, refugees from the castle. It's fallen, apparently."

"Ah, of course," Midir whispered. He set his survivor on a third sled, and he gave me an odd look. "Where is your coat?"

"That one there was freezing and I didn't have a spare blanket," I explained, pointing to the first patient's sled. I finished up on the one Ayra brought before moving to the one he had, and did my best to ignore the pain I felt. "I'll take it back when we have one."

"Take mine for now." Midir removed his and I took it gladly. It was a bit big for me, but it was warm. "Ayra, you're glaring."

"Of course I am," Ayra snapped. She sounded frustrated, and I didn't blame her. But I continued my check, and determined that this one might make it, if we hurried, so I focused a bit more on her. "Letting her leave... we're just letting her die?"

"She's a knight," Midir replied softly. He understood her choice more than anything. He was a knight too. "She swore to protect the people, and she cannot hide while they are in danger. That's all."

"Still, though..." Ayra sighed, and stomped her foot once from frustration. "Damn it. This is bad."

"It is. We also know that we'll need to prepare the castle for more refugees, and we will need to check them over, to ensure we do not have a second Agusty. Alicia, will you stay...?"

"I'll stay back," I agreed, fighting back a wince. I knew very well that if a dark mage masqueraded as an injured person, I'd let them in without a thought again, even given what happened before. I'd be thinking too much on treating them. "Have Lachesis screen them for injuries and illnesses. She's skilled enough to do that without supervision."

"Thank you," Midir whispered. He paused, and looked back. "We'll need to head back soon. To be ready."

"These three need better treatment than I have on me soon, as well."
"Right." Midir looked up at Ayra, who still looked frustrated. There was no good answer to this. At least, I didn't think so. "Ayra, can you stay here? I'll want to get everyone grouped up to head back."

"Of course," Ayra confirmed. She dug through her pack and pulled out a tightly folded camp-blanket. "Take this. You're making me cold just looking at you."

Midir laughed and wrapped the blanket around him before heading off to gather the soldiers. They searched for more potential survivors as they returned. Some had a chance; others were mercy killed. But with them on the sleds, we made our way back to the castle. The snow began falling harder, slowing our progress significantly. One of the 'survivors' ended up passing because of it, and we left her on the ground, to be retrieved 'later' with the other corpses.

When we returned, I glanced back once and saw a shadow dancing about the skies, diving again and again, but always rising. When I next had a chance to look out though, after settling the surviving pegasus knights into warm beds to treat for their injuries and the beginning stages of hypothermia… when I next looked out, there was no shadow flitting about. Annand was gone. I wondered what her last thoughts were. I wondered if she'd still been horribly afraid and regretful. I wondered… I wondered many things, but I closed my eyes and walked back inside to do my job. No one could save everyone, but I could at least save as many as I could.

A couple of the pegasus knights died, the injuries and hypothermia being too much for us to heal. A couple I mostly kept sedated, more than a little worried about injuries to their brains. The rest healed slowly, their bodies mending. Most of them, though, screamed and sobbed whenever they were awake, though, from the physical pain and mental anguish. I heard a lot of names and knew they dreamed of watching their fellows fall, of falling themselves. I did what I could for them. No more injured came from Thove, so I was able to give them most of my time. Lachesis tended to the refugees for me."

"Alicia?" Ayra poked her head into the infirmary at some point. Logically, I was vaguely aware that it had been a day and a half since Silesse Castle fell, but it felt longer. I hadn't slept. Neither had Ayra. "Hey, Alicia, they're bringing in the corpses," she explained, walking over to where I was cleaning the wounds of an unconscious pegasus knight. She'd taken three arrows, and somehow hadn't died. When she was conscious, she sobbed out apologies, so I wondered if someone had shielded her. "Alicia?"

"One moment please, Ayra," I replied, entirely focused on my task. I finished it quickly and bandaged her up again. She, of course, remained unconscious; I'd used the Sleep staff to knock her out. I had to. She'd come close to throwing herself out of the window while I had my back turned. "Do they want me to confirm the deaths?"

"Yeah, if you don't mind." Ayra looked around the infirmary, frowning. "I'll stay here and keep an eye on them. Shanan is tending the kids. Have you seen them?"

"No, I haven't. The survivors require a lot of watching and quick responses." I sighed and stood up to go wash my hands and splash water on my face to try and wake up. It let me forget how much I really did want to just curl up with my children, and read stories to Seliph. "How are they doing?"

"They're fine, mostly. Seliph keeps wondering where you are, though. He keeps asking for his 'papa' too. And Caitriona and Conall look around for you and Chulainn."

"I'm sorry to push that on you. But Lachesis can't handle-" As if to prove my point, one of the survivors started screaming until her throat bled, flailing about. Working far too quickly, I barely
managed to get her back asleep via the Sleep staff before she ripped open the stitches across her abdomen. Again. "That. She can't handle that."

"Ah." Ayra sighed. She wasn't too thrown by it, and helped tuck the patient back into her bedding. "So, if that happens while you're checking the bodies, what should I do?"

"You can try calming them with words. Try to pin them to keep them from breaking things. Keep an eye on those who try to run." I set the Sleep staff back in the corner and almost pulled out the sedatives. Then I remembered the obvious and put them back away. Sedatives were difficult to dose correctly. "Then send for me. I'm hoping the rest will either stay under or not have such… ah…"

"Energetic awakenings?"

"We'll go with that." I sighed and rubbed at my tired eyes. I hated keeping them under so much. It was dangerous. But I had no other real way to keep them from hurting themselves short of actually tying them down, and we didn't have enough bandages or rope to spare. "I'll be off, then. Where…?"

"Cellars. It's the coldest place in the entire castle."

"Thank you."

I left then, pushing the hair out of my face, though I did have to actually return to grab a healing staff before making my way to the cellars. I almost got lost, but a helpful soldier had been looking for me, and led me down to begin my checks. Some were so mangled that you couldn't tell who they were. Others were strangely intact, as if they were asleep. Most were some combination of the two. I checked over each of them, since I had always read stories of people surviving worse. But each one was the same, dead and cold. Every single one was dead. For my own sake, I chose against counting.

Annand was one of the last ones they brought in. Part of me had hoped she had somehow survived, but of course, she hadn't. She was one of the remarkably intact looking ones. She almost looked like she was asleep, except, of course, the utter mess the back of her head was, among other things. She must've landed on her back, when she fell. I brushed the hair out of her face, and mouthed an apology. It might've been her choice, but I still felt horrible about it. I might've healed soldiers and sent them off back to the battlefield before, but the guilt pressed into my heart. It was so much easier to keep your distance if you didn't know the people in question. But, this was my job, so I'd keep on.

"The book and circlet are still with me," I whispered to her, still just brushing her bloody, matted hair out of her face. She had scratches and gashes on her cheeks, forehead, and chin. Her nose was bloody and broken. Blood crusted on the corner of her mouth. "I haven't been able to pass them on yet, but I will." I wondered if the Thove group knew yet what had happened. "All the civilians who escaped made it to us too, you know. They remember you fighting. You really did save them. You did it all."

"Lady Alicia!" a soldier called. Reluctantly, I turned away from Annand to look at them, making sure my healer's mask was in place. "You're needed in the infirmary."

I wasn't sure if I thanked them or not before leaving. I hoped I did, but considering everything, I wasn't sure if I held onto enough of my manners. All I really knew was that the soldier passed on that message and then the next think I processed was striding through the halls, trying to return to the infirmary as quickly as possible and expecting quite a bit of chaos. But I didn't find chaos.
Instead, I found a bewildered Erinys and Lewyn standing in the middle of the infirmary, staring in horror at the pegasus knights on the beds. I wondered how many they knew.

"Ah, you've returned," I replied, far more calmly than I felt. I looked around for Ayra, and didn't see her. "Ayra?"

"Ayra… gave us basics and then said she was going to let Midir know that… um…" Lewyn answered, tried to answer. He spoke very slowly and a little clumsily, far unlike his usual self. "Oifeye made it to us. We killed my uncle, were preparing to rest, and he came riding up, telling us what happened. Aideen and Claude sent us back first, they're going to send more, and…" He also didn't look at me. He just stared at the pegasus knights, while holding up Erinys. She was trembling, tears in her eyes, silent from horror. "Ayra said… Ayra said that the castle fell? That we have refugees? That my mother is probably still there and Annand is…?" The worst part, though, was how lost both looked. "Is there… uh…?"

"Last that we heard, Queen Rahna still lives. All the civilians we are taking care of saw her alive." I clasped my hands in front of me, and did my best to continue being as calm as I could. They would need that. "Annand, however… we just brought her in."

"You just brought her… but that…" Lewyn's expression crumpled, but he didn't cry. Instead, instinctively, he caught Erinys as her knees buckled. "That can't… that can't be. Sure, she could be injured, but if she was injured, she'd be here, so… but Annand… A-Annand couldn't have…"

"Follow me. I need to get someone to watch the infirmary until Ayra returns, but then I will take you to her."

I got a soldier to watch over the infirmary, with a request to another to find Ayra and Lachesis. Afterwards, I led Lewyn and Erinys down into the cellar. Both were perfectly silent, clinging to each other. One of them gasped; I thought it might've been Lewyn. But I didn't turn around. I couldn't. If I did, I knew I'd forget the way. I was just so darn tired… if I didn't focus, I wouldn't make it. So, I focused on finding Annand's body and leading the two to her. As soon as we reached her, though, Erinys just broke.

"It's not true!" Erinys sobbed, collapsing and burying her face into Annand's chest, uncaring of the breastplate. Lewyn just stood behind her, frozen from shock. "It can't be true! Annand, come on, wake up! Wake up and scold me for crying all the time! Please!"

Erinys continued screaming and I thought about hugging her. But rapid footsteps announced Lachesis's arrival, and she ran right to Erinys to hug her as she sobbed. I decided that Lachesis, who lost her sibling so horribly too, would be a far better than me in comforting hr. So, instead, I walked up the stairs, out of the cellars, holding onto my calm with everything I could. My intention had been to return to the infirmary and continue with that, with the addition of greeting whoever Sigurd sent back via Return and Warp. Stomps behind me, though, scattered my thoughts, and I turned to see Lewyn hadn't stayed down below. He'd followed me.

"Why?!" he demanded, voice cracking. I stared, a little bewildered, before realizing what was going on. "Why didn't you save her?! You save everyone! Why didn't you save her?!" He was lost, angry, and desperately lashing out. "Why?!"

"She didn't want me to," I replied softly. I fought to keep from crying, especially when he started sobbing. "She went back, even with her injuries, because she wanted to protect the civilians. So, I healed her, and let her leave, because that was her choice. Just as I have done with many others."

"Why…?!" He batted at my shoulder. It might've actually been a punch, but he was too tired, too
heavy with grief, to put in amount of power into it. "Why her?! Why did she…?! Why did this have to happen?! I left to keep this from happening! Why?!

"She said to tell you that she loves you." Even though I was certain he wanted someone else to comfort him, I pulled him into a hug. He just continued sobbing. "That she was sorry. That she believes in you. That she will be watching over you. And… well, the last thing can wait until later, I think. You just scream, Lewyn. No one can blame your for that."

Lewyn did just that. He yelled at me, at the gods, at himself while he sobbed, breaking down because he went from killing one of his uncles to learning that his home had fallen and one of his childhood friends had died. That was too much for anyone.

Notes on Erinys:

The newest of the Angelic Knights of Silesse at eighteen, with the title of 'Angel', and a kindhearted woman who can never turn a blind eye to people in trouble.

Our primary flier, and in fact our only one, she often will go out scouting and perform rescue missions. She's not the strongest, but her versatility and speed remains her greatest strength.

Looks up greatly to her older sister, Annand, and adores her to pieces. It's a mutual feeling, with Annand happily teasing her sister and pushing her to new heights.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: So, the name of Game-Chapter 4 is 'Dance in the Skies', hence the title. Also, yep, Annand dies. In game, you seize Thove castle and then Silesse Castle gets attacked, while you're helpless because it's technically 'neutral territory' and thus, you can't enter it, even with a flier. So, you just sit there and watch as Annand and her group get slaughtered either by the other pegasus knights, or by the squad of bow knights that appear, courtesy of Junby, led by Andrei. Why yes, Annand later got an expy in Phila from Awakening. Why do you ask? Her being afraid to die, and wishing she didn't want to die, comes from the Oosawa manga.

As soon as Silesse castle is conquered, Andrei and the Junby knights leave the map, and a bunch of civilians appear to be saved, meaning that you can finally go into the territory. Pamela and her pegasus knights will often go to Thove after Silesse is conquered to 'take it back'. Lewyn's line upon first learning Annand is dead, and Erinys screaming about how it can't be true are both based on their lines from the game.

Around 18 months of age (which is basically how old Seliph is now), children are typically able to speak a few words (including the ever popular 'no'), often point to things to draw attention to them, and will often cling to familiar people and show affection. Among other things, but you know, these are some basics.

(Btw, if you're curious about Arvis, and his relationship with Alicia, Memoirs of Velthomer will focus a lot on that (it's a backstory, though, so it'll end about the same time this story starts in-universe)).
Chapter 22) Forseti

We worked through the night. Day. Night. I lost track, really. It could've been one day. It could've been a month. I spend most of my time tending to the pegasus knights. Some healed. Others... I had two suicides. I hadn't caught them in time. One made it to the window and threw herself out. The other one made it to my medicines and overdosed. I pinned the blanket over the window better, to make it harder to pull off, and locked the door to the back room, keeping the key on me always. It was all I could think to do.

My world is confined to the infirmary. Their conditions change too much for me not to stay there. I never had so many patients hate themselves so much, or be in so much terror. Certainly, I never had to deal with so many essentially on my own. The closest would've been when Sadima had caught us off guard with that dark magical strike, way back in Verdane. Lachesis, Erinys, and Lewyn all know staves, of course, but Lachesis is busy handling the healing for everyone else in the castle. Erinys and Lewyn... well, no one can blame them for not wanting to help. They're in shock. They have to recover.

I miss everyone. I hate being lonely.

I should've been in the infirmary. I really should've. But Lachesis had sent a message, stating that in the past 'four days', no one had seen Erinys. She'd locked herself in her room and hadn't come out. She spoke when people knocked, but that was it. Part of me wondered why she didn't look into it herself, but that was uncharitable. I wouldn't have even thought it, save that I was so exhausted. I should've been more grateful to not, you know, be stuck in the infirmary and have the excuse to leave, but... well, I was too tired to really think. I supposed part of me was irritated that she'd asked via a messenger as well. I hadn't seen her since Erinys and Lewyn returned. I hadn't seen Shanan or Midir in just as long, or the children. I saw Ayra only because she'd come by the infirmary to make sure I was still alive and to bring me food. So, part of me was annoyed that she hadn't seized the chance to come see me, but I knew it was irrational, and born just how lonely I felt.

So caught up in my thoughts, I almost passed by Erinys's room. Sighing, I rubbed at my eyes, schooled my expression into my healer-calm, and knocked on the door. There was no response, so I knocked again. "Erinys, I'm coming in," I called, trying the door. Thankfully, it wasn't locked, so I could just walk on in on Erinys sitting on the floor, glaring at a very sharp dagger half-dangling from her hand, far too near her wrist for comfort. "Erinys?!"

"Huh? Oh, Alicia." She looked up slowly and tried to smile. Her hair was matted, and she had heavy bags under her puffy eyes. She'd lost a startling amount of weight, given the time period. Her clothes weren't quite on all the way, like she'd given up at getting dressed. "Sorry, I didn't hear you," she whispered, letting the dagger fall to the floor with a dull 'thump'. Her voice was raspy and croaky, like she'd lost it through screaming. "Hi?"

"Hi." I walked further in, shutting the door behind me. "Lachesis was worried, so she asked me to check in on you. Clearly, that should've happened sooner."
"It hasn't been that long."

"It's been four days."

"Oh." She stared blankly for a moment before looking at the dagger, apparently only just now piecing together why I'd been panicked briefly. "I… tried to brush my hair. But it didn't go well. So, I thought about cutting it instead."

"If you truly want that, I'll find someone to do it for you. But if you're saying that just because of the tangles, I can brush them out for you."

"The knights in the infirmary?"

"I have people watching them." Besides, I felt a little more 'myself' having only one person to focus on, a person I adored at that. Maybe that was the main reason why Lachesis asked me to check instead of doing it herself. "So, do you want me to try and brush your hair out?"

"…Please?"

"Of course." I sat behind her on the floor and worked on detangling her hair, working slowly. Her hair was greasy and she smelled a bit bad, hints that she hadn't been able to even bring herself to take a bath. That worried me a bit; even with as busy as I was, I managed quick washes. Then again, it was part of my job to be clean. A dirty healer spread disease and infection. "When did you last eat?"

"At Thove, I think. Maybe. I haven't been able to eat a lot, but Sylvia made sure that I always had at least something."

"You've had trouble eating?"

"Yeah. I mean; I'm killing people I fought alongside of. I'm killing people I trained with. And I try…" Her voice cracked, but she coughed to clear it. "I try to get them to surrender, but they won't, so I just fight as I always do, and try not to scream when I see them fall." She laughed bitterly. "In the moment, it's not hard. Ish. But after… gods, I killed Deet'var, and at the time, I was just so relieved that no one had been hurt, and that no one was near death, and that no one had been kidnapped, and that the children were fine, but after… after…!"

"Erinys, try to remember to breathe."

"R-right… right…" She coughed again, choking back tears. I felt a huge surge of guilt for not going to check on her after the first fight. After finishing up in the infirmary, I'd just gone straight to my room. I should've at least made sure someone was with her. "I just keep remembering, for instance, of how pretty Deet'var looked at her wedding. How happy she was with her baby girl. Yet all this…"

"I'm sorry."

"I just wish I knew why they won't stand down. Did they believe in their lords that much? Was it pride? Did they hate Lewyn that much? I…" She slumped and almost curled into herself. I caught her and made her sit up. "With all that in my head, my stomach is in knots and everything just tasted like mush. It tasted like nothing. So, I couldn't eat. I just... couldn't."

"I see." Not quite knowing how to reply, I focused on the ends of her hair first, in the hopes I could actually detangle the mess. I could see why she'd thought to just cut it all. But I thought of how pretty it was, and how Annand had wanted to braid flowers into it. "I wish I knew the answers to
your question, but I don't. Maybe even they don't really know." I frowned at a particularly stubborn knot, but managed to get it. "But, speaking as a healer, you have to eat something, even though it tastes like nothing. I can tell that you've lost too much weight. If you lose anymore, I'll have to confine you to the infirmary."

"Sorry." She almost slumped again, but straightened before I nudged her. "I truly didn't realize how much time had passed."

"It's fine. I'm just concerned for your health." Silence fell for a moment, weak sunlight streaming in through the windows. It was the only light in the room. "Have you seen Lewyn?"

"No, I haven't. I suppose that's odd, considering how long it's actually been." She sighed, drooping. "I honestly thought it had... only been a day or something. Just a day. A very long day. I didn't even notice... I only just have been able to get the curtains open to let the sunlight in. They were too heavy before."

"I see." I worried for a moment about Lewyn before deciding to leave it to the others for now. Lachesis hadn't asked me to check on Lewyn, so I was assuming for now that someone had at least seen him. I'd check when I had more time. Unfortunately, much as I wanted to immediately try to find him, I was spread too thin as it was. "Your hair is really matted."

"Yeah. You know how I don't really tie it up or anything during a fight, so all the battles led to it being tangled. Yet, I was so drained and tired that I hadn't brushed it for a few days prior to Thove. In the aftermath of the last battle, where we killed Duke Maios, Sylvia was scolding me for it while Taittiiu teased. Then Oifeye rode up on a full gallop and told us what he knew. Sigurd sent Lewyn and me ahead, said that he could handle settling things in Thove without us, and then..."

"I know the story from there." I finally got one matt undone and worked on the next. "I probably should've delivered that news better. I'm sorry."

"Honestly, nothing could've softened that blow."

"I suppose not." The idea that something could happen to Arvis or Azel was painful to even think about.

"How did she die?" Erinys said the words so softly. I barely heard them, and I was sitting behind her. "No one... No one has told me yet. Though, I suppose locking myself up on accident didn't help."

"I don't know what killed her, but I know..." I paused, struggling to figure out how to say this, how to explain the bits I did know. "The civilians were being chased by Daccar's troops. They had to deal with soldiers wielding axes, mages with Blizzard siege tomes... They had been in horrible danger, and if Annand hadn't gone back, they would've died." I had no idea if there were others fighting, of course. I had only seen her in the skies, but there might've been more below. It was impossible to know, at this point. "That is the death she chose for herself. She saved them. They all made it to us, thanks to her sacrifice."

"She always wanted to be the perfect knight. I loved her for it. I admired her for it." Erinys laughed bitterly. "Because she was like that, because she was the knight in shining armor, she couldn't... she couldn't just leave them. Even though she had the perfect excuse..."

"Do you hate her for it?"

"No. I would've done the same. I can't simply leave people when they're in trouble. That's why I
became a knight. I wanted to learn how to protect people. She did too." Her voice became thick and she coughed before taking a shuddering breath. "Was she in pain? When you last saw her?"

"I healed her up as best as I could given the situation. She had some injuries still, but I've sent soldiers out with worst, in the past. So, I imagine she was in minor pain, at most." I'd had a Mend staff and quite a bit magical power. I wished I could do more, but…

"Was she afraid?"

"Yes." I immediately thought I should've lied, but I had a feeling that she would've known. Though maybe that was my tiredness dragging my thoughts down. "But she chose to fly towards it with her head held high."

"Did she say anything?"

"She did." I reached into my pocket and pulled out Annand's circlet. I kept it on me along with the key to the backroom, a reminder of the message I needed to pass on. "She asked for you to have this."

"Have…” Erinys gasped and cradled the circlet in her hands, letting it pool in her palms. "This is… something our mother gave her. I always thought it pretty. I loved helping her put it on. It's not rigid, so it could be tricky, but we always made it fun." She clutched it tightly, so tightly that I feared she'd somehow break it. "Was… was there anything else?"

"She loves you. She's sorry. She believes in you. She'll be watching over you, always." I went through my memory, making sure I didn't forget, as I carefully picked apart more of the tangles. I'd made that much progress, at least. "That's all she said."

"I see…” Erinys's breath caught and this time, she began crying. "You know… th-they say that particularly skilled pegasus knights becomes the knights of the Wind Gods, guiding the winds to assist the mortals. I'm sure… I'm sure she's one."

"I'm sure she is too." I paused at working on her hair to hug her and let her cry on my shoulder. "I'm sure she'll be on the winds."

"Yes…” Erinys silently cried, clinging to my shirt, and I held her until her tears ran out. Afterwards, I worked on her hair and then helped her set up a bath. I had to return to the infirmary then, but Erinys promised me she'd eat. I sent a message to Ayra to make sure Erinys did eat, and warned her that Erinys wasn't quite aware of how much time passed.

When I returned to the infirmary, I had someone almost bleeding out because they accidentally ripped out their stitches and, for some reason, no one thought to get me for it. I'd taken too long of a break, it seemed, so I'd have to work that much harder. I couldn't save Annand, so I just had to save as many as I could. I had to.

While working on a pegasus knight, a flash of light and a pulse of power briefly caught my attention. Unfortunately, it more than caught the attention of my patient, so instead of preparing for whatever injured might be Returned or Warped into the infirmary, I had to deal with a sobbing, flailing pegasus knight, screaming out what might've been a name. These were easily the most traumatized patients I ever had to deal with, but I supposed I couldn't blame them. I could imagine very few things were as horrific as watching your friends and comrades die and be utterly helpless to do anything about it.

The patient nearly hit me in the face as I tried to calm her down, but someone reached over to pin
her down until she could focus on me. "You're safe," I whispered to her, brushing the hair out of her face. She blinked a few times, coughing and choking on screams and that name. "You're here. Can you see me?" She nodded slowly and I made sure to smile. "Go back to sleep. I'll tend to your wounds."

Slowly, she did so, exhausted by her own nightmares, and whoever had pinned her stayed near as tended to her injuries. When I looked up to thank them, I froze, thinking I was dreaming, because it was **Chulainn.** It was Chulainn, with a cut on his cheek and a worried look, but it was **him.**

"Hey, Aly, if you want to step out for a bit, I can watch him." It wasn't just Chulainn either. Tailtiu was also here, characteristic cheer contained only to her soft smile and wink. "I've my staff on me, so I can do the checks for you," she continued lightly, holding up said staff for emphasis. "Why not take a short break?"

"I… think I will," I murmured, not quite processing anything. I hadn't expected either of them. "The ones with ribbons tied to their beds are special cases. Please just make sure they're not dying immediately."

"You got it!" Tailtiu began humming as she did checks, and Chulainn led me outside the infirmary to take that little break.

As soon as we turned the corner, just out of sight, I hugged him tightly, relaxing at the familiar warmth. He hugged me back, his hand twisting about my braid. I was sure I smelled horrible, considering everything, but he held me close without a care, kissing the top of my head. He didn't even pull away. He waited until I did first before cupping my face in his hands and studying me closely.

"When did you last sleep?" he asked me softly after a moment. "You look haggard."

"Aren't you supposed to lie and tell me how beautiful I am?" I tried to joke. It just came out tired. "I got an hour. I think."

"So little?"

"Lachesis isn't trained enough to tend to them. Honestly, I'm not trained enough for some. The refugees also need treatment, and someone has to check the children." I managed a smile for him, but he didn't smile back. "You should see them. The children, I mean. They've missed you. I've missed you."

"…" He leaned in and kissed me gently. "I'm worried for you right now."

"I'm an adult, you know. The children are really too young to understand."

"I will see them. But let me worry about you, at least while you're in front of me." He kissed me again, so sweetly that my knees buckled. He held me up, though. "You're exhausted."

"We didn't exactly plan on having refugees and the like. We planned for a three step system where I would ideally only have a few, very wounded people." Instead, I had very traumatized soldiers who required near constant care due to heavy injuries. "So, you were Returned? Warped? Whichever?"

"Yes. Sigurd decided that non-cavalry will be sent back via staves. I think he's planning on Claude or Aiden to come back once they've gotten the others."

"Thank the gods." If one of them were here… especially if Claude were here… I could rest, and
the patients could get fresh care, with fresh eyes. "In that case, I just have to hold out until then."

"Alicia…" He sighed and smiled so bitterly. "Sometimes, I do wish you were a little less devoted to your job."

"Would I have even caught your attention if you hadn't needed to remind me not to do everything by myself?"

"Well, yes. You're very beautiful. When you don't look like death warmed over."

"Oh, you…" I went red, and he grinned. "Ah, I should get back in there."

"If you're certain." He kissed me again soundly, and my tired mind went a little numb. "I'll be by to help after checking on the children. During your next break, you should try to visit them. The nursery isn't far."

"I'll try." I smiled up at him and he smiled back. "I miss them."

"I'm sure they miss you." One more kiss, and then he was gone, heading down the hallway.

I returned to the infirmary where Tailtiu was still doing checks. She looked up at me worriedly when she noticed I'd returned. "No offense, Aly, but you look bad," she told me bluntly. "I can…"

"I appreciate any help you can give, Tailtiu," I refused, shaking my head. The motion made my head spin. "But honestly, I'm a bit out of my depth with some of them."

"Which means I really will be, so I can't just take over." She sighed, but nodded, understanding. I knew she would. "At least let me help. Why isn't Lewyn? He knows staves too."

"As I said, I will gladly take help." I sighed. "As for Lewyn… he's mourning. Annand didn't make it, and we have no new information on his mother."

"Oh…" Tailtiu winced. "I get it. How's Erinys?"

"She's…"

"Right here." Erinys poked her head in, looking exhausted, but surprisingly determined. "I realized while eating with Ayra that I could help out here," she murmured, brushing her hair behind her ear. She wore Annand's circlet as a bracelet, looping it around her wrist a couple of times to keep it from falling. "I know them. I can probably calm them down."

"You probably can," I replied, smiling. I was a bit worried about her working, but honestly, I couldn't say much about that. "Let's get started then, you two."

We worked a little more before more light and magic heralded the arrival of others. I tensed, expecting wounded, but found it was Jamke and Brigid, looking around stoically. "The Warp and Return staves broke, so we're the last until they're repaired in the morning," Jamke reported when he caught my eye. He and Brigid had no injuries I could see, but I supposed there could be some bandages hidden by their clothes. "He figured having more archers would be a good thing here, but maybe he should've gone ahead and sent Claude."

"Well, I do appreciate having more defense," I replied with a little laugh, leaving the patients to Erinys and Tailtiu temporarily. The reassurance that Claude would be the one sent ahead was also nice. I loved Aideen and longed to hug her and gossip, but the patients would need Claude's knowledge far more than I needed her reassurances. "You should probably report in, though, to
"Midir."

"Yeah." He and Brigid shared a look and a nod. Apparently, the two had already discussed this? "I'll go do that, then."

"Meanwhile, can I help out here?" Brigid requested. That startled me. She'd always seemed to avoid the infirmary like the plague. "I can only really do mending or bandaging, but…"

"I will literally take anything you can do," I replied before giving them both the best smile I could. They both smiled back. "Can you start with making some calming teas, though, Brigid? I haven't been able to, and I'd like to try and have them drink that instead of sedatives. I'm worried about them developing a dependency."

"Yeah, sure." Brigid went to the back room, as Jamke left, but then frowned as she tried the door. "It's locked?"

"Oh. Right." I passed her the key absently, already thinking of something else. "I'm sorry. I forgot I had to lock it."

"Why?"

"I had one overdose."

"Ah." She asked no more questions, simply opened the door and went into the back to work.

I returned my attention to my patients, doing my best to work as efficiently as possible. When one pegasus knight woke up sobbing, Erinys managed to calm them down, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I focused on their injuries. Tailtiu actually got a few laughing when she popped over, making me smile and relax. Help was welcome. I was so, so glad to have help…

My vision blurred suddenly and I stepped back, rubbing at my eyes. A hand fell on my shoulder as I did and nudged me towards the back table. It took me far too long to realize it was Brigid. "I've the calming teas going, but if you're going to insist on working, I figured you'd need a little energy boost," she explained, making me sit down. A cup of tea was steeping, and I could smell the ginseng. "Seriously, what the hell have people doing? Don't they know someone has to watch the healer? Gods, that was basic manners among the pirates."

I burst into laughter, and only managed to muffle it when Brigid gave me a worried look and then looked to Erinys and Tailtiu as if to say 'did she snap?'. "I'm sorry," I managed, still giggling. It shouldn't have been so funny, but it was. "Chulainn said something similar, once. It's a reason why I fell in love with him. Just one, though." Though it was that belief of his that led me to get to know him. If not for that, I doubted… well, it would've taken longer, at the very least. Maybe he would've fallen in love with someone else. I didn't like that thought. I was too tired for that thought.

"Oh." She eyed me carefully and then smirked. "Pretty as you are, Alicia, and handsome as Chulainn is, I have a feeling that you and Chulainn like an exclusive relationship. Though, if you two aren't…" Her smirk grew as I laughed more and blushed madly. "Yeah, I figured. Almost a bit of a shame."

"You're teasing me."

"Maybe." She snickered, and I just kept on laughing. It felt like forever since I laughed. "So, there's a bloody shawl in the back?"

"It's something for Lewyn. The shawl is wrapped around something Queen Rahna wanted him to
"I stored it there for safekeeping, to have one less thing to keep track of. "That's all."

"Got it." She peered at my face and sighed. "Seriously, why hasn't anyone hit you over the head to get you to stop working?"

"Honestly, the reason is because I'm the most trained healer on hand, and we didn't exactly plan on... any of this." In retrospect, we should've. That was our error. We made a horrible mistake to not even think of the Thove attack being a diversion. "When Claude returns... Jamke said Claude was the one coming ahead?"

"He is. He and Aideen debated the benefits and consequences and decided that Claude would be the better choice for the patients."

"I see." I managed to smile. "So, when he comes, I'll rest. Until then, though..."

"Right." She nodded to the mug, reminding me it was there. "You drink that and rest your feet for a moment, at least."

"Of course. Thank you."

Over the next couple of days, more people arrived via Return and Warp. Dew, for instance, arrived with medicines and staves he 'happened to acquire', likely stolen from Thove's own infirmary. Though he and I weren't close by any means, I did give him a hug for that and he gave me a wink and a grin before dashing off to do whatever. Sylvia was the next person I recognized, and she took over all the medicine making for me, so that I had time to take a small nap, and she worked in the infirmary alongside me at all hours. Tailtiu and Erinys cycled between helping me in the infirmary and helping Lachesis with the refugees. Midir, Jamke, Brigid, Ayra, and Chulainn all did shifts as well, though they added 'watching the children so that Shanan finally had a break' and 'patrolling' to their list of things to do. Lewyn remained... away, but no one requested that I look into him, so I assumed others were watching him.

Still, it was quite a relief when Claude appeared. It really was.

"I see things ended up somewhere between the worst and best-case scenario," he murmured, looking around. It took a second to realize he'd been joking. "I think one of us should have come sooner to help, though."

"Oifeye had no idea how bad things were," I pointed out. I pinched the bridge of my nose, desperately trying to will away the headache I had. I needed more sleep. I wanted a bath, a relaxing one not the quick 'clean off all the fluids and dirt to not infect my own patients' one. I wanted to cuddle with my children and my lover. I wanted... a lot of things. I'd settle for sleep. "We certainly didn't plan for this."

"True." Claude fell silent, looking over the patients and studying them closely. "Before I take over for you, might I ask an odd question?"

"Of course." I glanced around as well, noting Sylvia, Jamke, and Tailtiu were all working well enough. In the past few days, most had managed to stop flailing and screaming. I felt almost hopeful that we wouldn't have to watch so much for suicides, though I kept the back room locked, just in case. "What is it?"

"Have the bodies been buried?"

"They... haven't, no." I'd been startled when I'd learned that, but apparently, between people
wondering if they 'should' bury them here in Thove, an inability to find enough coffins, and everything else that was going on, it hadn't been done. Part of me thought it was odd and a little stupid, but honestly, the rest of me was too tired to care. "Would you like to see them?"

"Yes, actually." Claude set his staves in the corner, holding onto one I didn't recognize. For one thing, it had tassels. It looked like an ornate fortify staff, with tassels. I had no idea why a staff needed tassels. "Can you show me the way?"

"Of course." Quietly informing the others where we were going, we headed down into the cellars, where the dead still rested. The smell of incense didn't do anything to cover the smell of death and rot, and my stomach rolled as we descended down the stairs.

Claude, however, remained perfectly calm. "Which body is Annand's?" he asked softly. Confused, I led him to her, covered by a tarp. I knew which one was hers, of course. The bodies hadn't been moved at all. "Let's see then."

He held a hand over the tarp, like he was about to pull it back, but he shook his head and brought his staff up. The gem glowed, the tassels fluttering in a breeze I couldn't feel, and I wondered why he was doing this. Annand was dead. Healing magic didn't work on the dead. It was basic logic. However, as the gem glowed more, I noticed my blood humming and that's when I finally put the pieces together. This was no 'ordinary' staff. This… this was the Valkyrie Staff, the staff that could bring back the dead.

Hope and unease warred within me at that revelation, as while I would love to have Annand back, as much as I would love to apologize to her, as much as I knew she deserved a better death than this… she'd been dead for over a week. Erinys, and presumably Lewyn, had mourned for that long. Then there was the question, the small question, of whether such a thing was 'right' to do, and what gave us the 'right' to choose who could come back from the dead. Why did our loved ones take priority? Should they? They were rather uncomfortable questions, really.

However, the gem stopped glowing and he brought the staff down to his side, shaking his head. "It won't work," he murmured, smiling bitterly. "I had thought that if it would work on any that fell, it would be her based on the little I knew. Ah, well, the gods do love their children."

"I'm not sure how that last sentence connects to the rest," I whispered. I couldn't decide if I was more disappointed or relieved that it didn't work. "Regardless, it didn't work?"

"No, it didn't. I couldn't fulfill all the requirements."

"I have heard that the Valkyrie Staff has many conditions to work-"

"You mean Arvis told you." He chuckled and I shrugged, neither confirming nor denying. Arvis was the one who told me, after all. "It's kept quiet to add to the mystique."

"How do you keep people from requesting you to bring back their loved ones?"

"By sealing the staff in the Tower of Blaggi. It lets us keep the mystery, while also keeping all blame from us."

"I see." I wanted to ask what it meant that he had the Valkyrie Staff now, but I decided I didn't actually want to know. Perhaps I'd feel differently, when I wasn't so tired. "So, that's why you wanted to come here. You wanted to see if she, at least..."

"I might as well. The staff can be repaired after use. It's just expensive and time-consuming." He shrugged and nodded to the stairs. "But, let's return. Since it didn't work, we have no reason to
linger and disturb the dead any longer."

"Of course." I looked back to Annand's covered body briefly before following Claude out of the cellar, feeling very... odd. Perhaps it was because I was so tired, but this whole thing felt odd. "Why bring me along for that?"

"According to the records, injuries still persist, so a healer is encouraged to be on hand, and I knew you'd at least pretend to keep calm if I somehow managed to succeed." Claude continued walking with a slight, mildly smug smile. I resisted the urge to give him a dirty look. "It was a wild chance anyway. I just wanted to try. I wanted to say that I did, in fact, do all that I could."

"What are the requirements for the Valkyrie Staff, if you do not mind me asking?"

"Let's see..." Claude frowned as he tried to remember, bringing up his hand to count them off. "There must be enough quintessence left in the body, too much time cannot have passed, you must be able to find and 'hold' the spirit back from the gods, and if you fulfill those three conditions, you then perform a 'ritual' where three people, ideally close to the deceased, speak and serve as 'anchor' points to guide the soul." Claude rattled it off easily, but I did feel my mind wander a bit. While most of it made sense, I had no idea about why some of the things, like whatever 'quintessence' was, were important. "If you do all of that, it might work."

"Might?"

"It's not a sure thing, even with all of that. Truly, the Valkyrie Staff is better used as a more powerful Fortify staff." He laughed ruefully, and I simply smiled, having no real reply. "However, now with that out of the way and no longer bothering me..." He smiled, but he had a serious look to him. "Alicia, it is a healer's recommendation that you go to sleep. You looked horribly drained. I can take over."

"I'd rather explain some of the worst cases first." This was far more of what I'd been expecting when he arrived. "Then I will pass out."

"Ah, very well." Claude nodded, understanding, and both of us walked just a bit faster to the infirmary. "What sort of things are we looking at, then?"

As soon as Claude knew what was going on, and didn't need my assistance anymore, I tried to go to my room to finally get some sleep. I ended up half-passing out in the hallway, all my exhaustion catching up now that I no longer had to work. Someone caught me before I hit the ground, though, and carried me to my room, where I properly fainted and slept for over twelve hours. When I woke, I found Chulainn sitting next to me, playing with Conall and Caitriona, as happy as anyone could be.

"Morning?" I croaked, pushing myself up and noticing that someone, probably Chulainn, had actually tucked me in. He smiled at me and pointed to the window that showed the beautiful night sky. "Evening."

"Evening," he whispered, settling Caitriona and Conall in his lap before he leaned over and kissed my forehead. "You want me to get a bath for you?"

"Yes, please." I sighed and took over playing with Caitriona and Conall while he set up the bath. Both reached up to hug me, and I covered their faces with kisses to make them giggle. "Did you see their Holy Marks, Chulainn? I forgot to warn you about that."

"I did." The sound of running water almost drowned him out. "I'm not sure how comfortable I am
with that."

"I'm not either, especially given just how many Minors of our generation showed early." But that wasn't a topic I wanted to think on right now. It just made me uneasy. "Say, who carried me? I was too delirious to see who it was."

"Lewyn."

"Really?" That startled me. I hadn't seen much of him since he came back. "Huh. That's unexpected."

"Unexpected was seeing Lewyn carrying a half-conscious you." He stepped out of the bathroom and bent down to kiss me. In his eyes, I could see the residual fear. I was sure he'd been thinking of Agusty, when I'd been unconscious and near death. "I knew you'd been working too much."

"Well, I'll have a nice little break. Claude can take over and we can divide the work." I smiled reassuringly up at him and he simply kissed me again, fierce enough that he nearly pushed me down on the bed. "Careful, love. Our children are in the room."

"People kiss all time. There's nothing wrong with them seeing a show of affection between their parents." He smirked and I rolled my eyes. "But you do have a bath waiting for you."

"I do indeed." I looked at the children, frowning as a thought occurred to me. "Do they need baths?"

"I bathed them earlier." Chulainn glanced at the bathroom sheepishly. "There might still be some mess from it, actually."

"That's because you can never resist splashing them."

"They laugh! They find it fun!" He picked me up and pushed me towards the bathroom. "Anyway, your water is just getting cold."

"You're just avoiding a lecture."

"I know much better ways to avoid a lecture." To prove it, he bent down and kissed the back of my neck. I flushed instantly and squirmed a bit. Damn him for knowing that was sensitive. "But, you want a bath. Let me play with our children."

"Yes, yes."

I took a very relaxing bath and enjoyed a fun moment with my little family. Afterwards, I decided to try and find Lewyn to thank him, and to check in on him finally. Of course, I discovered then that no one really knew where he was. He appeared and disappeared much like the wind itself, and all anyone really knew was that he was still alive and he ate regularly, according to the kitchen staff. Erinys mentioned that since this was an abandoned castle normally, she, Lewyn, and Annand used to play hide and seek in here. Lewyn always won, because he'd found all the hidden alcoves ahead of time, allowing him to basically be just about anywhere.

So, seeing that I was the only one 'off-duty', I decided to hunt for him. Though, admittedly, it was more wandering around, enjoying the opportunity to walk around the castle again. Along the way, I finally was able to see Lachesis, also taking a break due to dizziness, and Shanan, who was practicing swords. I found Midir and made sure he was okay, and chatted with Ayra for a bit before continuing my search. However, it proved rather unfruitful and I was just about to give up when I thought I heard the sound of a flute. It was very faint, to the point that I almost thought I imagined...
it, but as I listened, I realized I knew the song, and it was not a song I'd just imagine, or so I thought. So, I followed it, pausing every so often to decide if the song was louder or softer.

Eventually, though, I found the source of the sound, though I had to look very high up to actually find Lewyn. He'd somehow managed to tuck himself in an alcove high above the ramparts. I half-thought he'd just climbed into it from the roof. Regardless, though, I waited until the song ended before saying, "I can see how you always won hide and seek, Lewyn."

"For pegasus knights in training, it's surprising how long it would take them to think to look up," Lewyn replied. He looked down and smiled tiredly, bringing his flute down to his lap. He had bags under his eyes, and he was grey from exhaustion. He might've been eating, but he definitely hadn't been sleeping. "I always found it hilarious."

"It sounds like it." I clasped my hands in front of me and stepped back so that I didn't have to lean my head up quite so much to look at him. "That song was 'Hope on the Wind', wasn't it? You said it was your father's favorite."

"It was Annand's too. She loved spring the best." Lewyn looked up at the stars, eyes narrowed. "Last time she was here, she made me promise to play it for her next time she saw me. A little silly to play it now, but there was that poem she always loved."

"Poem?"

"'Do not stand at my grave and weep. I am not there. I do not sleep.' He recited it easily and softly, perfectly memorized. "I am a thousand winds that blow. I am the diamond glints on snow." The wind blew a bit of snow up into my face, like it was playfully playing along. "I am the sunlight on ripened grain. I am the gentle autumn rain." He closed his eyes, smiling slightly. "When you awaken in the morning's hush, I am the swift uplifting rush of quiet birds in circled flight. I am the soft stars that shine at night." Almost unbidden, my gaze was drawn to the stars, and the gentle light they gave off. "Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there. I did not die."

"That's beautiful, if…" The only word I could think of was 'bittersweet'. It was hopeful and comforting, but the entire premise was just… sad. "Did she recite it often?"

"No, mostly just when she and Erinys visited their parents' graves, though she also said it for my father's funeral. I, however, thought it would be impressive if I could recite it from memory. I was infatuated with her when I was younger." He shrugged, laughing. "Annand just rolled her eyes and ruffled my hair. To her, I was always the 'little brother'. It bothered me when I was little, but as I got older, and that crush faded, I appreciated it. I wish I had told her that."

"I think she knew." I felt my smile falter, so I changed the subject. "Thank you for carrying me back to my room."

"It was nothing. I Lewyn twisted a bit to better look at me. I half-feared he'd fall, but he seemed perfectly balanced. "Alicia, can I ask you something?"

"Yes, of course."

"The wind has been explaining to me what all happened. The sylphs watched and all. So, I know that the civilians were in danger because my uncle is a bastard and sent armed soldiers to kill civilians. I know she chose to go back." He paused and looked down briefly. I sighed, and decided attempting to change the subject had been a stupid thing to do. He deserved answers, just as much as Erinys. "But what the wind can't answer is… she was badly injured, and you chose to heal her and let her go. Why?"
"It's what she chose." I closed my eyes and did my best to not flinch. It hurt, but I was also keenly aware that it only hurt because I knew her, and because she was so close to people I adored. I would not have hurt as much if she hadn't. It was part of the basic training for healers, to be able to maintain that distance. "I've healed soldiers, and they've gone out to die before. It was the same thing, sadly. I healed her up, as well as I could, and sent her on her way, because she chose to no longer be my patient. When she chose that, I had no 'right' to stop her."

"If she'd asked…"

"I would've shielded her. I would've defended her. She was badly injured. But she chose otherwise, and I respected that choice." I smiled bitterly. "You always hear the phrase 'sacrifice the few for the many'. It's an easy mentality, when you don't know the 'few'." However, once you knew those 'few', it became so much harder. But it was selfish and unfair to suddenly decide that mentality was 'wrong' just for that reason. "It's how we all have to operate. I do my best to save everyone, but there are times where I can only ease someone's pain, because their injuries require too much focus and in that time, I could've saved three others."

"In this case, Annand chose to be one of the few. One of the few sacrificed, so that the rest could survive. So that the civilians, who shouldn't be dragged into this, survived." Lewyn sighed and covered his face with his hand. I thought he'd been crying, but when his hand came down, there were no tears. I wondered if he'd cried himself out, or if he was just too tired. "That just… damn it, I left to avoid things like this."

"I'm sorry."

"I am too." He sighed again and tucked himself into the alcove. "I am too."

"…Lewyn?" I waited for him to look at me again. "I have an item for you, something Annand asked to be passed to you. It's in the infirmary. Would you like it?"

"…Yes." He swung out of the alcove, up onto the roof. I knew he'd climbed it. "I'll… ah… meet you in the hallway."

"Please do. I highly doubt I could make the climb."

"Oh, I know you can't."

"Hey!"

I headed back inside the castle 'proper' and waited for Lewyn to find me. From there, we headed to the infirmary. Claude and Sylvia began to scold me for working, but I reassured them that I wasn't there to work. I was just there for something stored in the back room, pointing to Lewyn. Claude still looked reluctant, but Sylvia pestered him into letting us duck back in, so he relented. I found it incredibly amusing how quickly he folded, but that was talk for another time. Instead, I found the shawl-wrapped-book among the back shelves, where I stored extra bandages, and passed it to Lewyn, finally fulfilling the last task Annand had asked of me. Lewyn stared at the shawl for a moment, no doubt recognizing it, before unwrapping it to reveal a green and white book, strangely immaculate given everything. At least, it was strange until I noticed the 'hum' in my blood, and I realized just what it was.

"Forseti," he whispered, confirming my suspicion. He traced the design on the front, some strange design that looked almost like a set of scales, but with wings instead of the actual scales. "Of course." He sighed and nodded, clutching it and the shawl against his chest. "I get it, Mother. I hope you're still alive, for you to scold me." He took a shuddering breath, held it, and breathed out
slowly. "I think… I think I'll help out here. I really should've done it sooner."

"No one is forced to help," I pointed out gently. I made sure to smile. "But, if you want, I doubt Claude would mind. I, however, am going back to bed."

"I imagine." He managed to smile back. "Thanks, Alicia. For getting this to me."

"It's the least I could do, for you and for Annand."

I left the infirmary then, lingering only long enough to see Lewyn offer his assistance, and headed back to my room. Chulainn was still there, of course, playing with Caitriona and Conall because that was probably his favorite thing in the world to do. I changed into a nightgown and crawled into bed with them, teasing Chulainn and joining in on the playing, babbling about this thing and that to the children, in response to their own babbling. Before long, though, I was nodding off again, and I curled up next to them, smiling softly even as sleep took me.

The sight of Chulainn playing with our children… if I could be blessed with that sight every day of my life, I'd be very, very happy.

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It was so relieving to have another trained healer in the infirmary. It wasn't as if everyone magically got better. A couple of the 'special cases' had to be let go, due to severe brain damage essentially making them breathing dolls, decisions Claude and I made with Lewyn and Erinys present, because it was always morally ambiguous. We still had risks of suicides, and had to keep the back room locked up tight. But I felt like we were actually making progress instead of simply flailing about. Perhaps that was simply the view after a good night's rest. Everything seemed better when you weren't exhausted.

"So, Claude, since we're not in too much of a panic…" I began during a small break we had. I was cleaning up after stitching up someone's injuries again, while he was doing checks over the patients, all peacefully asleep finally. They'd calmed significantly ever since Lewyn and Erinys both started helping out, likely because of the familiar faces. "I've a few questions."

"Are they serious questions or are they teasing in the guise of questions?" Claude asked dryly, giving me a wary look before returning to his checks. "Your tone implies the latter."

"Why, Claude, I'm hurt." I smiled so that he knew I was joking, so he simply shook his head. "Fine, then. I shall start with the teasing."

"Oh no."

"It's a simple one. I've noticed the longing looks-"

"There are no longing looks."

"I hadn't even finished my statement." I grinned and he groaned, facepalming. It almost hid his blush. "I'm sorry. Should I keep quiet? You're about the same age as Arvis, so I tease without thinking sometimes."

"I didn't think Arvis had things to tease about."

"Oh, there is quite a bit. I'll let you know more, some time. But you have to promise to not tell him I told you~!" I giggled and dried my hands, done with cleaning. "But, seriously, if you want me to keep quiet, simply tell me."
"For now, yes, please. I am a bit worried about the age difference. Among other things." His expression became serious, and a touch dark, so any teasing and reassurances I had died on my tongue. I thought of how he had seen the future, many futures, and wondered just what he saw. But I didn't ask. For one thing, I knew he wouldn't answer. For another, I wasn't sure I wanted to know. "Besides, I am uncertain if the feelings are simply admiration or something more amorous. At the least, I know I do enjoy her company. For now, that is enough. When we are out of the current crisis, I'll evaluate my feelings more."

"Of course." Noting that things were still relatively stable with the patients, I actually set about making tea for the two of us. We both deserved the break. "Then, might I ask a serious question?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"It's simply something that has always bothered me, but Arvis never knew how to answer. Why is it that some of those with Holy Blood can sense others with ease, while others simply… can't?" For instance, I was able to hide my Vala Minor Blood for a few months in this army filled with others of Holy Blood, while Travant knew I was of Holy Blood the second I walked into his tent. Admittedly, he'd had other clues, yet it still bothered me.

"Mmm… truthfully, the answer is uncertain. No one has been able to find a pattern to it. Most, in fact, can't sense it at all, or only can with intense concentration." Claude came over, and found two teacups for us. "It's just something some can do, like how some people are left-handed. I am one of the latter, personally, but it's so much concentration that I'd prefer leaving the focus for other things."

"I'm one of the former." I laughed softly, nodding. That did make a little more sense, I supposed. "That's a much better answer than what Arvis gave."

"Now, now, I did have a few more years to pursue my own interests before becoming the Duke of Edda." Still, he laughed too. "Ah, but I am curious about something."

"Yes?"

"What is…?" He paused and looked to the door. "I wondered what happened."

"Pardon?" I gave him a confused look before seeing a messenger slide in, literally. They lost their footing at the last second. "Oh dear."

"I'll take care of them."

"Thank you." I headed to the back to check our medicines while Claude tended to the messenger. After all, something like this normally meant that there was an attack, and attacks always meant injured.

After making sure we had sufficient medicines, hopefully, I checked the bandages and other things before checking the staves to make sure we had plenty. Since Claude was here, we had a Fortify for absolute emergencies, and the Valkyrie Staff that he could apparently use as a Fortify if need came to it. Between those two and the other staves, we should have enough staves to cover most plausible scenarios.

With that completed, I returned to the main room of the infirmary and peeked out the window to see what I could see. "There are no pegasus knights yet, at least in my view," I murmured. Claude simply nodded and prepared the few extra beds we had. We'd have to set up bedding on the floor, just in case. "That's good, yes?" Would it be too much to hope that Annand and her squad killed all
the opposition before being slaughtered? Of course it would. I wondered if they'd gone to Thove. I hoped not; Sigurd had sent most of his archers here.

"It depends, sadly, but it does mean that, for now, we're…" Claude began, but he trailed off and looked out towards the door. "What is that song?"

"Song?" I frowned, because I didn't hear anything resembling a song. "What song?"

"The song that… it's like it's on the wind." Claude closed his eyes and smiled gently. "It's quite pretty."

"I still don't know what you're…" I fell silent then, because I finally did hear the song. It was quiet at first, but slowly grew louder. But it was never 'too' loud. It was the perfect volume to be… soothing. There was no other word for the song. It was peaceful, soothing, calming. I had no idea what instrument, or instruments, played it. All I knew was that any anxiety I had just faded away. I felt at peace.

"Hear it now?" Claude nodded to the patients, who all slept… they all seemed peacefully asleep for the very first time. It was like they heard it too. "I think we can head outside, to find the source."

"Should we, though?"

"In this case, I think so."

Claude strode out confidently and I hesitated briefly before following him out of the infirmary and down the hall. It was very difficult to find the source of the sound. It never grew louder or softer, and it's soothing nature made us very… there was no hurry. It was like we had all the time in the world. It was like we'd been cut out of reality, and we just watched everything pass, but there was still something so incredibly comforting.

Eventually, Claude and I made it out onto the ramparts, where we found many of our friends. Claude immediately went to stand with Sylvia, Dew, and Ayra, while I went to Chulainn, and Shanan. Absently, I hugged Shanan from behind, looking around at everyone. Tailtiu, Lachesis, Brigid, Jamke, and Midir were apart from us, the only ones with weapons, but they didn't make a move to actually fight. I almost wondered why they had weapons at all, but then remembered the messenger. The song had driven the threat right out of my head.

I looked out and saw enemy forces scattered about in the distance. They made no move to attack. Some had even fallen to their knees, and somehow, I knew they heard the song too. They heard it and surrendered, the urge to fight driven out of them. Others, however, were not calmed. They were not soothed. They regained their will to fight, and so they did, charging and bellowing. Chulainn wrapped an arm around me as we just watched, unable to really do anything, as Tailtiu and Lachesis prepped their spells, thunder and wind respectively, and Jamke, Brigid, and Midir drew arrows. Midir even shouted for 'archers', so there must've been others that I just couldn't see.

"Oh, wind…" But before they could do anything, someone spoke. The voice was soft and had a slight echo to it as it slowly replaced the 'song'. It took me a few seconds to recognize it as Lewyn's voice. "Dance to my song."

The wind shrieked into a fury, whipping into a storm that threatened to take us clear off our feet. Chulainn dragged Shanan and me down, using the ramparts' walls as some sort of shield, and I clung tightly to Shanan just to make sure he didn't get blown off. I thought I heard screams, but the wind was so strong, so loud, that I wasn't sure. So, I just held on, relied on Chulainn, and hoped
desperately that no one would have shrapnel thrown into them or, worse, through them.

Eventually, though, the wind calmed again, and we slowly raised our heads. Chulainn and Shanan looked around, but I found myself looking 'up' and 'back', suspecting just what it was. Lewyn standing on the roof of the castle, with Eriny's and her pegasus near, proved my suspicion. That... *that* had been Forseti, the Holy Weapon of Wind, the Divine Storm.

"Well, damn." Chulainn's voice made me look up, but he wasn't looking at Lewyn or me. Instead, he looked straight ahead to where our enemy was. When I looked too, I gasped, unable to help it. There were... 'Massacre' was too tame of a word for the blood and armor scattered about, all that remained of the chargers. 'Obliteration' was closer. But what was most interesting was that those who just 'disappeared'... they were only those who charged. Those who had fallen to their knees were pushed back, but otherwise unharmed. They were shaken, frozen, but *unharmed*.

The wind whipped up again and we all tensed, prepared to drop again. But, there was no 'storm'. Instead, Lewyn suddenly wasn't on the roof anymore with Eriny's. Instead, he was below, in front of the soldiers, as calm as you please. "Inform my uncle that I am coming for him," he ordered coolly, voice pitched perfectly to reach all the way up to us. "That throne isn't his, and it never will be. Go on, now, unless you wish to try my spell again."

The enemy ran. Of course they did. The fury of a Divine Weapon wasn't meant to take lightly, and seeing so many just gone, with only their blood, armor, and weapons showing they had even existed... I'd run too. I did run, actually, but it was inside, towards the stables, since I guessed Eriny's, at least, would be there to tend to her pegasus. I was right, too, but ended up a little lucky. Lewyn was with her too.

"Did you have to be so dramatic?" Eriny's scolded, fussing over him. Lewyn just let her, sagging against the wall, sweating profusely and face grey with exhaustion. "You told me that you were just going to try it out, to accept it and show your resolve! Not all of that!"

"I know. I know," Lewyn sighed. He smiled sweetly at her and Eriny's paused briefly to blush before fussing again. "I didn't think using it like that would use up that much strength."

"Of course, it would! Lewyn, you big dummy!"

"Hey, not so loud, please. My head really hurts."

"Ah! I'm sorry!"

"Somehow, I knew you might need a healer," I teased, wishing I didn't have to interrupt. I wasn't sure how much they'd interacted since Annand's death. "I did think Claude and I would have to hunt you down, though, Lewyn. I was going to ask Eriny's for help"

"No, I planned on being good and report to the infirmary, actually," Lewyn replied. He waved weakly to me, while Erinys turned towards me and smiled. "Ugh... I didn't think it was possible, but I think I feel worse than when I was plagued with the spasms."

"Can you walk?"

"Yes." Lewyn winced when Erinys glared at him. "No. Erinys will help me, though."

"Do you want to have a check up now, or in the infirmary?"

"Infirmary, because I have a feeling you're going to at least keep me there for the night."
"Well, of course I am." I smiled at Erinys, ignoring Lewyn's groan. "Do you need help carrying him?"

"No, I've got him," Erinys reassured. She gave Lewyn another dirty look when he looked ready to protest. "Not a word out of you, mister. Not one word."

I led the two to the infirmary, and worked on Lewyn while Erinys helped out with the pegasus knights and Claude tended to the very few wounded we'd gotten prior to Lewyn unveiling Forseti's might and reminding us of the strength of the Holy Weapons. Thankfully, though, Lewyn's main problem was simply exhaustion, so I simply had him rest in the infirmary, under observation, just in case. Afterwards, I went about my normal duties until Claude's shift ended, and I urged Erinys to rest while I settled in for my 'solo' shift. 'Solo' being used loosely because there was always someone coming by to help out. This time, it was Brigid, but something was off. Though she smiled and reassured me that everything was fine, something was off.

I waited to ask, though. I waited until we made some medicines, did some mending, and settled down for a break before asking, "Brigid, is everything okay?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, yeah, I'm fine," she replied. It was mostly convincing, but her sigh implied otherwise. "I'm just thinking."

"I see." I finished make us both some tea and sat down at the table with her. "What are you thinking about?"

"It's just…" She paused and sipped her tea, squeaking when she found it too hot still. I did my best to hide my smile. "It's the Holy Weapons. They're so strange."

"Strange?"

"Yes. They're so powerful and…" She looked to Yewfelle, tucked in the back corner. "It turns my arrows into light. With it in my hands, I am stronger and faster. My injuries heal, and it digs into my skull to unearth old memories. Forseti, a tome, basically sang a song to make our enemies stop fighting, and then killed those who didn't surrender. Those aren't normal things." She sighed again, looking down at her mug. "It just… it overwhelms me, sometimes. A year ago, I was just a normal pirate, maybe a bit luckier than most. Yet now… now, sometimes, I feel like I'm not quite human. I'm not sure how much I like it."

"I wish I knew what to say." I smiled sadly at her. "But I don't. I've always known about my Holy Blood, even if I hide my Mark."

"Yeah. It's just something I have to learn to accept." She sighed, and gave me a curious look. "Say, subject change."

"Yes?"

"So, Aideen trusts you a lot."

"I'm glad to hear that. I trust her completely."

"She also said that if I needed to talk to someone, I should try to find you."

"I… that depends on the topic." I smiled sheepishly. "There are things I don't know about. There are many things, actually."

"What about, say, relationships?"
"I can think of... well, Ethlyn and Aideen would be..." I paused, remembering how long Aideen and Midir danced around each other and remembering that Ethlyn wasn't here. I still wasn't used to it. "Never mind. When we take another break, or tomorrow if that's your preference, I'll gladly listen to your feelings for Jamke."

"H-how did you know I'm interested in him?" She scowled and I laughed. "Seriously?"

"You spend the most time with him. I took a guess." I chose against mentioning that many of us in the army were hoping for the relationship, especially Aideen. Aideen could tell her that herself. "For now, it might be better just to relax."

"Probably." She smiled almost shyly, laughing a bit. "We are such a weird group."

"We are indeed."

After finishing our tea, we settled back into work. We ended up not taking another break before Claude returned for his next shift, so we silently agreed to have the 'relationship' conversation tomorrow, probably with some of the other girls to weigh in. She left to go on patrol, and Claude and I worked in silence until the end of my shift. However, Lewyn woke up then, so I decided to stay just a little longer to check in on him.

"How are you feeling?" I asked him as he groaned and sat up. "Groans are not an adequate answer, for the record."

"I feel like I'm never going to do that again," he complained, leaning forward to rest his head in his hands. "Ugh... I ache."

"I'll get you some pain reliever for that." I brushed the hair out of his face, and frowned over how grey he still was. "Perhaps suddenly disappearing and reappearing was not the best thing to do after obliterating an army."

"Nah, the teleportation via wind is just a thing with Forseti. It's a passive bonus, so to speak." He shrugged, but he didn't try to smile to reassure me. Instead, he looked a little haunted. "With the song though... with the storm... that was..."

"What happened?"

"It felt like there was another person in my head, sharing my body, but a mind that was completely separate." He shuddered and I stilled, startled and unnerved. "I don't like it. It felt so... foreign. Foreign to the point that it didn't even think like me, couldn't think like me."

"Do you feel it now?"

"I don't think so. But I remember what it felt like, and I have that shadow hovering over me."

"...Let me get Claude. Mental things are, sadly, not something my staves and medicines can do much about, but perhaps he knows something." I gently touched his cheek and smiled. "I will be very glad, though, if you chose to never use the tome that way again."

"Same." He smiled back, relieved. "Single target. That'll be fantastic."

"Of course."

I snagged Claude and informed him of what Lewyn had felt. He immediately gave Lewyn an intensive check over, while I tended to the other patients. Ultimately, he found the same thing I
did: exhaustion but nothing else. He did, however, think he could 'see' what that 'shadow' had been, which made us all uneasy. Claude ordered that after every battle Lewyn used Forseti, he check in with us, and I wondered if we should do the same with Brigid, since Yewfelle also invaded her mind.

The Holy Weapons were indeed powerful, but if they cost you yourself... how desperate had the Crusaders been to take up weapons like that?

Notes on Beowolf

A 25-year-old mercenary with many, many rumors and stories about him from my understanding. The one that stands out to me is that he might have a son, but Beowolf himself never confirms or denies any of the stories.

One of our more balanced fighters, with a wealth of experience and a solid offense. His versatility lets him adapt to many situations, though he only uses swords.

A bit distant from most, possibly because of his background as a mercenary, and rarely comes anywhere near the infirmary or children, preferring to patrol or have a drink in the tavern. He and Chulainn are surprisingly good friends, though, perhaps because they were both mercenaries.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: So. Forseti. It's kinda broken. By kinda, I mean 'completely'. It's the only magical Holy Weapon you have any access to in game and it can be ridiculous depending on who uses it. In the second generation, the general rule of thumb is 'anyone who attacks the Forseti wielder deserved to die', particularly if Erinys's son, Ced, inherits it (because no matter who his father is, Ced is a powerhouse). The 'shadow' thing, though, is hints for... later stuff.

Forseti having the ability to soothe and calm via music comes from the Oosawa manga, and having it not strike down those who surrendered comes from how, in game, its power is explicitly described as being more like the 'cool breeze guiding people to the path of peace', not violence. (Going to point out again, though, that the tome more or less kills anyone.) For the teleporting via wind, that's based off of a few scenes from the Nea Fuyuki manga, and I used it to show off Forseti's speed boost. Which is twenty. Yes, Forseti boosts speed by 20. It also boosts skill by 10. To showcase how ridiculous this makes Lewyn, assuming Lewyn meets his averages, he'll have 100 Evade, have a 65% chance of activating Adept, 35% of scoring a critical (not taking into account lover bonus), and has an attack of about 50-60, depending on how lucky you were. The design for Forseti is based off of official artwork, but fun fact, 'Forseti' is the god of justice and reconciliation in Norse Mythology, which might be why the book's design looks so much like scales.

Yewfelle, by the way, since its abilities finally came up, gives a plus 10 to both strength and speed and also gives them the Renewal skill (I'm using the Renewal skill as an explanation for why Brigid starts remembering things from before becoming a pirate btw). It basically gives Brigid 60 attack as soon as she joins and she essentially destroys anyone she attacks. Bows are still effective against fliers, by the way, so she
gets a chance to really show off during the game chapter, since she's coming at the flyers with 120 attack. (Weapon effectiveness guarantees a critical in FE4, which doubles attack prior to damage calculations)

As for the Valkyrie Staff, it is a single use resurrection in game, and it is very expensive to repair. I'm adding the ability to be used as a 'stronger' Fortify based on how the S-ranked staves in future games acted. The 'ritual' for bringing back the dead is more or less taken from Critical Role and the Tal'Dorei Campaign Guide for Dungeons and Dragons because I think it just makes wonderful sense. The Valkyrie Staff is the only Holy Weapon to not give stat boosts.

Brigid joking a bit about a threesome with Alicia and Chulainn is a nod to how Brigid is often paired with Chulainn in game for the stats. Though, despite the popularity, he's not one of her 'predestined' lovers, having absolutely no interaction with her in-game (watch a remake come out and turn that into a lie). Her predestined pairings are Alec, Jamke, and Midir, based on Chapter 5 conversations. Only one, Midir, has any conversations with her before hand. (FE4 is sparse on in-game convos, sadly.) Lex is also a popular choice for her husband, thanks to Elite.

So, I really should've mentioned this in the previous chapter, my bad, but FE4 has this mechanic where you 'save' civilians for a free level, which is very helpful for the hard to level folk like your thief (Dew) or your dancer (Sylvia). However, they tend to be chased by enemies that can kill them in one hit, so you do need to be a little quick about at least dealing with the enemies.

The poem Lewyn recites is 'Do Not Stand at my Grave and Weep', written by Mary Elizabeth Frye. It's a favorite of mine, and is a fairly popular poem for funerals.

Next chapter - Seraphim
Chapter 23) Seraphim

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 23) Seraphim

Perhaps not surprisingly, the next few days were quiet. No few of us hoped that we'd hear some message from Daccar declaring his unconditional surrender, though we all doubted it would be that easy. Instead, we strengthen defenses and work on healing. Lewyn and Erinys slowly recover, and the pegasus knights finally healed enough that they no longer required constant supervision, though they needed far more mental support to try and move past their traumas.

As everyone heals, we focus on our ultimate goal. If Daccar will not surrender, then we will have to continue the fight. Even if we wanted to stay back, we knew Daccar would send his forces at us. So, we only awaited Sigurd, and the rest of our cavalry, to push forward. I could only hope everything would be okay.

"Hello, every… hey, wait, where's Erinys?" Early for her afternoon shift, Sylvia skipped into the infirmary and looked about curiously, as if Erinys was hiding under the beds or something, before frowning. "I thought she was helping in the infirmary," she continued, setting her hands on her hips. "I also thought this was your joint shift with Claude, Alicia."

"It is," I told her, continuing my mending. There had been quite a few torn clothes in the past few days, mostly children taking advantage of the quiet to actually play about in the snow, so I volunteered to do it during my shifts. It was relaxing. "Claude's doing inventory in the back. To be more accurate, he's making sure my numbers are correct. I wasn't certain on a few."

"That makes sense," Sylvia jumped in there briefly, scaring Claude based on the yelp I heard, and came out again with all the medicine making equipment and the herbs to make some of the more popular medicines, such as headache remedies. "And Erinys?"

"She had another breakdown over Annand, so she's with Lachesis." By chance, Lachesis had already been here so that Claude and I could give her a checkup, so we hadn't needed to send for her this time. "I thought you and Lewyn were performing."

"We finished up, and he went to chat with Brigid again. He said to tell you that he'd be a bit late for his shift. The children are starting to feel homesick, so he's promised to tell them some stories."

"That's fine." I smiled at her before returning to my mending. "Do I need to move anything out of your way?"

"Noooooope~! I've got plenty of space." She giggled and began measuring things out. She was an old hand at this and, honestly, she was the best of us at making medicines. Shanan and Oifeye were close seconds, though, and to Claude's and my amusement, all three were better than us. It made sense, since they had more time to learn of other remedies, and more time to memorize all the measurements, but it still amused and pleased us. I was very proud of all three of them. "Say, Alicia?"

"Yes?"
"This is something I've been wondering for a while, just based number of people I've seen come talk to you and Claude." She paused for a moment as she double-checked a measurement. "Is it part of your job to serve as a confidant too?"

"Is… huh?" I gave her a confused look, not quite sure why she was asking. "Well, there is patient confidentiality, but that generally just involves matters with their own health." Lewyn's worries about Forseti, for instance, were something kept strictly between Claude and me. If Lewyn chose to tell others, that was his choice, but neither of us would say a word unless it became a struggle between life and death.

"But people tell you secrets, right? Like, emotional things?"

"They're not secrets, no? Some people will ramble at us to gather their thoughts, certainly, but I can only think of a handful of things people have confided solely in me." Honestly, the only thing I could think of at the moment was Chulainn's past. Though, I supposed I did keep some things Sigurd told me quiet, but then again, Sigurd was rather open with a lot of his worries, so it was difficult to know who knew what. I simply made a point of being near when I knew he was upset, because he was my friend, he was Deirdre's husband, and I'd promised Eldigan I'd keep an eye on him.

Still, since she had asked, I decided to try and think about it a bit more to give her the best answer I could. Some things came to mind immediately and it was mostly what I didn't know. I knew next to nothing about what Alec, Arden, Naoise, Dew, Beowulf, or Jamke went through, and those were just the people I know the names of. I had a professional relationship with most people in the army, from the soldiers to the messengers, and I preferred it that way, since it made it easier to do my job. Though, even among my friends, I didn't know everything. Ofeye never asked me for emotional advice or anything and the most I knew about Claude's emotional issues was that he didn't know what he felt about Sylvia, and I doubted I'd ever learn more. I'd listen, of course, since they were my friends, but that was their choice, not mine. It was always their choice.

For instance, I hadn't known until recently that Ayra and Lex had issues and discussions about how his father could've been involved with the death of her father, not to mention her feeling guilty for falling in love with someone from Grannvale. In fact, I only knew about it nowadays because I'd overheard Ayra mention it to Brigid when they were talking about Brigid's own feelings for Jamke. Otherwise, Ayra kept her issues close, save for when her emotions overwhelmed her. Hearing of her brother's death had certainly been one of those times, but Lex had handled the bulk of that. I'd simply helped with cheering her up, after the initial bit.

Tailltiu was another I didn't know too much about, emotionally wise. I did know, of course, that she still had issues over her father's crimes and how his actions, and her running away, might've hurt her family's honor. But I didn't know exactly how deep those issues went, and I didn't know what other problems she was having. But I had seen her talking privately with Lex and Azel, as well as Erinys, Lewyn, and Lachesis, so I assumed that if she'd told anyone, it was one of them. I was here if she needed me, but she seemed to enjoy teasing me far more.

Now, Lachesis… I did watch out for her. She was like my little sister, and I had promised Eldigan I would keep an eye on her. However, there was no way I was the only one she talked to. Many times I'd seen her and Ayra talk quietly, and chose to not get close to eavesdrop since it really wasn't my business if she chose to not tell me. Shanan was another one I kept a close eye on. He was also family, he was a child, and technically speaking, he was still my charge. Even with that close eye, though, there had been parts of his trauma that I had missed and they were issues I couldn't help with. Thankfully others could, like Chulainn and Lex.
That didn't even go into Azel and Aideen. Azel did come to me for some things, like his feelings for Tailtiu, but other things, I knew he kept quiet. It was sometimes annoying, because I was his older sister and I wanted to help him, but there were things you just couldn't tell your siblings. Aideen didn't really confide much in me either, despite her advice to Brigid. In fact, I was convinced she'd only advised Brigid to come to me was because I could help her find others to talk with. For instance, Brigid now talked with mostly Ayra about her feelings for Jamke and she talked to Lewyn and Claude frequently now too, as a fellow Major Blooded who could understand better her issues with it.

I had to admit that Erinys had sought me out before, to have an outsider's opinion on Lewyn and his motivations when she first joined, but I remembered I hadn't been her first choice; Sylvia had. And while Lachesis had asked me specifically to check in on her after Annand's death, that had been less because of the potential emotional issues and more because Lachesis had been very afraid Erinys would've needed immediate medical attention and knew she'd have no idea of what to do, whereas I did have lessons and training with that sort of thing. I had also seen her talking many times with Lachesis, Sylvia, and Ayra over her conflicted feelings, and stayed away to avoid eavesdropping.

That all said, I did have to admit I'd seen quite a few of my friends during their emotional lows. In fact, I sought them out when I knew something had happened. After Eldigan died, for instance, I made sure to check in on Lachesis and Sigurd every day, knowing that Ethlyn and Quan would lean on each other and that Chulainn and Lex would take care of Finn. When I had realized Sylvia was depressed back in Silvail, I had tried to cheer her up. But wasn't that normal for a friend to do? Was I supposed to simply stay back when I thought they were hurting? That didn't seem right.

Caught up in all the thoughts, I realized I was just being silent and not really thinking on an answer to Sylvia's question. So, I discarded most of them to try and focus on what she might have been referring too, and once I thought past 'emotional things' I realized in an instance what it had to be. I was almost embarrassed at how long it had taken me to figure that out.

"Sylvia, I think you've seen a lot of people coming to Claude and me for medicinal advice," I finally said. I double-checked that my stitches hadn't gone awry during my thoughts and undid a few that had. "With that said, ultimately, no, it's not necessarily a healer's job to be anyone's confidant. It's our job to be the reliable ones in an army, pillars of stability and serenity." I couldn't count how many lessons I had on the subject. I understood that most people in the medical field were taught that. "Some people will tell us things because of that presence, but it's hard to say what I know or don't know about everyone's emotional issues. I only know of the ones who come to me, or those I seek out. It is impossible for me to be everywhere at once, and to know everything about what is going on here." I smiled at Sylvia and laughed a little. "We've all been through a lot, so I assume that we're all supporting each other as best as we can. I simply play a single part in that."

"It's rather heartwarming, actually, how many of us support each other," Claude added, stepping out of the back room. He set down the inventory list on the table and went to make tea for the three of us. "At least, it seems to me that we do. I see so many gossiping and so many helping each other through panic attacks and bouts of crying."

"It truly is." I leaned back in my chair to stretch out my neck before focusing more on my mending. "Did you hear all of the little conversation, or just the last bit?"

"I heard most of it. You weren't quiet." Claude brought back the tea, and I noticed with amusement that he'd give Sylvia the 'nicest' mug of the ones we had. "I agree that most of those who come to us are probably for medical advice, though. That's part of our job, and very few people want to come by the infirmary if they don't think they have to. It's only those we call friends who seek out
our company."

"I guess it's because you guys only stick to a small group of people, but that's more time for me to steal~!" Sylvia giggled. Claude and I exchanged a knowing, and a little sad, smile. We were both very lucky to have the friends we did. "So, that's what's been going on. I've been worried you two were spreading yourselves too thin."

"I believe we're both doing well? I am, at least," Claude replied, before turning to me. "What about you? You are adding 'being a mother' to all of our duties."

"Why do you think I stay near my friends?" I asked with a little laugh of my own. Though, I did think that was also typical. I had enough of being around people apathetic towards me while I was growing up, and I certainly didn't want to stay near those who didn't like me. "They help me relax and to not stress out so much, and cuddling Caitriona and Conall is the perfect way to wind down after a busy day."

"The kids are so cute!" Sylvia declared with a little giggle. She started mixing up some of the potions, and let a few sit to 'set'. She's mix them with beeswax later for balms. "Especially now that they don't spit up so much."

"No, they're all very neat now. You can deal with spit ups again when Lachesis gives birth."

Suddenly quite curious, I poked Claude's shoulder, making sure that my needle was safely pointed away. "How do you relax, actually? How do you wind down from the day?"

"I read, actually," Claude answered. His smile was calm, but there was a distinct mischievous light in his eyes. "I've been reading one of Tailtiu's actually. It's quite fascinating, though some of the scenes are very anatomically incorrect."

It took me a full second to realize what Claude meant, and I spent the next several minutes choking on laughter and blushing madly as I realized that Claude, calm and gentle Claude, Head of the Church Claude, read erotica to wind down from infirmary work. That was just too hilarious.

After finishing my shift in the infirmary, I went to the nursery to check on the children and to give Shanan a bit of a break in watching them. Of course, the children were all wide-awake and eager to play and chew on everything, so I spent the better part of an hour running about trying to make sure they didn't hurt themselves, and around that point, someone else came in to help out: Jamke. Neither of us had really expected each other, so we stood there awkwardly for a moment before the children stole both of our attentions and we had to try and get them to play nicely and not hurt themselves. That cut any awkwardness to shreds, though the two of us did have difficulties maintaining conversation. It was almost amusing.

"Did Deirdre teach you that song?" Jamke asked at one point while playing with Larcei. I'd just finished humming a lullaby to get Ulster to settle down long enough for me to check his health. "The song you just hummed?"

"No, Arvis did," I replied. Done with my check, I tickled Ulster's stomach to make him laugh and scooped him up to return him to the others. I picked up Caitriona and comforted her as she protested being taken away from her toys. "It's one his mother sung to him, though he no longer remembered the words when he taught me. Azel might remember them, though."

"Where was his mother from?" Jamke tossed Larcei up briefly before catching her again. That really was her favorite game. "Do you know?"
"No, I'm afraid not." I set Caitriona on the check up table and laughed when I saw Conall reach up towards us. "Okay, I'll get both of you." I picked him up and kissed his chubby cheek before placing him on the table next to Caitriona. The two immediately began giggling and playing together. "Oh, this might not have been a good idea."

"Just a little." Jamke laughed and I rolled my eyes and worked on getting the two to at least let me check their health. It took a few tries to trick them into thinking it was another game. "Sorry for badgering. The song sounded similar to a well-known Verdanite lullaby. But without the words, I suppose it would be difficult to figure out if it's the same or not. Melodies can sometimes be repeated."

"I could also be humming it wrong. It has been a while since I heard it." I also didn't have much practice at it. Chulainn normally sung them lullabies when it was time to go to sleep. "But as I said, Azel might remember."

"I see. I'll ask him." The conversation died again, and I really couldn't help but smile in amusement. We were both rather bad at this, or at least, I was. Looking back, most of my friendships started with people reaching out to me. So, I decided to try and simply treat him as I did my other friends, which meant only one thing: teasing. "So, how are things going with Brigid?"

"Wha-?!" Jamke choked on a laugh and set Larcei down to avoid accidentally dropping her. He also went more than a little red. "I… that's…" He tried and failed to say something a few times and I just giggled and laughed. Conall and Caitriona laughed too, maybe thinking it was just part of another game. "No offense meant, but anything like that, I think I'd rather discuss with someone else."

"Of course." I was still giggling. "Honestly, I really just wanted to see your reaction."

"You can be far more mischievous than your 'calm healer' implies."

"The healer mask is for keeping calm and for pretending you know what to do to reassure the people around you. It… mostly works." I set Conall back down on the floor to play with Ulster, but I picked up Caitriona and clung. I still remembered the terror and panic I'd felt, not knowing where she was during that ambush. Racing about wildly, desperately trying to find her… I doubted I'd ever forget it. "Aideen and Claude do the same."

"Guess it's like being a leader. Leaders are expected to be calm too. Though, Sigurd makes the whole 'showcasing his emotions' work."

"He still tries to work even through trauma." One only had to look at how he kept going through all of this to see that. "Say, Jamke?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you hard anything about Verdane?" I couldn't help but think on it. Verdane… that campaign had started all of this. It had changed all of our lives forever. No one could've expected that simple campaign would lead us all the way here, taking sanctuary in Silesse. "Queen Rahna let us… um…"

"She managed to get messages too, so I know my steward is holding things together. Grannvale has been a bit… tense on the border, but they've mostly been working on taking over Agustria for 'violating' the peace treaty. I've little doubts Verdane will suffer the same fate, eventually."
"Do you want to return?"

"Yes. I miss my home, and I've been away for... two years now? Three? Years are so hard to keep track of, sometimes." He shrugged like he was unbothered, but his eyes held pain. "However, I and Verdane owe Sigurd a debt, and I can't simply head home anyway. Until Sigurd is cleared of his charges, I have little doubt that any attempts to try would just result in my execution."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. I made my choices, and I stand by them. I just hope my people won't suffer badly for them." Jamke glanced down briefly before visibly steadying his resolve for something. "Say, there's a question I've had for a while."

"Yes?"

"Forgive me for this, but I am an outsider to things about Grannvale, so it lets me look at things from a different perspective." He looked down again briefly before focusing completely on me. "And you're probably the worst person to ask, but at the same time, I'm probably most interested in your answer out of the people currently here."

"Well, now I'm almost afraid of the question." I set Caitriona down so that she could play with Larcei. "What is it?"

"Why are you so certain Arvis is going to help us?" He said the words calmly, evenly, yet still, they sounded... I had no word for it. "Perhaps it's because of what happened between my brothers and me, but..."

"That is..." I fell silent, desperately trying to gather my thoughts and failing miserably. It was just second nature for me to trust Arvis. He was my brother, my Lord Brother. He was the first person to ever smile at me, and the first person to tell me I wasn't a nuisance. Without him, I would've been alone. Without him, I never really would've joined up with this army and found the happiness I did, because I originally only came along because of Azel and Arvis was the one who first told me of him. "I'm afraid the only answers I can think of at the moment involve caustic words that I know you don't deserve."

"I figured. It's just..." He sighed and reached up to fix his bandana. "From my perspective, with the exceptions of the ones with us, all the Grannvale nobles seem to fall into two categories: our enemies or dead. And I just find it... I find it all convenient, really. The prince dead with his two advisors being blamed... obviously they were framed, but who benefits? It seems like no one truly, since based on what I've heard, Grannvale wouldn't accept Reptor or Langbalt as king." He paused, and I knew what his next words would be. "But what about Arvis? He's popular enough, or so it seems based on how you all talk to him. And his fiancé just so happens to be the hidden princess? So hidden that even Prince Kurth didn't know?"

"Arvis would never force... he'd never trick..." I struggled to try and explain my thoughts, but they all clunk together. All I felt was a war between my desire to have a proper conversation with Jamke for once and the need to defend my brother, my precious and lonely older brother. "Even if what you say is true, I know for a fact that he would never force her into that sort of situation and he wouldn't marry her if he didn't love her. But he wouldn't..."

"Sorry. Maybe I shouldn't have brought it up." Jamke smiled apologetically. "It goes against your being to distrust him, doesn't it? I forget that some siblings actually trust each other, sometimes."

"I will always trust and love him. I won't necessarily forgive him for everything, and I know that he
has lofty goals and those goals might..." I sighed and smiled wanly at him finally. That question really did shake me. "But, I can't see him not helping Sigurd. He likes Sigurd, always has, and Azel and I are here. He loves us. So, it's just... I can't give you a proper answer, and I wish I could. It's just a very strong belief."

"I see." Jamke closed his eyes and nodded. "All right, we'll let it end there. I'm still not quite convinced, but it does give me more insight into why everyone seems convinced he's on our side."

"I wish I could defend him better, or at least be a little more coherent in why..." I sighed and shrugged. "Maybe Sigurd can explain more, or Azel. But I can't, sadly. You're right. Trusting him is just... I can't not trust him."

"I'll ask them, then. Sorry to shake you so." Jamke suddenly looked down and pointed. "Um... is Lester supposed to be chewing on that?"

There was a split-second of panic before realizing that Lester was just chewing on one of his blocks, a 'not-good-but-also-not-too-bad' thing. The two of us did have to spend several moments getting the children back to playing nicely, though, and poor Jamke had to deal with Seliph climbing on him to try and pull his bandana off. Overall, though, focusing on the children chased most of the tense air away.

But it didn't take all of it, and I had to admit to something horrible that I never would have thought of otherwise. It would be well within Arvis's capabilities to have arranged a lot of this, or at least, take advantage of these strange circumstances. I knew he was clever enough, and pragmatic enough, to do so. But I still trusted him, and I still believed in him. I believed he'd help Sigurd and this army. He was my brother, after all. I would always believe in him. Always...

"So, what happened?" Chulainn asked after we finished putting Caitriona and Conall to bed. It was late evening, past their bedtime truthfully, but I'd clung to them a little longer than normal. "You've been off for most of the evening."

"It's nothing really," I replied. I sat down on the bed to brush my hair, but he took the brush from me to do it himself. "Jamke brought up a reasonable point that goes against a lot of the things I believe, but that I also can't really refute."

"So, you've been unsettled because of it."

"Yes, that's all. You don't think the twins noticed, do you?"

"I don't think so, no." He finished brushing my hair and began braiding it back for me. "It's hard to tell. They love cuddling just as much as you do. They're quite affectionate. Must've gotten it from you."

"So says the person who often refuses to let me out of bed in the morning."

"You're warm."

"So, I am your personal fire now?"

"You are the light of my life, alongside Caitriona and Conall." He laughed brightly when I blushed madly. "You're blushing to the tips of your ears."

"Y-you can't just say stuff like that!" I sulked as he continued laughing. "They definitely got it from you."
"Are you upset about that?"

"Of course not. You're wonderful. But when they're older, if they start saying cute things like that, I know the three of you are going to team up and make sure I never stop blushing."

"That sounds like fun. We can coordinate it."

"You're impossible." I huffed and pretended to be mad, but it didn't last long. For one thing, I knew he saw through it easily. For another, despite the fun banter, my mind inevitably went back to Jamke's very reasonable question. In fact, I was surprised no one had asked us sooner, but maybe they'd just... hadn't known how. "Chulainn?"

"Yes?" He leaned over and picked up a hair tie from the nightstand to tie off my braid. "What is it?"

"Do you trust Arvis?"

"Hard to trust someone you haven't had a conversation with, Alicia." Still, he hugged me, drawing me into his lap to kiss my cheek. "However, you trust him and I trust you. Until I meet him, that's the closest it'll get."

"I see." I smiled slightly, comforted, and shifted to tuck myself against his chest. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Things are weird. I'm guessing Jamke was asking you why you believed he'd help."

"So, you thought it too."

"Honestly, those of us who have never met him all wonder about it, and how reasonable it is to trust a Grannvale noble in all of this. But all the people who know him seem convinced he'll help out, so we all yield to you. While keeping a little wary."

"I'm sorry." I felt an instinctual spike of outrage that they'd doubt Arvis, but I quickly beat it back down. Of course they'd doubt. Everything about our circumstances was strange. We might be the odd ones for holding onto our trust. But it was... "I'm sure he'll help us."

"Of course."

"He wants to meet you. He looks forward to it."

"Hopefully my meeting him won't lead to me being set on fire."

"Arvis wouldn't do that. I love you."

"I love you too. I'm just making a morbid joke." He tightened his hug and kissed the top of my head. "You don't have to reassure me. I believe you. I'll just keep wary anyway, just in case."

"In case I'm wrong?"

"Or if someone manages to intercept him. I will admit to being worried for his life."

"That's..." Panic seized me as I realized he was right. Arvis was likely an assassination target right now. He always had been, but now, he was probably an even bigger one. Th-though, he did... "He has Valflame. And guards. And Aida. B-between all of that..." My voice got squeakier and squeakier as the thought burrowed into my head. "He should... he should..."

"Alicia, easy!" Chulainn turned me so that I faced him and rested his forehead against mine.
"Alicia, try to take a deep breath."

"Right…" It took a couple of attempts, but I did manage to steady my breathing. I didn't quite calm down, but I was able to settle down. It was enough. "I'm sorry."

"That was probably one of the worst things to say when you were already worried." He kissed me gently, and I smiled into the kiss. I always smiled when he kissed me. "Let's talk of happier things."

"I'm debating making clothes for the children. Though, I never really made clothes before. I've mended-"

"Of course you have."

"Hush, you." I rolled my eyes and he laughed. "But I was thinking about that. Should I?"

"You'll probably want to have someone helping you. It always looked tricky to me. But I have no idea who'd be good for that."

"I'll ask around, then." It was a fun little thought. "We should buy some stuffed toys for the two as well."

"Dogs."

"How did I know you'd say that?" I had to laugh and he grinned. "What about a stuffed wolf? Will that be fine?"

"Wolves are nice too. They're rather big, though. Bigger than you expect."

"I think a toy would be small no matter what."

"I'm talking in general. They're fun to play with, though."

"I… wait, hold on." I frowned at him and he grinned. "You played with wolves? Wolves?!"

"I thought they were just big dogs at the time. Really big dogs. The ones I wrestled with were very friendly and fluffy."

"I swear by all that's holy, if the twins do anything like that…"

"It's okay. I'll teach them how to do it safely."

"Don't teach them at all!" I glowered when he just laughed. "I mean it, Chulainn!"

"Yes, yes." He looked 'perfectly' innocent, which told me he was already plotting on how, but before I could call him out on it, his eyes darted to the door. "There's shouting."

"Is there?" I heard nothing, but I knew better than to doubt his hearing and instincts. "Is it another ambush?"

"Not sure." Chulainn got off the bed and opened the hall to look outside. I fetched a shirt for him to wear with his sleeping pants, and a robe for me to throw over my nightgown. "Hello, Sylvia."

"Hello, Chulainn!" Sylvia replied, apparently in the hall. I threw the shirt at Chulainn and stepped out of the hall too. She was also dressed in her nightgown, though she didn't have a robe. "Hi, Alicia!" She smiled sweetly at us both. "So, surprise, we got ambushed."
"I'm guessing that the cheer means that it's nothing to really worried about?" I asked. I silently offered her my robe, since I did have another, but she shook her head. She really didn't get cold easily, it seemed. "What's going on?"

"It's mostly pegasus knights, and we have a lot of archers. Skilled archers. Midir, Brigid, and Jamke got them all in formation or whatever quickly, so they're dropping fast."

"Still, we should treat this seriously," Chulainn murmured. He leaned against the doorway and kept one eye on the windows. Caitriona and Conall's crib was safely away, but it was still worrisome. "Arrows do have a maximum reach. There's also a chance this is a cover for an assassination attempt."

"Yeah, it's being treated seriously, but if you're not a ranged fighter, then you're asked to just be on alert and prepared to fight," Sylvia confirmed with a smile. "Though, Claude does want you in the infirmary, Alicia, just in case."

"That makes sense," I murmured. It was better to be prepared and not need the preparations. "Thanks for coming to tell us, Sylvia."

"It's not a problem. I was heading this way anyway, looking for Erinys. Don't suppose you two have seen her?"

"Erinys is missing?" That… that didn't sound good. "No, I haven't seen her since picking up Caitriona and Conall from the nursery. She was babysitting them."

"Darn it." Sylvia sighed, trading her smile for a worried frown. "It makes sense, but I still kind of hoped…"

"Any luck, Sylvia?" Lewyn ran up then, not wearing his scarf for once. He wasn't dressed for bed, though, so I wondered if he'd been in a high place again, playing for Annand. "I'm… guessing not," he whispered, smiling bitterly. Sylvia shook her head to confirm and he sighed. "Damn it. I hope she's not outside."

"Why would she be outside?" Chulainn asked. He still kept an eye on the windows, but he reached around Sylvia to pat Lewyn's shoulder reassuringly. "It's late."

"For a flight. She flies at night to calm down enough to sleep. Midir said it was okay, but with all this going on…"

"Why is it that someone goes outside right before an ambush?" Chulainn said the words lightly, but I saw how tense he was. He still remembered that terrifying moment. It had to be worse for him, since he had only arrived at the infirmary to learn Caitriona was missing, and I'd run off in a panic. "I'll go looking after dropping the children at the nursery."

"I'll ask around on my way to the infirmary," I added, smiling reassuringly. Lewyn tried to smile back, but it was clear he was far too terrified to really be comforted. "We'll find her."

"And she might be injured, but she'll be fine. She's a talented flier and fighter. She might be out helping the archers." Chulainn rolled his shoulders and sighed. "I better get my armor on again. Gods damn it. Why can't they come in the morning like polite people?"

"You can politely ambush people?"

"You can ambush like civilized folk, yes." He looked so annoyed that even Lewyn managed a chuckle. "Let's get going, then. With luck, everyone will be safe and sound and we can sleep like
As I walked to the infirmary, I asked every person I passed about Erinys, including a couple of people who simply rolled their eyes and ignored me. I wondered what I'd done to get that sort of reaction, but decided it didn't matter. There were just some people who didn't like me, and it was in both of our interests to simply move on. I simply continued on with my task, though it wasn't until I made it to the infirmary that I heard any sort of answer besides 'I have no freaking clue'. One of the pegasus knights had seen her flying shortly before news of the attack had spread. My instinctive reaction was to go find her, but I knew that would just be stupid. In a situation like this, I'd just be a burden. So, instead, I sent a messenger off to let Lewyn and Sylvia know, and worked with Claude to prepare the infirmary.

"Either they weren't expecting as many archers as we have, or there is another point to this assault," Claude observed after a while. We both had ample time on our hands, due to how few wounded there were. Most were just archers who had bloodied their hands from firing so much, or had a mishap with their bowstring. "I am assuming, at least, that we do not have a mountain of dead."

"We would've heard something by now," I agreed, changing the sheets on one of the beds. I'd planned on changing them in the morning, but since we were here, and the infirmary was actually empty for once, I figured I'd make myself busy. "I'm nervous that someone will attack the nursery."

"Ayra and Chulainn are both there, alongside Shanan, and there are few windows there for our enemies to exploit." Claude smiled gently at me. "If we remain quiet for a while longer, I think we can afford having you go check."

"I'll be fine. Logically, I know they'll be fine." Mentally, though, I couldn't help but worry anyway. Thankfully, the children were all asleep now. I'd hate to think of how scared they'd be otherwise. "I wonder if this is... " What my mother felt. 'I couldn't say the words. They were drowned instantly by the instinctual torrent of hurt and loathing. I hated her. I hated her so much, as much as I hated my father. But, I couldn't help but wonder, just a little, if she knew this fear and if that had been why...

An awkward silence lingered, with Claude waiting for me to finish my sentence and me not really being willing to do so. However, a sudden burst of cold made both of us turn and we saw someone cutting through the blanket we used to cover the window. I ran to grab the Sleep Staff in the corner, while Claude ducked into the back for something. Since I had less distance to travel, I got to mine first and cast Sleep on the pegasus knight carving a large hole. She instantly slowed, shaking her head as she struggled to fight off the drowsiness. Then Claude appeared and just blasted her off her pegasus with a Thunder tome.

"Since when do we have tomes?" I asked, surprised. We didn't have them in the back when I'd been here earlier. "I'm not complaining, certainly, but..."

"Tailltiu threw hers in here for me to use, just in case, before joining the defenses," Claude explained. The knight's pegasus disappeared from the window, and when I looked out to check, I saw it trying to wake up its splattered rider down below. "Remind me why we haven't repaired this window yet?"

"There was too much to do, and the closest glass maker is across the river. Believe me; I have tried to have it replaced." I sighed, set down Sleep, and began taking down the ruined blanket. "If a mage ends up near, Silence is in the corner."
"I must admit to liking two non-violent ways to shut enemies down. When it works."

"Yeah, we should actually study those staves to get an idea of how I should use them. I've tried a few ways, and sometimes, it works really well, and other times..." I remembered that dark mage. He'd resisted Sleep entirely. Deirdre and I had gotten too reliant on it. "I wish I'd thought about that before danger came to us again."

"Well, you were distracted by motherhood and I could've asked. I think all of us secretly hoped that there would be no more danger anyway." He took the blanket from me, sighing. I didn't know if he sighed over the blanket, or of the hopeless little wish we'd all had. "Well, this will make good padding, or bandages, now. Unless you want to try to repair it."

"I might be able to mend it, but that'll be later, not now."

"Right. Stay near here, just in case. I'll find a heavier one for us to pin up."

"Of course." I leaned against the wall, doing my best to not shiver. Unlike Claude, who was in his normal robes, I was still in my nightgown and robe, so it was particularly chilly. I wished I'd changed clothes, but I'd just run here while hunting for Erinys. I'd still heard nothing of where...

My thoughts stopped as I saw Erinys, flying above the courtyard right outside the window. I almost called out to her, but I noticed a second pegasus knight, one who wore armor like Annand's and had very short green hair. Both of them were just flying there, staring at one another with their lances in hand. It felt wrong to say anything. Part of me felt it was wrong to even watch, but I couldn't tear my gaze away. I just watched, and listened, because there were no patients. The infirmary was empty.

"Well, well, it is you, Erinys," the unknown knight laughed. It was a strange sound, a combination of genuine warmth and cold bitterness. "You came back, huh?"

"Pamela, why are you doing this?" Erinys begged. Even from here, I could see she was crying. "Why do we have to fight? I've killed so many of... I know you and my sister never really got along, but..."

"No, we didn't. How could we? She was always so much better. Pamela scoffed, hands shaking on the reins. I could see that, even from here. "Better fighter, better rider, better at everything. You should know. You were constantly compared to her."

"Well, I..."

"Always. You were just Annand's pretty sister, who cried a bit too much, but was otherwise unremarkable. I was just second-best, the one who could never catch up."

"Did you kill her?"

"I wish it was me. I wish I could've bested her. But no, it was a damn arrow that took her. Shot by that Jungby lord, Andrei. Bastard." Pamela spat out the words. "But I did lead the assault, so maybe in a way, I did kill her. Just not the way I would've wanted. I didn't beat her. I just outlasted her."

"I... I see..." Erinys shook, and more tears fell down her face. "Pamela, do we have to fight? You didn't answer that. Deet'var is dead. I had to kill her. I had to kill her to protect my friends, even though... and then there's so many..." Her voice cracked and she leaned forward slightly to hold out her hand to Pamela. I wondered how many other pegasus knights she'd done that too. I wouldn't know, because I never saw the battles, and I couldn't ask. "We don't have to fight. We can..."
"No. No, because I can't accept Lewyn, a man who abandoned us, as king." She growled in frustration and tugged her pegasus back a bit, lengthening the distance between them. "He left us all! For what? A bit of fear? A bit of a threat and he crumpled? How can Silesse prosper under someone like that? How can I fight for someone who wouldn't even stand with us?"

"Pamela…" Erinys let her hand fall, resting it awkwardly on the saddle. "I…"

"But you'll fight for him. Of course you will. You're his childhood friend, and you've been in love with him for years." Pamela glared at the sky above. "Not that he's worth it. He's not worthy of you, your loyalty or your love. He wasn't worthy of Annand's loyalty. He sure as hell isn't worthy of mine."

"Pamela… please…"

"Pick up your lance, Erinys. Here we are, the last of the Angelic Knights." Pamela twirled her lance once before pointing it at Erinys. "I couldn't best Annand. Neither of us could. So who better to fight for her title? The title of Seraph, leader of the Silessian Pegasus Knights, is up for grabs, Erinys. I challenge you for it, but I warn you now! If you lose, my next target is going to be Lewyn."

"You won't win against him, Pamela. He has Forseti now, and strong friends." Still, Erinys palmed her own lance and glared. She cried still, but it did nothing to take away the determination in her eyes. "However, you won't go near him. I won't let you near him. He's had enough to deal with without having to deal with you. It might be foolish, protecting someone who can make a hurricane submit, but I will anyway. Because Lewyn is my king and my love, and I will protect him and Silesse with everything I have and all the skill Annand taught me!"

They flew at each other quickly and I instinctually looked away. When I turned, I saw Claude was also watching, a heavy blanket draped over his arm. I gave him a weird look, but he simply smiled and said, "let's wait to put it up until she's done. That way, she can just fly in."

"That… makes sense," I murmured, looking over the empty infirmary. No one had come in yet. "In the meantime, then, since we have nothing to do, can I borrow it? I am freezing."

"I told you that you could go back and change."

"You told me that shortly before we got our first wave. Let me borrow the blanket, please?"

"Sometimes, Alicia, you need to not be quite so much of a workaholic." He did drape the blanket around my shoulders. It was incredibly warm and I was half-tempted to steal it for my room. But of course, I wouldn't. "That's coming from one."

"Believe it or not, I am actually a little better than I used to be, thanks to everyone here." I looked out the window again, a bit afraid of what I'd see. What I did see, though, simply took my breath away.

It was a dance. It was another dance in the skies. Erinys flew through the air with perfect grace, weaving around Pamela's strikes. Her own attacks were sharp and quick, like staccato notes, and struck Pamela squarely. Bits of blood marred her armor, showing that she hadn't dodged all of Pamela's attacks, but she was noticeably less bloody. She was noticeably less tired than Pamela, and with the moonlight behind her, she honestly looked like a goddess.

Erinys did this complicated spin, one where she was upside down for a brief moment, to both dodge Pamela's lunge and to slip into her guard. In one smooth motion, she rammed her lance
straight through Pamela's abdomen before ripping it out violently. Blood sprayed everywhere and Pamela pitched forward, gasping from either shock or pain. She looked like she smiled, though, before slipping out of the saddle. As she fell, she reached up at something. I wondered what it could have been. Had it been Eriny's? Had it been the sky? Had it been, perhaps, Annand's spirit? Deet'var's? Could it have been someone else who died, and now, welcomed her as she died?

It was impossible to say. But she hit the ground with a giant red splat, and her pegasus landed next to her body, trying to nuzzle the remains awake. Eriny's herself simply stared, crying again, but it seemed more like tears of shock than anything else. I thought it might have been because she was now the last of the Angelic Knights, and she had killed yet another person she had trained with. But, I wasn't sure, and I knew I could never ask.

"Eriny's!" Claude called. She jerked at the noise and wildly looked this way and that before focusing on Claude and me in the broken window. I made sure to smile reassuringly at her. "Eriny's, come over here. You're injured."

She stared for a moment longer before doing just that, letting Claude and I help her climb in. Her pegasus made some sort of noise that I assumed was happy, and flew down to rest in the courtyard below. Claude handled pinning the blanket up, while I tended to Eriny's injuries. She didn't say anything, but she did lean against my shoulder to cry while I worked. I made sure to give her a hug when I was done, and she smiled and tucked herself into the back room, clearly needing to be alone. I told Claude and the two of us periodically checked in on her while working on the other injured that trickled in, until the end of the battle when Sylvia appeared and took Eriny's away from the infirmary to scream and cry as much as she wanted.

Claude and I made a note to check in on her later, but for now, we'd work on the injured in front of us. We had our job, after all.

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It was dawn by the time the 'battle' ended. Casualties on our side were minimal, thanks to our very strong and very coordinated defenses. Our enemies, a group of foot soldiers and pegasus knights, had been soundly defeated, with only very few escaping. Midir led a few to chase them to the river, but afterwards, had returned. It wouldn't be a good idea to launch an offensive with a good half, or over, of our army still making their way here from Thove.

I yawned, stumbling through the hall and rubbing my tired and blurring eyes. When the battle ended, we got an influx of injured as people discovered, or were reminded, that even the smallest of cuts hurt horrifically once the battle-fever left. There were a few who had been horribly injured, but hadn't noticed because of how numb they'd gone, so Claude and I had a few emergencies. In addition to all of that, the heavy blanket we covered the window with was too heavy for the previous pins, and so it fell a couple of times until we tasked someone to hold it up while someone else found enough pins to keep it there. As a result, I was very exhausted, very cold, and very glad to finally be done for the day. Night. Whichever.

Well, I was mostly done. I was done with my 'official' duties. But I wanted to check in on Eriny's, so instead of going to my nice and warm bed, I wandered about the castle, trying to find her. There was no one I could ask, really. Everyone that wasn't on patrol was asleep like sane people. But I really did want to check in on her, both because of her injuries and because of… I hadn't checked on her after Deet'var's death, and only found out later how shaken she'd been. It felt wrong to not check in on her now.

So, I wandered, feeling exhaustion drag me down like weights or ice. I needed to change my robe and nightgown as well, because parts were stiff from the dried blood. I was still freezing. But still, I looked for her, or at least one of our friends so that I could ask them about her. I'd honestly take
that. Erinys might not want to see anyone, after all, and my vision was blurring more and more with each step.

As I came up on a courtyard, I decided that would have to be the final place to look. I simply was about to collapse, and it would take almost all the energy I had left to make it to my room. So, of course, I found Erinys in that 'last place' and almost stepped out to talk to her. I hung back and even hid a little, however, when I noticed she wasn't alone. Lewyn was with her.

"I am going to preface this with I am very tired and I have… next to no mental filter," Lewyn was saying. He was smiling warmly, and Erinys was shyly smiling back, half-hiding behind a handkerchief. "But it occurs to me that I haven't ever thanked you, nor have I apologized."

"Thanked? Apologized?" Erinys repeated. She laughed a little, and that was enough to make me feel better. "I'm exhausted too, so maybe that's why I can't figure out what you're talking about. If anything, I should be thanking you for earlier."

"All I did earlier was give you a shoulder as you attempted to sob your eyes right out of your skull." He poked her cheek, and I noticed the tearstains. "But yes, I have lots of things to thank you for. The easiest is the most obvious. Thank you for not giving up on me. Thank you for coming to find me. Thank you for fighting, even though I know this war has to be the roughest for you."

"Oh, that's…" Erinys began blushing and looked down. "Um…"

"As for apologies… Well, that's also a lot." Lewyn's smile faded for a very serious and very sad look. "I never told you that I was sorry for leaving, or that I was sorry for ignoring you when you first joined the army. I'm also sorry for…" His voice caught briefly and he coughed to clear his throat. "For Annand. If I had simply done my job, she wouldn't have…"

"Annand made her choice. It hurts, and will always hurt, but she made her choice." Erinys managed a tearful smile. "Besides, I know you're hurting a lot over her too."

"Of course. She was a good friend."

"And you're in love with her."

"Huh?" Lewyn's expression blanked before he facepalmed. "Oh, freaking hell."

"What?" Erinys frowned in confusion. "You told me that."

"When we were children. When we were little." Lewyn looked almost exasperated, but still, he smiled. "Yes, when we were young, I was infatuated. She was kind, beautiful, and strong. But that was then. Now, it's you."

"Huh?"

"I love you, Erinys. I have for a while. And, honestly, there's probably more romantic ways to confess, but like I said, I'm tired."

"Wait, you… huh?" Erinys pointed at herself, still bright red. "Me?!"

"Yes, you! Who else is here?" He gestured around and I made sure to duck away so that they couldn't see me. I really shouldn't have eavesdropped, but… well… "So… um… anyway… did I make you cry again? Why can I never seem to not do that?"

"I'm sorry for having overactive tear ducts." Erinys's voice sounded off, so I peeked out again to
confirm that it was just because she was crying again. "I'm happy, though."

"You are?"

"Yes." She gave him the biggest smile I'd ever seen her wear. "I am very, very happy to hear that."

"Oh… um…" Lewyn coughed again, and looked away, turning even redder than Erinys. "That's… great. That's really… great."

I decided to leave then, partially because it really was rude to eavesdrop and partially because I was tired enough that I had next to no control over my emotions as I usually did, which meant I was in danger of revealing my presence via giggling. So, instead, I giggled as I walked down the hall and made my way back to my room. I actually continued giggling when I made it there, changed into a clean nightgown, and crawled into my delightfully warm bed with my equally delightful lover.

"Now what has you all giggly?" he asked groggily, half-asleep. He'd probably been fully asleep until I'd walked in. He always woke when someone else was in the room, and it was a habit that only increased once we had the children. "Are you so tired that everything is funny?"

"No, I'm not quite yet, but I think I'm too tired to stop giggling," I replied, still laughing a little. His solution was just to kiss me soundly. "Oh, don't do that. I am too tired to properly appreciate it."

"Then stop giggling and go to sleep." He wrapped an arm around me and drew me closer. "Your feet are cold."

"They'll warm up in a bit." I was already starting to nod off. "I wonder when we'll have to wake up… today?"

"When the children wake us up. Good night."

"It's morning."

"We haven't slept. It's night."

"But-"

"Go to sleep."

"Fine, fine…"

Notes on Tailliu:

A 19-year-old thunder mage, the middle child of Reptor and the oldest girl. Bright and bubbly on the surface, with a quietly insecure nature, especially when it comes to her family.

She's one of the least experienced in the army, but she does her best to learn as quickly as possible. Strangely enough, her skill and power seems to increase once she's taken damage, as if she has learned how to add her anger to her magic.

She does her best to be as cheerful as possible and maintaining the air of someone who doesn't like complicated things, like politics. It's the only thing she can think of to make sure no one worries over her or, worse, babies her.
Author's notes: Have a confession to make up for the last couple of chapters. In game, Pamela is completely unrepentant, while in the Oosawa manga, she's an incredibly sympathetic character (and actually survives). I went with a bit of a mix here. Bits of foreshadowing, bits of clarification, yes Pamela's squad falls this fast so long as you've got a few good archers… That's about it. Oh, 'Seraphim' is plural for 'Seraph', so the title refers to both Erinys and Pamela.

The Lewyn-Erinys conversation should really take place later, after Silesse, but shifted it to here. Basically, if they talk after Silesse castle is conquered, they'll have a conversation that automatically makes them lovers. It's also one of the very few 'canon' pairings since, while in FE4 you can have them marry whoever, in FE5 revealed that they were an official couple.

Tailtiu's one personal skill is 'Wrath' which, in FE4, is a guaranteed critical hit if you're below 50% HP. (This skill factors in why Lex is a popular husband for her as Lex's Ambush skill always guarantees the first hit when below 50% HP. Lewyn and Azel are generally considered better, though, due to actually being magic users. Azel is arguably her most popular thanks to his Pursuit skill, and the resulting children being strong and stable, if not particularly outstanding. Lewyn gets you Forseti early, and on a mount eventually, so it's a very good pairing. Claude isn't, despite being a magic user and despite her initial crush, because Tailtiu's son is unable to use staves)

Next Chapter – Interlude, Blizzard (Fun fact: we're about… 14~ chapters away from the end of the first generation, roughly)
Interlude - Blizzard

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude – Blizzard

The next morning, Sylvia discovered that Erinys and Lewyn had finally confessed and made sure everyone in the entire castle knew. Erinys nearly died from embarrassment and Lewyn swore revenge, but it got everyone laughing and smiling again. That was important as, though we did our best, the constant vigilance and waiting was starting to wear on us. More and more people came to the infirmary because of brawls that had broken out, accidents where people weren't paying attention...

I'm tired.

"Is it normal for boys Oifeye's age to push themselves?" I asked Claude as I mended in the infirmary. Oifeye had returned ahead of the main group to let us know they were on the way, half a day out at most. However, he'd been half-frozen and exhausted. He'd ridden through the night apparently. "Was there an emergency I didn't hear about?"

"I do think it's fairly normal for most seventeen year olds," Claude laughed. He was reading, since there wasn't much to do, for once. Both of us were a little on edge, though, expecting someone with a cracked skull again. We had a few of those this morning, along with many with broken bones. Someone decided to try climbing the outside walls of the castle, and most failed in mimicking them. "But in Oifeye's case, I'm not certain it's unrelated to trauma. When I was examining him earlier, it seemed less 'not quite aware that invincibility is an illusion' and more of 'must be helpful'."

"Ah…" I paused, thinking, and came up with a possibility fairly quickly. "I wonder if it is because of everything that has happened to Sigurd. Sigurd has basically raised and trained Oifeye, after all. They're as close as brothers, yet…"

"Ah, so similar to Shanan. The feeling of helplessness when loved ones are suffering." Claude looked down and I couldn't help but wince. We knew that fear too. The feeling that you would have to tend to a loved one, and find that you couldn't do anything… "Combined with perhaps a feeling of 'owing'… yes, I can see where the trauma would spiral from that easily. Do you wish to talk to him about it? Should I?"

"Might be better to tell…" I almost said Sigurd, but paused. Sigurd had a lot to deal with as well. However, we couldn't hide this from him either. "Let Sigurd know when he arrives, but perhaps let Sigurd pick who talks to Oifeye about it. One of the Chalphy knights might be best, but honestly, I'm not certain. I am certain, however, that he probably won't open up to me."

"Yes, that sounds good. Who knows? They might've have noticed…" Claude laughed suddenly. "Actually, I'm sure they have. We're being busybodies."

"I suppose we are. But Oifeye is…" I paused and sighed, focusing on my mending for a bit. Oifeye had helped me earlier, and shown how skilled he had become. A few years ago, he didn't even know how. Now, he was easily as good as I was. I was so proud of him. "He isn't a child anymore.
I need to not think of him like that. He honestly could be on the frontlines." He was older than Finn and Ethlyn had been, during the Verdane campaign. "I wonder why he isn't."

"He does serve as the tactician, and perhaps it is simply habit. I'm sure others in the army have difficulties remembering he's legally an adult now." Claude looked out the window for a moment and suddenly frowned. "Is… is that a wolf in the courtyard?"

"There's a wolf?" I frowned as well, confused. "Why would there be a wolf?"

"I don't know, but there is one." He leaned towards the window, to try and see more. "Is Chulainn playing with it?"

"That would not surprise…" I almost just dismissed it, but then I remembered something. Chulainn was watching the twins. He told me he was going to take them out to the courtyard to play. If Chulainn was playing with the wolf, then…!

I bolted out of the infirmary, knocking all my mending to the ground. Claude helped and called after me worriedly, but I ignored him. I focused solely on running through the halls, worry and annoyance warring in my head as I hunted for a way to the courtyard. It took me a few tries, but eventually, I did find my way there, and found that I was absolutely right. Chulainn was by the wolf, the wild wolf, with Caitriona and Conall, and they were far too close to its teeth and claws for my liking!

"Chulainn!" I snapped, aggravation taking over. Chulainn looked up to smile, but it disappeared as soon as he saw how angry I was. "I told you that I didn't want you teaching them things like this!"

"They're enjoying themselves, though," Chulainn pointed out. I did have to admit he was right. They looked like they were having fun, petting the wolf. But it was still a wild animal, who could be carrying all sorts of diseases, and they were…! "And she's a nice wolf."

"The next one they go after might not be!"

"I think you can trust me to keep the children safe."

"That's…!" An angry retort burned on my tongue, but I swallowed it because it was nothing but poison born from my temper. I did trust him, especially with the children. Honestly, I was getting far too worked up over this. But I felt horribly overwhelmed suddenly, so instead, I did the 'mature' thing. I burst into tears.

It was embarrassing, really, especially since Chulainn began panicking. He set the children on the bench, gently coaxed the wolf away, and then fussied over me to try and help me calm down. All I could do, though, was babble.

"Wild animals can transmit diseases and they were so close to the teeth!" I just continued sobbing. Chulainn continued trying to soothe me. "I don't want them to be hurt! I want them to be safe! I don't want them to be in the infirmary, bleeding out and I'm helpless!"

"Easy, easy…” he murmured. He kissed my forehead and my cheeks, wiping away the tears. "They were fine. I kept them away from the wolf's mouth."

"But…"

"And I was between them and the wolf's teeth. If she reacted badly, I would've been the injured one."
"That's almost as bad!" I just kept crying. "We had the infirmary filled with people getting hurt over accidents or bits of overconfidence, and... and...!"

"Alicia." He sighed and hugged me, letting me cry into his chest. "I love you."

"I love you too." I did manage to get that out while I just kept sobbing. By this point, I wasn't even sure just why I was crying. Was it because I was overwhelmed? Was it because I was on edge and, honestly, the thought that I would have to treat my children and keep them from dying was one of my greatest nightmares? Was I just breaking down finally over Annand and how I let her march to her death? Was I crying because of all the pain Erinys and Lewyn had suffered, continued to suffer? I had no idea.

Eventually, I did finally stop crying, though the two of us panicked when we noticed Caitriona and Conall really wanted to eat some flowers. So, we focused on settling and distracting them, and Chulainn found a handkerchief to help me clean my face a bit. While we did, I once again wondered if this anxiety was something my mother felt, and felt even more unsettled because of it. It also made me angrier. Even with this anxiety, I would never simply abandon... ah, I didn't even want to think of her. I never did. I hated her so, so much.

"I'm sorry," I whispered once we were all calmed. We all sat on a bench, though Caitriona and Conall sat in our laps. "I shouldn't have snapped."

"Probably not, but I can understand," he replied. He ran his hand through my hair repeatedly, twisting his fingers about the strands. "I did have it under control, though."

"I should've accepted that. I'm sorry."

"Caitriona and Conall wanted to pet her, so I thought it would be a good experience. I didn't think it would make you so upset. I'm sorry."

"I really shouldn't have snapped. I just got..." I became terrified. "I really don't want them to be my patients. I don't mind illnesses or anything, or checking their health, but..." I smiled bitterly. "It was so much easier to do my job when I wasn't close to anyone. It was also easier to apply my training when I didn't have children."

"You regret it?"

"Never. But I worry about my reliability."

"You don't have to be the reliable one all the time."

"But I like being reliable. I like helping." I sighed and rested my head against his shoulder. "I don't like screaming at you. I'm sorry."

"Not one more apology, okay? It's fine. You shouldn't have snapped, and I should've taken your protests more seriously."

"But..."

"How about a different way to apologize?" He tilted my face up and kissed me sweetly. "Something like that is far better, really."

"The children are literally right here." Still, I smiled and kissed him again. Caitriona made some sort of curious noise, though, so I pulled away and blushed. "They should... um... probably go inside?"
"Probably." He kissed my reddening cheek, and laughed as my blush deepened. "You also probably need to clean your face more, by the way. Your nose is still running."

"Chulainn!"

After getting the children back to the nursery, and cleaning my face, I stammered apologies to Claude. He scolded me about loosing my calm a bit, but reassured me that it was fine. I still felt horrible about it, though, and pulled an extra shift in the infirmary to give him a longer break. However, right around the end of that shift, the winds suddenly shifted and we had ourselves a blizzard. Claude and I immediately moved the most common medicines out of the infirmary and locked it up. The window still wasn't mended, so it was… just a bad idea to be in there. We set up a temporary infirmary in a different room, and then helped the rest of the castle prep for the cold. In the middle of those preparations, our cavalry finally made it back home.

"Now you no longer quite look so much like a drowned rat," I teased, helping Sigurd dry his hair. I had thought to help Azel, but I'd seen Tailtiu hesitating near so, instead, I nudged her towards him and went to Sigurd. "I'm glad you all made it here before the snow really came down."

"Same!" Sigurd laughed. He glanced over to where Tailtiu was teasing Azel and then focused on me. "So, what all happened after Oifeye left? I see signs of battle and signs of 'I am maybe two seconds away from throttling someone'."

"Well, that is certainly…" I hesitated in answering and he looked pointedly at Lewyn and Erinys. "Oh, they finally got together."

"I'm glad. It also looks like they lost weight."

"They did." I sighed, deciding to just be blunt. "Annand died. The castle is captured. We were attacked… two times? It might be three. I honestly no longer remember."

"Queen Rahna?"

"We have heard nothing yet, not even a hostage situation."

"I see." Sigurd sighed and smiled sadly. "Well, things always get complicated, huh?"

"Claude has some warm tea for all of you. You should get some." I gently nudged him towards the back, mostly because we both knew there was no reply.

I watched him leave and, after a moment of worrying, went over to Azel. Tailtiu was no longer near, but he watched her with a little smile and a faint blush. I debated teasing, but chose to stay silent, instead simply poking his cheek. He scowled, but I grinned and, after a moment, he just laughed and leaned into me.

"So, will I have to warn Arvis that he will have another niece or nephew soon?" I joked. He choked on a laugh and I grinned. "Ah, so--"

"You haven't told him, have you?" he asked, still laughing a bit. "About my blooming feelings for Tailtiu?"

"No, I assumed you did?"

"No, not yet. I want to see his reaction. It'll be great!"
"That is true." I laughed as well, while secretly being very glad I had not yet told Arvis that it was a possible thing. "Very well. I shall keep your secret safe from our adorable older brother."

"Adorable isn't the word I'd use, but it'll still be hilarious." He let his laughter fade to study me closely and poked my cheek. "You seem off. Is everything okay?"

"It has simply been a rather rough time, Azel." I didn't really want to try and explain my earlier crying fit. Even now, I wasn't quite sure why I had cried so much. "How about you, though? Did you get ill?"

"I haven't gotten sick since… before the Verdane Campaign!" He scowled briefly, but softened when I giggled. "No, I'm fine. I'm worried about Lewyn, though. I can tell he's faking a smile, even from here."

"It's a stressful time."

"Better do my job as a friend and try to cheer him up."

"Ooooor you can greet your nephew!" Tailtiu appeared out of nowhere and passed Azel Conall. She had Caitrion curled up against her shoulder, grinning. "Shanan brought the kids to greet everyone," she explained to me, laughing. "You don't mind me snagging yours, right, Aly?"

"Of course not," I reassured, laughing. It actually touched me she would, for some reason. "I… oh, hello, Lex!"

"Hello!" Lex greeted, ambling over. He carried Larcei tentatively, as if afraid to hurt her. For her part, Larcei clung to his collar, sulking. She didn't appreciate being separated for so long. "Seems like Tailtiu and Azel are practicing." He grinned as both blushed and tried to stammer protests. Caitriona, curious, poked Tailtiu's cheek. "Too easy."

"Lex!" Tailtiu snapped. She bristled a bit, glaring. "Knock it off!"

Deciding very quickly that I didn't want to be in the middle of this, I gave Azel and quick hug and disappeared into the crowd. I trusted them to not fight, at least without making sure the children were safe, so I didn't feel too guilty over it. The thought of the children, however, reminded me of their Holy Marks. I wasn't sure if Oifeye knew, or if he would've thought to tell Sigurd if he did. So, I meandered through, smiling and greeting others as I passed, and found Sigurd in the back corner, with Seliph in one arm and holding a mug of tea in the other. He mostly just watched everyone laugh and cheer over everyone meeting each other again, although there were quite a few tears from people who learned friends had fallen. Still, surprisingly, most were cheerful.

"I heard Tailtiu yelling," he teased when he saw me. Seliph twisted and waved at me. He laughed when I poked his chubby cheeks. "Avoiding an argument?"

"Lex teased Tailtiu and Azel," I explained with a smile. However, my hand fell on Seliph's back, and I remembered the Mark there. "Seliph already has his Baldur Mark."

"He… what?" Sigurd frowned. "That's far too young."

"He's not the only one either. All of the children are showing. In addition…" I tugged my sleeve unconsciously, thinking of the rest of that conversation. "When did Oifeye's Mark appear? Do you know?"

"He was eight. It was shortly after his parents died."
"So, he is early as well. Ethlyn appears to be unusual for being at the 'average' age for Holy Blood Minors of our generation. We also know Shanan's appeared early, and Tailtiu's niece, Ishtar, also has hers."

"That's a little…” Sigurd's frown deepened. "I hope that's not not a sign of things to come."

"Truthfully, it made me think of the 'Catastrophe' Deirdre feared."

"That is…” Sigurd winced and hugged Seliph a little more tightly. I took his mug so that he could hold him easier. "Ha… I wonder if she and I really did doom the future…”

"Sigurd."

"Yet, at the same time, I can't regret it. Even if it is a crime, I continue to love her and will always do so.” He smiled bitterly. "I just wish… if it really is a crime, gods, then please punish me, and only me. Leave the children alone."

"It is no crime." I made my words as firm as possible. "I am certain she was simply a convenient scapegoat. I will always believe this."

"Thank you, Alicia. It means a lot to hear you say that." His smile softened. "Especially since you used to be almost uncomfortable about Deirdre and me."

"Shoot, you noticed?” I shrugged and smiled sheepishly. "Well, Sigurd, you two did… you met twice. The first time, you were ready to fight for her. The second time had you two proposing to each other. The others might think that you were secretly courting, but I am aware of the truth."

"…Okay, when you put it like that…” He laughed and looked at Seliph. "Seliph, you have a more normal courtship, okay? I wouldn't trade Deirdre's love for anything, but it'll reassure the people around you." Seliph, of course, just tilted his head in confusion before reaching up to 'pat' his father's face. "Ow…” Of course, it was a more like a slap and Seliph laughed at the noise Sigurd made, so he tried again. "No, don't do that!"

I helped Sigurd convince Seliph that slapping people was bad, before going to spend time with the others. This sort of joy seemed increasingly fleeting recently. I was glad to still have it.

Lewyn guessed that the blizzard would last a few days so, after a moment of panicking because we weren't certain we had enough supplies within the walls, we all settled in and enjoyed the unexpected benefits that came with the blizzard. We had many excuses to indulge ourselves with sweets and warm drinks, and the chances of being attacked were exceedingly small. We couldn't fully relax, since the weather did bring its own troubles, but we did enjoy ourselves. That was enough.

"Ah, I am so delighted that Erinys and Lewyn are together!” Aideen giggled. She was much thinner than before, a clear sign of the stress she'd suffered, but her smile was as warm as always. I did notice that she clung to Lester, though Lester didn't mind. He liked cuddling with his mother. "I wonder if there will be another baby in the nursery soon."

"Did you forget Lachesis was pregnant?” I teased her, checking over Larcei's health. I'd normally due this during my own shift in the nursery, Aideen, was the one watching the children at the moment, but since I had unexpected free time, I'd come to check them over earlier than normal. "In about four or five months, there will be another baby."

"Oh. Right." She pouted when I laughed. "Give me a break. I'm still exhausted."
"I understand." I smiled sympathetically at her before tickling Larcei's stomach and then setting her down. "But I do wonder if Erinys and Lewyn will marry soon." My heart ached, though. Annand had wanted to see them wed. I supposed she would see them now, from beyond, but it wasn't quite the same. "That'll be nice."

"It could be a big party! I think the last wedding was mine?" She frowned a little in thought. I picked up Ulster to check him over, the last one this time for examinations. "Are Ayra and Lex wed?"

"No, they have not, technically, wed yet." Like Chulainn and me, though, they saw little point in it. It helped with legal things, I supposed, but I liked not having the fuss. "So, the last wedding was yours and Midir's."

"Well, I suppose technically, the last wedding was Lachesis's to Finn." Aideen playfully scowled and I had to bite back a laugh. I hid it by rubbing noses with Ulster, making him giggle, and then set him back on the floor to play. All of them were in perfect health, just as always. It was honestly surprising. "But they eloped, so I suppose it didn't count."

"No, though it is a legal thing." I was glad she was playful about it. Part of me wondered if anyone was upset that Lachesis and Finn had done that, and that Claude and I had been their only conspirators. No one had said anything to me, but that didn't mean much. "They'll have a 'proper' ceremony later, when things are calmer."

"With their baby~!" Aideen giggled again, and nuzzled Lester's cheek. Lester laughed and tugged at her hair. I smiled and sat down with Caitriona and Conall, letting them crawl into my lap. Seliph was with Sigurd. "I hope we can stay in Silesse even after things calm."

"Do you?" That surprised me. I would've thought her eager to return to Jungby.

"Well, it would be one thing if we were welcomed back, but I'm worried that we'll have to march. As an army." She kissed Lester's head and held him even tighter. "We can't really march off to fight with the children. To get to Grannvale from here, we'd have to either cross the mountains or the Yied Desert. Neither is a place for children, especially if we're also having to fight."

"That is true." I knew little about the Yied Desert, but I had heard horror stories about the sandstorms. A child could be lost and killed very quickly among the sands, lost to everything. "We'll have to see what happens. I personally hope that once things settle after the wedding, we'll be able to return."

"So do I. Though, it's a shame we can't attend Arvis's wedding." She sighed gustily and I smiled. "He was always distant, but my father rather liked Arvis. Worried about his idealism."

"His…?" It took a moment to realize what she talked about, but when I did, I smiled softly. Arvis always worked hard to make the world a little more 'ideal' for everyone. It was one of his greatest dreams, really. I always thought it a beautiful dream, even though I wasn't sure it would ever happen. Still, I was also the person who knew no one could save everyone, but I tried hard anyway. "Arvis does get impatient sometimes. I'm a bit worried he'll push through something to help us, and put himself in danger. He's done similar things in the past."

"I'm sure everything will be fine." Aideen smiled, but it faltered. "Though, I'm not sure about Andrei…" She bit her lip and shook her head. "No, never mind."

"If you're certain." It didn't surprise me that she had mixed feelings about her brother killing her father. It also didn't surprise me that she didn't want to talk about it with me. I was utterly
incapable of not trusting my brothers. I would only be able to listen, sadly. "I'm here if you need me, Aideen."

"I know." Her smile returned, but it was sad. "I'm here for you too. We're friends."

"We're practically family at this point."

"True!"

We chatted about a few other things, lighter topics like how big the children were growing, before Brigid showed up for her shift in the nursery. The three of us talked for a while before I left, leaving the two to talk to each other in relative privacy. I had planned on checking in at the infirmary, to make sure I wasn't needed, but Ayra found me on the way and snagged me by the arm.

"So, ah… what am I being recruited for?" I asked a little squeakily, desperately trying to keep up. Ayra was a much faster walker than me. "I had planned…"

"I checked the infirmary already," she reassured me. She grinned over her shoulder, and I looked away sheepishly. "You're fine. Claude is actually letting Tailtiu handle it alone because of how slow it is. Last I saw, he was having a lovely chat with Lex and Azel."

"I see." I tripped over my feet, but Ayra kept me from falling. "So, what am I being recruited for?"

"Lachesis is abed from nausea, again, and Erinys is feeling horribly sad because of Annand. So, Sylvia thought we could just hang out in Lachesis's room to play games and tell stories. With lots of sweets and warm blankets."

"Essentially, we are spoiling ourselves due to how hectic the past few days have been."

"Yep. I told Tailtiu to swing by when she was done, and she'll let Aideen and Brigid know. We can just have a girls' night. Day. Whichever. Time never seems to flow right during a blizzard." She laughed and winked. "I think we could all use a break, truthfully. I think Lex has something similarly planned for the boys, and honestly, Sigurd was talking a bit about at least getting a feast together for everyone."

"We can forget about the civil war for a few days."

"More than a few. It'll take a bit to shovel out a path. Once that's done, we're pushing forward to the castle. But until then…" She turned sharply, into the kitchens. "Help me carry some stuff, will you?"

"Of course." I couldn't help but laugh. This all sounded exactly what we needed. "Let's see what's here, then."

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**Chapter End Notes**

Author's notes: Sigurd's thing about crime and loving Deirdre and the like come from his Heroes dialogues. Otherwise, just... have some character interactions and some characters that we haven't seen for a few chapters!
Next Chapter - Silesse
Chapter 24) Silesse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 24) Silesse

The blizzard lasted a few days, just as Lewyn suspected. It took a little longer for us to even manage to get the outside doors open and clear the snow out from the courtyards and the like. Some took the opportunity to play while others were overly enthusiastic in their work, so Claude, Aideen, and I had to treat many for bruises and frozen fingers.

Before long, though, the castle is cleared and everyone's attention turns east, towards Silesse Castle. There was still absolutely no word, and we were all tired of waiting.

I just hoped this wasn't a trap. You could plan quite the clever one just by utilizing Sigurd's loyalty.

"It'll still be a day or so until we have a path clear enough to walk," Sigurd murmured, frowning over the reports. We were in his study, consolidating information, and I was making him some tea. "What's the situation with the infirmary? Will it be the same?"

"Considering how Thove went, Aideen and I thought we'd handle the infirmary together, while Claude handles the field infirmary," I explained. I set the teacup next to his hand, a silent 'stop working for a while and take a break'. He picked up on it instantly. "Lachesis shall also remain with us still. But between Lewyn, Erinys, and Tailtiu, you should have things covered on the field itself."

"I see." He leaned back in his chair and sipped the tea. "This is nice. What is it?"

"It's a blend I made. Things I've noticed you like, plus some herbs to help." I did the same with Arvis, though he was probably out by now. I had last sent him some prior to Chagall's second attack. I'd have to make him more, when we returned. "The blizzard gave me extra time to make some up. I've got a blend for a few others as well." Ayra, for instance. Azel. Lex. Sylvia.

"Like Chulainn?"

"Chulainn isn't all that fond of tea. Sadly." He'd drink it when someone he liked made it, but he wouldn't go out of his way to drink it. "We're waiting to see if Caitriona and Conall like it or not. He jokes that they will and he'll be surrounded by tea all day."

"Not a bad thing." Sigurd smiled sadly. "I wonder what Seliph inherited from Deirdre and me. He doesn't have Deirdre's coloring."

"No, he doesn't. But his smile is already like hers."

"That's true." He sighed and sipped his tea. "I hope she's okay. I want to see her again."

"I'm sure she is. Maybe when we get back..." I wasn't sure what to say, really. 'Maybe she will be there, waiting for us'? 'Maybe we can look for her'? "Arvis promised he'd help."

"Ah, that reminds me." He looked up at me and smiled slightly. "Does he even know what she
"Of course he…" I trailed off as I realized a couple of things. One) Arvis and Deirdre had never met. Two) I had absolutely no memory whatsoever of describing her to him and I highly doubt I did because of how both of us were. "Ah." I coughed in embarrassment and Sigurd laughed and laughed. "Well, I'm sure he can get information from Verdane. Someone had to have made some sort of song about the two of you, yes?"

"You are the worst at describing things!" Sigurd, of course, just kept on laughing. "Does he know what Chulainn looks like?"

"No?" I scowled. "I don't know what Diadora looks like either." Sigurd laughed even harder. "That is the… I don't even know how many times people have brought that up."

"It's weird! Ethlyn practically wrote poems about what Altena looked like after she was born!"

"I don't have enough paper to even try at this point, you know." I grumbled a bit more, but I wasn't really angry. It was nice to see him laughing and smiling. "I do apologize for not telling him what Deirdre looked like, though. That has to be slowing things."

"It's fine." He finally stopped laughing and downed the last of his tea. "Okay, serious talk. Serious talk."

"I am always serious." "You are not. Not anymore, at least." He grinned and I smiled, conceding the point. "You were always working when you first joined."

"It's what I was used to. But we can reminisce when we're back in Grannvale, safe and sound."

"True." He picked up a report and scanned through it. "I'm thinking that, if Daccar isn't there, we'll use the castle as a base to continue attacking him. I'll ask Lewyn, of course, but do you think the move will be safe?"

"I worry about moving the children, so they might have to remain back here under guard. Though, one of the others might have an easy way to bring them. Regardless, the infirmary can be moved easily."

"So, providing Lewyn doesn't mind, we'll do that and we'll discuss what to do with the children once the battle is over." He spun a pen about his fingers and I poured him a fresh cup of tea. "How many do we have? Soldiers wise, I mean."

"There should be a paper that has the number that Claude and I agreed on." I smiled when he scowled. "You can't expect me to have that memorized."

"Why not? You have so much else memorized."

"People's lives do not depend directly on me remembering a number that was written down. You didn't lose it, did you?"

"No. It's just… buried?" A knock on the door saved him from further teasing, sadly. I would've at least teased him over how relieved he looked at the convenient interruption. "Come in."

"Sorry to bother." Erinys stepped in and smiled tiredly. She had bags under her eyes and her complexion was grey. She'd been up crying again. "I wanted to let you know that the other pegasus looks like?"
knights wish to fight with us," she explained softly. Sigurd looked up at me, and I subtly shrugged. I knew physically they were fine, but mentally… that was a question better suited to Claude. "Most of them have their pegasi, so…"

"I appreciate the offer, but I will want them cleared by the healers before I take them up on the offer," Sigurd replied. He twirled his pen about his fingers again, but almost dropped it, so he set it down. "I'd also want to confirm that Jungby's soldiers really have left before…"

"They have." Lewyn poked his head in, grinning. "At least, that's what the wind says," he continued. He stood next to Erinyes, resting a hand on the small of her back. Erinyes's smile warmed when she looked at him. "Apparently, they were only here to make a fuss and to cripple Silesse."

"The wind tells us a lot." Sigurd became half-exasperated and half amused. "Can the wind tell you how they pulled all of this off?"

"Sadly, no." Lewyn sighed. "All I get is 'puppeteers in the shadows' which… you know… we've suspected the Loptyr mages were at least involved, thanks to Verdane and Agustria. Considering everything, it would not surprise me if they were involved in the Civil War here."

"Right, I suppose there's no point in asking further," Sigurd nodded. "All right. Health checks are still a thing, though. Lewyn, if you can help me…?"

Recognizing the dismissal, I took Erinyes by the hand and led her out to the infirmary, deciding she would be the first one. She dragged her feet just long enough to kiss Lewyn on the cheek, to both of their blushes, before following with a skip to her step before she became serious and saddened.

This Civil War was really hard on them both. Hopefully, we would end it soon.

"Shanan, can you pass me… thank you." I smiled at Shanan, almost laughing at how he'd anticipated what I'd needed. "You're a quick learner," I praised, bandaging up my current patient's leg. I'd run out of antiseptic by me. "Are you doing okay with all the blood?"

"It's not that much messier than the babies," Shanan joked, grinning proudly. He was helping me here, while Aideen fed the children. Ayra had opted to head out and fight during this battle. "Not a lot of injured."

"That means the battle is going well." Though, it could have also meant things were going poorly. But I preferred thinking the former. "It's good for a healer to be 'bored'."

"I know. Oifeye told me!" He watched me finish up and then handed me a damp towel to clean my hands with. "Here you go."

"You're the sweetest." I looked over all the other patients, counting how many. There really were fewer than anticipated and, despite our worries and preparations, there hadn't been a single attack on us. There had been no fliers at all, despite their ability to fly very high and skirt around patrols.

I half-wondered if all the fighting had killed them all, except for the few who fought with us and whatever troops Daccar had. If so, Silesse's army was crippled and would be for quite a few years. I had no idea how long it took to 'properly' train up a pegasus knight, but I assumed it would take a while. That actually made me uncomfortable, though. Verdane and Agustria were also weakened, thanks to us. I wondered how the countries were doing. That wasn't even going into…

"Isaach." Shanan's voice startled me because, for a second, I thought he had read my mind. But no, he had been asking me something and I had been too lost in thought to hear. "Are you okay,
Alicia?" he asked, taking the damp towel from me. He quickly tossed it into the corner with the other 'to be laundered' cloths. "You got super quiet."

"I was just thinking a bit," I reassured. I walked around to check the patients we had, making sure nothing had happened. "What were you asking?"

"I was asking if Zaxon was far from Isaach. I don't think it is." Shanan looked out the window, though it faced the wrong direction to 'face' Isaach. It was a northern facing window and Isaach was far to the east. "I wonder how it is. Isaach, I mean."

"I'm sure it is well." I hoped, at least. Few in Grannvale likely knew the truth, about how Isaach had been set up. I hoped their anger at Darna didn't bleed into how the people were being treated. "You're right in that Zaxon isn't too far away, a couple of weeks perhaps? You can see it soon."

"I don't remember much about it." He looked back at me, smiling sadly. "I feel like I'm a bad prince because of it."

"You're not…" I had no idea how to reply to that. "Shanan…"

"That's not the only thing I don't remember. I don't remember what Father looked like anymore or Grandfather. Whenever I think 'Mother', I picture Aunt Ayra. I don't remember anything about her at all." With each word, his head dropped and his posture drooped. "Whenever I think 'family', I see the army. You, Sigurd, Lex, Oifeye, Finn… everyone here. And whenever I think 'home', I don't see any one place. I see Evans Castle. Agusty. Here. Not Isaach."

"Shanan." I walked over to him and rested a hand on his shoulder. "Well, what is it that you do remember?"

"Singing. I remember people singing." He smiled slightly at the thought. "I think some festival. People laughing and everything. But that's it, really. Well, there's the warm milk with honey, but I don't know if I 'remember' that or if it's just because Aunt Ayra makes it for everyone." He leaned into me. "I'll have to return one day, right? I'm the crown prince, and my people will need me."

"That is true, but you are young. You'll likely have a regent." It would probably be Ayra, actually. Though, they might have Sigurd do it, to have 'watch' over Isaach, much like how Sigurd had to stay in Evans castle after Verdane or in Agusty after Chagall. "You can take your time to learn about your people and then decide how you want to lead."

"…I don't wanna…" He leaned more into me. "I mean; I do, but I don't. I can't imagine being away from everyone. I miss Finn like crazy. Same with Ethlyn and Quan. I can't see…"

"Well, you won't have to for a while." I pulled him into a hug and stroked his hair. "Besides, even when the army goes its separate ways, there is no reason why we can't visit. Chulainn and I joke that we'll have to spend half of our time traveling to keep up with everyone."

"True." He looked up at me and smiled again. "Oh, I remember this waterfall not far from the castle. It's super pretty and everything. I'll show it to you when you visit."

"I look forward to it." I leaned down to kiss the top of his head. "We can make a picnic out of it."

"I think it's shallow there too. I'll ask Aunt Ayra. But we could bring the kids and teach them how to swim! Or at least splash around!" His eyes sparkled and he became more and more excited as he thought about it. "It'll be fun!"

"It sounds perfect." Though, I was already fretting over the children learning to swim. "You should
"Okay!" He laughed, cheering up, but then he suddenly stopped and tilted his head to the side. "That song…?" He brought his hand by his ear, eyes glazing over slightly. I frowned because I didn't hear a song. "It's Lewyn's song."

"Oh?" It took a while for me to hear it too. "Goodness, we're quite a distance from the battlefield." I also remembered Lewyn stating he wouldn't use 'this' trait of Forseti again. I hoped Erinys wasn't too upset. "Should we go outside?"

"Can we?"

"We can, briefly, after I check on our patients."

"I'll help!"

The two of us quickly checked on everyone and then we walked up to the ramparts. Once there, we found Lachesis and Aideen, who apparently had the same idea as we did. We exchanged smiles and stood there, the wind tugging almost playfully at our hair and coats. From here, you couldn't see anything of the battle. Aside from the song, you couldn't hear anything either. But that song was there and it brought a comforting peace to it. 'Everything will be fine.' 'This battle will be over soon.' It was almost like Forseti itself sent the song back, just to reassure us that all was well.

Arvis never mentioned that Valflame had traits like this. Was that because it never came up or if Forseti was unique? If it was the latter, though, I wondered why. Could it be related to how it shared its name with the God of Wind? Was it something else?

I hoped it didn't cost Lewyn anything. I really, really hoped it didn't.

The wind-song had been correct. It wasn't long before we got word back that the battle had been won and we were to move into Silesse. Aideen and I were requested to come ahead, because there were wounded. Queen Rahna had bruises, and there were quite a few wounded among the servants, but thankfully, there were very few dead. Between we three healers, we got everyone patched up. Afterwards, Claude and I fixed up the infirmary while Ayra, Lachesis, and Aideen set up a nursery. Oifeye and Shanan were on babysitting duties with… whichever soldiers were on break. Everyone else was on patrol or cleaning up other areas.

"So, there was mostly a token amount of troops here," I murmured, mending blankets while sitting on the windowsill. The infirmary had been a horrible mess, with quite a few things broken. It seemed that, when he retreated, Daccar had decided to be petty and trash as many rooms as possible. "That must mean that Daccar is preparing for another assault. At least, that's what I would guess."

"That is my guess as well, Alicia," Claude agreed absently, focused on his task. He was carefully arranging the medicines Aideen and I had brought on a table we stole from a nearby room. There was absolutely no piece of furniture that hadn't been ruined, not even beds. "Did we send a message requesting assistance?"

"I sent one telling them that we specifically needed the ruined furniture cleared." I eyed the pile of splinters and glass warily. Claude and I had hurt ourselves quite a few times trying to clean up. Thankfully, we both had healing staves. "I do wish Daccar had been a little less thorough in his tantrum."

"Well, destroying all the medicines and dirtying up the infirmary does have some tactical backing,
providing that your enemy's healers don't keep multiple bits of medicine or have other rooms they can set up as an infirmary." Claude's tone became more and more sarcastic with each word and I had to giggle. "And providing said enemy didn't have reinforcements."

"It's a tantrum."

"It is, indeed, a tantrum, from someone old enough to be my father." He sighed and brushed his hair back over his shoulder. I really didn't understand how he worked without pulling it back as I did. "I'm not sure why I expected better."

"Perhaps we thought there had to be some sort of dignity to him, since he was related to Lewyn?"

"Perhaps." Claude finished arranging the medicine and looked up at me. Then his eyes darted to the curtains. "Did he seriously rip them too?"

"Yes. I was thinking we could turn them into extra bandaging or use them for rags. I doubt they can be mended."

"We should ask Queen Rahna if she minds." Claude's eyes darted to the door. "Ah, someone is…"

I set my mending to the side and both Claude and I went to the door, expecting the 'someone' Claude heard to be the help we requested. Both of us ducked back, however, when we saw it was actually Lewyn and Queen Rahna, walking down the hall.

"I'm so sorry, Mother," Lewyn murmured. He helped Queen Rahna walk, as bad bruising on her leg made it hard for her to walk. Both Claude and I ducked behind the door, not quite sure what to do, so I focused on him. He'd been surprised when I'd told him about the song, surprised and unnerved, but he looked fine now. I'd get someone else to check on him later. "I should've been here. If I had been, you wouldn't have been so hurt and Annand…"

"Well, no matter how much I've missed you, it's clear that your trip abroad did help you mature," Queen Rahna replied. She had a bruise mottling her cheek as well. I remembered her insisting on being treated 'later' for them, once she'd been confirmed to be 'not dying'. "Sigurd has been a very good influence."

"He's not much older, you know."

"He's quite a bit more mature than you."

"Hey!" Lewyn sulked and Queen Rahna laughed. "Well, regardless, my horribly teasing mother, I will protect you and Silesse from here on. I promise."

"I'm glad to hear it. I do want you to stay with Sigurd for a while longer, though. You can learn quite a bit, and…" Queen Rahna rested her head against his shoulder. "If there are darker forces at work, you will need to assist. That's what it means to be descended from a Crusader."

"Of course. Forseti's winds are the path of peace."

"And you are a child of the wind, much like your father." She sighed gustily. "Makes me wonder if I'm ever going to get grandchildren out of you."

"I… er…" Lewyn blushed and coughed awkwardly. They passed the door to the infirmary and, engrossed in eavesdropping, Claude and I shifted so that we could continue to listen in. "I confessed to Erinys?"
"Did you now?" She laughed, clearly delighted. "Ah, I wonder how it'll be spun, you marrying your heir."

"The Seraph is the one who inherits if the ruler dies without an heir. Erinys isn't officially the Seraph. Don't say weird things."

"How else should I get revenge for leaving me alone?"

"Ugh…!" Lewyn shook his head, still red to the tips of his ears. "Anyway, I don't remember the infirmary being this far." Claude and I shared an amused look and carefully stepped out. "Did we pass it?"

"Yes, you did," I answered. Lewyn yelped and whirled, before quickly apologizing and fussing over Queen Rahna. "I take it you're coming for the 'later' treatment, Queen Rahna?"

"If it is all right," Queen Rahna replied serenely. Lewyn was still a little flustered. "If you're busy…"

"At the moment, we're just waiting for help removing the ruined furniture." I glanced back inside, and Claude pushed the door a little more open to emphasize the words. "We… might want to actually sit in another room."

"That's fine. Lewyn, be a dear and make sure their request for help didn't get lost, will you?"

I handled tending to Queen Rahna's bruises while Claude directed the helpers Lewyn brought back with him. By the time I had finished, Lex and Azel had swung by to help out as well, moving new furniture in. Chulainn arrived not long afterwards with freshly laundered sheets for the beds, and… well, word got around, so the infirmary became a very lively place with us laughing and joking just as much as we were cleaning.

At some point during the fun, I'd noticed Claude had stepped off to the side. At first, I thought that he had needed a bit of quiet, or that someone had been injured, but he simply stood there and watched us. He watches us laugh, watches us tease, watch us work together perfectly. He watched us with a sad look on his face and an even sadder smile. It wasn't a healer's smile at all, meant to reassure or to blunt bad news. It was the smile of someone whose only other option was to cry.

The Civil War was almost over, but that smile made me feel like the worst was, somehow, yet to come. I didn't like that. I didn't like that at all.

_____________________________________________________

Notes on Claude:

The 25 year old Duke of Edda, head of the Church. Serene and wise, though with a bit of a mischief that makes you think he was once a prankster.

His Holy mark covers his abdomen and parts of his torso

Primarily a healer, though he does have some basics in fighting. It's mostly to just keep patients safe, though. The Blaggi blood gives him a high resistance to magic, though, so mages beware.

Because of his Blaggi blood, he has a keen intuition and even the ability to see the future, though only at Blaggi Tower. He's certainly seen something that shakes him, but he refuses to tell, for whatever reason.
Author's note: Penultimate chapter of Game-Chapter 4, Silesse castle is relatively easy to 'take back' (or, at least, I always found it that way). Claude has no skills, personal or otherwise, much like your other healer, Aideen. Blaggi gives a hefty bonus to resistance (which is, of course, often the lowest growth, especially in earlier Fire Emblem games). Lewyn and Queen Rahna's talk is based on their in-game talk (in game, this is when Lewyn would get Forseti, but he got it earlier). While FE5 makes Lewyn-Erinys canon, in FE4, you are able to pair them with other people. However, Erinys ends up as the Queen of Silesse no matter what in Gen2, so I'm explaining it by the Seraph being in line for the throne, to minimize succession crises. Even though I am doing Lewyn-Erinys.

Next Chapter – God of Wind
Chapter 25) God of Wind

Silesse castle is ours. It's a bit beat up, and in need of repairs, but it's successfully liberated. The people within are all safe, including Queen Rahna. Considering how many have died, it's a blessing.

Of course, we still have Daccar to deal with. This war won't end until he's dead. Though I probably shouldn't wish for it, I hope it's soon. His ambitions have caused enough trouble for everyone, and more pain to Lewyn and Erinys than I can ever forgive.

"Here, Shanan, this is a trick Sylvia taught me." It was strangely heartwarming, watching Oifeye teach Shanan how to sew better. Even though I had my duties, I couldn't help but linger in the doorway, just watching. "See?" he murmured. "Better on your hands."

"It is!" Shanan agreed with a laugh. He beamed at Oifeye before returning to his work. "Okay, let's finish the mending!"

"Sounds good!" Oifeye grinned back, but he looked up and happened to catch sight of me. "Oh, Alicia!" He began to stand, but sat back down on the floor when I shook my head. For some reason, the two decided to sew on the floor of some side room, even though this place actually had chairs. "Is anything wrong?"

"No, I simply heard laughter and decided to be nosy," I replied, smiling still. I was ridiculously proud of his improvement. "What are you going to do once you're done with the mending?"

"Make medicines for you and Claude," Shanan answered easily. He was completely focused on his work, his tongue sticking out a little in concentration. "Claude ordered you to take the day off, right?"

"He did." I'd woken up this morning with horrible dizziness, to the point that I'd half-wondered if I was pregnant again. A quick check with Claude said 'no', but that I showed signs of mild anemia. He thought it was from dietary deficiencies, probably due to working too much, so he ordered me to rest while he consulted with the cooks to make sure I ate properly. It was, honestly, more than a little embarrassing. "Are you two doing my chores for me, then?"

"Yep!" Shanan tied off his thread, and hopped to his feet to give me a hug. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. Trust me; Chulainn wouldn't let me walk around if I wasn't." I ruffled his hair and smiled reassuringly. "It's very mild. Claude just wants it to stay mild."

"He wants you to rest for a couple of days, circumstances depending, right?" Oifeye asked, sewing a button back on a shirt. He double-checked that the thread matched the shirt before continuing. "Just in case?"

"Yes, and you can imagine how everyone is enjoying their fussing," I half-complained. Part of me was truly irritated at the forced rest, but I did recognize the need for it and if this was dietary-
caused-anemia, then I really only had myself to blame. "I was just heading to the nursery." Claude had allowed me to check on the children's healths, since I was their most constant healer, and I was far too antsy to not do something.

"I think Lord Sigurd is on babysitting duty." He must've been on break, then. I knew Aideen had scolded him for working too hard too.

"That's wonderful. I get to tease him and feel so much better." All of us shared a laugh and Shanan let go of me to return to his sewing. "Thank you for this."

"Of course." Oifeye grinned at me. "Get better soon! My hands are cramping!"

"I'm sure!" With a smile and a laugh, I left the room and made my way to the nursery. I passed people along the way, all doing various duties. Most ignored me, of course, but my friends did stop me to make sure I was doing all right. Jamke actually walked with me to the nursery, since it was on his way anyway, to make sure I didn't have a dizzy spell. It touched me dearly and we even had a nice talk about how repairs were going.

"Oh, Alicia!" Sigurd greeted me warmly when I stepped inside, even as he tried to dissuade Seliph from yanking his hair. "How are you feeling?" he asked, waving to Jamke. Jamke waved back and continued on his way. "You have anemia?"

"I have mild anemia, and Claude intends to nip it in the bud," I explained, looking around the room. Conall was closest, so I picked him up first to hug. Caitriona crawled over and reached up as well, so I just crouched down to hug both of them. "However, I am allowed to do my normal checks on the children. It's the only bit of work I'm allowed."

"Must be driving you crazy."

"Immensely." Still, it was hard to be irritated when your children were hugging you. "Is there any word on Daccar?"

"For the moment, just that he's preparing something. We'll probably be ambu… ow, Seliph, my ear is attached to my head." He pulled Seliph's hand off of his ear and I had to laugh. "And I'm told the worst is yet to come. The terrible twos?"

"Supposedly, around age two, children learn what 'defiance' is." It was certainly going to be interesting, especially if we were all still together when Caitriona, Conall, Ulster, Larcei, and Lester all turned two. "Still, though, the grabbing is how they learn."

"I think Seliph just likes the funny noises I make." Seliph giggled right then, as if agreeing. "Oh, so you are? What a silly child. Who do you get it from?"

"He gets it from both you and Deirdre, of course. I can attest to that." Slowly, I extracted myself from Caitriona and Conall's hugs and urged them to play. "Well, Seliph is already up and…" I trailed off as a bit of dizziness hit me, waving my hand when Sigurd stepped towards me worriedly. "I'm fine. I just shouldn't have crouched." I smiled reassuringly at him. "It's already passed."

"That 'stood up too fast' thing?" Sigurd nodded, but he did still look worried. "So, Seliph first?"

"Yes, please." I headed over to my normal checkup area and Sigurd set Seliph there. Seliph focused on me, well used to this routine now. "Let's see how we're doing today, yes?" Carefully, I checked over Seliph, frowning a bit when he seemed uncomfortable at a spot on his back. I tugged his shirt off to look and discovered a small bruise. "Aw, sweetie, how did you get yourself hurt?"
"He must've backed into something. Surprised no one caught it." Sigurd ruffled Seliph's hair while I hunted down the spare healing staff I kept in the nursery and used it to heal up the bruise. "My brave little one, dealing with that."

"Don't teach him to hide his pain, Sigurd." I carefully made sure Seliph had no other bruises and tickled him when it became clear that was the only oddity. "That'll just make my job older as he grows up."

"I'm not praising him for hiding it. Simply being… hang on, that sounded better in my head." He sulked and I laughed. I laughed harder when Seliph mirrored his expression almost perfectly. "Whatever." He ruffled Seliph's hair again and his mood darkened when he looked at the Holy Mark on Seliph's back. "I still don't like that they appeared so early." He ran his fingers over the Mark, and I kept silent, not sure how to respond. I was uneasy too. "...Is that… silver?" Sigurd pointed to a spot in the middle of the blue, which did look noticeably different. It wasn't a large difference, but it was… well, noticeable. "Surely not. Two colors in a Holy Mark implies two different Holy Bloods, and Deirdre didn't have any."

"It could just be an oddity, I suppose." Part of me wondered if Deirdre did have Holy Blood, but that was… Verdane was famous for not having ties to the Crusaders. It wouldn't make much sense, really. "Arvis has two colors in his Mark."

"He does?"

"Yes. There's a spot on his arm that's a darker red than the rest." I mimed for quiet and winked, hoping the 'cheer' would help lift his mood. His slight smile told me I had half-succeeded. "Don't let him know I told you that, though. He's not fond of that bit of weirdness."

"And no chance he had two Holy Bloods either, huh?"

"I highly doubt it. After spending so long among the nobility, it surely would've come up if Cigyun had Holy Blood." Though, admittedly, my father had kept her more or less locked away. "Regardless, for the record, it seems less 'silver' and more 'silver-blue' to my eye. I think we're fine."

"True." Sigurd straightened with a laugh. "Maybe it's the Mark trying to give Seliph some of Deirdre's coloring after all. Her hair was silver."

"I think I still remember that." I did have to admit, though, that it was becoming a bit harder to remember what she looked like. It was just 'little things' for now, like how I barely remembered that scar on the bottom of her foot or why she wanted to wear the circlet all the time. I dreaded the day where I might forget entirely and hoped I saw her long before it happened. "You know; I should ask around and see if anyone has sketches of her. It'll help Seliph recognize her when we see her again."

"That's… true." Sigurd smiled, a little pained but mostly warm. It was hard, holding onto hope when you had no answers. "When all this settles, we should really get portraits done of everyone. I don't think we've done that."

"That does sound like fun." Actually, it didn't, but I'd certainly suffer through it. He looked rather happy by the thought, so what else could I do but agree? "We should tell the others, so that they can think of what groupings they'd want."

"And, you know, see about getting someone to do them in the first place." He became thoughtful, humming a bit. I recognized the song; it was popular, often played in Jugby during the Harvest
Festival. "I think that we have sketches scattered about of Aideen's wedding. Shame we don't have the same for Lachesis's."

"She still has the dress I made up." I grinned at his playfully hurt look. I knew it was playful. We'd actually already talked about the 'elopement'. "Now, now, they are planning on having a 'proper' one once things calm down. That was really for them." Honestly, if they hadn't needed a witness, I was fairly certain I wouldn't have known until after everything either. Though, I had to admit, I was still very pleased they'd asked.

"I know. I just can imagine all the scoldings Eldigan would've given me." The playfulness in the look was quickly devoured by the hurt. Eldigan was still a very, very painful wound. "I miss him."

"I can imagine." I smiled kindly and picked up Seliph, who had been looking around in confusion during the whole conversation. "Yes, I know. We're being far too serious when surrounded by such adorableness." I kissed his cheek and Seliph giggled. "Come now. Let's scold Sigurd, yes?"

"Hey!" Sigurd pouted and stole Seliph from me quickly. "No turning my son against me!"

"Is it 'turning against' when it is simply to help you improve?"

"I... that's..." He hugged Seliph tightly to his chest. Seliph just giggled again, clearly thinking this was a game. To be fair, it really was. "Seliph, don't listen to Aunt Alicia. She's mean."

"Hey!"

The two of us playfully bickered while I checked on the other children, drawing them into the 'argument'. It resulted in a lot of explaining when Lex swung by and found us 'at war with the children', the children who were thoroughly enjoying the game at that. But it was fun, so I didn't think anyone cared.

Daccar had the worst timing. I had just been clear for 'light work' and had gone out to the market with Azel when he decided to go for that ambush we'd half been expecting. Everyone quickly got the civilians safely within the walls of the castle, and Claude, Aideen, and I quickly determined who would do what for this battle, healing wise. Lachesis would tend to the wounded civilians, I'd handle the badly wounded, and Aideen and Claude would be on the field. It was our practice, but this time, there was one... oddity, I supposed. I was working alone for the first time in a long while.

"I hope Shanan and Oifeye are okay with the children," I murmured, smoothing out the blankets on one patient. They were guarding and tending to the children, as typical. None of the mothers were there this time, since Sigurd hoped this would be a shorter battle. "Maybe I should..." I smiled ruefully and shook my head. No, I couldn't leave the infirmary. What if I got another wave? Though, there were few badly injured. I hoped it meant things were going well.

Sighing, I wandered between the patients I had, triple-checking that I had not missed something. I had nothing else to do. Everything was mended, for one thing, and there simply wasn't room on the shelf for more medicine. I'd already replaced what little I had used. Being 'bored' was good for a healer, but in this case, I... I had grown used to being able to talk to someone. I was no longer used to working alone.

"I'm sure someone would find that amusing." In fact, I was so used to talking to people that I had to talk to myself, aloud, to not feel overwhelmed by the silence. "I should write about this to Arvis. It should make him laugh." Of course, that was assuming we'd still be able to send out messenger
birds. It would certainly be a while before we could. I hoped he wasn't too worried. He needed to focus on keeping himself safe, as well as Diadora. Then again... "Is Diadora trained to fight? Certainly, she isn't against assassins." Light magic was the weapon of choice for the royal family, so I imagined she'd be taught it.

Of course, the thought of light magic just made me think of Deirdre again. If she'd been here, I wondered if she'd be out fighting. Would she have stayed here with me, to help with the children? I could see both easily. I missed her so much. She could always make me laugh. I hoped, wherever she was, she was okay. I hoped she wasn't dead. I hoped that she wasn't being tortured. I hoped...

A quiet 'rattle' made me pause and I turned slowly, wondering just what the sound was. Silesse wasn't prone to earthquakes, not like Thracia, but I did wonder if we had a mild one. My next thought was 'is there an avalanche?' because it wasn't as if I knew anything about avalanches besides 'giant wall of snow that'll bury you alive'. But we were a safe distance away from the mountains. So, I strained to hear the rattle and turned to the windows. They were the source of the rattling. They rattled and rattled, shaking more and more violently with each passing second. Then they shattered, and the wind nearly dragged me out the broken window.

"What in the gods' name...?!" I yelped, slamming against the wall right by the window. My hand fell on the window frame itself, gouging my palm on the glass that remained, but I had no time to think on that. I struggled too much to make sure I didn't have a much-unwanted flying lesson. More shards of glass sliced across my arm as the wind dragged them out, howling in fury.

When the suction finally died enough for me to move, I got on my hands and knees and frantically tried to set up my patients on the ground, because of course, the wind had dragged quite a few out of their beds. I, badly, bandaged up my hand and arm as I tended to the new injuries and pretended everything was perfectly fine for the few who woke up before using Sleep to put them under again.

"Alicia!" Oifeye swung in, looking rather frazzled. "The windows broke here too," he murmured, noticing the glass. I ignored him to keep working. "Are you okay? The children are, but we saw the hallway windows had suddenly shattered."

"I'm glad to hear you are all okay," I murmured. Finished with tending, I went to bandage my arm a little better. Oifeye took the bandages from me to do it himself. "I was just thinking of how nice it was that I was bored."

"Shanan and I were just thinking one of us should see if you needed help. The children are napping, so we were a little bored ourselves." He found some gauze and put it on my palm before finishing up the bandaging. "I think the gods wanted to punish us for not liking our good fortune."

"I suppose." I looked out one of the broken windows, the one that faced east. That was where the battlefield was. "Oifeye, I'm worried about the others. I'll be fine here, providing that doesn't happen again, but if you can check in on Lachesis and Queen Rahna? I can't go myself in case that trick resulted in a lot of badly injured."

"I will." He tied off the bandage and smiled wanly. "I wonder what happened."

"I do as well." I used my not-bandaged arm to hug him, ignoring the pain that spiked through me. I'd gotten some bad bruises; I'd need Lachesis to check on me in a moment to make sure it was just bruises.

He ran off and I checked on my patients again before wandering to the window, noticing the wind was still howling. It was like it had gone mad, and it was strangely charged. It was like magic had been... oh. Oh no.
"This is a Final Strike," I breathed, piecing everything together with horror. This was the Final Strike of someone with Forseti blood and, since I was certain it couldn't be Lewyn, I knew it was Daccar. Daccar… he was trying to take everyone with him! "Everyone…!"

I leaned against the broken frame, careful to avoid glass, and strained to see the shadows in the distance. It was near impossible to see anything, of course. It was just too far. So I wondered if I'd… if I'd just be helpless. I wondered if all my friends, my family, were going to die and I could do nothing but watch and wait for the inevitable. I could do nothing but simply let my absolute worst fear become a reality.

But even as I thought that, the wind suddenly froze. It froze, not moving at all, and then it rushed back, slapping me in the face and sending me crashing to the ground. I coughed, struggling to breathe from the incredible weight of the wind pressing down on me, and it was a trial to crawl over to my patients to make sure they would be okay. When I confirmed they were still fine, somehow, and when the wind lifted, I stumbled back to the window, feeling each and every bruise I picked up. But all pain, and really all thoughts, disappeared at the sight of the… the thing suddenly hovering over that distant battlefield. I had no name for it. The closest comparison I had was Thracia's dragons, but that comparison fell flat. I might as well be comparing those same dragons to a lizard.

From here, its wings looked almost feathered, like a pegasi's, and they flicked in and out of sight, like it was shifting into the air and back again. Its body was a glittering white, like the snow in the sun, and shimmered with a green-blue hue. It was also massive, easily bigger than the palace. The horses and pegasi, tiny dots at this distance, looked like children's toys in comparison. Its head twisted back briefly, surveying everything, and even though I was so far back, I still saw their color clear enough: sky blue, and as timeless as the wind itself.

"Do not defile the wind with your magic, ruined and pathetic child of the wind." The voice echoed through my skull, so loud that I instinctively covered my ears. But it did nothing to quiet the sound. "Your ambitions are unworthy of the blood in your veins." The worst part was how calm the voice was. No, it wasn't 'calm'. It was indifferent, like the wind that blew through everything, no matter what was going on. "You have brought conflict to a peaceful land. You have let yourself be taken by the dark and allowed it to spread. So, I remove the blessings from you. I remove the protections. And you will be taken, by my knights, to the darkest of hells. That is my judgment."

A single chime rung through the air then, like a single bell, strangely loud and heavy for a simple sound. But the being, whatever it was, dispersed into light… or perhaps snow. But they didn't remain that way for long. Instead, they began to combine and morph into other beings. These ones were humanoid, with beautiful wings, just like a pegasi. Their clothing was uniform, light armor as near as I could tell, though there was no color to them. If there were features, I couldn't see them. To me, they were faceless warriors with weapons at their side.

As soon as the last one formed, they dove. They dove and, somehow, I knew they were going after Daccar. I heard his faint scream of horror as he fell, his last attack negated and his last moment spent in terror. But the winged beings didn't care. They seized everything he was, destroyed it, and scattered into the wind, though a couple of the lights lingered for some reason, dancing about figures I couldn't see.

One came to me and gently bounced against my cheek. "Thank you for giving my message." The words echoed through my head again, but it wasn't that old and calm voice. It was… it was Annand's. "Please, take care of them for me. I'm counting on all of you for that."

The light disappeared then and I collapsed, sobbing. I had no idea why. Was it relief? Terror?
Sorrow? I had no idea. But, bruised, bleeding, and wondering what exactly just happened… I broke down in my own infirmary, feeling very, very small. I didn't have the energy to do anything else.

Lachesis had come running, just after I'd finished crying. She'd panicked, thinking I was crying from pain, but I shook my head and told her I'd just been overwhelmed. She'd given me basic treatment, enough to make sure I wasn't going to die, before I ushered her out to check on the others. A few more injured showed up then, one conscious enough to inform me that the battle was won and the rest would be returning soon. I tended to them all to the best of my abilities, and when the rest arrived, I worked with Aiden to heal them up. Claude didn't help us. Claude had Lewyn in another room entirely, working solely on him, and once the injured were stabilized, I went to join them, leaving Aiden in charge of the infirmary.

"I saw the Final Strike and panicked," Lewyn explained, while Claude and I checked him over. He'd been babbling what happened repeatedly, as if saying it multiple times would somehow make it all make sense. "I knew there was no way we'd be able to get out of the way in time, so I tried to just seize the wind from him. Stupid. I was desperate. But I have more command over the wind than him… had more command… shit…"

"Have some water," Claude instructed, passing him a mug. Lewyn's hands shook so much that he nearly dropped it, but I caught it and helped him with it. Some water spilled down his chin, but none of us bothered acknowledging it. "So, after you tried to turn a Final Strike against its user…"

"I was suddenly the wind. I was just… a channel. A larger version of before. There was that presence, but it was everywhere. And I heard so much…!" Lewyn began trembling again, and I wrapped an arm around his shoulders, silently conveying to Claude that the physical assessment checked out. Claude nodded and focused solely on checking Lewyn's mind and spirit. "I could hear people cheering in Leonster. I could hear people dying in Thracia. I could hear prayers in Verdane. I could hear sobs in Agustria. I could hear how the Issachians refused to give up. I could hear how the Grannvalians prepared for the coming wedding. Then there were the whispers..." Lewyn's voice cracked. "Dark whispers, twisting out from the desert, twisting out from all over. Too quiet to hear. The wind hated them. It wanted to suffocate them, but couldn't. I…"

"Easy." Claude set his staff down, apparently not finding anything either. He and I shared a worried look over Lewyn's head, but when Lewyn looked up at us, we both had our healer's masks firmly in place. "You must remember to breathe, Lewyn."

"Right…" Lewyn took a shuddering breath and coughed a bit. "Claude, have you heard of anything…?"

"Unfortunately, no, not to this extent." Claude frowned heavily, resting a hand against his chin as he tried to think. "The closest would be the Book of Naga, which is said to invoke the image of the Goddess Naga to destroy foes. But that seemed a little more to invoking." He sighed, letting his mask slip briefly before gathering up his calm again. I stepped a little behind Lewyn so that he couldn't see my own mask slipping. "The Gods shouldn't be interacting with the world. They left it to we humans, to shape it. That was why they blessed the Crusaders, instead of finding the dreaded Loptyr themselves."

"So, something has caught their eye and made them turn their attention back here," I suggested hesitantly. I ran my hand through Lewyn's hair in an attempt to soothe him. He leaned into me and closed his eyes, trying to take comfort from the gesture. "Lewyn, when was the last time Forseti was used?"

"It hasn't been used since the Holy War," Lewyn mumbled. "At least, in combat. It's been used to
dispel conflict through its song, but that's the extent. Any actual fighting was done with more normal tomes, like Tornado." He sounded just so drained. I could barely hear him. "So, maybe that's it. They sensed it being used and wondered 'what the hell' and then got mad when they saw why."

"And that might've caught the God of Wind's attention because Forseti hasn't been used in so long, unless Mjolnir and Valflame, which have seen conflict," Claude mused. He still frowned, though, and his eyes flicked over to where the Valkyrie Staff rested in a corner. Again, I wondered what it meant for it to be unsealed, but I didn't ask. I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer. "It could also be that you accidentally tapped into a different ability. We can check the stories."

"And make sure I never do it again because that was very terrifying. I thought I was dead, and someone else was moving my body." He shuddered and I hugged him, still doing what I could. Really, I wanted to get him to someone who could at least distract him, but… "They do say that Forseti was the god most reluctant to leave us to our own devices, though."

"Yes, I remember. The God of Wind wanted desperately to stay, to help the humans, but was persuaded to leave. So, it could also be that." Claude rested his hand on Lewyn's back. "Well, we can sit here and theorize all day, but that won't answer anything. You're perfectly fine, physically. In fact, you're in better condition than Alicia." He smiled pointedly at me, and I smiled innocently back. "You are going to be under observation, though. You're getting a check up every morning and evening for the time being, just in case something new develops."

"Got it." He sighed and pulled away from me. Claude peered at his face, and headed over to the medicine shelf for something. "Ugh…"

"It's also the healer's recommendation to thoroughly distract yourself, perhaps with a lovely date with your lover," I gently teased. I managed to get a shadow of a smile from him. "Though, if I might ask one thing?"

"Of course," Lewyn replied immediately. He looked at me, complexion pale but eyes curious. "What is it?"

"Did… did you hear Annand too?"

"Ah." His expression crumpled and he nodded. "I did. Just her. Most of those little lights went around the pegasus knights. Around Erinys." His voice caught and he coughed to clear it. "I think… I think they were the ones that fell. The ones that died. They were all sobbing. The ones that survived, I mean. Quite a few collapsed…"

"Erinys told me of how particularly skilled pegasus knights would become the knights of the Wind Gods." I wasn't sure how to react. I had kind of hoped I'd just been hallucinating. "It seems like it's at least a little true."

"Valkyries, we call them. Did she not say that?"

"She was… a bit distracted." I smiled ruefully. "I'd just given her Annand's circlet."

"Oh. Yeah." He returned my smile and it was very bitter. "That would do it."

Claude rejoined us then, giving Lewyn a sleeping medicine to use for the night and seconding my recommendation to just enjoy himself. We both kept up the calm smiles and reassuring presence until he was out of the room, at which point we shared a silent, and frankly terrified, look. Neither of us knew if Lewyn was going to be okay. Neither of us had any idea if he'd accidentally
condemned himself.

I hated all of this. I wished this war had never happened. What was wrong with us just being happy?

Claude and I worked in the infirmary, letting Aideen go check on the children and assist Ayra with feeding them. Both of us wanted reassurance that, yes, there were still some people we could help. There were still some things we could heal. There were still some things we knew. During that, though, the injuries on my arm bled through my bandages, and Claude instructed me to step out of the infirmary and let myself be treated. It was still a bit of a mess thanks to the broken windows, and cold even with the windows covered by blankets.

Lachesis found me as soon as I stepped out and seized my not-bandaged hand to drag me off for healing. We ran into Tailtiu on the way and she insisted on helping. We actually ended up going to her room for it, since we knew it would be empty. I just let myself be dragged along. I was tired, and I ached.

"You got this injured because of the wind thing, right?" Tailtiu asked, tending to my hand. She had to dig it to pick out a couple of glass shards Lachesis and I had missed. "Wow, that sucks. Lachesis, how were you?"

"All the civilians were in the basement, so there weren't any windows," Lachesis explained. She shifted behind me, carefully treating my bruises. Part of me wondered if we should've sat on the bed for this, for potentially more comfortable seating, but the floor did allow Lachesis a little more room to maneuver, so here we were, in the middle of Tailtiu's floor. "I didn't have a clue that anything weird had happened until the voice sent me to my knees."

"Not sure if that's luck or not. Though it's good that you didn't get hurt. Might've hurt the baby."

Tailtiu picked out the last glass shard and picked up her staff to heal my hand up. She stopped when I shook my head. "Huh? Why not, Aly?"

"If you just heal it up like this, I could get some severe scarring on my hand," I explained. I could already hear Chulainn's fussing, but it made me smile. "I use my hands too much to risk that."

"So, just bandages and medicine for now, got it," Tailtiu murmured. She set the staff down and pulled the bandages and medicine Lachesis had brought closer to her. "Anyway, outside, we all got knocked flat. Well, after trying to run for our lives. Azel recognized what it was first and yelled for all of us to get as far away as we could."

"Final Strikes are particularly dangerous from those of Vala's blood, so Azel has much more training in recognizing when he's in danger of loosing one."

"Yeah, he explained that on the way back to the ones who didn't know." She stuck her tongue out at me, and I smiled, recognizing that I had, in fact, just told her something she would've known better than me. "The eeriest thing was the pegasus knights, though. We were all basically punched to the ground, but they were gently, but firmly, guided down. Of course, if they'd been punched down, they would've died, but still..."

"It is eerie that it differentiated like that," Lachesis murmured. She moved to my side and helped me get my shirt back on. She was done with tending the bruises, then. "Tailtiu, let go of her hand for a moment?"

"Sure," Tailtiu agreed. She helped Lachesis too, and I winced at how stiff I was. I'd have to rest for
a few days, darn it. "But wow, blech, this is all talk, talk, talk about boring and creepy stuff. Let's talk about more exciting things!"

"Like what?"

"Uh…"

"Well, I do have a question while you both think," I began, amused. With my shirt back on, I gave Tailtiu my hand again for her to continue bandaging. "Why do you call me 'Aly'?"

"Huh? Oh!" Tailtiu laughed, smiling sheepish. "Well, when Azel told me about you, he mentioned it was super secret," she explained. She bandaged my hand a little loosely, but Lachesis reached over to fix it. "So, I came up with 'Aly' as a means of… I don't know, hiding? It made sense to us at the time. And now I just… you know…"

"I see." I laughed as well, even more amused now. "You don't need to be apologetic. I was simply curious." She was the only one, really, who called me by a nickname, unless one counted the terms of endearment Chullain would use.

"Oh, good."

"I thought of something!" Lachesis noted excitedly. She tied off the bandage for Tailtiu and leaned forward eagerly. "So, this is super secret, and just something I happened to overhear, but Lewyn actually proposed to Erinys."

"No!" Tailtiu gasped, clapping her hands with delight. I smiled, also delighted, but also worried. The recent events might've delayed… well, there was no point in worrying about it. That was their business. "Who knows? What did she say?"

"She said yes, of course. But I don't know who knows, so that's why it's super secret."

"Got it, got it!" Tailtiu giggled, clapping her hands with delight. I smiled, also delighted, but also worried.

"Seeing as I don't see a need for the fuss, it won't be until we're back in Grannvale," I answered firmly. I genuinely didn't see a need for it. "It'll be mostly for our friends anyway."

"Aw, that's going to be a while," Lachesis sighed, sulking. "At least not until after winter. Queen Rahna asked us to maintain a presence in Zaxon, worried about the Jungby Knights showing up, and… well..." She shrugged, but smiled bitterly. "Silessse's army was devastated. We're probably the only military presence in the whole country. Meaning that bandits and snow rescues…"

"It is still near the beginning of winter, isn't it?" Though it could also be 'mid' winter by this point. We'd have to look at a calendar. Days blended together too much. "I wonder…" Someone knocked on the door then, so all three of us turned towards it. "Come in."

"Hello!" Azel stepped in, and he immediately came over to give me a hug. I returned it as best as I could. "I'm sorry if I interrupted girl time or whatever," he began, crouching next to me. "But we're having a little party to try and distract Lewyn from whatever the hell the weird thing was, and I was instructed to get you guys and see if you wanted." He poked my cheek. "Also, Claude says you're banned from working in the infirmary for a couple of days due to your injuries."

"Of course he did," I sighed. Knowing my friends, they wouldn't let me even try. "But I think we're done here, so let's go have some much deserved fun, shall we?"
I hoped this civil war was the last war we went through. It probably wouldn't be, but I still hoped. We were all very tired of fighting.

Notes on Brigid:

The 23-three-old heir of Jungby, Aideen's elder twin, who disappeared during a pirate attack when she was five years old. Has a strong sense of justice and a desire to keep people safe, despite being a former pirate.

Her Holy Mark covers the entire left side of her back.

She's arguably our biggest hitter among the physical weapon users, thanks to Yewfelle, and Yewfelle's regenerative abilities allows her to heal what damage she receives. Since she's Ullur Major, she can practically weaponize her luck.

She does her best to adapt, but it's clear that all the recent revelations, and all the recent troubles, are weirding her out. She was probably a lot happier as a pirate.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: And thus ends Game-Chapter 4. Just a bit more… foreshadowing to future events. Daccar has a force of mercenaries (pretty sure they're mercenaries) that guard the road to Zaxon and they can be tricky, but once they're dealt with, it's more or less a straight shot to Daccar, though he does have a Blizzard tome iirc. 'Final Strikes' were mentioned in the early chapters, a last ditch effort for mages of Holy Blood, where they kill themselves for a… well… final strike at their foes, to take as many enemies with them as possible.

And, amusingly, we've actually hit the last of the character bios for this generation. Brigid is the last person you recruit in Gen1. (I'll have to think of what to make notes on for the next Game Chapter, huh?) As a reminder, the ages in all their bios reflect the age they are upon recruitment. This is why Brigid's age is listed as different than Aideen's in her bio.

Brigid joins as a prepromoted sniper (though prepromotes aren't that 'bad' in Fe4, since promotion only gives a bonus to stats; all units had a level cap of 30), with strong bases and not all that great of growths (she only has two growths above 50%, HP and Luck, which are boosted by her Holy Blood). That said, thanks to Yewfelle, she has an attack of like… 60, right from the get-go. So, most units she does hit are going to die in a couple of hits. (Why, yes, all the Holy Weapons are a tiny bit broken.) She, like Claude and Aideen, has no personal skills, only her class skill (Pursuit), so her children are reliant on their father for any skills.
Next Chapter - Interlude, New Year (time skip again; so we're around ~10 chapters from the end of Gen1. More or less.)
Interlude - New Year

Thus, Silesse's Civil War ends. Of course, things don't just magically get better once the fighting ends. There are those who still fight, hating Lewyn for whatever reason. There are still the injured who must be treated. There are buildings to be repaired, funerals to be had. Annand's had been particularly large and beautiful. Though, we did get a blizzard not long afterwards, and our first 'call' to assist with snow rescues.

In the midsts of all of this, there are preparations for Lewyn and Erinys's wedding. They had wanted to wait, but everyone seized on the excuse for a party, particularly the civilians. They decided to not even bother fighting, and that's how we celebrated the coming of 761 Gran.

The day of the wedding, I had planned on maybe watching the children to make sure they weren't underfoot, or to tend to the minor injuries that popped up whenever you had a large group of people running this way and that. However, it was apparently taking longer than expected for Erinys to get ready, and I happened to be the first person Sylvia found when she went out looking for additional assistance. I wasn't sure why. I guessed it was because Sylvia automatically went towards the infirmary first, because that's where she normally would be at this hour, though it could've just been because everyone else was busy.

"Erinys, try to stop flinching," Sylvia chided absently. She was attempting to put makeup on Erinys, but since Erinys wasn't used to wearing a lot of makeup, she kept squirming. "Ugh... I have to wipe this off and start over."

"I'm sorry," Erinys murmured. It might've been easier for her if she could look in the mirror, but with Sylvia doing her makeup and me being recruited to braid her hair up, she really couldn't. "Must we... whatever you're doing?"

"Lining your eyes. It's just to help emphasize them." Sylvia very carefully wiped off the eyeliner and then began again. "They're pretty. Well, all of you is pretty, as I'm sure Lewyn poetically describes. Or will tonight."

"Sylvia!" Erinys went red all the way to the tips of her ears and the roots of her hair. Sylvia just laughed. "You...!"

I bit back my own laughter and focused on my task. Erinys had decided, at some point during the preparations, that she would have flowers braided into her hair. I wasn't sure if it was chance or not, but she picked anemones for it, the flower Annand had once cheerfully mentioned wanting to braid into Erinys's hair. I felt rather saddened by it, because honestly, Annand should've been the one doing this. While I was fairly certain Sylvia would've been Erinys's Maid of Honor no matter what, Annand should've been the one helping Erinys get ready. Annand should've been the one braiding anemones into Erinys's hair. Annand should've been the one laughing at Sylvia's teasing and Erinys's squeaks. But she was dead. She was dead and buried. I felt like I was 'stealing' her place, and it felt wrong.
It didn't help that brushing and braiding Erinys's hair reminded me of the last time I'd helped a bride get ready for her big day. Deirdre was still missing. Deirdre, who had been so happy and so nervous about her wedding, wasn't here. It hurt. It hurt all the more because I knew I had to smile, today of all days. Erinys and Lewyn deserved all the happiness in the world, after all. I didn't want to bring the mood down.

"I don't know how the makeup is going, but your hair is done," I finally murmured, tucking the last flower into the braid. Annand had been right; Erinys's hair was good for things like this. "Is there anything else I can help with?"

"At this point, I think it's just Sylvia torturing me with makeup," Erinys joked. She waited for Sylvia to pull back before looking up at me. "Thank you, Alicia."

"Of course." I carefully hugged her, worried I'd somehow mess something up. "I'll see you during the reception."

"Save a dance for me~" Sylvia teased with a wink and a smile. I laughed and left the two of them to it, making sure the door was shut.

I lingered a bit, though, just… remembering Deirdre. Aideen's wedding hadn't made me so sad, but that might've been because I hadn't been very involved. Ethlyn had been Aideen's Maid of Honor, for instance, and others had handled most of the preparations. Because I'd been pregnant and ordered to rest, I'd spent most of the time prior in the infirmary, tending to minor injuries and making sure we had plenty of hangover remedies. And while I had technically been involved with Lachesis's 'wedding', it had been so different and rushed that I hadn't made the connections.

But I couldn't help it this time, and… well, I felt guilty about Annand as well. While I stood by my decisions, it didn't help the gnawing 'what ifs'. I could only hope she was watching, and having fun with everything.

"Lady Sister!" Startled, I turned and saw Azel jogging towards me. "Good, finally found someone," he sighed. Before I could even ask, he held up his sleeve and a button. It took a moment to realize the button really should've been on the sleeve. "This fell off. Somehow. I don't know how, thankfully Tailtiu caught it before it got lost, but it needs to be fixed and I can't sew, so if you don't mind…?"

"I think my sewing kit is in the infirmary at the moment," I replied. I'd left it there last night, at least. "But that should be a quick fix." I thought about ruffling his hair, but settled for smoothing it out. "After all, we can't have the Best Man looking any less than his best."

"I'm just confused as to how I managed to tug it off." He sighed gustily, but smiled when I took his arm. "Are you okay? You were looking sad."

"I'm fine." I made sure to smile back. I didn't want to dampen his mood. He'd been excited and nervous when Lewyn asked him to be his Best Man. "I suppose I am a little sad that we won't see Arvis's wedding."

"Not at this rate, anyway. Still, part of me is glad that we can avoid all the chaos." He stopped me as four servants ran past us, each carrying something. One almost fell and had to do an elaborate series of juggling and steps to keep from dropping everything. We both went to help, but they were out of sight before we could. "Grannvale is much bigger."

"That is true." I hoped we could write soon. I hadn't wanted to ask Queen Rahna when so much was going on. But I did want to make sure he and Diadora were still okay. "I suppose yours will be
just as fussy."

"Why...?" Azel groaned as soon as he got it, nearly tripping over his own feet as we continued making our way to the infirmary. "Shoot. I'm the little brother of the future king of Grannvale. Does that mean... wait, what would our titles be?"

"I have absolutely no idea." I didn't really care to find out, truthfully. The idea of answering to a 'title' made me queasy. "Regardless, yours will be very fussy."

"You say that like yours wouldn't be either!" He scowled and I smiled serenely. "I should suggest it be extra-fussy."

"We'll see." No matter how excited the others got, I couldn't really see Chulainn and I going through a formal ceremony. I was happy the others enjoyed it, but it didn't feel right for us. Besides, I had promised Deirdre and I... I wanted to continue hoping she was okay and that I would see her again. "Ah, here's the infirmary." I was almost surprised to see no one inside, but then I remembered that Aideen and Claude were busy. Claude was officiating, after all, and Aideen was helping with the decorations. "Let's see about getting that thread."

It took a couple of tries before I found my sewing kit and a couple of tries to find a thread that matched Azel's shirt. But once I did, the button really was a quick fix. I decided to check the other buttons on his shirt to make sure none of them were at risk, and found them all perfect. It made both of us all the more confused that the first one had fallen off.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Lewyn poked his head in just as we confirmed the last of the buttons and I was putting away the sewing kit. "A maid told me you headed in here," he explained, stepping inside. I was used to him wearing white, but today, he was wearing nothing but white, much like Erinys. I'd been told it was traditional for Silessian royals to wear a lot of white for formal things, to reflect the snows of their home. "Did something happen?"

"My button somehow got pulled off," Azel explained, holding up his sleeve for emphasis. I focused on packing up my kit and storing it away. "We have no idea how or why. But Alicia fixed it. Her sewing kit was here."

"Why here?"

"I was working a late shift last night, since Aideen and Claude needed to be up early," I explained, turning to face them. "Now then, unless you two want some sort of tea to calm your nerves, I do believe you have more work to do?"

"We do," Lewyn confirmed. He gave me a quick hug before slinging an arm around Azel's shoulders and leading him out. "Claude is insisting on a last minute practice sort of deal, Azel, so..."

I watched them leave with a smile, and then decided to check on those hangover remedies. I had a feeling they would be needed.

The ceremony had been lovely, far more musical than Sigurd and Deirdre's and Aideen and Midir's. It was, apparently, how all Silessian weddings were, celebrations of song and music. Lewyn even performed a few pieces; I only recognized 'Hope on the Wind', but the others were just as beautiful. Afterwards, there was traditional dancing, though it was outside in the cold courtyard, with the snow falling on all of us, instead of a ballroom. I had attempted to stay inside, because it was warm, but Sylvia caught me for the promised dance and after that, I ended up dancing far
more than my poor-athletic-ability really would allow. I danced with Azel, of course, and Lex. Sigurd snagged me for a couple, and Lewyn got me for one. Taltiui insisted on a group dance with Ayra, and afterwards, I danced with Shanan and Oifeye. It was a relief when Chulainn finally caught me and helped me inside, though he did have to half-carry me.

"Could you have not grabbed me sooner?" I whined, struggling to breathe. I was horribly sweaty and my hair stuck awkwardly to my face and neck. "Why so many…?"

"Because they think it fun," Chulainn replied, grinning at my dark look. "You looked like you were having some fun as well, when you weren't struggling to not pass out."

"We'll see what my answer is in a few hours." I whimpered as my legs went from numb to 'why did you do this to us?'. "I need a bath. My feet hurt."

"And up." He picked me up easily, laughing at my yelp. I hadn't expected that one! "Is that a little better?"

"I still need a bath." Still, it was a relief to not be on my feet. "Thank you for getting me when you did, by the way. I should probably say that before I continue complaining."

"Ah, it wasn't solely altruism." He kissed me gently, smiling as he pulled away. "I was jealous they kept stealing you away."

"So that's the selfish motive." I laughed and tucked myself against his chest. "We'll have to head back out in a while. We need to be good friends and celebrate with Lewyn and Erinys."

"We can do that after you get that bath you want." We made it to our room, and he managed to open the door. Though, strangely, Lachesis was also there, playing with Caitriona and Conall. Now, that wouldn't be unusual, except it was our room and the twins should've been in the nursery.

"Hello?"

"Eep!" she squeaked, whirling. She almost fell, and Chulainn and I exchanged weird looks before he set me down on the bed. "Uh… hi?"

"Did you get dizzy, Lachesis?" I asked, skipping the greeting. I probably shouldn't have, but this really was a bit bizarre. Chulainn ducked into the bathing room to make me up a bath and stay out of this. "Though, I'm not sure why the twins are here?" With that said, Caitriona and Conall were certainly happy to see me, climbing into my lap. I spared a thought half-lamenting that Chulainn had been right on their eye colors. Caitriona had red eyes, like Arvis and Azel, and Conall had a red left eye and a blue right eye. Chulainn had been smug for an entire day about it. "Actually, I thought you'd… I'm just rambling and not letting you answer. I'm sorry."

"Well, it's definitely not something you'd expect?" Lachesis admitted sheepishly. She sat down on the bed too, fiddling with her ring. I wondered if we needed to get it resized again. "So, first off, I'm not the only one who left the party."

"Right, right, but…" She paused, gathering her thoughts. There was the sound of something falling in the bathroom, but when I leaned over to peek in, Chulainn waved away my concern. "That shouldn't have been the first thing to say. The first thing should've been that the children actually escaped the nursery?"

"They… they what?" I gave her an incredulous look, absently fending off Caitriona's attempts to pull at my necklace. Conall took the opportunity to 'chew' on my sleeve. I found one of the teethers
and passed it to him. They were both teething, though Caithriona seemed rarely bothered, unlike Conall. I worried a bit by how they were warmer, but I'd been reassured it was fairly typical for teething. "How?"

"Not sure, but we're currently blaming Seliph as he's the only one who can walk steadily enough to the door." She shrugged. "Could be that the door was partially open as well. But the point is that they escaped. Well, except for Ulster. The servant we left to watch them had been changing his diaper." Clearly, we needed to have more than one person watching them. They were far more mischievous than expected. "I got recruited to help find them. Along a few others."

"So, that explains most of it." Though it was still bizarre to me. "Why are you in our room, though?"

"Actually, you guys left your door open, and they crawled or whatever here." She poked Caithriona's cheek, making her giggle. "I think they were looking for you and Chulainn. Though, I don't know how they knew the path from the nursery to your room."

"Well, we do carry them every night." Still, would a baby actually retain that? Did they get lucky? I had absolutely no idea. "So, that's how you ended up here."

"Yes, and they just looked so sad because you weren't here, so I played with them to try and make them smile again." She picked up Caithriona from me and cuddled her to her chest. Caithriona tried to go for her earrings, but Lachesis ducked out of the way in time. "And then you two appeared."

"I see." I laughed softly, amused now that I had an explanation. "Thank you for finding them."

"It's no problem. Though, it does make me worry." Lachesis rested a hand on her abdomen. She still had about four or five months to go for her own pregnancy. "I hope they don't lead my little one into trouble."

"Now, how much trouble can they get into?" I grinned when she rolled her eyes. After this, I was expecting a plethora of pranks and the like when they got older. "Regardless, though, thank you again. Chulainn and I will take them to the nursery after we've recovered a bit."

"I should make sure the others were found." She kissed Caithriona's cheek and set her down on the bed. Caithriona immediately crawled into my lap again, which made me feel… I wasn't sure. 'Happy' felt too tame. "See you later!"

"One moment." I caught her hand before she went too far. "Did you get dizzy?"

"No, I got a little… lonely." She smiled wryly, running her fingers over her ring again. "I miss Finn, and I can't wait to have a big party like this one. But I didn't want to make anyone worry about a bit of self-pity."

"I understand." I couldn't stand thanks to the twins in my lap, but I did tug her a bit closer so that I could give her a hug. "Are you better?"

"Much. The kids are great for relaxing and cheering up!" She grinned and it was real enough that I smiled back. "But I need to get back before worrywart Sigurd comes looking!"

"Of course." I waved her goodbye and gave Chulainn a 'really?' look when he finally stepped out of the bathroom. "You were more than welcome to have that conversation with us, you know."

"I might have, if you didn't put those bath salts you like in an inconvenient place," Chulainn retorted instantly. "That's why some things fell, by the way." He scooped up Caithriona, smiling as
she laughed. "Your bath is ready."

"Thank you, dear, but do remember that the bath salts are placed where they are because the children are too curious," I replied. It took a little bit of convincing to get Conall to leave my lap, and really, he didn't until Chulainn sat down as well. "Do you mind picking me out another dress? This one is far too sweaty to put back on."

"Sure. Enjoy your bath."

"I shall."

After an enjoyable bath, a change of clothes, and copious playing with the children, Chulainn and I dropped off Caitriona and Conall at the nursery, now guarded by four servants, and returned to the party. I was almost immediately accosted by Erinys for a group dance, and it took me a while to get extracted from the dancing. Honestly, the only reason I did was because Sylvia recruited me to help Erinys escape the party with Lewyn. After all, today was their wedding and weddings nights were apparently very special. I didn't quite understand it, but that was neither here nor there.

"And here I would've thought you would have escaped again," Sigurd teased. Both of us were on the edges of the crowd, watching everyone dance and have fun. I tried to keep an eye on Azel, mostly to see if he and Tailtiu would actually kiss or not. They'd gotten close thrice today.

"Where's Chulainn?"

"Chulainn has been dragged into a drinking contest," I answered, glancing over to that corner of activity. Chulainn and Beowolf both looked extremely bored at Alec's antics. "Sylvia also made me promise to try and stay late at the party."

"Ah, promises. We forgot to get one out of you during Aideen's wedding." He watched everyone with a warm smile, laughing to himself. "Deirdre would've loved this."

"Chulainn has been dragged into a drinking contest," I answered, glancing over to that corner of activity. Chulainn and Beowolf both looked extremely bored at Alec's antics. "Sylvia also made me promise to try and stay late at the party."

"Ah, promises. We forgot to get one out of you during Aideen's wedding." He watched everyone with a warm smile, laughing to himself. "Deirdre would've loved this."

"She would've." I poked his side to make him squeak. "She'd also be cross with me if I let you not be anything but amused during this."

"That's true, and we should be happy for Lewyn and Erinys. And for Silesse." He sighed, though, and looked up at the sparkling stars. "It's so incredible how... relaxing it's been here. It's been good to all of us."

"It has, civil war aside."

"Civil war aside." He pointed to a group of particularly cheerful children, laughing and dancing about. They looked like they were having a lot of fun. "In a few years, our children will be old enough for that."

"Yes, though now, they're thankfully asleep." Shanan was too, actually. Oifeye was awake, though. I wasn't sure where he was, but something told me he was with the knights in the 'drinking contest corner'. "I can't believe they escaped the nursery."

"Aren't they clever?" He grinned and I rolled my eyes. "Ah, it's going to be fun when they're older. Pranks all the time... I can't wait to teach Seliph my favorite ones."

"I bet you'll regret that when you become the target."

"Not if it's clever enough!" He gasped suddenly and pointed to a darker area of the courtyard where we were all partying. "Hey, look there."
"Hmm?" It took me a second to find what he was looking at, but I had to gasp and giggle when I did. Sylvia had kissed Claude's cheek before bolting with a bright red face, Claude staring after her with a blush of his own. "Progress!"

"Speaking of progress." He pointed to a relatively empty part of the dancing, where Brigid and Jamke were dancing. Though, it did look more like Jamke was teaching her than outright dancing. "I hope Jamke can get home soon. He's been with us far longer than he needed to be."

"I do believe he keeps reminding you that he doesn't regret it."

"I suppose." He grinned and nudged me. "Bit of a relief that you two are making steps to become friends finally."

"I'm sorry that I hold grudges." Looking back, I really should've tried sooner. Considering what I'd forgive other people for… "Though, maybe I just can hold onto one grudge at a time, and Jamke was significantly better than Chagall."

"May Chagall burn in whatever hell the gods put him in." He said the words darkly, and I had a feeling that if Chagall somehow came back, Sigurd would gladly rip him apart again. "Wait, that's too serious of a topic. How did we get on that?"

"You brought up how Jamke and I are finally getting along, and then I turned it to Chagall. So, I'd call it my fault." So, I needed to be the one to change the subject. "Drat, I lost track of Azel."

"Why are you looking for him?"

"He's gotten close to confessing to Tailtiu a few times and I'm curious if the wedding atmosphere will spur it on."

"Oh, that's a good thing to watch for." Sigurd even got on his tiptoes to help me look. "There. They're with Lex and Ayra, sharing a drink."

"I see." I smiled softly at how happy they looked. "You know; we should probably jump back into the festivities."

"We should, but it's so much fun watching everyone have fun."

"It is." Though, I was now worried that there wasn't nearly enough hangover remedies. "We are such a crazy family."

"We are." He grinned and offered me his hand. "Here, let's dance and then go make sure no one is dead with the drinking contest."

"That sounds like a plan."

It took more than one dance, mostly because Lachesis wanted to dance with Sigurd while she was well enough and Azel had caught me for a dance as well. But we all did manage to make it over there, just in time for the drunken stories to start. I curled up next to Chulainn as I listened, though I couldn't help scolding people for particularly bad medical choices. Aideen did the same when she and Midir joined us, which only seemed to spur the storytellers into telling more outrageous stories, just to hear the two of us squawk in protest.

This would be a good year. If it started with this much fun, it had to be.
Author's note: So, have a wedding and some slowly finalizing of the last of the couples. Just some fun for the group, really. As we come into the final year for Gen1. Babies typically begin teething between 6-10 months (based on the research I did; saw another source that said '4-7', but that was only one) and can have a variety of reactions to it (with some unbothered and some in a lot of pain). Teething can cause a slight elevation of temperature, but shouldn't be in a 'fever' range. If there is a fever, then there's likely an infection. (Teething did used to be considered a 'cause of death', mostly because so many children died in their first year which happens to be when teething also occurs. Now, we know that's not the case. Correlation does not equal causation!)

Also, since this has come up a few times. While I do take inspiration from the mangas, I do not consider them 'canon' nor do I plan to use every little plot in them (as can be seen with my avoiding the awkward Lachesis and Eldigan subplot that Oosawa used). If you want specifics (as in, 'are you going to do this plot point?'), you are going to have to PM me (does AO3 even have a PM system?), as some people do wish to avoid spoilers.

Next Chapter - Spring Flowers
Interlude - Spring Flowers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude - Spring Flowers

So winter thaws to spring and brings about new changes and the like. Eriny end-up pregnant quite soon after the wedding, to the teasing of all, but she wasn't the only pregnancy our army dealt with. Apparently, that kiss on the cheek between Sylvia and Claude led to more serious things very quickly as a month later, Sylvia was pregnant. It seemed a little uncharacteristic, given Claude, but it wasn't my place to judge and the two were happy.

Actually, considering everything, all of us were quite happy. I loved it.

"There we are," I murmured, finishing up Diarmuid's health check. It was a relief to see him doing well. He'd been born early, and unlike Seliph and both sets of twins, who only had minor issues, Diarmuid suffered from a few health complications. Though, the others were picking up a few things… "You're all better!" I picked up Diarmuid and kissed his nose, getting an automatic smile in return. It was a relief to see him smiling.

"How is he?" Shanan asked from the table. I glanced over to him to see he hadn't looked up from making the medicine, still with the dark look he had when arriving at the infirmary. Thanks to Shanan, we'd discovered this morning that Larcei had meningitis, and Ulster had sepsis, so Claude was treating them both with Aideen's help, while I manned the infirmary and checked on the other children. After I confirmed that Seliph, Caitriona, Conall, and Lester were thankfully not sick, yet, Shanan had come to the infirmary with me and begged for something to do. Oifeye was out on patrol with Alec and Naoise, and couldn't help distract him. "Diarmuid? Is he okay?"

"He seems to be recovering well from the heart surgery, yes." I carefully wrapped Diarmuid in a blanket, remembering the surgery. It had been more than a little terrifying, truthfully, but between Claude's skill and healing staves, everything went smoothly. "I am certain Larcei and Ulster will be just as well." Tucking Diarmuid against my shoulder, I walked over to Shanan and kissed the top of his head. "You did a good thing, catching both in time, Shanan. It's unlikely Ulster and Larcei will suffer long-term effects."

"And I know it's not my fault they got sick. It's common in premature babies and Lester is the only one who isn't premature in the group. Twins are commonly born early, and ten percent of babies are born premature anyway." He rattled it off easily, and I smiled ruefully. He was young, but in many ways, he wasn't a child. It made me sad. "I just feel helpless."

"Well, you're helping now, I promise." I crouched down to look at him better, and so that he could see Diarmuid smiling up at him. Shanan softened enough to smile back and wiped off his hand to poke Diarmuid's cheek. "Trust me. That medicine will help."

"Yeah…" He poked Diarmuid's cheek again. Diarmuid flailed and grabbed his finger. "Ow… that's a strong grip."

"Well, he is of Hezul's blood, and they're known for strength."
Uneasily, I looked at Diarmuid's upper right arm, where the amber lines of a Holy Mark slowly bloomed. I really didn't like how all
of them were getting their Marks early. Diarmuid wasn't even a month old. "Ah, but I am getting distracted. Do you mind watching the infirmary for me while I get Diarmuid back to Lachesis? We can send for Tailltiu if you want." She was helping Lex keep calm while his children were getting treated; he lost the argument with Ayra over which of them would stay.

"No, I can do it!" He brightened up instantly, once again glad to have something to do and in the trust we put in him. "How is she doing?"

"She's recovering well, thankfully." Like me, Lachesis had suffered from a postpartum infection, as well as some complications. Unlike me, and like Aideen, we nearly lost her. Adelaide, the castle midwife who I was more than a little convinced was divine because of how quickly she managed to save Lachesis, theorized the stress of the civil war had negatively impacted her. "She's insisting on feeding Diarmuid herself, though, and it's almost time for a feeding." Almost to emphasize the words, Diarmuid mouthed my shirt, trying to get to my breast. "I'll be right back."

Leaving Shanan grinning and making medicines, I carried Diarmuid through the halls, shifting him about when he tried to latch onto my breast again. He really was hungry, but I couldn't help with that. Instead, I did my best to distract him, smiling softly when he smiled at me. He was young, and took mostly after Lachesis in coloring for now, but his smile reminded me of Finn's. I couldn't wait for Finn to meet him. I was sure it would be a happy moment I'd cherish forever. He'd probably blush and stumble over his words a few times, and Lachesis would laugh and laugh. It would be so much fun.

"Lachesis, you awake?" I asked when I reached her door. I walked in with barely a knock and smiled when I saw Ayra sitting by her bed, the two happily chatting over something. A small bouquet of wildflowers, freshly picked, sat in a jar of water on the nightstand by the bed. I wondered who'd brought them. "Well, it looks like it."

"Ayra is going to help me out with feeding Diarmuid, since last time was difficult for both of us," Lachesis explained. She was still rather grey in the face, but her arms didn't shake when she reached out for her baby. "How is he?"

"He seems to be doing well, though I'll want to check him again later today." I carefully passed Diarmuid over and glanced at Ayra. She looked like she needed a nap or twenty. "How are your twins?"

"Claude and Aideen are double-checking, but they should be fine," Ayra explained. She helped Lachesis position Diarmuid and smiled tiredly up at me. "Claude thinks they got exposed to the pneumonia that went around last week and that's what led to this."

"I knew we should've been more vigilant at who got close to the children," I muttered. Still, sadly, all we could do was do a better job for the future. "Regardless, since you're here, I think I'll go make sure the other children are still fine."

"Yep, I can watch her." Ayra grinned and tugged me down to kiss my cheek in thanks. I smiled and hugged her back, kissed Lachesis's forehead since I couldn't really hug her, and headed out again. I'd be back by lunch to make sure Lachesis ate.

As I walked down the hall, towards the infirmary, I actually almost ran into Claude, to my surprise. "Ah, Claude!" I called, catching up easily. He smiled tiredly at me, letting his healer's mask fall briefly. "Ayra said she was told Ulser and Larcei will be fine."

"They should be, but we're definitely keeping them isolated for the time being," Claude confirmed. I breathed a sigh of relief. "Diarmuid?"
"He seems to be recovering well. I was going to check the other children again."

"Oh, good, as I was heading to the infirmary to ask if you'd mind if I took a look at them. Aideen is triple-checking Ulster and Larcei."

"I would welcome another opinion, particularly with my twins." Caitriona and Larcei were becoming 'thick as thieves' as Dew once put it, and Conall's favorite nap partner was Ulster. "Though, I would've thought you'd be with Sylvia?"

"She's visiting Eriny and Lewyn at Silesse Castle, along with Azel, remember?" He smiled slightly and I pinched the bridge of my nose to keep from facepalming. I'd completely forgotten in the morning's chaos. Heck, I'd even forgotten that Lewyn and Eriny didn't live in Zaxon with the rest of us, but in Silesse Castle so that they could attend to royal duties. Though, they visited often enough. "I am definitely checking the children."

"Watch it, mister. I've been nice, but I can tease you relentlessly about Sylvia." I smiled, though, to let him know I was joking. While there seemed to be no regrets, and a great amount of affection from what I saw and heard, Claude didn't want to talk about it with anyone but Sylvia. "But yes, they're in the playroom now."

I hoped this would be the last major thing we had to deal with. It was enough panic to last me the rest of my life, truly.

As soon as winter ended, and we confirmed things were settled, Queen Rahna sent out messenger birds to Arvis to let him know we were fine. Arvis immediately sent a reply and Diadora even managed to, somehow, send a small flower along with her letter, as I discovered when I holed up in my room to sit by the fire and read through them both.

"What a pretty flower," I murmured, holding it up to the sunlight to study it better. According to her letter, it was a 'poppy', a beautiful red one. "I'll need to press it." I set it carefully to the side, and tucked my legs a little more under me to read through her letter.

'I am so glad you and your family are okay!' The words were surrounded by little drawn stars and hearts, of all things. I assumed it was a way to squeeze in a little more excitement, but I wondered who taught her that. For one thing, Arvis could barely draw a stick figure. Perhaps it was Aida. 'Especially given all the dead I've heard about. Grandfather and I have talked about trying to help out, but things are focused on the wedding for now. I'm super nervous. What if I step on my hem and go sprawling on the floor? Or what if I bump into someone and spill wine all over my dress? My really poofy and elaborate dress. It's pretty, but I swear I'm going to rip something. And I can't dance to save my life. Ah, wait, I should stop complaining... oh dear..."

I laughed a bit, reading through the rest. She really was endearing and I couldn't wait to meet her. After finishing, I set the letter to the side, carefully tucked under the poppy. I'd compose a reply later, though I had a few ideas of what I should tell her. It also touched me that she wanted to help Silesse, though given the current political climate, I wasn't sure how much help would come. But perhaps it could be the first step... ah, but that was a thought for another time. Instead, I picked up Arvis's letter and read through.

'It is a relief to know you are well. When the letters suddenly stopped, I feared the worst. It terrified me that you were in so much danger and, worse, Caitriona and Conall were as well. I don't suppose you can just sneak back to Gramvale ahead of the rest of your army? I can send Aida to get you. (No, don't frown and yes, I know you are. I'm just worried. ...Though, if you do want to, I will arrange it as soon as possible.) I am pleased to hear that Chulainn guessed their eye
colors perfectly. What were the hair colors again? Blonde and red, right? Please tell me; I'm trying to picture them and Aida is driving me up the wall with questions. Cyas is excited to meet them (and he can't wait to see you again). I can't wait either, particularly with all the fuss the wedding promises to be. It's in a few months, but I think I've done more paperwork for the wedding than I have for the guard and Velthomer combined!

From there, he talked of lighter things, things to make me smile. I laughed when he mentioned locking himself out of his study in the castle and scared Diadora by climbing up the side of the palace to get through an open window. It was a little quirk of his, being able to climb so well. I'd have to write a warning for him to not teach Caitriona and Conall how to do that. I really didn't want to treat them for broken bones because they decided to emulate their uncle. For now, though, I simply read through and, for a moment, pretended everything was well. I couldn't pretend I was in my little house in Jungby anymore, things were much too different, but it was still comforting enough to help me relax.

"Lady Sister, are you in here?" Azel's voice suddenly filtered through the door, followed by an odd knock for him. It sounded more like he kicked the door. "If you are, my hands are full," he continued. I smiled and stood up, wincing as my legs protested. "Hello?"

"Hang on, Azel," I called. I rotated my ankles a few times to loosen them up and then opened the door. "Why hello there!" I smiled at him, and it warmed when I saw he was carrying two steaming mugs. "Did you bring me tea?"

"Better. Cider." He stepped inside and skipped over to the fireplace, careful to not step on anything. "The apple trees are only just blossoming, so it'll be a while before we can have the first fresh cider of the year, but there's still some left over and I thought it would be nice."

"That's so sweet of you." I laughed and took a mug from him to make it easier for him to sit down. He peered at the fire in the fireplace and gestured to spark it further into life. "I will never get over how amazing that is."

"You really should be able to do it too." He frowned a bit, but it was a thoughtful frown, more remembering lessons than anything. "Those of Vala's blood do need tomes to get conjure up large fires, but we can toss little fireballs with a snap of our fingers. Useful enough to, say, set clothes on fire and distract an enemy, though you'd have to be really lucky to kill someone without a tome. You could use it to quickly boil water or sterilize something. Or cauterize a wound."

"Regardless of what Arvis thinks, I am certain the pixies aren't particularly fond of me." Though it could be my own fear. I didn't like using fire or, honestly, any magic besides healing. It just wasn't my first instinct, or even my tenth. "Even if they are, I have no training and, truthfully, no desire to learn. I like my healing." Thought, part of me did wish I didn't flinch at hurting people. Perhaps I could've saved Deirdre if I hadn't.

"True." Azel grinned, perfectly accepting of it. To him, it was just yet another quirk of his sister. "However, when Caitriona and Conall are older, I'm definitely teaching them the basic fire stuff!"

"Of course." Truthfully, the mental image was amusing, and heartwarming. Azel's sparkling eyes told me he looked forward to it. "You can work with Arvis to come up with a good lesson plan."

"I can! And he'll be so jealous~" He laughed and I giggled, sipping my cider finally. It was sweeter than normal, but incredibly delicious. "Hopefully by this time next year, we can sip cider by the fire in Velthomer again, in Arvis's study." He frowned when I burst into giggles. "What's so funny?"
"That's actually the first promise Arvis ever made to me." I did want to do it again. It sounded like fun, and the memory of that promise was warm. That had been the day I'd met him, and my world changed for the brighter. "That's all." I laughed when he sulked, apparently not fully convinced. "Regardless, have you read your letters?"

"I have! Arvis is so nervous. He tries to hide it, but you can tell." Azel grinned and I giggled again. "I keep wanting to tell him about my feelings for Tailtiu because I'm bad at keeping secrets and I know he'd cheer up at it, but I really want to see his reaction!"

"Though, at the rate you're going, you'll only tell him about your feelings and not a relationship." I nudged his side and grinned. "So?"

"I've tried!" He sulked and sipped his cider, slowly turning as red as our hair. "But each time I've either mangled the confession or Tailtiu gets distracted and the mood is totally ruined. And Lex is no help because he's too busy laughing."

"I bet he has to deal with Tailtiu's side of things too." I didn't know too much, as Tailtiu talked more to Aideen about her romance difficulties, but I had heard enough to know that Tailtiu had tried just as many times as Azel. "Well, would you like me to help conspire?"

"Please!"

We spent the next few hours thinking of ways Azel could confess, some plausible and others I said just to make him squeak and blush. I wouldn't answer the letters until the next day, but I did remember to press that poppy. Though as I did, I tried to remember what symbolism a poppy had. Then I shrugged it off and decided it didn't matter; Diadora had likely just thought it was pretty and that was all there was to it.

"Oh, I hope it goes well!" Aideen gushed, clapping her hands together. The sound echoed through the gardens as we walked through, enjoying the warming weather on our break. "Tailtiu spent so long picking out her outfit this morning…"

"Azel nearly drove Lex up the wall, apparently," I replied, laughing. Sadly, I only knew secondhand. I had been working a shift in the infirmary when Azel and Tailtiu left this morning for a date. "Though, I did also hear you yanked Midir's hair for something related to it?"

"Oh, Midir saw only Azel in the stables, and thought Azel was going to ride alone. Since it is still a bit dangerous…" She shrugged, but smiled scarily politely. "I simply 'reminded' him that he was supposed to take Lester for a ride later. He caught the hint, the dear."

"Aideen, I honestly think you could make most people quake in fear with that sort of smile." I laughed at her playfully offended look. "Ah, but that is neither here nor there. You had originally wanted to ask me about something before we got sidetracked."

"But what could be more important than young love~?"

"Azel is only a year younger than me, you know."

"We're still young!" She sulked and I had to bite back yet another laugh. "Oh, whatever. Yes, I wanted to ask you about something. I want a healer's opinion."

"And you want mine on it?"

"I'll ask Claude as well, and Adelaide when next I can, but…" She shrugged, and the mention of
Adelaide gave me an idea of just what she wanted to ask about. "Midir and I are talking about trying for a second child. However, given how close it was with Lester…"

"We would be more vigilant this time around for certain, particularly given Lachesis…" Thankfully, her recovery was going well, but for a second there, I had been deathly afraid I'd have to tell Finn she died. Thankfully, I could do something. Having someone I loved dying at my fingertips while I was helpless… that was my worst nightmare. "I think you would be fine, though we'd definitely have to keep a close eye on things."

"Of course." Still, she smiled and blushed prettily. It encouraged her that I didn't reject it out of hand. "And, like I said, I'll get their opinions as well." She hummed a bit, giggling. "Ah, I should think of a name for another boy. I already have one for a girl."

"What is it?"

"Lana, for a character in a story I loved so dearly as a child. You probably know it."

"I do?" I frowned a bit, trying to desperately to think of what story she was talking about. It took quite a few steps before I finally remembered it. "Oh, you mean 'Dawn Breaks Through'." Now that I was thinking about it, it had a character named 'Lester' in it as well. They were the protagonists… maybe? I couldn't quite remember.

"That took a while." She frowned thoughtfully, tilting her head curiously. "I'd always been taught it was a common story told to children."

"The church didn't exactly have story time." The thought of that was almost baffling to me, truthfully. They provided for us. They kept us safe. But things like that, they never did. At least, they never did when I was around. "But that is neither here nor there. I do think you'll be fine, having a second child, but I can already tell you I have no help for picking a name. Chulainn picked Conall's. Deirdre picked Caitriona's. "You could ask him."

"That could be fun!" Aideen giggled again and we turned a corner in the path. We both hopped back very quickly and crouched down by the bushes, however, because we discovered we weren't the only ones in the gardens. Jamke and Brigid, apparently, had decided to enjoy the flowers too.

Both of us remained crouched, spying on the two. They were talking quietly about something, too far away for us to hear anything, but I noticed both had silly little smiles on their faces. Brigid kept looking down and to the side shyly, fidgeting with her gloves, and Jamke simply laughed and looked at her adoringly. At one point, he even gave her a beautiful pink flower, tucking it behind her ear. I had no idea what it was, but it certainly was pretty and it perfectly matched Brigid's blush.

Aideen and I ducked back, worried that they'd accidentally see us, and I helped her brush the dirt off her dress. "So…?" I asked with a coy little smile. Surprisingly, though, Aideen's wasn't as triumphant as I thought it would be. "That looked nice."

"It is, but you must promise me you won't tease," Aideen answered. In fact, her smile was almost bitter. "Someone, I don't know who, but someone told her that Jamke used to be in love with me and… well…" She shrugged. "Insecurities. Jamke's fighting an uphill battle."

"But he wasn't in love with you?" I frowned, desperately trying to remember from the time I actually asked. I'd been so angry at him still, unconsciously wanting to make him uncomfortable, so I honestly didn't remember much. "He once told me that yes, he had been interested, but his primary focus had been to get you away from what he knew was a bad fate. He hoped to see you
"He told you?" She gave me a curious look. "Really?"

"I… uh… might have directly asked him. It was before the first fight with Sadima and I'd wanted to make him squirm." I shrugged and looked away guiltily. I really wasn't proud of that. "Regardless…"

"Regardless, that is ammunition I have for when Brigid gets nervous." Aideen smiled warmly and I breathed a sigh of relief. "Though, I can't believe you asked!"

"As I said, I really just wanted to make things awkward. I was mad." I smiled back awkwardly. If it could help Brigid, I'd be grateful, but gods, I wasn't proud of that at all. "Oh, but do you think how you recruited him might play a part?"

"Ah! Maybe!" She winced, remembering that dramatic moment. I was still confused at how she hadn't died that day. I was glad she hadn't, but still… "I'd just been… oh, I wish I could find who told her that so that I could give them a good whack in the head." She carefully stepped around that corner in the path again, and nodded. "Ah, they're leaving." A quick look showed they were heading in separate directions at that. "Um…" She glanced up at me apologetically, but I smiled reassuringly. "Thanks!"

She skipped off, chasing after Brigid to tease and reassure her. I debated for a moment before gathering up a bit of courage and going after Jamke. "Um… Jamke?" I called, mostly to make sure he didn't get too far ahead. He paused and turned, looking at me curiously as I caught up. "I'm sorry to bother. I just wanted to apologize.

"Apologize?" he repeated with a frown. He crossed his arms and glanced up at the sky as he wracked his brain before shrugging. "For…?"

"Er… truthfully, I should probably apologize for all the awkwardness I caused, but specifically, I was… ah…" I looked down, a little mortified. This was really far too long to go without an apology. "I was apologizing for my words before the first fight with Sadima."

"The… oh. I remember now." Jamke nudged my face up and smiled awkwardly. "Yeah, that… Well, I doubt it's the cause of Brigid's anxiety, but…"

"Hopefully, what you told me can help Aideen convince Brigid?" I coughed, now more than a little mortified. This was the worst. "And yes, I know what you're talking about. Aideen told me. I'd offer help, but Chulainn and I didn't have a conventional courtship."

"You can make it up by telling me how you two got together?"

"...I will accept that, on the condition that you do not tell anyone. Not even Azel knows how, exactly, that all worked out." I sighed. I didn't want to do this, but it did seem fair. "Well, Ayra knows a little bit, but not the whole thing." So did Sylvia, now that I thought about it.

"What's the little bit?"

"She knows I had to ask Arvis what I was feeling." I scowled when he instantly burst into laughter. "Oh, give me a break! I never had these crushes or infatuations everyone else seems to have had. I used to get so confused as to why many my age would sigh after handsome people being shirtless."

"Seriously?"
"Do you know how many people I've seen shirtless and naked over the years? I'm a healer!"

So, Jamke and I had a nice walk through the gardens, with me slowly telling him of how Chulainn and I got together, from our meeting to our confession, and Jamke laughing and teasing me relentlessly. It was horribly embarrassing, but it did feel 'even' and it was... nice to feel like we were moving forward past my grudge. But I did make him swear to secrecy multiple times. I really didn't want others to know; they'd never shut up about it.

"Why is it so hard to pay full price around here?" Sigurd groaned. I bit back laughter and focused navigating the market. We'd completed the infirmary shopping I'd wanted to do, so now we were on the hunt for something Lachesis would like. She was recovering nicely still, to the point that she was now getting aggravated at the enforced bed rest. "Why? And I know the shopkeeper gave me a discount, no matter what she says!"

"You are their ruling lord for now," I replied, sidestepping a puddle. Sigurd helped me over the next one and took the basket of our purchases from me to lessen the chances of me dropping it while I dodged puddles. "Most wouldn't complain about getting a bargain. Dew practically specializes in it."

"It feels wrong. Even in exile, I think I'm richer than the town." He sighed, but then shook his head and grinned. "Ah, I'm just complaining to be complaining. I should be celebrating!" He laughed warmly and almost crashed into someone. "I have a nephew!"

"That you do." Along with the letters to Arvis, Queen Rahna managed to get a messenger to Leonster, reassuring them that all was well after the sudden bit of silence. We'd gotten a reply telling us that Finn had led his first battle against the Thracians and that Ethlyn had safely given birth to a son, Leif, shortly before the end of the year. "Perhaps we should find a gift for them here as well."

"We'll have to reply soon anyway. Finn should know that Lachesis and Diarmuid will be fine." He paused, waiting for me to nod and confirm, and then smiled in relief. "Ah, I can't wait for Seliph to meet Altena and Leif. And Ares!"

"You lit up when Quan's letter mentioned Grahnye and Ares were safely in Leonster." Though, Grahnye was apparently a little distant and cold to them. But I imagined Eldigan's death hit her hard and we never got a chance to talk to her about it. Even with that distance, she still let Ares and Altenna play and she still let Ares keep the stuffed bear I gave him. "With luck, we can see them soon, and have a proper talk."

"Yes, I hope so as well." Sigurd laughed cheerfully enough, though I could hear the sadness in it. The days where he could dream of spending time with his best friends and watch their children play were gone. Eldigan was gone. "Ah, too sad. Happy thoughts. Ah... oh! How about Azel and Tailtiu?"

"They did finally confess." I hadn't heard the full story yet, but I did know it had somehow incorporated them falling into a lake. Tailtiu had badly skinned her knee due to it, and Azel had to carry her into the infirmary. I'd happened to be working that shift. "They also wear matching necklaces. It's quite adorable."

"It is!" Sigurd laughed brightly. A couple of others in the market looked at us with smiles. "Matching necklaces for a future promise, right?"

"Yes. They plan on 'properly' courting when things calm down. Tailtiu states that Bloom will insist
"I bet. Bloom adores his little sisters." Sigurd kept on snickering and opened his mouth to likely continue that thought path, but then we passed by a group of people wearing mourning black. They had a small feather tucked into their clothes to symbolize the person they were mourning had been a pegasus knight of Silesse. At least, that's what Erinys had said when I'd asked. "So many dead."

"Yeah." Everyone's mood was cheerful enough. Lewyn had returned and, while he wasn't officially coronated yet, he was taking all the responsibilities and doing his best to help his home heal. The people loved that. They loved him. But it certainly was bitter, seeing how many had died, and there was no way to hide it. You saw the signs everywhere. "I think they'll wear the black until the end of summer, and continue to wear the feather until the year anniversary of the funeral."

"Yeah, that's what Lewyn told me." He glanced at the florist we passed, overflowing with customers. Families wanted to get fresh spring flowers for their loved ones' graves. "And here I am, not really doing anything…"

"We are helping Silesse." My words were automatic, but mostly because I anticipated this sort of conversation. This was not the first time Sigurd had mentioned feeling helpless, though it was the first time he'd brought it up to me directly. "If not for our soldiers, many would've frozen to death in the avalanche two months ago."

"Well, yes, but I can't help but wonder that it's my fault that they lost so many of their pegasus knights. Or, rather, my presence here gave Grannvale the excuse to…" He sighed, and tucked the basket against him as we hit a crowded part of the market. "I'm worried our presence is proving more harmful than helpful, Alicia. And we both know that no one would say anything if that was the case. Not at this point."

"That… is true." Everyone in Silesse was well aware of our part in the civil war. Their opinion of us was higher than the clouds. It would take something very drastic to bring it down. Then there was Queen Rahna, who thought we could do next to nothing wrong, because of the help we had given and because Lewyn was friends with us. "Well, what do you suggest?"

"Part of me thinks we should leave, but I don't know where." He smiled bitterly. "Isaach would be good for Shanana and Ayra, but bringing an army of primarily Grannvale soldiers there probably isn't the best idea. The Yied Desert is neutral, but I'm not sure we should travel that with children and I don't know if the few cities within would welcome such a large number of people. The Manster District would shelter us, if only for Quan's sake, but that'll give Thracia an easy ally for their war and Leonster simply cannot fight off both Thracia's army and Grannvales. Agustria is all but a territory of Grannvale by this point. Verdane is too far, as is Miletos." He laughed ruefully. "I certainly made a mess of things, huh?"

"Everything will be fine. I am certain that your kindness has earned you more allies than enemies," I smiled kindly up at him, wishing Deirdre was here. She'd have him laughing before long. But she wasn't, so I just had to do what I could to keep my promise to Eldigan. "After all, you have a nephew you need to meet."

"That's true." He didn't quite cheer up, but his smile wasn't quite as sad. "Ah, but you suggested gifts. We're near the stall that had something I think Lachesis will like, but let's hunt for Ethlyn and Leif as well."

"I'm following you through this mess." I laughed and his smile warmed a little more. He knew the hidden meaning in the words. "Lead on."
The weather continued to warm as spring fully took root and with everyone doing well, I decided to do something unprecedented, something I had never done before. I decided to take a full day off, despite being completely healthy and unshaken. I felt guilty about it, but Claude and Aideen thought it was an excellent idea, so I went with it. I asked Ayra and Sigurd for advice on what to do with said day off, and they suggested I drag Chulainn out and spend the day with my twins. The tentative plan turned into a family hike and picnic in the woods behind Zaxon, complete with blankets, baskets, and the children getting into everything.

"You need to make sure they eat that," I warned, watching Chulainn feed the twins. I should've just been setting up our own food, but I was nervy. "They're mildly anemic, and that was recommended to help fix it." I'd nearly cried when I had Claude confirm it. I was told it wasn't uncommon with premature babies, even when they were almost a year old, but I wasn't sure if that was true or if Claude was just trying to make me feel better. "You might also want to try getting the food in their mouth."

"They're having fun," Chulainn laughed off. He had food mashed on his shirt, almost as much as the twins had on their faces. But he was right in that they were having fun and, perhaps more importantly, they were eating. "You're too serious. It's your day off."

"I want them to be healthy!" I scowled and huffed, looking away. "They're still so little…"

"Meaning we should enjoy when they can't quite feed themselves yet. In another year, they'll be in their terrible twos." He laughed when I groaned. Seliph was quickly becoming a little terror, one who was far too cute on top of it. As we were leaving, Sigurd was chasing him around to get him to let go of an important report. "Though, why is it called 'terrible twos'? From what I've seen in my travels, it lasts from one to four."

"I imagine the alliteration appealed, but then again, I suppose it's just the average age people notice the behaviors." I had talked to a few mothers in the castle town, to get an idea of what to expect since Seliph was firmly in that 'age range' now. 'Tantrums' and 'stubbornness' jumped to the top, but all of them also insisted it wasn't necessarily a bad thing, though it would test even the most patient parent's limits. But it was a time where they began learning independence, right and wrong, how to communicate, etc… while also being little adorable terrors. "From there, it simply became 'common knowledge' that the scholar known only as 'everyone' rattles off."

"Like how 'everyone' says wolves are dangerous creatures."

"They are dangerous. You just think they're fluffy and cute and somehow charm them." I gave him a dirty look. "Somewhat."

"You just treat them with respect, same as anyone else." He shrugged and made sure the twins had eaten all their food. Then he started cleaning their faces. I was just glad I'd thought to pack food that would keep for a while, since I somehow doubted Chulainn and I would actually eat until it was almost time to head back. "Yes, I know they're capable of killing me, but let's be honest. A particularly dedicated bird could kill me."

"Wild animals can transmit diseases, according to my studies." Though, from what I understood, it was something only discovered this past decade. "Oh, never mind. We'll just have this argument again when you next decide to introduce the children to animals."

"I'll make sure it's a dog next time?" He grinned at me and, amusingly, the twins perfectly mimicked him. "I think the butcher in town has a pet dog, actually."

"You would know better than me." I did think of the 'pets' we had back when we all lived in
Verdane. All of them had remained in Verdane when we moved to Agusty. "Regardless, to change the subject, 'I'm a bit worried Sigurd is plotting some sort of party for the children during the summer." Seliph would turn two years old, and the rest would turn a year old. They were separated by a couple of weeks, but their birthdays were all clumped together. "Actually, I'm more than a little worried."

"You hate any fuss that doesn't involve you being the fusser." Chulainn laughed and I rolled my eyes. I couldn't dispute that. "It's not every day that your child turns a year old, though."

"I suppose." I smiled softly as he began playing with the twins, clapping games and 'tug-of-war' with their toys. "I hope that by this time next year, things will be calm enough for you to meet Arvis, and for Arvis to meet Caitriona and Conall." I hoped that by this time next year, the fighting will have stopped and we could rest at last, and just focus on raising the children. "Maybe by then, they'll have little cousins to play with too." They would have Cyas, of course, but...

"And you will be fussing and fretting over all of them." He grinned and I sulked. "But it would be nice. I'm tired of fighting." He picked up Conall and held him high over his head. Conall laughed and wiggled, enjoying being so far up. Caitriona, bored now, began crawling into the grass to stare at the pretty flowers. "And I hope these two never have to fight."

"You plan on teaching them swordsmanship, though?"

"It's good exercise, and a good way to wind down." He set Conall down, and Conall immediately crawled after his sister. They accidentally bumped into each other, but they laughed instead of cried, and kept exploring. "A good way to stay healthy."

"I'll take your word for it." I laughed when Caitriona and Conall started batting at the flowers, finding a fluffy dandelion among them. I remembered watching the village children blow wishes on them, scattering the seeds about. I had always been confused, and simply studied on the dandelion's medicinal uses. But I thought how it might be fun, teaching them how to make 'wishes'.

"That's a pretty smile." Chulainn picked a flower and tucked it behind my ear. "It's good to see you relaxing."

"Wars rarely give you time to relax, and we had the scares with Lachesis, Diarmuid, Ulster, and Larcei." I thought about taking the flower out to study, but I decided against it. I might just default into studying and reciting the medicinal properties. "Hopefully, I'll have more time to relax."

"True." He kissed my cheek, lingering a bit. "I suppose I should look into a proper ring for you."

"Why? I don't see the point." I smiled warmly at him, laughing. "I love you. You love me. Why would I need more? You've given me far more happiness than I could've ever dreamed of." That summarized quite a bit of this little 'adventure', actually. Though I'd gone through more pain than I imagined, I also had far more happiness. There were regrets and things I wished were different, but overall, I wouldn't change any of this. "What brought that on?"

"I think… oh… the half-dozen people who have asked me about it. Including, by the way, your charming little brother." He smiled back and I laughed. "I imagine your older brother will insist as well."

"Maybe you and Lex can pick out rings together, since I'm sure they're bothering him as well."

"They are. We laugh about it over drinks. But that might be fun." He took my hand and kissed it. "We're all a little weird when it comes to relationships, huh?"
"We make it work for us. Why should anyone else care?"

"True."

"Ma… ma…!" The word made both of us freeze and we turned to see Caitriona tottering hesitantly towards us. It was her first steps, and her first word. "Da… da!" She beamed, perfectly proud, and climbed into my lap. Conall carefully followed, saying the same words. 'Mama' and 'Dada'...

This had to be the definition of happiness. I hoped things stayed like this forever.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Have another kid! For semi-plot, semi-comfort-for-me-to-write reasons, Erinys and Sylvia are both pregnant with their eldest kids. Brigid being worried about Jamke simply loving a shadow comes from their chapter 5 lover's conversation. Grahnye being in Leonster comes from Gen2 convos and supplementary material (her also being a bit cold also comes from that, though I think the materials mentioned it solely for Lachesis and Sigurd).

Babies tend to switch to mostly solid food at around a year old (though it's still supplemented with breast milk). Anemia isn't uncommon for premature babies, along with breathing issues (which can lead to other issues depending on severity). It's also not uncommon for them to obtain infections, due to a weaker immune system. *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, a major cause of pneumonia, is also the main cause of meningitis in children and elderly, as well as sepsis in HIV-positive individuals. It can reside asymptomatically in healthy carriers and spread to those with weaker immune systems. (standard PSA to always make sure you take your full round of medicine and to keep up to date with your vaccinations!)

Poppies, ftir, have long been used as symbols of sleep (because it's a sedative), peace, and death (due to the red color). In Greek and Roman myths, poppies were often offerings to the dead (though there are interpretations that the crimson color represented a promised resurrection after death). In Ancient Egypt, the seeds were used as pain relievers due to them having small amounts of morphine and codeine. They're also strongly associated with WWI thanks to the beautiful poem 'In Flanders Field' (seriously, if you haven't read it, do because it is lovely). Fun fact, iirc, it was written early into the war, so it's a bit more on the idealistic/romantic side of things, in contrast to later works which depict the war as utter hell. (Yes, opium is derived from a type of poppy; this is not the poppy that is mentioned in this story though. This one is red-flowered corn poppy.)

Oh, and since this has come up in a couple of PMs, like Katri and Hilda from my *House Hanover* series, Alicia's demisexual.

Next Chapter - Summer Festivals (last timeskip interlude for first gen; seven chapters from the end of first gen)
Interlude - Summer Festival

Spring slowly warms to summer. I loved the summers in Silesse. They were just warm enough, with a gentle sunshine that made everything sparkle. By this point, the flowers were all in full bloom, so the wind always smelled nice. The sunshine led to everyone spending more time outdoors, picking up freckles and sunburns.

It was fun. That last summer... it had been so much fun.

"Sigurd, I am not throwing a huge party for my twins!" I retorted, huffing a little. Sigurd instantly tried to his cute-puppy-pout to get me to reconsider, looking remarkably like Seliph. "I'll help you plan one for Seliph certainly, but I draw the line at my twins."

"You're as stubborn as Ayra on it!" Sigurd complained, leaning against his desk. We had been discussing infirmary supplies and the like, but now, we were 'arguing'. There was no heat to it or anything, but it was still very much a stubborn match of stubborn wills. After all, we were both very stubborn people. "Lex and Aideen like the idea!"

"They're from Grannvale, like you."

"In case you've forgotten, you are as well."

"You're nobles from Grannvale. I'm the simple healer." I crossed my arms and scowled. "There's no need for a huge party. A simple one is fine, if there must be one at all. I don't see a point to it, truly, but..."

"Your twins are turning one!"

"Yes, they are, and Seliph is going to be two." The words made my heart ache. Deirdre had been missing for a year and a half. She hadn't met my children. I was beginning to fear she never would, and that I would never see my best friend again. I feared Seliph would never know his mother, and Sigurd would never see her again. "You're not changing my mind, no matter how much like Seliph you try to act."

"Are you calling me childish?"

"No, I'm saying your sulk is exactly like his." We scowled at each other for a grand total of two seconds before bursting into laughter over how ridiculous we were being. "You seriously brought the idea to Ayra?"

"No, Aideen did, since Ulster and Larcei are only a few days older than Lester. Much like Caitriona and Conall's birthday is only a few days after Seliph's. Her idea was two big parties, but some people..." He pouted again. "You know; Chulainn wasn't stubborn."

"Chulainn is very stubborn. How else do you think he 'courted' me?" Though we didn't exactly have a 'traditional' courtship, by any means. "However, I'm certain he told you something along the
"Well, this sounds like a fun little scene!" The door opened suddenly and Lewyn stepped into Sigurd's office, smiling softly. He looked happier than I had seen in a while, his wedding day being an exception. He certainly looked like he'd finally gotten a full night's rest. I hoped it meant he was finally healing from Annand's death. "What's going on?" he asked, looking between us. "Or is it secret leader-healer stuff?"

"It's me trying to convince Alicia to throw a party for Caitriona and Conall's first birthday," Sigurd complained petulantly. I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms, not affected at all. Though it was incredibly amusing how like Seliph he looked. "Or maybe combine it with Seliph's since their birthdays are so close together. But no, she thinks it's too fussy. Probably because she's not the one being the fusser."

"If it was a healing thing, we'd all be dragged into it!" Lewyn grinned and I huffed, looking away. They… ah… weren't wrong, but I didn't have to acknowledge that. "However, I have a solution! Sort of. More like a super convenient thing that we can pretend I've made up just for this."

"Oh?" Sigurd grinned and I felt cold dread drip down my spine. "What is it?"

"Well, the purpose of today's visit, besides seeing everyone's delightful faces that I oh-so-miss seeing on a daily basis…" Lewyn sulked briefly. "Offer is still there to just move to Silesse, you know."

"I want to be in Zaxon. If Grannvale moves again, they'll hit us first and hopefully spare your people." Sigurd smiled brightly and Lewyn and I exchanged a 'of course, this is just like him' look. "What?"

"Nothing. You're just ever the knight." Lewyn shrugged and grinned again. "But, anyway, now that the weather is as warm as it'll ever get in Silesse and people are starting to put up their full mourning wear, we're having a huge festival in Silesse and you're all required to attend. By order of me. Because Erinys and I miss seeing everyone every day."

"A festival!" Sigurd laughed and I just groaned. "Perfect! You can't say no to that one, Alicia!"

"Who says I can?", I instantly retorted with a huff. I had to fight my grin, though. Both of them looked far too excited for me to actually be mad, but it was the principle of the matter! "I'm a healer. I have a perfect excuse to stay out of everything."

"Ah, but I have an ace up the sleeve!" Lewyn declared dramatically. He gestured grandly and, surprising, did actually pull something from his sleeve. "Ta-da~!" He handed me a piece of paper, and I quickly realized it was a letter from Erinys, who sweetly asked for me to attend the festival. "For the record, yes, I have other letters. Erinys figured it would be harder to say 'no' to her and wrote to the particularly stubborn people."

"I… have absolutely no idea what to feel about this." I really didn't. Amusement was there, certainly, but… "Offended' does come to mind."

"Yet you love us!" Lewyn, meanwhile, was completely unrepentant. "Like I said. There are other letters. Got one for Claude, actually, among others."

"Speaking of Erinys, how is she doing?" Sigurd asked, wisely changing the conversation. I was still trying to decide what to feel about the letter. "Has her pregnancy been treating her well?"
"As well as any pregnancy can be, or so I am told," Lewyn answered easily. His smile brightened and he blushed in pleased embarrassment. He was looking forward to a child. "The nausea is bad, but the snowdrops have cheered her up."

"Snowdrops?" Sigurd and I glanced at each other. We remembered that argument… gods, that had been just last year, hadn't it? It had almost been a year since I'd seen Ethlyn, Finn, and Quan. I hoped I could see them again soon. Letters simply were not enough. "That's… uh…"

"I know what they mean in Leonster, but they're not here and have a hopeful meaning in Silesse, sooooo…" Lewyn shrugged and winked. "Don't tell them?"

"Can I threaten to in order to get out of this?" I asked dryly. Lewyn sulked and Sigurd laughed. "Oh, goodness, Erinys is right. I really can't refuse her. Fine, I give up. We can celebrate the children's birthdays alongside the festivals." Sigurd cheered and I sighed. "Well, we can celebrate Caitriona and Conall's. You'll have to convince Ayra. I will not help."

"Ayra is one of the people Erinys wrote to!" Lewyn declared happily. I had to laugh at that, joining Sigurd's own laughter. In fact, he was laughing so hard he was tearing up. It had been a while since I'd seen him laugh so much. "But Mother will also be delighted. She's been horribly worried and she's got…" He paused and made a show of counting before throwing his hands up in the air. "A lot of gifts for the children."

"Does that pile include gifts for your eventual child?" I couldn't help but keep on laughing when he went redder than my hair. "So, how much are you looking forward to being a father?"

"W-well, I can't wait to teach the songs my own father taught me?" Lewyn smiled goofily. Yes, he was looking forward to it, and greatly. I was happy about it. He and Erinys would be wonderful parents. "And how to hear the sylphs. And… um…"

"Come, sit down, and let's have fun talking about the festival and your fatherly plans!" Sigurd insisted, gesturing to the chairs. When I made to leave, however, he shook his head. "No, no! I must have help teasing Lewyn relentlessly!"

Lewyn squawked a protest, but I did join in with the teasing. I felt it was appropriate retaliation. After all, now I was stuck attending a 'party', though I supposed a festival would be fun. I first met Arvis at a festival, after all. I had good memories of them.

The hours before the actual festival were tiring. There was a formal dinner, fancy clothing, far too many forks and knives, and too many servants asking me about the food and drink while I had my mouth full. In short, it was a 'typical' formal dinner and it was even worse than I ever guessed from Arvis's explanations. It was a relief to change into simpler clothes and join the main festival. It was far cheerier.

"Aw… that looks good," Sylvia complained, watching me drink some sort of alcoholic thing that Lewyn insisted I try. I had to admit; it was quite delicious, and I normally avoided alcohol. "Can't I try a sip?"

"While I know a sip or two won't hurt your baby, Sylvia, you did throw up not all that long ago," I replied, shaking my head and continuing to people watch. Claude had asked if I'd mind staying with Sylvia while he tended to something, and since Beowolf had 'stolen' Chulainn for some drinking thing and Azel and Taltiu had the twins, I agreed. "So, I'd rather you didn't on those grounds."

"Mmm… okay, point." Sylvia sulked for just a moment longer before giggling and resting her
hands on her stomach. She was about six months pregnant now and wore looser clothes than her normal to adapt to it. "I wonder if the baby will like dancing? I'd love to teach them."

"I'm sure they will. I wouldn't be surprised if they have an interest in healing, just like you and Claude." Part of me wanted to ask about how her relationship with Claude was going, or even how it started. But it wasn't really any of my business, especially since both seemed happy by it all. "Your first born will likely have Major Blaggi blood. That tends to be what happens, though there are exceptions."

"Oh, right, all the noble stuff…" Sylvia hummed a bit before shrugging. "Well, I'll deal with that when it happens, yeah? I should just focus on staying healthy. You'll be there when I give birth, right?"

"Yes, Aideen and I will move to Silesse temporarily when Eriny..." Sylvia and Eriny... had both requested it, even though there were plenty of healers. I felt rather touched by it, and a little giggly, even though I knew I'd miss my children desperately during that time. They would be staying in Zaxon. "I hope Chulainn doesn't have the twins meet another wild animal."

"I'm sure he'll imagine your scolding if he does!"

"Oh, I'm sure as well. But will he listen is the question?" A bit of white caught my eye and I smiled when I realized it was Eriny's dress. "Eriny!"

"Ah! There you are!" Eriny... replied, making her way slowly over. Her pregnancy had led to swollen ankles and general aches. All were typical symptoms, but it did make it difficult for her to move about freely. "Lewyn had to mediate an argument and I told him I'd wait with you two, but then I lost sight of you."

"Here, sit down!" Sylvia insisted, helping Eriny... on a box. Eriny... sighed in relief as soon as she sat and I crouched down to look over her feet and ankles. "Aw, are you hurting?"

"Just a little." She smiled wanly and I frowned over just how swollen her ankles were. "Any issues, Alicia?"

"I think I want to give you a thorough health check in the morning, before we return to Zaxon, and I think you won't be walking much more tonight," I answered after a moment. I made sure to smile, though, and stood up. "I don't think it's anything to worry about, but I do want to check. You are more swollen than Ayra, Aideen, Lachesis, Sylvia, and myself ever got."

"Just my luck, isn't it?" Eriny... groaned. She leaned against Sylvia and Sylvia ran her hand through her hair reassuringly. "By the way, did you like Queen Rahna's gifts for the children?"

"Yes, they were very thoughtful." I honestly didn't notice most of them. My attention were on the portraits Queen Rahna had commissioned for us. Sigurd and I had talked a little about it, but he'd mentioned it offhandedly to her and she ran with it. Part of me was a little irritated, because it felt like something we should have done, but it was still a very thoughtful gesture and the portraits were very lovely. They weren't 'stiff' either, but random scenes from our day to day lives. I wondered how the artist knew. "The children loved them."

"They did!" Eriny... giggled, unaware of my conflicted feelings. "Though, I'm sure some of them will be special when they're older." She giggled again and waved. "Ah, Chulainn! I thought Caitriona and Conall were with Azel and Tailtiu?"
"They were, but I kidnapped them," Chulainn retorted easily, walking up with both twins. He kissed my cheek, a little freer with affection than typical in public. Then again, there was the smell of alcohol, so he was probably a little tipsy. "Is it all right if I kidnap her as well?"

"Yeah, we'll be fine!" Sylvia reassured with a laugh. I finished off my drink and set the empty cup to the side before taking Conall. "Go on! Enjoy! It's your kids' first birthday!"

"We'll have just as big of a party for your children's first birthday," I half-threatened. Sylvia and Erinys only laughed, yet again. I couldn't blame them, though. The festival was very cheerful. "If you need me, just send someone to find me, okay?"

"We will!" Sylvia gave me a hug and Erinys tugged me down into one as well. "We'll see you later!"

"Stay safe, please." That was all I had time to say before Chulainn whisked me away and into the crowd. "So, how much did you drink exactly?"

"I'm not drunk," Chulainn replied instantly, stepping a little closer. He had Caitriona braced against his shoulder, and she looked around curiously while chewing on the ear of something. "I wouldn't carry the children if I was."

"You're tipsy." I kissed the top of Conall's head, laughing at how he seemed to hide away from the noise. "Aw, sweet one… you don't like the fuss anymore than I do, huh?"

"Meanwhile, Caitriona just wants to grab everything." Almost in emphasis, Caitriona tried to grab someone's colorful hair piece and almost dropped whatever she'd been chewing. "Whoops!" However, Chulainn caught it. "See? I'm not tipsy yet. Probably still had more than I should. Beowulf is still drinking everyone under the table."

"I'll take your word for it." My attention, however, was on the thing Caitriona had been chewing on. It was a mottled grey-ish color and it almost looked like… "Is that a stuffed dog toy?"

"Yes?" Chulainn shrugged and helped Caitriona reclaim her stuffed dog. "It's just until we get our pet dogs."

"You are fixated." But still, I had to laugh. "Why doesn't Conall have one?"

"He didn't nearly steal it on the way." Chulainn grinned and kissed Caitriona's cheek. She giggled in return. "She, however, grabbed it while we passed by a booth. See? She loves dogs already."

"Don't encourage theft!"

"I'm not. I'm encouraging a love of animals. Very important." He reached over and brushed my hair behind me ear. "We should buy one for Conall, though. To be fair."

"I'm sure there's something in the pile of presents they got." But Conall did look a little jealous at Caitriona's new toy. "But very well, let's find him something."

Chulainn led the way to the same stall, and I apologized for my overly-grabby daughter. Thankfully, the stall owner was a very kind woman, who had children of her own and had dealt with the same thing. The fact that we came back to buy another one, though, no doubt played a part in why she was so forgiving, and before long, Conall had his own stuffed dog, a black one. Then we wandered about the festival, passing by people we knew. Lex and Ayra had their hands full with their own twins, but managed a quick hello. Aideen and Midir both laughed and fussed over a sleepy Lester. Lachesis stuck with Sigurd for the evening, cuddling Diarmuid against her chest.
while she laughed at Seliph's antics. We didn't run into Azel or Tailltiu, sadly, but we did pass by Jamke and Brigid shyly holding hands.

Then, eventually, the 'main event' began, a 'play' in the sky, telling many different tales of folklore with pegasi and magic as the 'props'. It was fascinating and beautiful, but more importantly, the children were enthralled. Next year, we would have to make sure to attend a festival in Silesse again, just so that I could see their faces light up like this again. It was far too fun.

"I believe that is the twelfth case of a hangover this past," I laughed, mixing up some more in Silesse's infirmary. We'd run out. "How much alcohol did they have, anyway?"

"I wonder how many of them think their stories actually cover up the injuries they also picked up from alcohol induced stupidity," Claude chuckled, replacing some bandages. The two of us decided to run the morning shift at the infirmary here to give the normal healers a morning off, and because both of us just knew the morning would be hilarious. "What was that last one?"

"He claimed it was an angry cat, but really, it looked like he got in a fight with a tree and lost." I probably shouldn't giggle about it, but it was just too amusing to not. "Oh goodness… who won the drinking contest anyway?"

"Beowolf." Claude finished replacing the bandages and went to check inventory for our medicines. "Chulainn was apparently giving him a good run, but then decided he wanted to spend time with his wife and kids. Lover and kids." He paused and looked at me. "You're waiting until you're in Grannvale, yes?"

"Why is everyone so obsessed with whether or not Chulainn and I properly marry?" I paused in my medicine making to scowl. "There's been so many questions on it and rings. Is it so bad to go at things a different way?"

"Well, no, but I have overheard Ayra trying to talk with him about taking over Sophara when things are calmer, so that might complicate things." He shrugged, but I frowned. Chulainn hadn't mentioned that to me. If anything, Chulainn seemed to be acting as if we would live in a village in Silesse here, like we originally talked. "I don't think she's had much headway, mind."

"I see." I'd have to ask him later. "If one more person asks, though, I swear Chulainn and I are going to elope, and I apologize to Arvis later."

"Well, that's why I brought it up. If you want to elope, I will officiate." He grinned and I smiled back after a moment. "I've offered the same for Ayra and Lex. Just to get everyone off your backs."

"I am sorely tempted." But Arvis looked forward to the wedding, so for now, I saw no reason to not wait a little longer. It wasn't something either of us were doing for ourselves anyway. "Ah, Arvis's will be soon…"

"I'm gladdened he's found someone he wants to spend his life with. I have always been very worried over how alone he was, but he always kept his distance." Claude paused in his inventory check, fingers lingering on some vials. "Always so driven, always focused on ruling. Always reaching for ideals and bringing them into reality. Always focused on raising Azel. It was very ambitious of him to do it all, but it looked so lonely."

"Yes…" I knew that. When it got too much, Arvis would escape to Jungby, where I would fuss over him and he wouldn't have to focus on anything for a while. "Was there any time there he seemed happy? He always smiled and relaxed when I saw him, and would never properly answer
"Besides when near Azel?" Claude remained silent for an uncomfortably long time. "I think when with Sigurd. Sigurd would go out of his way to make sure Arvis was smiling and laughing when their paths crossed."

"I see." I smiled softly at that, unsurprised. Arvis always spoke well of Sigurd. "Regardless, though, I wonder if I'll be able to send some sort of gift."

"Queen Rahna is planning to send some, but to Velthomer to lessen the chances of being stopped." He went back to doing inventory. "I'm sure she'll arrange something."

"Much as I don't want to put more on her, I can't help but hope so." If nothing else, I wanted to send Arvis a new mix of the tea I always made him. He had to be out by now, and it was his favorite. "I still can't believe she even got a portrait done of Deirdre." It was the only one of her, of course, but it was a beautiful and had really captured a lot of her.

"That one was apparently with Aideen's help. Though, I do hope..." Claude trailed off again, faltering. I looked up to see he had that sad look on his face again. "Well..." At that moment, laughter filtered through the open window and both of us looked out to see quite a bit of the army just having fun in the courtyard. I was amused, but Claude remained sad. This time, I couldn't bite my tongue.

"Claude, what exactly did you see that makes you so worried?" I frowned at him. "I do not wish to pry, but this is not the first time I've seen your mood drop."

"It's nothing." Claude shook his head and deliberately went back to work. "One future out of many. There's no point in telling."

"Even if it can be avoided?"

"If it can be avoided, I am certain knowing will make no difference."

"If you say so..." I wasn't sure I agreed, but I wouldn't push. It wasn't as if I were an expert in this. "But if it gets too much for you, know that I will listen."

"Thank you, Alicia." His smile, however, quietly refused the offer. If he was going to tell anyone, it would not be me. "You know; it's going to be very strange working here alone for a month."

"That's right. You'll stay here when Aideen and I leave for Silesse." Sylvia was already there, staying with her best friend so that they could commiserate over the side effects of pregnancy through these last few months. "Why is it that you and Sylvia decided you would stay?"

"Partially because there really does need to be a healer here, and I will be there for the month prior to fuss over her." He smiled slightly while talking about Sylvia and I let myself soften. It was good to see him happy. "Also, traditionally, males aren't allowed within the birthing room, even male healers, unless there's an emergency involving the mother's life, or the baby's. There will be many healers, all with quite a bit of experience."

"I see." I thought a moment before deciding to make sure our conversation remained light. "But I can't help but mourn how long I'll be away from my children. I'll be away for a whole month!" I drew out the words dramatically and he laughed. "Can you not think of a worse fate for a mother?"

"Do you want a serious answer to that?"
"No, I don't. I can think of many worse fates." I sulked childishly and he laughed again. "But still, I will miss them terribly. Can you please try and make sure Chulainn doesn't introduce them to wild animals? Azel and Sigurd have also promised me, but..."

"I will certainly do my best, and if something happens, I'll make sure you would never be able to tell." He grinned at my scowl. "Relax, everything... ah, Lachesis, what brings you here?"

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Lachesis murmured, stepping in. She cradled Diarmuid against her and looked ready to cry, so I automatically stood and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "But Diarmuid didn't seem to be breathing right earlier, and he's fine now, but..."

"You're not interrupting anything," Claude reassured. He took Diarmuid from Lachesis and smiled as Diarmuid looked at him curiously. "Let's give you a thorough check up, Diarmuid. Alicia?"

"I'll set up," I replied. I gave Lachesis a better hug and went to work. "Lachesis, help yourself to some tea to relax."

A healer's work was never done, and I enjoyed these sorts of days. I feared, however, they'd come to an end far sooner than I'd ever like, and I hated the very thought.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: I am aware that in game, Seliph is 'not even two' during the early part of Game-Chapter 5, but for timeline purposes, he's going to be two. Having a lot of alcohol while pregnant can lead to a host of developmental issues, though most doctors believe 'a sip or two' is still fine (that all said, since there's no real way to scientifically and ethically prove how much is too much, most doctors also say to simply avoid alcohol entirely, because 'none' is definitively less than 'some').

Next Chapter - Byron (Game Chapter 5 begins; 6 chapters from the end of first gen)
Chapter 26) Byron

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 26) Byron

Summer cools to autumn, and that autumn... that was when we started seeing signs of military around Lubeck Castle, the last town before one entered the Yield Desert to the south. They don't come closer, surprisingly, but their presence was enough to make us wary. If they attacked, we would have no choice but to retaliate. Silesse could not suffer another war. We would have to march...

Gran Calendar 761. The doors of destiny still stand open. But no one realized that the doors did not lead to an open road. No, they led to an abyss that drowned us all into darkness, and all because we were too blind to see anything but the false yet straightforward path down.

"Sigurd, watch out! Seliph is jealous!" Erinys teased, laughing. It was hard to tell if Sigurd even heard her though, since he was busy cooing over her son, Ced, by the window. "Oh dear. Seliph, why don't you come to me?"

"I could also just check on Ced next," I suggested, picking up Conall and kissing his cheek. Conall laughed in return and then wiggled to let me know he wanted down. "That is, If you don't mind me giving him a health check."

"Oh, why would I?" Erinys grinned up at me and started playing with Seliph. Seliph gave his papa a dirty look before happily joining in. "Though, you'll have to convince Sigurd."

"Sigurd, healer's orders. Bring Ced over here." I pitched my voice to be perfectly no-nonsense, and Sigurd groaned and brought him over. Then he looked confused when Erinys and I both burst into laughter. "Erinys has been trying to get your attention."

"Oh, oops," Sigurd replied with a sheepish smile. He passed me Ced and then crouched down to play with Conall and Ulster. Ulster went along with the game enthusiastically, while Conall did as much as he could while clinging to his stuffed-dog. "I suppose the term 'healer's orders' just gets my attention faster."

"It appears so," I teased, still more than a little amused. "Now let's see..." I laid Ced down on the 'healer station' and began a check up. I frowned, however, when I noticed something almost immediately. "He's already showing his Holy Mark?" Ced was barely a month old, yet there, on his left arm and the left side of his chest, was a Mark of pale green. "I don't like this..." Lene also had a Major Blaggi Mark already, starting from the bottom of her foot and climbing all the way up her leg to her hip. I had first thought it was some sort of skin discoloration, since Blaggi Marks were a pale white, but I had felt the hum of power before long. "I really don't like this."

"Well, hopefully, we're just being paranoid or something." Sigurd shrugged, and tried to smile. But I could see the worry in his face. "Where are Lester and Diarmuid again?"

"They are with their parents." I finished giving Ced his check-up and then picked him up and kissed his cheek. "Erinys, he's in perfect health!"
"Oh, good!" Erinys cheered. She finished up her game with Seliph and walked over to take Ced from me. Seliph toddled over to Sigurd and climbed into his lap. "I think he's trying to make sure you pay attention to him, Sigurd."

"Seems so!" Sigurd laughed. He kissed Seliph's forehead and Seliph finally stopped pouting. "Come on. Let's play with Ulster and Conall. You do like them, remember?"

"Though maybe not as much as Caitriona likes Lene!" All of us looked to the corner, where Caitriona was curled protectively around Lene, her stuffed-dog tucked under her arm. Both were napping, even though Caitriona hated naps. "I'm surprised how quickly she took to Lene."

"I am as well," I murmured, smiling softly. It could simply just be 'new person', but she didn't take nearly as much to Ced. "Well, it makes nap time so much easier." Still, as fun as it was to linger and play with the children... "I should find Shanan and let him know the children are all fine." He had been worried earlier, hence why I was checking on the children now. "I will see you later, okay?"

I attempted to leave the nursery, but, much to the amusement of Erinys and Sigurd, I found myself bombarded by playful children before I made it even two steps and had to stay exactly where I was until Sylvia came by to accidentally save me. From there, I wandered the halls of Zaxon castle, trying to find Shanan. I passed by a room filled with bright laughter and peeked inside to see Azel, Lewyn, and Tailtiu all helping Lachesis with her magic training, and with babysitting Diarmuid. I watched them for a moment unnoticed, enjoying their cheer, before moving on. I paused by the infirmary, curious if they needed assistance even if I did have the morning off. However, a quick look inside showed they weren't the least bit busy, unless one counted Aideen teasing a bashful Claude silly over being a father. I was tempted to join in, but decided against it. Reassuring Shanan was more important than teasing Claude.

So, I continued on, at least, until I passed a window and saw some pegasus knights in the distance. They were most likely messengers, since Silesse kept their surviving combat-trained pegasus knights close to the castle for protection. They reminded me of the care-package Queen Rahna managed to send to Velthomer, filled with gifts for Arvis's wedding. I'd made sure to send a new mix of the tea Arvis loved so much, and some earrings for Diadora. I didn't know if she even had her ears pierced, but they had been too pretty to not buy, silver and amethyst. I had originally thought I'd hold onto them for when I saw Deirdre again, but then I had decided it would be more fun to simply go shopping if... no, _when_ that happened. I hoped it wasn't bad luck or anything to give a bride a gift originally intended for someone else, and I sent along a necklace I had bought specifically for her as well to hopefully counter any potential bad luck.

"The wedding went off without any major problems, at least," I whispered, still watching the pegasus knights fly away. Rumors of it made their slow way towards us, and described it as a fantastic affair. Arvis sent a brief, mildly harried, message to let us know that the gifts had arrived and were _very_ appreciated, with a promise of proper thanks and a longer letter to come once things had settled down. "I hope Diadora wasn't too overwhelmed." Sighing, I shook my head and smiled to myself. I had things to do, and then didn't involve fretting over my brother and his wife. I could do that later, on my own time. "Where _is_ Shanan, though?"

After a bit more wandering around, I asked a couple of soldiers where Shanan might be. My questions led me past the archery yards, where Brigid and Midir practiced and Jamke playfully 'taught' Lester how to shoot a bow, and help him with his walking. I made sure to wave at them while I passed, and frown a little worriedly, but I trusted the three were being perfectly safe. I wasn't as certain that the _knights_ (plus Beowolf and Oifeye) were being safe with their practice drills, but they did look like they were having fun, so I let them be. Instead, I continued on,
eventually coming across the field where Chulainn and Shanan were sparing. I had forgotten that this was the normal time for their lessons.

"Alicia!" Shanan cheered when he saw me. He yelped and ducked under a strike Chulainn aimed for his head. "Hey! Not fair!"

"Battles aren't 'fair', Shanan," Chulainn chided. He aimed another attack at Shanan's leg, and Shanan jumped over it. "You must maintain wariness, even as you keep an eye on those around you. Otherwise, you will lose your own head.

"Grr..." Shanan scowled and swung at Chulainn. Chulainn blocked and disarmed him easily before carefully tapping the back of his head with his knuckle. "Ack!"

"And that is 'death' for you." Chulainn tucked the two practice swords under his arm and walked over to me to kiss my cheek in greeting. "What brings you out here, Alicia?"

"I thought I'd reassure Shanan that the children are fine," I replied. Shanan breathed a sigh of relief and ran over to hug me. "The oddity you saw, Shanan, was Lene's Holy Mark.

"Another already appearing?" Chulainn asked. He frowned, a dark look crossing his expression. "In Isaach, such a thing…"

"Ayra told me." I stroked Shanan's hair, ignoring his curious look. It hurt my heart to realize he didn't know the tale. He had been away from Isaach too long to remember. "I wonder if I should take up praying. I never really have, but…"

"I'm not sure we want the gods paying attention. Isaachian tales always state that when the gods turn their eyes towards the world, it is because the world is in dire peril." He shook his head, but I winced as I thought of the 'Catastrophe' Deirdre had been so afraid of, and my certainty that the gods had bound her and Sigurd. If that was the case... "But let's talk of lighter things. You have tomorrow morning off as well, yes?"

"I do, yes?" I frowned, especially when Shanan started bouncing with excitement, barely keeping quiet. "What are you two plotting?"

"A picnic. Shanan and I found a beautiful field during our warm-up walk. We thought it might be fun if you, Ayra, Lex, Shanan and I take the children there."

"Is this another excuse to introduce the children to wild animals?" I made my voice as dry as possible. "Considering last time…"

"That wasn't actually my fault." Chulainn smiled sheepishly and averted his gaze. Though I didn't scowl, Shanan did for me. It was almost adorable. "I should have been keeping a closer eye on Caitriona, though. She's quite the little explorer."

"She is." Meanwhile, Conall was shy, content with observing. "Still, learning that she nearly got bitten by a poisonous snake…"

"Yes, I know. That's why I suggest more people. Between all of us, we should hopefully…" Chulainn trailed off, and at first, I thought he was simply being a little evasive. However, his cheer was instantly replaced with a stoic look and I turned to see Ayra running towards us. "Well, hopefully, we'll be able to have that picnic."

"Do you all know where Sigurd is?" Ayra asked as soon as she was close. She spared a moment to hug Shanan and kiss his head before focusing on us. "Lex and I were on the ramparts and saw the
scouts return with news of an enemy force heading our way, chasing a lone man. Lex recognizes their coat of arms as Dozel. "Her eyes were dark with quiet fury. "And he thinks the lone man is Sigurd's father."

"Sigurd should still be in the nursery," I murmured, fighting back a wince. This was bad. This was very bad. If Dozel was here, then… "Shanan, come with me to the infirmary for now. Chulainn, let's plan the picnic later?"

Here we go to war again. Oh gods… when would it end?

There was a rather intense debate over where each of us three healers would go where. We decided fairly quickly that Aideen would handle the field infirmary, but Claude thought it would be best to have a room prepared for Byron, since we had absolutely no idea what state he was in or what information he had. Well, I had absolutely no idea. I was half-convinced Claude did. Regardless, that all meant one healer had to man the infirmary and the other had to prepare that room, and neither Claude nor I could decide which of us should do so. Finally, ClaudeGrabbed a random soldier and asked them to pick between 'red' and 'gold', with the random soldier's random choice being who would prepare the room. The soldier picked 'red', so that was how I came to preparing one of the few guests rooms we had in Zaxon, only leaving when Claude needed the extra staff in the infirmary.

"That should be enough medicine and bandages…" I murmured, going through everything I had set up. I had blankets, and warmed stones thanks to Azel being a sweetheart and getting a fire set up for me. I had a change of clothes prepared. I had a full array of staves, including Sleep and Silence, just in case. "Should I open a window? Would that get too cold?" It was hard, not knowing anything. I had no idea even how the battle was going. "Mmm… I should stoke the fire more…"

I fuss ed about the room, making little changes that probably weren't needed. I couldn't leave, just in case. I couldn't really start any sort of chore, just in case. All I could do was wait. I wasn't used to simply doing nothing. I wasn't used to not at least talking to people, not anymore. Though I wasn't even certain that sentence made sense. So, it was almost a relief when rapid footsteps heralded someone's arrival and I turned just as Lex burst through the door, carrying… well, at first I thought it was an oversized ragdoll. It took me a moment to realize said ragdoll was truly Duke Byron, looking a far cry from his typical 'stern yet dignified' appearance.

"Place him on the bed," I instructed, pulling the blankets back. Lex set Duke Byron down gently on the bed, and I barely held onto my 'healer's mask' when I saw just how bad off Duke Byron was. Malnourishment, exhaustion, infected injuries… that was what I could tell at a glance, and I knew the healing would reveal worse. "How goes the battle outside?"

"Not too bad, considering everything," Lex answered. Everything from his voice to his posture was tense, though. "Need me for anything else?"

"If you're not terribly wounded, then no, I do not." I smiled gently at him, hoping it would reassure him. I certainly didn't feel confidant. I wasn't sure Duke Bryon could be saved. If he were a little younger, then perhaps his body would find the reserves, but he was in his fifties and had endured enough to cripple a younger man. "Do be careful, however, Lex. None of us need to hear Ayra screeching at you for recklessness."

"Ha!" Lex managed to crack a smile. "Well, I'll try, at least." He absently waved goodbye as he left the room, shutting the door behind him. As soon as I heard the 'click', I let the smile fall and turned to Duke Bryon to begin… attempting… to save his life.
Duke Byron groaned and mumbled as I worked. A couple of times, he feebly tried to push my hands away, but it was easy to ignore his attempts. I honestly was certain even Lene could fend him off. It was almost unnerving, since growing up, I had always heard of Duke Byron's strength. Yet now, he couldn't even stop a weak healer from cleaning him up, changing his clothes, and tending to his injuries. Of course, it was good that he couldn't, but that was neither here nor there. It was unsettling.

At some point, Duke Byron opened his eyes, blinking blearily at me as I attempted to ward off the infection in his injuries. "Lady Sunna?" he croaked, squinting. It took me a long moment to remember why that name sounded somewhat familiar; Arvis told me that was my mother's name. "Not who I expected to greet me in death?"

"You're not quite dead yet, Duke Byron," I replied. I smiled calmly at him, even as I started to concede defeat. His body was so ravaged that it just could not fight off the infection, especially when there was illness and blood loss to also deal with. "My name is Alicia. I serve as a healer for Sigurd's army."

"Ah, Sunna's daughter, then." He closed his eyes, focused solely on breathing. The one Kurth liked keeping a distant eye on.

"Did he now?" I hadn't know that part, but I supposed it did explain why I was left in Jungby. No one would think of anything of Prince Kurth visiting Duke Ring. "That's interesting."

"Your mother died protecting him and Cigyun. He felt it was the very least he could do." He opened his eyes again and this time, his gaze was clearer. Then he smiled, just slightly, but enough for me to see the resemblance between him and Sigurd. "You needn't spend so much effort. I know I should already be dead."

"I can see where Sigurd and Ethlyn inherited their stubbornness."

"Oh, no, they got theirs from their mother. My wife was far more stubborn than me." He laughed a bit before coughing horribly, enough to jerk his body up. "I couldn't give up, though. I didn't want Langbalt to get the Book of Naga or Tyrfing. I wanted to see at least one of my children again." He coughed again, thankfully with much less force. "Ah, I never got to meet Altena. I was supposed to make a trip before all of this."

"Ethlyn gave birth to a son late last year." I wondered why he was rambling all of this, but then realized that he was simply too tired to hide his thoughts. He was saying exactly what he was thinking, because it was too much effort to keep them to himself. "His name is Leif. Did you hear about Seliph?"

"I did." His smile grew and I could very clearly see Sigurd in his face. I didn't like it; it almost made me feel like I was desperately trying, and failing, to save Sigurd's life. "I'd just gotten that letter. I was telling Prince Kurth and Ring about it, and Prince Kurth said something about hopefully getting to meet him and then Andrei shot Ring straight through the throat and Langbalt…"

"He's adorable, and takes after Sigurd." I wasn't sure what else to say. "Apparently, Leif takes after Quan in looks and coloring, or so Ethlyn claims. Quan says that while Leif has his coloring, he takes after Ethlyn in looks. Sadly, none of us have seen him to confirm or deny either statement."

"Ethlyn probably almost wrote poetry about what her son looked like. She did for Altena."

"She did." I desperately tried to remember any, but came up blank. I hadn't paid much attention,
just as I rarely paid attention, and I almost despised myself for it. "Aideen and Midir married."

"About time. Ring was thinking about confronting Midir." Duke Byron laughed-coughed again. "Do they have children?"

"They have a son, Lester, and are thinking of having a second child." I dealt with the worst of the infection and bound up the rest. It wasn't worth stitching. "Oh, Brigid was found."

"Was she?" Duke Byron's eyes widened and he tried to push himself up. A simple hand on his shoulder, though, stopped him cold. "Good... Ring never gave up hope that she was okay."

"King Jamke is slowlycourting her."

"Is he?"

"Yes."

From there, I just... babbled. As I continued attempting to save him, really just buying him as much time as I could while not putting him through agonizing pain, I babbled about anything and everything I could think of, about the people he would have known. I told him of Deirdre's disappearance. I told him of Eldigan's death. I told him of Lachesis's 'elope'ment and how she had her son, Diarmuid. I told him about how Lex and Ayra were together and had two children. I told him about how Azel and Tailtiu were courting. I told him of how Claude had a lover named Sylvia and they recently had their first child, Lene. I rambled about Alec, Naoise, and Arden. I bragged about Oifeye. I even rambled about people he didn't know, or only knew through letters. He listened closely, asking questions when confused, laughing at our silliness.

Eventually, Oifeye knocked on the door and poked his head in. "Um... the battle is over," he explained, expression carefully blank. I paused in my storytelling and work to look at him. "Sigurd was wondering..."

"I see," I whispered. I looked down at Byron, not even sure why, but he found some silent question in my expression because he nodded. I took it to mean it was time to simply announce... "If Sigurd wants to say his goodbyes, then he had best come quickly." I returned my attention to Oifeye and smiled sadly. "I have bought all the time I can."

Oifeye sprinted away, not even bothering to shut the door. I focused on helping Byron sit up and be as comfortable as possible. I gave him the strongest pain medicines I could that wouldn't knock him out, and changed his bandages. Perhaps it was cruel to buy him as much time as I could, but Duke Byron never protested. He just smiled, amused by something.

Sigurd eventually walked in, freshly scrubbed and carrying Seliph. I gave Duke Byron one last check and stepped away to give them space. Before long, Aideen hesitantly tiptoed in, carrying Lester, with Brigid and Oifeye close behind.

I left the room then, making sure to shut the door behind me. I spared a moment to lean against the wall tiredly, willing back tears, and then I shook my head and went to the infirmary to help Claude. If anyone else visited or paid their respects to Duke Byron, I didn't hear. With the number of wounded and all, I didn't hear much of anything, really.

By dawn, Duke Byron of Chalphy had passed, comfortably in a warm bed, surrounded by family. It was as good of a death as anyone could have, I supposed.

"So, it seems Grannvale is bringing war to us again," Sigurd murmured, deciding to start off the
"War Meeting' with the obvious. Though Duke Byron had been buried yesterday, in Zaxon's crypt with Lewyn's permission, Sigurd didn't wear mourning colors yet. He wanted to wait until he at least told Ethlyn. "My apologies, Lewyn. We seem to keep bringing trouble."

"This Langbalt and Reptor are the ones bringing trouble, not you,," Lewyn countered easily. I took the time to look around Sigurd's study, noting it was a small meeting this morning, consisting only of Lewyn, Lex, myself, and Sigurd. When the scouts came in, I knew there would be a larger one, and Claude would take the 'healer' slot in the meeting instead. After all, the only reason I was here now was because I had been discussing medicines and how many soldiers could be fielded. "Silesse sadly can't provide much to help, since we're still recovering, but hey, I'm practically an army in my own right with Forseti."

"I… huh?" Sigurd looked almost adorably confused, and I silently went over to Lex and poked his cheek. It took a second poke to startle him from his thoughts and after a moment, he smiled bitterly. He had been stiff ever since the battle ended, only softening when around the children. "What do you mean?"

"What? Is it a surprise that Erinys and I are going to continue to serve?" Lewyn grinned cheekily, knowing exactly how much of a surprise it really was. "You can consider it my marching orders, in fact, directly from my mother. She thinks I've still got things to learn in the army, and I agree."

"I… but…" Sigurd visibly groped for words. Lex and I exchanged our own smiles, though mine was mostly to prompt one out of him. "Okay, I know you two silent ones are laughing at me."

"You're easy to laugh at," Lex playfully mocked. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. "And it's also clear that you'll lose the argument. So, my question is more of what is going to happen with your kid?"

"Ced is already on his way back to the castle," Lewyn answered. His smile dimmed slightly, already missing his son. "Since Erinys decided to have someone wet nurse him, we can be away for a while. If anyone wants to send their children to Silesse, Mother is more than happy to shelter him."

"Mmm… honestly, probably safer for all right now to just keep them with us," Lex looked to Sigurd. "Knowing my old man, he's got people all over the place. I don't think he'd go after Ced, but one of ours?" Lex shrugged and tried to appear nonchalant. "I'm not sure we should consider them anything but targets."

"Warp staff? Return?" Lewyn frowned. "We can set up both easily."

"Still has the risk of enemy soldiers attacking a Silesse with little defenses. It's easier to protect one child than many." It was also easier to escape with only one child, if the need arose. "My old man is stubborn and clever. If he's moving, then he's been setting things up. You honestly might want to question any new soldiers and servants you've gotten." Lewyn's face went ghost-white. "I'm about ninety-five percent certain he took advantage of what happened in Darna to start the war with Isaach to distract and pull Prince Kurth into a convenient place to die. He's always been clever and he's not above spies."

"...If that is the case, then I think I need to go ahead and send word to Mother so that she can get started on that." Lewyn glanced at the strangely quiet Sigurd, and Sigurd nodded in understanding. "I'll see you in the afternoon meeting." Lewyn left quickly, shutting the door behind him.

"I probably could've worded that better," Lex sighed, scratching the back of his head. Again, he tried to be nonchalant. "Well, what's the plan, Sigurd? My old man will be coming after you. He's
"For now, I'm thinking we'll be on the defensive," Sigurd replied. He attempted to find something on his desk, but his frown said he wasn't having any luck, so I went to help. "Soldier list, Alicia?" I pulled out immediately and smiled at his grimace. "How can you be so smug yet so silent?"

"Arvis can be the same way. It's almost hilarious." Lex closed his eyes briefly. "Sigurd, did you hear of Andrei?"

"Midir confirmed that Andrei was on the field, though he retreated with the other soldiers. It's another reason why I want to be on the defensive. Neir's defensive formations are infamous for being difficult, and with Jungby knights to hit and run..." Sigurd frowned over the list. "Alicia, remind me again which ones...?"

"The ones marked with stars will be at full strength within a couple of days," I reminded him. This was why I handled these reports; I had a system. "The ones marked with an 'x' can only be fielded in emergency. The rest are in a grey-area where they could or couldn't, depending."

"That's right," Sigurd whispered. He went through quickly and nodded. "Yes, we'll wait for them. Lubeck also has ballistae, if I recall correctly."

"On the bright side, based on what I saw, I think the Dozel's main force is away, doing whatever," Lex reassured. Finally, he managed to relax a little and smile. "I'll handle setting up patrols, if you'd like, Sigurd. I know their typical patterns."

"Coordinate with Midir. He'll know Jungby's." Sigurd looked up and smiled. "Come back with the afternoon meeting, okay? I'd like Ayra here as well."

"Got it." Lex headed for the door. "Until then!" Then he was gone, bringing the 'meeting' to a close.

"He's hurting more than he likes to pretend," Sigurd sighed. He leaned against his desk, and rubbed at his eyes. "I know Aideen is crying as well, because of Andrei."

"They're not the only ones hurting and crying," I pointed out. I took the report from him and set it neatly on the desk, next to the medicine list I had made. "I'm sorry."

"For?"

"I couldn't save him." It hurt, to know that I couldn't. It was a healer's greatest nightmare to have a loved one bleed out under their fingertips, helpless to do anything despite all their training. I felt like I had walked too close to that nightmare and, worse, I wasn't able to spare loved ones pain. It was like with Annand again, truly. "I'm sorry."

"He had a better death than I feared. I got to see him one more time, and he got to be warm again." He bravely tried to smile, but it was easy to see the tears in it. "I'll break down later. I've had a good cry already. But right now..."

"Of course." I smiled back in understanding. Truly, I'd rather he just break down and cry now, but there really was too much going on. "Here. Let me make you some tea before I leave to handle the injured. It's going to be a long few days."

"Thank you."
Author's notes: Welcome to Game-Chapter 5. In game, Byron dies immediately after giving Sigurd the broken Tyrfing. In the Oosawa manga, he dies in camp, while Sigurd is off to bring Seliph to meet him. I went with this because… I felt like it.

I think this is the first time Alicia's mother has been named in this story; if you're curious about her, she serves as the POV for the prologue of *Memoirs of Velthomer*.

In game, you do, in fact, have enemies on the opposite side of Zaxon castle compared to where Bryon et al are, destroying villages. I'm using them as a justification for why they're not sending the children to Silesse.

Next Chapter - Blood Ties
Chapter 27) Blood Ties

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 27) Blood Ties

War has come again, this time starting with the death of someone close. I'm not sure how to feel about such a death at the beginning of a campaign. Eldigan had died at the end of the Agustrian Campaign, and Annand had died more or less in the middle of the Silessian Civil War. Is it a bad omen or a good one? I don't know. Growing up, I had rarely been superstitious and even more rarely thought much about the gods. Now, I'm wondering if we all should start praying a little. Of course, there's no real reason to worry to that degree. It's just another war, though we are quite tired of fighting. It's just another war, so why do I feel so uneasy? I'm not the only one; many others also are tense.

It's just another war. So why does it feel so wrong?

I carefully lit an incense using one of the candles that lit the crypt and set it carefully in the holder by Duke Byron's grave. In Silesse, it was considered bad luck to leave the dead in the dark and so, they always had crypts lit and lanterns lining the paths of cemeteries. I thought it a sweet idea, especially when paired with the incense that Grannvale burn for their own dead, done to help soothe the spirits and ensure they don't miss the living realm too much and come back to haunt the lands as ghosts. It was said to work best with the dead's favorite scents, but I didn't know which ones Duke Byron favored. I picked ones I thought Ethlyn would have chosen and ones that complemented those that Sigurd burned in the mornings. He burned some every morning, just as I burned some every evening. I wasn't sure if it was a nuisance or not, but… well, I still felt guilty. Burning incense was the least I could do.

Once I was certain the incense was burning well, I left the crypt, checking the instinctive urge to douse the candles. I nodded to a couple of passing soldiers and they saluted back politely before returning to their watch and completely ignoring me. I couldn't blame them. Everyone was on edge, waiting for the assault we all knew was coming. I could only pray that they wouldn't strike at night. Most were having trouble sleeping as it was, many staying up into the late hours, including me.

"None of this makes any sense to me." Aideen's voice drifted down the corridor, showing that she, too, was still awake despite the hour. "I still can't believe he killed Father," she was saying, obviously to someone. Far too curious, I decided to follow her voice to see who she was talking to. "And poor Annand as well. I can barely look Lewyn and Erinys in the eye." "Hard to feel proud of being of Jungby." By the time I heard Brigid's reply, I had come across the parlor the two were using. The food and tea in front of them hinted they had decided for a midnight snack. "What the hell happened to him?" Brigid continued. She paused and glanced at the doorway, but I quickly hid. I didn't want them to know I was near, though at the same time, I knew it would be difficult to pass by without them noticing. "He was so timid when we were little. So sweet. Couldn't hurt a flower, even."

"He took his studies more seriously after you disappeared, since he was now the heir apparent." Aideen sighed mournfully and when I risked a peek, I saw she looked ready to cry. "Part of me
swears he must be possessed or something, to do such horrid things. I just can't believe... any of it. He promised..."

"Some people are just evil, Aideen. Others let themselves become evil for ambitions. You saw it a lot." Brigid stretched her arms above her head, deceptively relaxed. Her eyes were hard though. "But it doesn't matter. I'm going to kill him."

"Brigid!"

"I am. For Father. For Annand. For all the pegasus knights he and his shot down." Brigid shrugged and sat back in her seat. I very carefully moved past the door and hid again on the other side when she glanced at it. "Maybe it's hypocritical. I was a pirate, though we were always careful to not kill and to not take from the needy. I killed some pegasus knights too. But still." She sighed and ran a hand through her hair, messing with the ends. "I'm also going to kill him for the shy, little boy I remember. He'd be horrified of the man he became."

"Brigid..." Aideen did start crying then. "I..."

"I know. It's rough. It's way rougher on you than it'll ever be for me." Brigid moved to Aideen's side and gathered her up in her arms. "But I want to let you know where I stand, and my reasons. As soon as I see him, I'm going to him. I already told Sigurd."

Aideen continued to sob, and I decided it was best to stop eavesdropping like a rude person and return to my room. My instinct was to run in and try to comfort her, but that wouldn't be right. For one thing, that had clearly been a private conversation and, honestly, that was clearly a family thing, something only those who knew Andrei as anything but a distant lord should be privy to.

"You're back later than normal," Chulainn greeted when I finally made it to the room. It might have been him attempting to scold, except it was hard to take him seriously when he was lying on the ground with Conall asleep on his chest and Caitriona playing with his hand. "Everyone okay?"

"Yes, everything is fine," I reassured. I picked up Conall from his chest, so that he could sit up. Conall wordlessly protested before curling into my shoulder. "Aw, someone is extra sleepy!"

"Because it's late." Chulainn scooped up Caitriona and held her high above his head. She squealed and laugh in delight. "But I knew you'd pout if I put them to bed before you got back."

"I would not!" I blushed, though, because he was very correct. I would pout. "It really was nothing, though. It was just my curiosity leading me to take a different path back."

"I see." He smiled sweetly. "Well, let's see how long it takes for this energetic one to get to sleep. Might need a couple of lullabies."

It took more than a 'couple' of lullabies. It took at least five, plus a few stories, before Caitriona finally decided to settle down to sleep. Even then, it seemed less because she wanted to sleep and more because she wanted to cuddle with Conall. I half-thought about asking Sylvia if we could borrow Lene. Caitriona only behaved when Lene was about.

"Where does she get this rebelliousness?" I sighed, finally tucking the two in with a light blanket and their stuffed dogs. They were almost too big for their crib. We'd have to get them a bigger one soon. "I don't remember being so troublesome."

"Would you remember?" Chulainn joked, making sure the curtains were shut. I could only smile sadly in response. "...Ah, right. You were ignored most of the time." He drew me into a hug and kissed my cheek. "This isn't good. You shouldn't be so sad right before bed."
"I am not that sad," I protested, leaning into him. I wasn't. It did hurt to remember how lonely I had been, but it was hard to be truly sad when I was with him and the children. "Though, if you're wanting to make up for it anyway, I won't complain."

"Of course not." He took my hand to hold it and leaned down to kiss me gently, yet fiercely. "Better?"

"Of course." I smiled at him, laughing. "Why wouldn't I be…?" I paused as I caught a glint in the candlelight and I brought up my hand to see a ring that definitely wasn't there a second ago. I also didn't recognize it, at all. I owned no rings, never bothering since I always wore gloves, and even if I did, I doubted I would own one so beautiful. It was a sparkling gold, with a ruby cut to resemble a rose and tiny emeralds tucked at the sides as 'leaves'. "This is…?" I looked at Chulainn skeptically and he grinned. "You actually bought a ring?"

"Lex and I decided to at least look and see if anything caught our eyes." He gestured to the ring, nuzzling my cheek. "The seller had two like that, the other a purple amethyst with silver 'leaves'."

"Do Ayra and I have matching rings?"

"Yes, because we both knew it would make you two laugh." Chulainn shrugged. "Not the most romantic of things, I suppose, but…"

"No, I love it!" I had to laugh. Perhaps some would be insulted, but I just thought it all sweet and adorable. "Though, I'm sure strangers will think Ayra and I are marrying or something."

"You could do worse." He smiled, noticeably relieved. He had been worried I'd be mad. "Regardless, your little brother can finally stop bothering me. He's horrible at being subtle."

"I shall happily show him in the morning!" Giggling, I broke out of the hug to get ready for bed and found something else off on the vanity. "Why are there earrings?"

"Those should… oh, right, Caitriona tried to eat them, so I just threw them the first place she couldn't reach." Chulainn looked away in embarrassment, crossing his arms. "They're for Caitriona. If she ever gets her ears pierced, that is."

"Oh?" I held up one curiously, studying it. It was gold and ruby drop, with the ruby encased in gold wire. "None for Conall?"

"Didn't see anything that reminded me of him. And, for all I know, Caitriona will hate earrings when she's older or they'll share the pair because both like earrings. Whatever they want." He was blushing from embarrassment. "But it matches your ring, and I thought of her, so I had to get it too."

"It does!" Back to giggling, I safely stored it in one of the drawers and returned to getting ready for bed. "You're so doting!"

"They're my kids! You can handle being the stern one."

"I suppose I have to be. You melt when they start sulking, while I can typically ignore it." I glanced at him over my shoulder and grinned when I noticed he was sulking. "Oh, relax. It's adorable."

"I feel like I'm being patronized." He sulked a little more, but was soon distracted in fixing the blanket on the twins. Conall had kicked it off. "I want them to have a happier childhood than me. That's all."
"I can understand." I wanted them to have a happier one than mine as well. I never wanted them to feel alone, or that they were a burden. "I love you."

"I love you too." He smiled gently at me. "But it's late. I want to get to bed at some point tonight, you know."

"Yes, yes. I'm almost done."

Two days later, the promised attack finally came. Dozel forces struck us hard in the early hours of the morning, while Jungby's bow knights peppered our soldiers with arrows from afar. There were so many arrow wounds that I dealt solely with them. Claude handled all the other injuries, and he was just barely busier than me.

"I am pleased to see this is easy to clean," I whispered, drying off my hands and studying my ring. I hadn't had time to take it off before rushing here this morning, and had been worried. "Claude, do you have a breather as well? You mentioned wanting to look at the ring."

"Ah, yes!" Claude replied, coming over to the washing station. He was splattered with more blood than usual and shook his head at my alarmed look. "Had a bone snap and rupture a major artery. Too much flailing."

"Do you want to switch?" I was covered in blood as well, but that was from cutting arrows out of people. The worst was the ones in the head and face. "I certainly won't mind."

"A bit tempted, truthfully." He splashed his face and scrubbed his hands. I took some of the water to comb out the worst of the blood in his hair. "Thank you."

"I'm going to braid it back." I could never understand how he could wear it down, especially in the infirmary. "This is a bloody battle."

"It is." He sighed and started drying off. "I hope Aideen is all right on the field."

"I do as well." Aideen had insisted on being the field healer today. She wanted to look the Jungby knights 'in the eye' as the army killed them. She wanted them to see how she stood against them. She felt she owed it to them. I knew Midir had felt the same, and had begged Sigurd to let him lead one of the strike forces. "Perhaps we should send a messenger to see if she needs to switch out. I certainly wouldn't mind being in a field infirmary again. It's been a while, and there will be plenty of guards."

"Very true." He took a deep breath to help himself relax and then smiled. "Okay, we still have a break in the waves of wounded. Ring?"

"Here." A little giddily, I held out my hand so that he could see it. It probably wasn't proper for a healer… no, never mind. I really wasn't proper for two healers to act like this. But it was a moment to ourselves among the madness, and that was something both of us desperately needed. "Ayra's is purple and silver."

"It's absolutely adorable." Claude laughed, a little tiredly, but with a little more color to his face. "I need to get one for Sylvia."

"When the fighting is over, bully Chulainn and Lex into showing where they went. Chulainn has been thinking of returning to see if anything catches his eye for Conall." It was adorable how bad Chulainn felt getting something for one twin and not the other, particularly when Caitriona and Conall had no idea yet. "Are those footsteps?"
"Is everything all right in here?" Oifeye walked in, wincing at how bloody the infirmary was. We hadn't gotten around to mopping the floor. "Do you want me to clean while you two rest?" he offered. "Shanan has the kids perfectly calm, napping even." Claude and I shared a pained look; it hurt to have the children so close to danger. "I thought I'd swing by and see if you all need medicines."

"Surprisingly, we're all right on medicines," Claude replied. He and I glanced at each other and shrugged. "However, if you want to clean, we won't complain. We have to check on the patients."

"Of course." Oifeye smiled proudly. "Leave the cleaning to me then!"

The next few moments were spent in that sort of 'quiet'. Claude switched to tending the arrow-wounded ones, since the treatment for it was more or less the same no matter where you were shot, and I handled the other wounded. Oifeye carefully cleaned the blood from the floor and changed the blankets and sheets for us. He set them soaking for laundry, and even made us tea. He left briefly to make sure Shanan was still okay with the kids before returning with changes of clothes for Claude and me, just in time for the next wave of wounded. At that point, he left for good, knowing he would just be underfoot with everything, but not before leaving us a little snack to go with the tea.

"He's really grown into a sweet boy," Claude noted when we had another break. I nodded in agreement, too busy nibbling on the pastries. My stomach couldn't handle much, but I appreciate both the literal and figurative sweetness. "Man, I suppose. I keep forgetting he's of age."

"I think all of us do, and Oifeye isn't in a hurry to remind us," I replied. I smiled when I sipped the tea, noting it was my favorite. Either Oifeye had picked it at random or had paid enough attention. I didn't drink it all that often. "That being said, it can be hard to remember I myself am no longer a teenager."

"I still keep thinking of Tailtiu and Azel as children, despite their ages." Claude smiled ruefully and shook his head. "Perhaps it's just a trick of the mind we older folk have."

"Hey, I'm still younger than you!"

"That you are." That dark, sad look crossed over his face yet again. "Speaking of younger, I remember trying to ask you how Azel reacted to the ring before we got that first wave."

"He was excited." He had actually dragged me around to show some of our friends. It would have been all if I hadn't 'conveniently' needed to get to work or, to be more accurate, if Ayra hadn't saved me. She was suffering from just as much enthusiasm. "Everyone is too weird sometimes. I really don't see why it should matter."

"Then let it simply be us cheering over the pretty piece of jewelry." Claude laughed and I softened enough to smile. "Regardless, do you need to switch back or...?"

"No, I'm still good for handling the non-arrow wounded." I finished my tea and waved off the thought. "I'll let you know if I get too tired and need to switch."

"Please do." Claude fixed me with a stern look before letting it drop for a tired smile. "Ah, back to work, though." He set down his own mug of tea and left the table. "We-"

The sound of shattering glass was louder than it should've been, but it was honestly all I could hear for a very brief moment as Claude suddenly buckled, gasping in pain. It took a moment to realize the reason for both was the same: an arrow. An arrow broke the window and still had enough
momentum to catch Claude in the back of his shoulder.

"Claude!" I gasped, catching him before he collapsed completely. I helped him limp over to a chair and immediately began removing the arrow. "That couldn't have been a st-" Claude reached up and yanked me down just in time for a second arrow to clip my cheek. "They're targeting this room." I got the arrow out of his shoulder and began bandaging him up. A couple of the patients tried to get up, slowly reacting to the attack. "No, don't move. The last thing either of us need is you all ripping your wounds back open."

"Alicia, fetch me one of the tomes in the back," Claude requested after I got his shoulder bound. He winced and gasped in pain as he tried to move. The arrow had gotten quite the annoying spot. "I'll ask one of the lesser wounded to play messenger."

"Very well." I ducked into the back room, picking out a fire tome for Claude. When I returned to the main part of the infirmary, one of the patients had left and Claude was by the broken window, peering out. He had to flatten himself against the wall to dodge another arrow. "I think they figured out where the infirmary is."

"I fear that might be my fault." Claude held out his hand and I tossed him the tome. "Andrei must've recognized me and knew what it meant."

"Is he out there?" Carefully, I looked out the window, careful to avoid the glass shards. I just got sight of Andrei before I had to duck. Four arrows flew through and nearly hit some of the patients. A few more hit the other window in the infirmary, cracking the glass. "I'll move the wounded."

"I'll at least try to get the arrows." He gestured sharply as two arrows appeared, burning them. "Quickly."

The injured who were conscious assisted me as much as their injuries would allow. A few even set up outside the room, just so that Claude and I would have less to worry about. At one point, though, while I was in the middle of both tending to a reopened injury and moving an unconscious patient, an arrow almost caught me straight through the throat. It only didn't because the patient's friend shielded me, and died in agony because I didn't have the time to tend to them too. It was enough to make my heart ache, but I had to keep going. I had to get them to (relative) safety until someone could come by and help.

"Gh..." Claude grunted. I looked up and saw another arrow in his arm, almost making him drop the tome. From where I was, I could clearly see the archer, a Jungby knight who had climbed to the roof across the way, using that to get a very good angle. They had another arrow at the ready, aimed right at Claude. That one, I was certain, was going to kill him.

But then the Jungby Bow Knight lost their head, via a single arrow of pure light that made it explode. The body tumbled down in a mess of blood, to the screams and horror of whoever was below.

Quietly, more than a little stunned, I finished tending the patients and then went to cut the arrow out of Claude's arm. In my slight daze, I stupidly stood right in front of the broken window, but the Jungby knights were thankfully very distracted. Most people would be distracted by their lost liege lady stepping out of the shadows while wielding the Divine Bow and wearing a glare colder than ice and sharper than any blade.

"Well, I didn't think you all could sink any lower," she hissed, quiet vehemence echoing in every word. A few of the knights flinched and stumbled back. In the middle of the group, though, was Andrei who looked somewhere between furious and stunned. "Proud knights of Jungby? Bah.
You're not worth the title of knight. Even I can see that much."

"Sister, you're alive?" Andrei breathed. Then after a moment, fury replaced that shock completely. "How dare you talk of shame, though? Allying with trai-

"No, not a word, you patricide." She said the words calmly, but each one dripped with venom. "If anyone is a disgrace to Jungby and Ullur, it's you. You are the one who gave these cowardly orders, and you're the one who killed Father."

"For being a-!"

"You know it's a lie. And you show no remorse for using that as an excuse to kill him. But you couldn't even kill him in combat. You had to ambush him." Brigid brought Yewfelle up and it hummed in power. "Let's see how long you last in proper combat, Andrei. I'll grant you that much of a fair chance."

"Don't think because you're the Major that you'll get lucky!" Andrei also brought his bow up, and an arrow. "I-!"

"Who needs luck? I've far more experience than you when it comes to fighting." To emphasize her point, she shot without really aiming and killed the two knights right by Andrei. "I think you'll want to pray for the luck to last more than two seconds!"

Andrei fired and Brigid rolled out of the way. More knights fired on her, but she dodged them easily. A few managed to scratch her, but Yewfelle healed most easily. By the time I cut the arrow out of Claude's arm, and bandaged him up, she'd actually dealt with most of the knights with barely a mark on her. Only Andrei remained of the group, and he stared in utter horror as Brigid calmly walked towards him.

"More than two seconds," she noted dryly, smiling ironically. Andrei tried to shoot her, but she ducked and twisted, kicking him in the face. "I guess you do have the Ullur luck after all." She spun and kicked him in the face again, knocking out a tooth and sending him crashing to the ground. "My adoptive father, the pirate who saved me, taught me some hand-to-hand to help counter an archer's weakness in melee combat. Seems you didn't get the same." Andrei tried to snarl something, but she braced her foot on his chest and aimed Yewfelle at his face. "Hello again, little brother. And goodbye. I'll see you later in hell, okay?"

She shot the arrow, completely mangling Andrei's face. She studied him for a long moment before stepping back and pinching the bridge of her nose. Then she looked up at the broken window, where Claude and I still were. After a moment, Claude awkwardly waved with a bloody hand and I smiled serenely. She waved and smiled back before leaving, likely to rejoin the battle.

Not long after that, Azel and Taittiu arrived with a small group of soldiers to assist in cleaning, guarding, and healing. It was a good thing, as Claude's injuries actually made it difficult for him to work, and their awkward placement meant healing them with a staff ran the risk of scar tissue on nerve bundles. So, he was restricted to minor things, and I had to take over the bulk of the injured that came in with Taittiu and Azel working together to tend to the lesser injured and the ones who had been here before the mess with Andrei.

I was in the middle of repairing someone's liver when word came that the battle was over and, surprisingly, Langbalt had surrendered and was being brought into custody. I wasn't sure how much I liked that, concerned about how Lex felt about it. After all, he didn't get along with his father. Would this be a good or bad thing for him? I had no idea. But I worried. I worried greatly.
The dungeons in Zaxon were carefully cleaned regularly, though they still remained rather dank and cold. It was not a place I normally would be anywhere near, but here I was. Why? Sigurd wanted a healer to check in on Langbalt, and with Aideen bitterly mourning Andrei and Claude still recovering, I was the one he asked. It was almost enough to make me roll my eyes. Langbalt was part of the reason why his father died and responsible for many horrific acts, and yet, Sigurd still wanted him to be treated well. That was his kindness, and I certainly couldn't refuse. I was a healer, and I healed people, no matter where their loyalties were. Besides, Langbalt was Lex’s father. I wanted to be certain Lex at least had the option to confront him.

"We will be waiting right here, Lady Alicia," one of my guards murmured. Sigurd had insisted on sending a squad with me, just in case. His kindness and trust did have some limits. "If you feel unsafe, please call for us."

I nodded in response and continued on, stepping into the next room, where one of the actual cells were. There, sitting calmly on the stone ground, behind the bars was Langbalt. He sat almost proudly despite the setting, back straight and tall and it was horribly easy to see the resemblance between him and Lex, though his expression was far sterner, harsher.

"Duke Langbalt?" I called softly. He opened his eyes and looked right at me, stoic and silent. "I am a healer and have been tasked with checking on your health."

"The boy is too idealistic," Langbalt replied, tone almost mocking. His smile was the same. "Who tasks someone with tending to the enemy?"

"Clearly, Sigurd does, and you do not. There is no weakness in remembering all of us are human." I walked to the bars and sat down, setting up my medicines and staff by me. "Please come closer."

"Not going to open the cell?"

"Yes, I am going to open the cell of someone who can snap my neck in an instance." I let my 'healer's mask' slip just enough for a droll look. "If you would like to refuse the healing, I will not force it on you. But do not confuse kindness and duty for stupidity, Duke Langbalt. It is Sigurd's kindness that led him to ask, and it is my duty as a healer to tend to the injured." He eyed me skeptically for a moment longer before moving closer. "Thank you."

Carefully and slowly, I checked over his health. For the most part, he was perfectly healthy, but I did notice he suffered from arthritis, bad enough that his joints were a little swollen. In fact, his knees and the joins of his feet were particularly swollen, hinting that this was osteoarthritis, caused by long years of wear and tear. It had to be painful, but he didn't show a single sign of it.

"Vala-red hair and a face that bears a resemblance to Arvis's," Langbalt murmured after a moment. I glanced up to see him regarding me with narrowed eyes and a little smirk. "I always did wonder why Victor didn't have more bastard children running amok. Figured he killed them. I know he killed some of his mistresses when he got bored or if they got too 'defiant'."

"Did he?" That… troubled me. I didn't like that Arvis had spent his early years with our father as it was, but knowing that… it all just made me feel uncomfortable. "Color me surprised."

"The boy has done well, moving past his father. But Victor was certainly a sign of how far we have come from our ancestors." He watched as I continued to tend to him. "A thorough job."

"I am a healer. I have my oaths." I tended to the last of his swelling and hunted through my medicines. "I'll give you a couple of pain medications. You may choose when, or if, you take them. I imagine your joints pain you, no matter how stoically you bear it."
"You really are…" Suddenly, he began chuckling. The sound made my skin crawl for some reason. "It's funny. I had thought Sigurd would be harder to trick than Mananan, but even with everything that's happened, he still takes people at face-value. The straightforward fool of a knight."

"What are you…?" A couple of muffled screams and thuds startled me, and I looked back to the entrance to see soldiers in Dozel's colors standing there instead. All of my guards were unconscious or dead. "That is…"

"I hope you lot found the key." Langbalt stood and I slowly realized what exactly was going on as a couple of soldiers walked inside. One held the keys to the cells; the other dragged a giant axe. "Excellent. I was right to leave the task to you. Now capture the girl. She'll make a good hostage."

"Touch me and I swear I'll destroy you all with a Final Strike!" I snapped, absolutely livid. This man…! How was he related to Lex at all?! "I would rather die than be used, and I've enough power to take all of you with me!" Though, I would rather not die at all. I wanted more time with Chulainn. I wanted more time with my friends. I wanted to watch my children grow up. But if it became a choice…!

"Pretty words."

"My oaths are considered pretty words as well." I called to the power in my blood and the temperature of the room slowly increased. "But I think I just proved how much I stand by those pretty words!"

The temperature spike made him pause and a couple of the Dozel soldiers stepped back, as if that would be enough to save them if they were caught in a Final Strike. But it did give me enough of an opening to push through the door and escape. One soldier managed to whip their sword across my back, cutting through and leaving a gash, but I kept on running. I ran as fast as I could, all the way up the stairs.

"We're under attack!" I screamed as loudly as I could as soon as I reached the main part of the castle. My throat keened from the force. "Langbalt snuck people in! We're under attack!"

Thankfully, someone had been anticipating some sort of trick, or so I assumed by how quickly other soldiers appeared, racing past me as I continued to run. I would be useless if things came to a battle, particularly since I stupidly left my staff below.

Ah, this was the worst and, to my grief, Langbalt wouldn't be in any sort of pain from his arthritis. I'd made him 'fighting fit'. It was almost enough to make me curse my oath, but what other choice did I have? He had been my patient. How could I not do my best by my patient, especially when I had sworn to do so? No wonder Eldigan had picked a path that led to his death. Conflicting oaths just caused all sorts of heartache.

"Alicia?" Ayra's voice startled me, but what startled me even more was that I almost ran into her and Ulster. She and Ulster were, apparently, on a walk, with Ulster holding her hand. "Alicia, what's…?" she began. She gasped when she noticed the blood and figured out everything in an instant. "That… that bastard!" She glared and pushed Ulster towards me. But when she reached for her sword, her eyes widened. "Duck!"

Ayra's warning came a split-second before something flew through the air, just barely missing us to thud into the wall. Despite being made of solid stone, the wall cracked like glass, splintering as far as the eye could see. There was a crater at the point of impact, revealing the 'something' had been an axe, the same one I had seen the soldier carrying before. A gold light shimmered across the blade and then it disappeared from sight.
"Interesting. I thought that would've caught you." Langbalt walked out of the shadows slowly, the axe in hand. Now I noticed the thrum of power and realized with a touch of horror that the axe was Helswath. According to the legends, none could break through Crusader Neir's defenses while he wielded it, becoming an impenetrable shield that withstood even the harshest of strikes. "Ah, but it seems the Isaachian princess has senses as keen as her brother," Langbalt continued lightly, rolling his shoulder. Ayra snarled and instantly drew her sword. "You think you can break through? Your brother failed."

"Every armor has a joint," Ayra hissed. Her anger faltered slightly with Langbalt smiled, and it wasn't hard to see why. Horribly enough, when he smiled, it was easy to see Lex in his looks. In fact, aside from the mockery, the smile was the exact same. "I just have to find it!"

Green stars sparkled along her blade briefly before she lunged, and distantly, I realized she had activated Astra, to make five strikes for 'one' swing. However, due to Helswath's defensive capabilities, Langbalt blocked each one with a deafening 'clang' that echoed down the broken hallway. Ayra snarled in frustration and managed to activate it again before Langbalt could retaliate, likely because of her Brave Sword, a gift from Lex. But it was the same result and Langbalt readied himself to retaliate. However, a small sound caught his attention, so he swung for it instead and for a breathless and horrifying moment, everything froze because, in the madness, both Ayra and I had forgotten to make sure Ulster stayed with us. Ulster, likely in fear, had stumbled over to his mother for comfort, and had moved into range of Langbalt. But Langbalt stopped the axe before it could hit Ulster, so quickly that his arm actually shook from the momentum, and Langbalt froze too.

"...Lex?" Langbalt whispered after a moment. Ulster sniffed and began crying from fear. Langbalt just continued to stare. "Why does he…?" Slowly, almost absently, he reached for Ulster. "Why does he look like…?"

"GET AWAY FROM HIM!" Then Lex himself appeared out of nowhere, swinging his Brave Axe at his father's neck. Langbalt threw himself back and blocked the blow, but it was enough for Lex to get in between Ulster and Langbalt. "Don't get any closer to my son!" Lex snapped, snarling. "Gods above, why did I believe you would actually give up? Why did I let Sigurd believe that and send Alicia to give you treatment? Damn, I am an idiot!"

"Ah, so you have the gall to fight back now?" Though Langbalt spoke to Lex, his focus was entirely on Ulster. His eyes flicked over to Ayra, still glaring, and then to the ring on her hand. After a moment, he smiled slightly. Unlike his other smiles though, this one was actually soft. "It seems your little adventure helped you grow after all. Last time we 'fought', you ran."

"Yeah, it seems like it's fate we keep on fighting, though beating your own son for disagreeing with you is a rather poor excuse for a fight." Lex shifted to stand a little more firmly in front of Ulster. Ulster, for his part, just stared up at his father, not moving and not crying. I used the lull in fighting to scramble over and scoop him up, just to make sure he didn't get so close to the fighting again.

"What did you hope to accomplish with this? Killing Sigurd? He's got Tyrfing, you know."

"A Holy Weapon's blessings only work if the wielder is holding the weapon." Langbalt made to swing, but he had to block Ayra's strike. I bolted a short distance away and leaned against the wall. Everything was catching up and that made it difficult to walk. "Sigurd is fool enough to drop his weapon if there's a hostage. Like his son, perhaps?"

"Okay, I was feeling mildly bad about fighting you, but I think I'm not going to care anymore now." Lex glared, and Langbalt's smile just… softened further. I… I half-wondered if Langbalt said that specifically to challenge Lex and not because he would actually do it. But then I
wondered if that was the pain making me think weird things. "So-"

"Lex, move!" Lex dropped to a knee and Chulainn vaulted off his back to strike at Langbalt. Langbalt blocked it again, but had to move quickly to avoid getting hit by Ayra. "Helswath boosts one's defensive capabilities, yes? I can see that," Chulainn murmured. He glanced over at me and I smiled sweetly. "Why did I let you go down there without me again?"

"Because we're all damned idiots," Lex groaned. He stood up again and rolled his shoulder. "Glad you made it, Chulainn. Bit later than I thought."

"Sadly, Caitriona and Conall heard all the fuss and went 'we should go investigate'. They're safe with Larcei and the others now." Chulainn moved so that he stood side by side with Ayra, and Ayra shot him a vicious grin. "I understand that you're responsible for the campaign against Isaach, Langbalt. I hope you don't mind two Isaachians getting involved in this father-son debate. Both of us are rather vexed over that."

"Well, I don't mind, and who cares what he thinks?" Lex took a deep breath and hardened his gaze. "Let's go, old man. Three on one is totally fair when the one has a Holy Weapon, right?"

All three of them lunged at the same time. I found a nearby room to duck into, to be safely out of the way. Ulster whimpered and tried to wriggle out of my arms, no doubt seeking his parents. He wanted them for comfort, not me, but unfortunately, all he had was me right now. I held onto him as tightly as I could, ignoring the pain in my back, and tried to soothe him.

Every now again, I would peek out into the hall to observe the battle, which was mostly just Langbalt blocking all of them, gaining some scratches every once in a while. I wondered why, but then I caught Langbalt wincing and realized it in an instance. Lex would know about his father's arthritis. He would also know that Langbalt would've been in his 'best condition', because I had healed him. But that kind of arthritis worsened with movement, so all they had to do was force Langbalt to move a great deal to worsen the joints and pain. Before long, Langbalt couldn't guard as quickly, letting the three land more hits.

At that point, blue sparkles surrounded Chulainn's blade and he lunged forward, cutting straight through Langbalt's armor. Langbalt gasped in pain and stumbled, leaving an opening large enough to Lex to slam his Brave Axe into Langbalt's arm. Helswath tumbled from Langbalt's hands and shimmered, prepared to return. But it was too slow. Ayra took advantage of that small window in time, that small moment when Langbalt wouldn't have Helswath's blessings, and used Astra to carve through Langbalt's neck. Blood sprayed everywhere as Langbalt fell, head rolling slightly, but stopped before it could go too far. Dead. He was dead. They did it.

After a moment, I stepped out of the room, waving to catch their attention. Lex did his best to wipe off the blood before silently holding his arms out. I handed him Ulster and smiled sadly when Lex held him close, clinging tightly. Ulster, for his part, just looked confused and tucked himself under Lex's chin, smiling because he was finally with his father. Ayra reached over to hug them both, whispering something I couldn't hear.

Chulainn and I shared a look and silently left, with him helping me walk. Someone had to tell Sigurd that Langbalt was dead. It might as well be us.

"I am so sorry, Alicia." It was the tenth time Sigurd had apologized. "I really thought... I don't know," he said, flailing about. I assumed, at least. I wasn't facing him, simply making tea, but it was how he had been during the previous nine times. "I thought that if he tried something, the guards would've been enough. I should've had more people. I didn't think he had his own soldiers
"Sigurd, please relax," I chided. I glanced back at him, noting he wasn't sitting at his desk, and then returned to making the tea. "If anything, I should apologize. If I had been less thorough in my healing, then…"

"You've said that before."

"You've also apologized before." I smiled at him and he smiled sheepishly, conceding the point. "Langbalt played us well. I am grateful the death count wasn't too high."

"As am I." Despite the ambush, there were actually only three deaths, three of the guards who had been with me. There were many injured, but superior numbers and ample warning had been enough to save most of them. "How is your back?"

"I'm just fine." Aideen had insisted on healing me completely, so I only had a tiny scar on the back of my left hip, where the gash had started. "Believe me. Chulainn wouldn't let me walk about if I wasn't."

"I need to apologize to him too."

"No, you don't and he will threaten a spar if you try."

"Okay, never mind. I've seen him fight." Sigurd finally laughed and a look confirmed he had relaxed slightly, leaning over his desk to rummage through the papers. "But Langbalt is dead."

"He is." I continued making tea, humming softly. I was making this mix as I went, because I'd run out of my usual mix for him. "I understand Lex's brother is in Isaach."

"Yeah, having trouble keeping order. They're not exactly submitting. And here I thought Ayra's stubbornness was just her." It was a valiant attempt at a joke, but Sigurd's voice was just too serious for that. "But we killed him. We have to leave Silesse."

"Yes, otherwise Grannvale can send their full army." Silesse wouldn't survive that. They would be overrun in an instance. But if we left, we could hopefully divert their attention. "That means we have to travel through the Yied Desert."

"Yes." Sigurd's voice sounded strangely thick now. "Yes, we will."

"That will be difficult on all of us, particularly the mounts." I frowned a bit over the herbal mixture and added a little more chamomile for him. "I'm not certain how the children will handle that sort of travel, either."

"...They won't. We won't…" Sigurd's voice suddenly cracked and I whirled to see he was hunched over his desk, desperately holding back tears. "We're not taking the children through the desert. We can't take them to these next battles. It's going to be too chaotic."

"That's…" It made sense. It made perfect sense. But panic flooded me anyway. "Where will they go, then?"

"Isaach isn't far from Lubeck and based on everything, I doubt Danann has any control in the outskirts of the kingdom. I'll be sending Oifeye there with Seliph. As for the others, it's… it's what you all choose." He looked up at me, and revealed he lost the battle against his tears. He tried to smile anyway. "If you want to leave to be with them, that's more than understandable. Gods knows I want to run. But I can't. If I try, I'll just put Seliph in more danger."
"I can't see Oifeye agreeing to that."

"I can convince him." He coughed and rubbed at his eyes, trying to get rid of the tears. But they just kept coming. "But that's my decision. Today's battle just highlighted how dangerous this will be. For their safety, they have to leave."

"I... I see." I felt like I had been punched. "Who else knows? Who else...?"

"Just you, for now. I'll make an official announcement in the morning. Just in case some want to stay in Silessse."

"...Let me finish making this tea for you..." I turned away sharply, hiding my own tears. That was... this was... "Then I'll have to talk to Chulainn."

"Of course. Thank you, Alicia."

I had to actually make the tea twice because in my... because my distraction led me to completely botch the first attempt. Sigurd didn't comment on it at all, and made a point to hug me when I finally made him a cup. I hugged him back and left his study, to return to my room and have this... this horrible talk with Chulainn. However, I didn't make it there. I only made it down a couple of hallways, thankfully empty, before my legs gave out and I collapsed, quietly sobbing as the weight of this crashed into me.

Safety... sending them away to be safe... I had heard such things before, and had always thought them nonsense. I had always thought that it hadn't mattered, because I had been so miserable, because it had hurt so much. I had thought 'danger' would have been far preferable to being alone and feeling like I was just a burden to be discarded. But now... gods, now I understood. The danger... Langbalt's words... I finally understood just what my mother truly gave me. She had given me more than my life. She had given me the luxury of growing up safe, the luxury of being able to pick my own path. She had saved me from growing up with my father, and saved me from... from everything. She had protected me, just as she protected Arvis, Cigyun, and Prince Kurth. I understood now. I understood.

When all of this was over, I would visit her grave and light incense for her finally. I hoped she wouldn't mind that it took me so long to appreciate the gift she gave me. But I supposed it was better late than never.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Aideen and Brigid's conversation at the beginning is based off of their in-game conversation, and Andrei being a 'sweet child' when younger comes from the Oosawa manga and supplementary material. Brigid's words to Andrei is based off her boss banter with him, as is Lex mentioning that it's 'fate' when he fights his father. Langbalt 'surrendering' to get inside Sigurd's defenses comes from the Oosawa manga. (That said, in game, Sigurd is a lot angrier at Langbalt, though tbf, Langbalt taunts Sigurd about Byron's death.) The fight Langbalt and Lex refer to is briefly mentioned/hinted at in Memoirs of Velhomer.

In FE4, Luck only plays a part in evasion (in most games, it boosts hit, evasion, and critical evade), meaning those of Ullur's blood tend to be incredibly evasive as Ullur
Holy Blood boosts luck (Minors get a +30% bonus, while Majors get +60%). Also, between fairly good stats and powerful weapons, Holy Weapon Users often break the game in half. Lewyn is the most infamous for it (hello, Forseti), but sending Brigid out often results in a lot of dead enemies, with the only danger being those who come in for melee, since she's an archer. Often, the only reason Holy Weapon Users can't solo maps is because there are more than 50 enemies per map (each weapon has 50 uses) and the weapons can be expensive to repair.

Osteoarthritis is a type of arthritis that results from the breakdown of joint cartilage and the underlying bone, with its most common symptoms being joint pain and stiffness. Unlike other kinds of arthritis, it typically only affects the joints. It's believed to be caused by mechanical stress on the joint, and so it steadily worsens over many years. It's the most common form of arthritis.

Helswath, the Holy Axe, is the heaviest weapon in the game (20 weight), boosts defense by 20 and resistance by 10, and has 1-2 range. It appears again in Awakening, where it boosts defense by 5. (And, funnily enough, is actually the axe Cherche wields in her official art.) It teleporting back to Langbalt's hand is there to add a 'mystical' thing to its 1-2 range. Langbalt himself is a bit of a powerhouse thanks to Helswath, coming at you with 51 attack (30 might from the weapon and 21 strength), 41 effective defense (his base of 21 plus the 20 from Helswath), and 20 effective res (base of 10 plus the 10 from Helswath). Not to mention possessing the Great Shield skill, which gives him a 30% chance of taking no damage (in FE4 and FE5, the activation rate of Great Shield is the user's level; Langbalt is level 30). As a result, you really just want to throw your powerhouse at him: Lewyn with Forseti (fun fact, most bosses have the suggested strategy of 'throw your Forseti user at them' once you obtain it), Brigid with Yewfelle, Sigurd with Tyrfing, or Chulainn with his Luna skill cutting straight through the defenses (reminder that Luna completely negates an enemy's defense). In the Oosawa manga, Lex and Ayra tag-team to kill him.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Children (second to last interlude of Gen1, four chapters left)
Interlude - Children

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude - Children

*Sigurd announces his decision in the morning, to the uncomfortable dread of all. He notes that every parent will make their own decision, even stay, but the ones that stay have to be aware that they can't guarantee their safety. The recent incidents have proven that all too well. With that weighing on our heads, we move to Lubeck Castle in relative silence.*

*I cling to Caitriona and Conall, and they know something is wrong. But they don't know what. I… hate all of this.*

The day after we moved to Lubeck, the worst of the shock had passed, though not the pain and the dread of making the choice. Did we stay with the army and send the children away? Did we stay with the army and keep the children near? Did we all leave? All had their dangers, and each one weighed heavily on us all, making the choice near impossible. But more than the parents were affected by this, and when the shock faded, other emotions came into play. In Oifeye's case, that included anger and pain.

"Oifeye, my decision is final," Sigurd tried to firmly say. He was too tired, though, to give it any sort of authority. He hadn't slept last night. In fact, that was the whole reason why I was stuck listening to this. Sigurd had nearly passed out and I'd dragged him to his study to give him a check up, because it had been the closest room. Then Oifeye had burst in. "You will leave."

"No, I'm not!" Oifeye snapped right back. He clenched his fists at his side, trembling from hurt and anger. As I awkwardly stood next to Sigurd, I distantly noted that this was the first time I ever saw Oifeye yell, especially at Sigurd. He normally kept a good grip on his emotions. "I'm not a child that needs to be protected, Sigurd! I don't bring it up, but I am an adult, older than some of your soldiers!"

"That isn't..." Sigurd tried to stand up, but I stopped him. Sigurd raised a hand to his head to ward off dizziness. He really wasn't healthy enough for this. As I checked him over, I saw how he'd lost weight as well. He hadn't... he wasn't holding up well at all. "Oifeye..."

"So, why are you sending me away?!" Oifeye's voice cracked, but he didn't cry. He stubbornly refused to. "No, forget it! I'm not leaving your side, sir! I'm here until."

"Oifeye, please." Sigurd put everything he had into those two words, all of his own hurt and fear. "I don't want to lose Seliph. We have no idea where Deirdre is. Quan and Ethlyn are in Leonster. Eldigan is dead. I can't lose more people, Oifeye. But all these battles have proved so clearly that I can't both fight and take care of him." Sigurd's voice barely rose above a whisper, but if anything, that made them all the more heartbreaking. "The attack at Agusty, the start of the civil war, Langbalt... all of them prove that."

"But sir..."

"But I know you can protect him. I know you can take care of him. So, please?" Sigurd looked at him entreatingly, just so incredibly tired. He was too tired to cry at this point. "Please, keep him
safe? I'm not sending you away. I'm begging for you to make sure Seliph doesn't die."

"I… that…" Oifeye looked down suddenly, clenching his fists even tighter. I feared he'd bloody his palm. "That's not fair. I can't refuse that." After a moment, Oifeye looked up again, revealing he'd lost the fight against his tears. "Okay. I'll do it. I'll guard him with everything I have." Even with the tears, though, he glowered. "But you have to promise to come get us. I won't leave otherwise."

"Of course." Sigurd tried to smile, but it looked and felt flat. It hurt him to send Oifeye away, just as much as it hurt him to send Seliph away. With Duke Byron dead and Ethlyn in Leonster, he would be without family for the very first time since this campaign began. "I promise. Once things settle, once it's safe, we'll find you."

"Okay." Oifeye deflated and slumped, covering his face to try and muffle his crying. "Okay."

Sigurd tried to get up again, to comfort him, but I stopped him, again. Sigurd needed to rest and he would comfort no one if he fell flat on his face. So, I stepped around the desk to give Oifeye a hug. However, I only made it two steps before the door slammed open again, this time revealing a surprising irate Shanan.

"Hey, what's this I hear about Oifeye leaving with Seliph?" he demanded with a scowl. After a moment of the rest of us staring in various degrees of shock, Shanan roughly shook his head. "Nope, no way! Deirdre put me in charge of protecting Seliph, and I'm not handing that job to anyone, not even Oifeye, until she says it's okay!"

"I… Shanan…" Sigurd began, not sure what else to do. He gave me an incomprehensible look, and I just shrugged and held my hands up in silent surrender. I was just as lost as him. "Shanan, for safety…"

"No, no, I get all that. Aunt Ayra explained. I'm just leaving with them!" Shanan drew himself up proudly. Once again, Sigurd and I exchanged looks. We had been wondering what to do with Shanan, since he was still a 'child', but not one so young that decisions had to be made for him. We also worried it would trigger memories of his flight from Isaach. "Besides, you're from Grannvale, remember? And Grannvale is probably not well liked. But I'm their prince. I can keep them safe with that!"

"…All right." Sigurd smiled sadly. "You can leave with Oifeye and Seliph, then. You're right. You can keep them safe too."

"Yep!" Shanan laughed, victorious, and then blinked a few times. "Oh, wait, Oifeye, you're in here. Oops."

I used that as an opportunity to make all three of them sit down for tea, talk, and rest. I made some medicinal tea for both Sigurd and Oifeye, to deal with exhaustion and headaches respective, and a sweeter one for Shanan because he hated bitter things. I sent for food as well, and only when I was certain all three would be okay did I leave. I tried to not breathe a sigh of relief at my escape. I certainly didn't regret helping Sigurd or anything, but that had been uncomfortable to be caught in the middle of. Worse, it made me wonder if that was how my own children would react. They were too young to understand, yet…

"Argh, I'm so tired of this!" Dew's annoyed voice startled me, and I jogged towards the sound, wondering what was going on. I found Dew scowling at Jamke in the gardens, though, and quickly hid behind some of the bushes to avoid being caught in the middle of another argument.
"Everybody has been saying that," Dew continued, voice surprisingly angry, I was also surprised by how deep his voice was. The 'you are too young to be around' thing. But I'm seventeen now,
you know. Pretty sure that's considered 'adult' in most places." A quick look showed Jamke was a little startled by all of this. "I'm sick of it! We're not desperately losing or anything, but everyone's being weird! Then you're saying the same thing as them! The hell?"

"I…” Jamke began. He paused, grimaced, and then nodded. "Sorry, you're right. We're all on edge. Crossing Yied won't be easy, so we're all desperately thinking 'must get the children away to safety', and forget that some of these 'children' aren't anymore."

"I get it. It's just annoying." Dew shrugged and then looked down. "Hey… uh…"

"Hmm?"

"I never thanked you for setting me free. I know it was just because Aideen asked you to, but you still could've ignored it. But you didn't. So, I'm really grateful." Dew actually bowed slightly. "And I'm grateful that you've kept an eye on me all these years too, so I'm also sorry for any and all the trouble I've caused."

"Dew…” Jamke was startled for a moment before he grinned and ruffled Dew's hair. "What are you doing, getting all mushy like that? Now you're the one being weird."

"Yeah, well, that's just in case someone manages to chase me off to 'safety'!" Dew stuck his tongue out and Jamke laughed. "But I mean it. You're like a big brother or something, and I appreciate it. And now, I'm going to run away!" He grinned and bolted. "See you later!"

"Until then!" Jamke watched him leave, his smile fading the farther Dew got. "He senses something too, huh?" He sighed, shook his head, and turned. Automatically, I ducked back behind the bushes to hide. But I might as well not have bothered. "Alicia?"

"Um… hello?" I called sheepishly. I leaned out from behind the bushes and waved awkwardly. "I… uh… take it that this was a bad hiding spot."

"From where I stand, I can clearly see the top of your head," Jamke noted dryly. He covered his mouth to try and hide his laugh. "And how tangled your hair is."

"How…” I pulled at my hair and groaned when I realized he was right. My hair was tangled in the branches. "Darn it…"

"Here." Jamke crouched by me and helped me free my hair. "Why did you hide?"

"In retrospect, I should've left, but that clearly involves more sense than I have." After a moment, I just let Jamke handle my hair. All I was doing was tangling it up further. "I just left Sigurd, Oifeye, and Shanan…”"

"That had to be a comfortable talk." Jamke's voice was so sarcastic that I just had to laugh. "I think I can guess from there." He got the last of my hair freed and helped me up. "You're pale. How are you doing?"

"That's…” I struggled to think of a word that described everything, but eventually, I just smiled bitterly and shrugged. "That."

"Right. Should've anticipated that. Midir has been agonizing over the decision as well." He hesitated a moment before patting my shoulder. "You know; it is temporary. The separation, I mean. I'm sure it still hurts and all, but it's not that different form, say, when the army marched off to Trove."
"...I think you mean 'Thove'."

"That... um..." Jamke blushed with embarrassment, and I couldn't help but laugh. "R-regardless! It's just temporary. You'll see them again, if you decide to send them away. It won't be forever."

"...I suppose..." I smiled, finding some comfort in the awkward words. I had been thinking of it like my own abandonment, but he was right. It wouldn't be like with my mother, who died after sending me away. I would reunite with them. With luck, they wouldn't even remember this separation. "I've been overthinking."

"Everyone is on edge." He shrugged and smiled. "Anyway, I'm guessing you're heading to the infirmary."

"Am I so predictable?" I held up a hand when he smirked. "No, don't answer that. I would, however, appreciate an escort, just in case there are more awkward conversations that I don't want to eavesdrop on."

"Of course." He laughed. "Let's go, then."

"I am going to stay." The words were hard to say, particularly when I just blurted them into the silence. Chulainn and I had been playing with our children before bed, but the weight of the decision had made us far quieter. "I am going to stay with the army," I repeated, not looking up. I just continued playing a clapping game with Caitriona, wondering when I would next get a chance to. "There are too few healers, and I have promises to keep." I had to keep an eye on Sigurd, for both Eldigan and Deirdre. "So..."

"Okay," Chulainn replied quietly. He didn't look at me either. He was on the floor, making Conall's stuffed dog jump about like it was a real dog. Conall loved it. "That makes sense."

"Yes." Caitriona and I finished the game and she reached up for a hug. I clung to her tightly. "You could leave with them, though. The children, I mean. I'll miss you all, but I know you don't fighting and-"

"And who's going to make sure you don't work yourself to an early death?" Chulainn smiled up at me and shook his head. "I'll miss the children dearly, but they will be safer within Isaach's borders. The Yied is harsh on a child, as I well know."

"You... oh, of course you crossed it." The only way to leave Isaach was through the mountains or through the desert. Though maybe some ships...

"Worked in it. Yied is neutral technically, but it's close enough to the Manster District and Thracia for there to be frequent conflicts. You get a lot of mercenary jobs." He shrugged and moved to sit on the bed by me. Conall, sensing something wrong, immediately crawled into my lap to hug me too. "But the fighting will be difficult. So will the healing. We will both be too busy to properly keep an eye on them."

"When we reach Phinora, I'm sure things will be better." Phinora was one of the two major cities within the inhospitable Yied Desert, the other being Darna. "Velthomer isn't all that far from there. Erinys could even fly over."

"Reaching there, however, will be difficult." Chulainn continued to play with Conall and Caitriona, the two enjoying the 'game' with the stuffed dog. "The desert is the closest place to death and hell that I can think of, including a battlefield. There is a beauty to it, but the heat will burn us. The nights will freeze us. The sands are hard to move through. And that's not even going into the
possibility of a storm." He stopped playing with the two to run his hand through Caitriona's hair. "A child can easily die in the desert, even with the parents being attentive. One mistake can mean the end."

"Yes…" I hugged Conall and Caitriona crawled into Chulainn's lap for cuddles. "But are you sure you want to keep fighting, Chulainn? If you're worried about me, our friends do keep a good eye on me."

"Yes, but I do want to keep fighting for Sigurd. He'll need all the blades he can get for this last part of the journey home, and he's dear to you." Chulainn held Caitriona above his head, to her laughter. She loved that 'game' the most. "Ayra is also here, and even if she's been bothering me about nonsense, she's still my best friend. I'd hate to lose Beowolf, because it's fun snarking about the knights and how they can't hold their alcohol. Lex needs someone to keep an eye on him. I could go on, but.." He brought Caitriona to his chest and kissed her head. "I'll fight for their sakes."

"I see." I smiled in relief. I'd hate if he stayed just for my sake. "Well, it won't be for forever. It'll just be until things are safe."

"Exactly." He set Caitriona on the bed and kissed my cheek. "I'll go tell Sigurd."

"...Thank you…" I smiled tearfully at him. Even though I knew this was best, it still hurt. I didn't want to cry in front of Sigurd over this, though. I knew he hated himself for the decision and the pain it was causing us. "I love you."

"I love you too." He kissed me sweetly and left the room, shutting the door to make sure Caitriona and Conall couldn't sneak out after him. Smiling a bit, I moved Conall to the bed as well and watched as he and Caitriona played. I wanted to remember this and their smiles. It would be a bit before I could see them again.

However, to my surprise, someone knocked on the door not too long after Chulainn left. "Come in?" I called, frowning. It was quite late, after all. "Is there an emergency?"

"No, there's not." Aideen opened the door and tiptoed inside. "Or if there is one, I don't know it," she tried to joke. However, her smile was strained. "I just had a question."

"It couldn't have waited until the morning?" That was… odd. Aideen had never needed to ask me such an important question. Normally, she'd go to Brigid or Lachesis. "Well, what is it then?"

"Well…" She fidgeted with her hands, like she was trying to weave the words she wanted together. To give her time, and to stop frowning over her odd behavior, I focused on my twins, who were playing with their toys without a care in the world. "Are you staying? With the army?"

"Yes, I am." I returned my attention to her, just in time to see her breathe a sigh of relief. "Was that truly a wonder? I am a bit of a workaholic."

"Well, yes, but I… oh, never mind." She grimaced and fidgeted even more. "So… um… oh, why is this difficult?" Now she just growled in frustration. "Argh…"

"You could emulate Brigid and be as blunt as possible."

"Brigid isn't that bad." She made a face, but did relax slightly. "Oh, very well. So, I thought I was feeling nauseous over the decision, but then I got dizzy, so Midir insisted I get looked at. A good thing." She smiled tearfully and rested her hands on her stomach. I finally figured it out then. "I'm pregnant again, and I want this child so badly."
"You can't stay here then!" I was on my feet in an instance, automatically giving her a cursory checkup. I could already tell… "Your first pregnancy was hard, as was the birthing, and that was without all this stress."

"Exactly. So, I think I'll leave with Oifeye and Shanan. It'll be good for there to be a healer with them anyway." Now she started to cry. "Ah… why…? I can't stop…?"

"You were weepy the first months of your first pregnancy, remember?" I rested my forehead against hers and cupped her face. "I will feel infinitely better sending Caitriona and Conall away, knowing you'll be there as well. Oifeye and Shanan are skilled, but some things, only a healer can deal with."

"P-precisely." She managed a smile through the tears. "And it's just temporary. We'll see each other again. It's just…"

"It's painful, because we're all so used to being together." It was painful, because there were going to be so many things I'd miss. But if it meant them being safe… gods, I really did understand why my mother chose what she did. "Try to keep mine from wild animals?"

"I'll do my best!" She laughed. It wobbled a lot, but it was a laugh. "They'll be fine. I promise."

"Then I have little to fear." At least, I had little to fear for them. It was everything else that scared me.

Why was all of this happening? Why couldn't we have just stayed in Silesse? Why did Langbalt have to attack us? Why?

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After Chulainn and I made our decision, the other parents began talking to us. That was when I learned **most** had talked to Erinys, since she had left Ced back in Silesse Castle. After that, I felt silly twice over. The first was because I had, idiotically, only thought about it in my own head. The second was being so shaken when Erinys went through the same. When I talked to her, though, she noted that my chief problem lied more in my own issues, which she couldn't help with sadly, and that she left Ced in the loving care of his grandmother, in a defensible castle, surrounded by knights. We were sending our children into the outskirts of Isaach, a dangerous area, but less dangerous than the Yied Desert. The offer to send the children to Silesse was still there, but considering how well Langbalt had infiltrated, we were honestly worried. Erinys admitted to me she was **terrified**, actually. But she had faith in Queen Rahna and the knights that remained.

"I feel like how I did after Eldigan died, if you can forgive the melodrama of it all," Lachesis murmured. She and I were walking through the gardens, while I listened to her. "I feel horribly lost. I don't want to leave Diarmuid. For one thing, he's my son and Finn hasn't even gotten to meet him yet. For another, Diarmuid doesn't eat solid foods yet, so I'm terribly worried about how they would feed him."

"That is a legitimate worry," I reassured. Honestly, I worried about such things too. It would be hard for Aideen, Oifeye, and Shanan to feed everyone while being on the run. But I had to hold faith and it wouldn't be for long. …I repeated that phrase so many times, but it was honestly the only way I was making it through this. "Though, if they can make it to a village…"

"They can find a wet nurse. I know that, but I worry anyway." She sighed. "Then there's the whole leaving thing. I know I could, but I… I'm scared."

"Scared?"
"Yes, I'm scared that if I leave, I'll hear that Sigurd died soon after I left. Like how Eldigan died."
She sniffed and rubbed at her eyes. I tugged her into a one-armed hug and kissed her temple. "Plus,
you know, I've trained hard to become a Master Knight, finally accomplishing it. With Aideen
leaving, I also feel you need the extra healer. I know I'm not the most magically powerful, but I'm
skilled enough to wield the strongest of staves."

"That you are." She could wield every single staff I could, in fact, with only the Valkyrie staff
being out of her reach. "I'm not sure you'd be put in charge of an infirmary, but Tailtiu honestly
could do that." Tailtiu had been doing rather well helping out in the infirmary, and she was almost
as good with staves. I'd discuss it with Claude and her, later. "With that said, though, since
Diarmuid's feeding is your primary concern, and honestly should be one of the deciding factors, I'd
recommend talking to Aideen, Oifeye, and Shanan."

"...Yeah, that's probably a good idea." She hesitated a bit, but I nudged her forward. "Thanks,
Alicia! I'll talk to you later!"

"Have a good talk!" I waved her goodbye, keeping my smile until she was out of sight. I let it fall
as soon as she was out of sight, though, and took a deep breath to help calm myself down.

The mention of Finn reminded me that we hadn't heard from Leonster in a couple of months. We
had just gotten one letter after Diarmuid's birth, all that the messenger could carry safely given
everything. It had consisted of Quan, Ethlyn, and Finn all fighting over the pen. It had provided as
many laughs as there were words, from Quan and Ethlyn freaking out over how Finn was a father
and had eloped with Lachesis to Finn quietly panicking over the knowledge that he was, in fact, a
father. In between the laughs were heartwarming words of reassurance and love. I wondered how
they were all doing. I wanted to see them again. I knew Ethlyn could relate to the worry of sending
a child away to safety while fighting. I knew she'd make me smile to help me feel better. I knew
Quan would quietly fret over everyone and make sure they had their favorite things. I knew Finn
would be a silent pillar of support, helping in small ways and never calling attention to it. I hoped I
got to see them soon. I really did.

Still, that was a hope for the future and there were still many things to worry about in the present.
So after a few more breaths to help me calm myself a bit, I continued on my walk, since I still had
time before my shift in the infirmary. Eventually, I heard snatches of conversation and walked
towards them curiously. It wasn't long before I discovered it was Lex and Azel, though they were
up on a balcony above me, and had no idea I was near.

"But that's neither here nor there," Lex laughed, poking Azel's cheek. The sound was a little
hollow, "You look horrible Azel." From what I could see from below, both of them looked like
they hadn't slept in a while. "You and Tailtiu having a spat or something?"

"No, not at all," Azel growled. He batted Lex's hand away. "What are you so happy for anyway?
Considering…"

"Ah. My dad." Lex fell silent, looking out over everything. Neither saw me. "Well, I'd be lying if I
said I didn't hurt from it. But he deserved his death. Caused a war just to assassinate Prince Kurth.
Killed Ayra's family for that. Not to mention the whole…"

"You started living with us in Velthomer after he beat you." Azel smiled faintly. "You always said
that it was just temporary, but Arvis would always say that you could stay as long as you wanted."

"Well, Arvis gave us a lot of free reign. Always has been kind to us, though a little unreadable."

"Yeah, I know the feeling. But leaving when I did, to fight and all…” Azel fell silent, closing his
eyes. "I think I can understand him a little better now. Maybe I should've moved out or something before then."

"Spread your wings, find your own path and life. That's all."

"Yeah…" Azel opened his eyes again and looked at Lez. "What are you going to do? With your children?"

"...Ayra and I are still trying to figure it out." He winced, though, and Azel rested a hand on his back. "It's a hard decision."

"I know. Alicia's been crying a lot. She tries to hide it to not worry me, but I can tell."

I decided to keep on walking then, mostly because of how guilty I felt. I really had been trying to keep to myself to not worry him, but it had the opposite effect. I supposed that made sense, but it still… ah, I didn't know. I'd have to make it up to him, and I did need to make sure he had plenty of opportunities to play with Catriona and Conall, since it would be a while. Of course, the plans made me think longingly of taking a walk and going on picnics. It was too dangerous to do so now. We'd have to have a large family picnic when all of this was over, with Tailtiu, Arvis, and Diadora as well. It would be fun.

"Sylvia, please think on this!" Erinys's near-desperate plea startled me and I ran towards the noise automatically. I checked myself just before I burst into the room where I heard it, and peeked inside to see Erinys near tears, Sylvia already crying, and poor Lene being very confused and upset. "It's going to be dangerous!" she snapped. It was really unusual for her to snap. "The Yied Desert-"

"I've traveled through the desert, Erinys!" Sylvia retorted harshly. I had never heard them argue before. "I lived in Darna for a time. I know how dangerous it can be."

"But that's the case…!"

"But I'm not changing my mind. I'm not going anywhere, and I'm not sending Lene away. She's been having health troubles. It's better she stays near." Sylvia shook her head roughly. I half-felt like storming in to shake her, but stopped myself. I didn't have that right, friend or not. "That's all there is to it."

"Sylvia!" Besides, Erinys looked ready to shake her too. "Of all the times to be stubborn!"

"I'm scared, okay?!" Sylvia's voice cracked and poor Lene began crying, because of all the loud noises. "Everyone I've ever cared about has either hurt me or left. Lewyn was the first person to be kind and stay. This army is the only home I know. I can't leave it!"

"But Lene…!"

"I'll be careful! And if there's only a few, it should be safer! I'll handle everything. It's not like I'm much use on the field anyway!" Sylvia was barely understandable through the tears now. "Let me stay! Please! If I leave, I'm sure everyone will just…!" Sylvia completely broke down, and Erinys's worried-anger immediately fled, replaced by frantic comforting of both Sylvia and Lene.

I thought about stepping in to help, but then I decided to instead go get Claude. He was working in the infirmary, so I'd just take over his shift so that he could go to Sylvia. Besides, much as I was annoyed and frustrated, I also couldn't blame Sylvia. I, too, was scared that this separation would be permanent, even though all logic dictated we'd see them again before long. The only reason I didn't break down was because I had more experience controlling my own emotions, due to my
healer's training, and because I knew Chulainn and I simply wouldn't be able to spend all our time with the children to make sure they would be safe. But it would be okay. It would all… be okay...

Almost a week after Sigurd's announcement and our move to Lubeck, it was time for Oifeye, Shanan, and Aideen to depart with most of the children. Only Lene would remain, with Claude reluctantly agreeing to Sylvia's pleas. I thought it was more that she out-stubborned him, but it wasn't my place to ask. It was just as it was, and there was too much to worry about as it was. There were bags to pack, for instance, filled with clothes, diapers, trinkets, toys, and some of the portraits. There could only be one pack for each 'set' of parents, since there was already so much else to carry. Chulainn and I had stayed up most of the night packing as much as we could while still being reasonable. At first, I feared that Caitriona and Conall would have to leave behind their stuffed-dogs, but their ability to walk fairly well saved them from that. They could just carry them.

"There are small things in the bag, so please be careful," I warned Oifeye, handing him Caitriona and Conall's bag. "There's a pair of earrings, for one thing."

"Got it," Oifeye reassured. He slung the bag over his shoulder and smiled bravely. I knew he was about to cry, and I… I felt the same. Oifeye had been here since the beginning. He had helped me through that very first battle, way back in Jungby, when things were simple. "...This is weird. We say goodbye for battles, but…"

"It does feel different." I hugged him tightly, holding back tears. "Ah, whatever am I to do without my helper?"

"Hey, I made sure to help out extra these past few days." Oifeye hugged me back, clinging. "Thank you for everything you've taught me, from mending to medicine making. I'll keep everyone safe, so you just worry about coming to find us, okay?"

"As soon as it's safe, I will be right there." I pulled away and kissed his forehead. "Thank you for watching them for me, Oifeye. I'll see you soon."

"Yes, soon." He smiled warmly, and abruptly walked away. I laughed a bit, knowing it was because he was holding back tears. He was determined to not cry today. We would see each other off with smiles.

"Alicia!" Shanan jumped over for a hug and I caught him easily. "Alicia, you promise to come get us, right?" he asked, sulking slightly. In the last couple of days, he'd gotten second thoughts about leaving, remembering of how he and Ayra had left behind his father to 'go to safety'. His father had died. "Right?"

"Of course," I reassured. Thinking of something I'd seen in the village, I held out my pinky. He hooked his around mine, grinning. A 'pinky swear' was supposed to be a promise that couldn't be broken. "When I see you again, let's go to that waterfall."

"That'll be amazing!" He laughed, bright and cheerful now. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too." I hugged him again, marveling at how much he had grown since we first met. He was twelve years old now, just starting a growth spurt, and he started to wear his hair long, much like Ayra. His voice hadn't started changing yet, but it would soon likely. "You've grown up well. I look forward to seeing how tall you get."

"I'm determined to be taller than Uncle Lex!" Shanan puffed out his chest and I had to laugh. Lex was one of the tallest in the army; he certainly didn't set his sights 'small'. "Just watch!"
"I look forward to it." I kissed his forehead and walked with him over to where Caitriona and Conall were playing with their dogs. However, they immediately toddled over to me, knowing something was wrong, and reached out for hugs. I hugged them tightly and kissed their cheeks. "We will meet again, you two. I know it. So be good for Shanan, okay?" I pulled away, but the children clung. "Ah…"

"Hey, it'll be okay!" Shanan helped me step away, and he took their free hands in his. "We're playing a game. We're going to hide super well, and they're going to find us!" I wasn't sure if they quite understood the words, but they recognized his cheer and smiled. "Come on! You'll hide with me!"

"I love you, Shanan."

"Love you too, Alicia!" He began walking away. "See you soon!"

"Yes…" I watched them for a moment, making sure to smile and wave when Caitriona and Conall looked back. I nearly broke down when they smiled and waved back. "Ah…" To distract myself, I looked away, noticing that most of the goodbyes were wrapping up.

"Sir, I can't take this!" Oifeye protested about something. It took a bit of finding him in the crowd to see he was trying to refuse Sigurd giving him a silver sword, the same silver sword that Arvis had given him, when all this began. "It's…"

"If you're worried that I'll be without a weapon, Oifeye, I do have Tyrfung now," Sigurd reminded gently. Ignoring Oifeye's stammers, he attached the sword to Oifeye's belt. "But if you're going to protect everyone, you need a good sword. Chulainn is giving Shanan a silver blade to practice with, but I know you can use this."

"But…"

"You're just keeping it until I come for you, okay?" Sigurd smiled warmly at Oifeye and, after a moment, Oifeye smiled back. "It's to make sure you have a good weapon to fight with, if you have to."

"Yes, sir." Oifeye leaned against Sigurd, still struggling to hold back tears. "We'll be waiting."

"I'll be there soon."

"Alicia!" Aideen caught me in a giant hug. "Ah, I miss you already," she whispered. I hugged her back, not really saying anything. We had said our 'goodbyes' last night, where we could safely cry. "Be back soon."

"We will, as soon as we can." I smiled as brightly as I could for her. She smiled back just as brightly. "So, until then."

"Until then." She kissed my cheek and walked off, joining the departure group. After one last set of goodbyes and waves, they… they began to leave.

Almost as soon as they turned away, some of us began crying. I held Lachesis as she quietly sobbed. She had been debating whether or not Diarmuid would leave with them. She ultimately decided that his safety took priority, especially since Ayra found a village not far away where they could find a nursemaid. But it had been painful, and it was… this was one of those strange decisions that you didn't really regret, but gods, you hated all the pain.

"Ayra, why are you staying with us?" Sigurd asked quietly at some point. He passed her a
handkerchief to help wipe her face. She, like most of us, had been crying. Honestly, only Chulainn was dry-eyed; I'd long lost my own battles against my tears. "Not that I'm not grateful. You're one of our strongest fighters. But you were…"

"Yes, I promised my brother I'd take care of Shanan, but Shanan is old enough to watch for himself now," Ayra explained. Surprisingly, or perhaps not, once she dried her tears, no more joined them. "As you can tell by him deciding to leave on his own."

"Yes, but…"

"I will return to Isaach as soon as this war is finished, but it wouldn't be right to leave you now, Sigurd." She smiled warmly, reassuringly, and proudly. "I owe you more than I can ever say and ever hope to repay, Sigurd. Thanks to you, Shanan and I survived and thrived. So, I will not leave until you are safely home, Sigurd. It is the absolute least I can do."

"...And there's no way I can convince you that you don't owe me anything, huh?"

"Not in the least. In Isaach, we repay our debts. My sword arm is yours, Sigurd. I will fight to the end with you, and not regret a second of it."

"Thank you." Sigurd smiled softly and then turned to the rest of us. It was just us parents here, minus Sylvia, Claude, Erinys, and Lewyn. We had begged for that quiet. "Okay, everyone. Let's head inside. Knowing... everyone, actually... there's warm drinks and treats waiting for us."

I passed Lachesis off to Sigurd, letting her continue to sob into his shoulder so that I could rub at my eyes. When I made to follow the group, though, Chulainn hugged me from behind. I wondered why for a brief moment, but then he hid his face in my shoulder and I felt the tears. So, instead, we lingered outside, with me leaning into him, so that he could quietly cry without anyone fussing over him.

It was safer. We knew this. But gods, it was painful. It was so, so painful.

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Author's note: The Jamke-Dew, Lex-Azel, and Sigurd-Ayra conversations are all based on talks in the game, which can be viewed after Lubeck is conquered. The 'argument' Sigurd and Oifeye have is also based on their dialogue in game, as is Shanan insisting on coming along. Aideen leaving with the children comes from the Oosawa manga (Lachesis also leaves at this point in the manga, because Diarmuid isn't born yet). Ayra's line about paying debts and fighting to the end alongside Sigurd are based on her Heroes dialogue.

Next Chapter - Yied Massacre
Chapter 28) Yied Massacre

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 28) Yied Massacre

We spend a couple more days gathering our calm before marching from Lubeck. Lene ends up spoiled silly, because whenever Sylvia notices one of us parents looking sad, she asks if we want to hold and play with Lene. Still, it was horribly painful, leaving behind Caitriona and Conall’s cradle. They had needed a new one, but it still...

Of course, there are other concerns. Traveling through the desert isn't easy, and there is also a feeling of urgency. We want to be through as soon as possible, for our health and so that we can return to the children safely. I hoped we could return to them before the end of the year. It was a couple of months off, so that was probably far too soon, but still, I can't help but hope.

Hope, hope, hope. That was all any of us could truly do, at this point. Wait and hope.

Traveling through the Yied Desert was the worst experience I had ever gone through. Every day, we were treating people for sun poisoning, dehydration, and heat stroke. The sand got everywhere, to the point that each meal had a side of sand to it. The sweat plastered our clothes to our skin, making movement uncomfortable at best. Worse, though, was that we couldn't remove clothing, because that would increase the risk of sunburn and the sand scraping off a layer of skin. On a personal level, I hadn't camped since the end of the Agustria Campaign, and the almost-two-years in Silesse made me more than a little spoiled. I was sure that, if you actually lived in the desert, all of this was fine and normal, but to me, it was a near-nightmare.

"I think her eyes are turning green," Sylvia noted. It took a moment to remember she was in the 'infirmary' tent, making medicine. Since this one had to sit for a moment, though, she played with Lene, who typically traveled about in a sling-wrap we had improvised to try and protect Lene from the sun. Of course, in the safety of the tent, she rested in Sylvia's lap. "Huh, so she'll look a little like me."

"It's still too early for her eye color to be determined," I reminded, barely looking up from my inventory. Sylvia's humming hinted she wasn't really paying attention. She must've just been thinking aloud. Most of us had taken to that, too tired to filter our thoughts. "Mmm... I should ask Oifeye to..." This time I did pause, but it was to wince. Oifeye wasn't here. Shanan wasn't here. I couldn't ask them for help. I couldn't talk to them. They weren't... they weren't here. It hurt. "No, I should do it, then."

I went to work, keenly aware of how much Oifeye and Shanan had helped out as I found myself doing infirmary-chores I hadn't had to do in literally years. It reminded me of the weeks after Finn had left with Ethlyn and Quan, and the comparison made me smile bitterly. I really did hope I could see those three soon, and I also hoped I wouldn't spend nearly as long away from Oifeye, Shanan, and the children.

"Hey, Leonster is to the south of here, right?" Sylvia suddenly asked. I paused in some cleaning to look at her. She was back to work with medicine, while Lene was curled up asleep. Babies napped a lot. "I wonder if we'll make it to Phinora only to find Quan and Ethlyn waiting for us."
"They would probably ask what took us so long," I joked, laughing. The chances of that were impossibly small, but they were rather fun to imagine. I knew it would cheer up Sigurd immensely to see Quan and Ethlyn too. "They'd complain that they still have to wait to meet Diarmuid."

"They must be so frustrated!" Sylvia giggled, finishing up the medicine and then checking on Lene. She and Lene had handled the journey remarkably well, all things considered, but I worried about how things would be when we actually fought. I also worried about what the sand might be doing to Lene's health, but Claude hadn't noted anything yet. "I wonder if we will see them soon, though."

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know. Just a feeling." She shrugged. "It could just be some wishful thinking. Ethlyn is another healer, so that means more breaks for you guys."

"So, you get to spend more time with Claude~?" I laughed at her squeak and blush. "I see through you!"

"That's not… the only reason…" She smiled wickedly though and winked. "But it is part~!"

"You're incorrigible." Still, I kept on laughing, and her smile soon turned relieved. Sylvia had taken it upon herself to try and keep everyone chipper, particularly since she wouldn't be out in battles to provide her Dancer's Gift. That was a decision she had reached with Claude and Sigurd. "Silly."

"The silliest!" She grinned and returned to making more medicine. "Pretty luck that Aideen got pregnant when she did, though. I'm sure all of you feel a lot better knowing there's a healer with the children."

"Yes, it was." Perhaps it was her Ullur luck kicking in once again, making the decision for her so that she could stay with her son, and help make sure all of our children would stay healthy until we saw them again. "I hope she's not too nauseous."

"Oifeye will look after her. He's gotten good at medicines."

"That he has." It made me ridiculously proud. "I'm sure he'll learn some Isaachian medicines too." He could teach me! It would be fun! "Ah, I do feel better…" However, that was also when I noticed something. "Uh… Sylvia?"

"Hmm?"

"Lene is trying to reach your scarf and…" I was honestly surprised Lene hadn't fallen yet."

"Ack!"

I spent a few moments helping Sylvia both secure her scarfs and anything that a curious baby could reach for. I ended up carrying Lene while I worked for a time because Lene attempted to eat some raw herbs that would be very bad in large doses. Once Sylvia baby-proofed her area better, I returned Lene to her and we both quietly worked until Tailtiu arrived for her shift. Surprisingly, Ayra also came with her, though Ayra quickly left, with me. Apparently, she decided I need some fresh air and thought I wouldn't get enough on my walk to the tent Chulainn and I shared.

"Ah, when night falls, the desert isn't so bad!" Ayra gushed, stretching her arms above her head. I chose against replying and held my jacket a little closer to me. Nights were freezing, as cold as a Silessean winter. "I mean… look at all the stars!"
"They are pretty, I suppose," I begrudgingly agreed. Perhaps it was because there were no clouds, but I had honestly never seen so many stars before. It was almost like someone had thrown giant tubs of glitter into the sky. "Why are there no clouds?"

"Something about the mountains, I think. I can't remember." She took a deep breath and then stretched out her hands in front of her. Her ring sparkled in the moonlight. "I still can't believe they bought us matching rings."

"I find it adorable."

"I do as well, and it is very 'them'." She snagged my hand so that we could compare them side-by-side. Aside from the coloring, they were almost exactly alike. "They're so silly."

"They are. But, to be fair, they only bought them because no one would stop bothering them about it." We shared a look and a laugh, not quite understanding it either. But hey, we got pretty rings out of the deal. "Ah, I hope Oifeye remembers to keep the earrings away from them for now."

"Same for mine. I left a couple of pairs in the bag because Larcei loved them so much." She fell silent, looking back up at the sky. "You know… this all reminded me of something."

"Oh?"

"Yes." She closed her eyes, smiling nostalgically. "Mariccle told me, way back when Sophara fell and I thought Holyn… Chulainn… had died, that it was important to remember that one day, you will part ways with the people around you. It could be temporary. It could be permanent. But it would happen, because that was just how life was."

"That sounds sad."

"It's not, though. Knowing that there is an ending, that there will be an ending… with that in mind, it reminds us of how precious our time together truly is." She opened her eyes, still smiling. "We all met because of a string of coincidences. Some might call it 'fate' or 'destiny', but I just like the idea of luck. I got so lucky, meeting everyone. I'm glad for it."

"Now you're sounding like you plan on dying," I frowned at her. "Don't you dare. I'd be one of the ones trying to save you, you know."

"Don't fret so much. I have no intention of dying being the kingdom of Isaach is restored." She smirked and I did have to smile. "Regardless, you're done for the night, right?"

"Er… yes?"

"Good." She took my hand and dragged me off. "Come on. Lex and I decided we should play some cards. Erinys, Lachesis, and Azel were for it, but we still need another person."

"Lewyn?" Even as I said it, I knew the answer. "Wait, no, he has the shift after Tailtiu."

"Exactly." She laughed. "There's no escape for you!"

"...Oh dear…"

I ended up playing cards for most of the night, less because I enjoyed the game and more because I enjoyed everyone's company and laughter so much. Chulainn joined us before long and helped me win most of the hands, on the account that I had been doing so poorly before. The others protested, but the fun continued, so no one minded, too much.
So the days passed, and eventually, Phinora came into view. We all were on high alert, though, because for some reason, we hadn't encountered any resistance. The worst had been going through the desert and, while that was bad enough, we still had expected some sort of resistance. Once we were in Phinora, we wouldn't be far from Grannvale. Langbalt might be dead, but Reptor still lived. Reptor still had a lot to lose from our return, and I doubted he would take that lightly.

"Tailtiu is worried," Azel whispered to me. He and I walked together, while he carefully led his horse through the sands. Horses hated sand. "Her father…"

"I wonder if she'll get a chance to talk to him." I murmured. Tailtiu did her best to keep on smiling, but as we got closer to Phinora, and the possibility of fighting her father, it was harder and harder for her to keep her cheer. After all, unlike Lex, she never had any problems with her father before this. She loved him dearly. "I'm sure Sigurd will try."

"Just a question of if Reptor will allow it." Azel fell silent for a bit, and I fixed his hood when the wind tried to pull it off. "Maybe there's always been something wrong, though."

"What do you mean?"

"Whenever Arvis went to visit you, I'd often stay in Dozel with Lex. Well, after Lex befriended me. But one time, we went to Friege and stayed with Tailtiu." Azel paused to calm his horse, who panicked a little when the sand shifted beneath its hooves. I looked around and noticed most of our other cavalry having trouble. I hoped Arden wasn't boiling too much in his armor. "The day Arvis came to pick me up, Bloom suddenly insisted we have a morning hike through the woods. Lex, Tailtiu, Ethnia, and me. I thought it strange, especially since Arvis was supposed to come get me soon, but Bloom wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. It had been fun, but I always wondered why." He paused again, this time to take a single sip of water. Our water supplies were running low. "Arvis had been waiting for us, and while he'd been polite and all, I could tell something was wrong. And he never let me stay the night in Friege after that. At least, when Reptor was there."

"That's… odd." Arvis had never mentioned anything like that to me. "No ideas?"

"Well, there was the smell of smoke, like there had been a fire, but…" Azel shrugged, but I frowned, having a guess now. "What?"

"Reptor is known for having Loptyrian hunts. I wonder if that could be it."

"Oh, yeah, maybe. Arvis threatened to execute a noble who suggested having them in Velthomer. He's so vehemently against them that I forget they're a thing." Azel looked to me and fixed my hood. "Tailtiu doesn't seem to know about them, though. She's never mentioned them."

"Maybe that's thanks to Bloom." If Bloom had insisted on taking them away, then maybe he had done the same each time his father had done a hunt. "...How did we get on this conversation again?"

"Uh… I can't remember." Azel groaned and I snickered. "Give me a break. The sun is baking my mind." He scowled while I continued laughing. "Meanie." He probably would've elaborated, but he froze suddenly. "Hold on…"

"Azel?" I stopped too and managed to catch someone's attention. Slowly, everyone else stopped. "Azel, what is it?"

"The pixies are…" Azel frowned, looking down, before his eyes widened and he jerked his head up. "METEOR!"
That was all the warning we had before the meteor spells rained down on us, but since we had all been wary and alert, it had been enough. There was some difficulty in dodging, because of the sands, but most of us got out of the initial assault with minor burns at worst. A particularly large one headed straight for Sigurd, but he cut through it with Tyrfing, neutralizing it completely. We all scrambled to get into some sort of formation. An ambush was the absolute worst-case scenario, and I panicked briefly when I didn't see Sylvia. Then it turned out I didn't see her because Alec and Naoise had switched to guarding her and she had crouched down to protect Lene. But before I could breathe a sigh of relief, shadows fell over us. I looked up to see the shadow of a dark wing and I froze as I realized that Thracian Dragon Knights were here.

Just like the last time we fought them, their ambush was devastating. Thanks to their flying, they weren't restricted by the sands like the rest of us, so they had full command. Soldiers were speared left and right, and I noticed a pattern before long. They were targeting the archers. So, I immediately hunted for the ones I knew, unable to find Midir or Brigid in the chaos. I did find Jamke, though. He had a dragon knight flying right at him, and I wondered why he didn't dodge before noticing the burn on his leg. He couldn't move fast enough.

In the split-second I had, I decided to do something very stupid. I made sure my dragon's eye bracelet was visible and threw myself in front of Jamke, as a shield. Sand blasted into my face, and I flinched, closing my eyes and automatically bringing my hands up. I smelled the rank breath of the dragon, heard its ear-rattling shriek right in my ear, felt something wet drip onto my arm. But I didn't feel pain, so I hesitantly opened my eyes to see the dragon had stopped just short of biting me in half, razor sharp teeth hovering over my arm. Strangely red-tinged saliva fell onto my arm, staining my glove and sleeve, as the dragon looked right at my bracelet.

After a very tense second of silence, the dragon reeled back, stirring up more sand, and the knight stared at me in incomprehension. Some part of me was relieved I didn't recognize them, especially when they turned away. After all, as soon as they tried to leave and seek out another target, Jamke leaned around me to shoot them through the neck.

"Well, that was a thing," Jamke breathed as the knight fell. The dragon, shrieking in heart-wrenching sorrow, took to the skies again, attempting to fight us on their own. It quickly fell to a barrage of arrows, courtesy of Midir and his Brave Bow. "I owe you."

"I'm going to remind you that you saved my life before," I pointed out. I was... very surprised that work. I knew what the letters had said and all, but I was still very, very surprised. "Actually, you've saved mine twice."

"I counter with the fact that you have frequently healed up my injuries these past three to four years." He hissed in pain as he tried to stand and I crouched down to heal him up, because thankfully, I'd held onto my staff. "Like now."

"We can call that repayment for all the awkwardness I caused because of my grudge."

"Just accept that I'm in your debt."

"No."

"Jamke!" Brigid appeared then, stopping the little argument, mostly because Jamke and I both yelped over how bloody she was. "Not mine," she reassured, trying to wipe some off her face. She just smeared it with the sweat. "I shot one of the dragons at point-blank range. They bleed a lot. Are you two okay?"

"Yes, we're fine," Jamke reassured. He caught her hand and kissed it. I was amused at how red she
became, even under the blood. "How are-?" He looked up at another dragon's screech, followed by some meteors being thrown towards some of the other soldiers. "Cover. Now."

I followed the two of them for a time, before splitting off when I saw Claude. He tossed me his Fortify staff before using his Valkyrie Staff as a Fortify. I followed the unspoken command and stood a short distance away, just focusing on constantly casting Fortify. Between Claude and me, we managed to stay ahead of… most… of the injuries. At the least, we kept Erinys fully healed as she flitting about between the dragon knights to kill the meteor mages. Once they were all dealt with, it simply became a massacre, but considering the earlier ambush, I wasn't sure if it was a 'massacre of the enemy' or a 'massacre of allies'.

"I am more than a little surprised the Thracians are avoiding us," Claude noted at some point, as the battle was dying down. I hoped it was dying down, at least. Both of us were grey with exhaustion, sticky with sweat and itchy from the sand. "I expected them to have the pragmatism to take us out, considering we keep erasing their hard work."

"Perhaps they have an appreciation for healers," I replied absently. I thought it was simply them noticing the dragon's eye bracelet and deciding to not chance it. But I couldn't explain that, especially not right now. "Ugh… I stay off battlefields for a reason. This is the worst."

"Now imagine if we had all the children with us." He smiled wanly, and I could see the quiet panic even through his healer's mask. Alec and Naoise continued protecting Sylvia, and she had long since ducked back by one of the rocky walls of the plateaus to make it easier, but that didn't make the initial assault any less worrisome. "I think that scenario is the worst."

"If we're thinking in hypotheticals, the worst scenario is all of us dying to the meteors." Thank everything that Azel had sensed the magic. "Ah…" I barely caught sight of Sigurd cutting down someone wielding both sword and fire, and Midir shoot down the last dragon knight. "It's over. Well, the battle is."

"Now comes the healer's part." Claude smiled wanly. I smiled back ruefully. "Let's move about and see who can be saved."

After quickly healing up everyone that we could, Sigurd insisted that we press forward to Phinora. During the course of the battle, we had ended up moving towards Phinora as it was, so we really were too close to stop. When we arrived, we expected… something other than the warm welcome we received. Phinora apparently took the 'neutrality' part of Yied seriously. They wouldn't stop Grannvale from using Phinora as a base, but it also wouldn't deny us shelter. That was a very good thing, as before long, we had all the injured set up to rest, and replenished our supplies, including our very precious water.

"This place is truly a paradise, Elder," Sigurd murmured. It was only a short time after our arrival, but Sigurd insisted on being polite and greeting the leader of the town, pausing only long enough to wash up and change clothes. "Thank you dearly."

"It is simply our way, to assist those who come by," the Elder replied. This had probably intended to just be a one-on-one talk, but I had accompanied Sigurd in order to offer to heal people in town. It felt only polite. "Battles can't be helped, due to Yied's neutrality. Why, there was a skirmish to the south not long before your arrival, from my understanding."

"In the south?" Sigurd frowned. "Why would there be fighting in the south? Some random groups or…" Sigurd paused and, for some reason, the color drained from his face. "The Thracians came… from the south… and Leonster… is south… from here…" I stilled as horror flooded me too. Quan and Ethlyn… had promised to return with help. "Ethlyn… Quan…"
"Let me go find them!" I blurted. I felt bad at how the Elder yelped in shock, because I had been so perfectly quiet, but… "Sigurd, I'll leave with a small group to see if I can find them." I grabbed his sleeve and did my best to both plea and appear as the confident healer. "You need to rest, but I can still heal."

"I think you need to rest too," Sigurd immediately retorted. Fear made him snappier than usual, but I didn't blame him. "So-"

"Your horse is slower than my walk in these sands." I felt bad, telling him to wait, but… "I won't go alone. It will be a small group, like I said. But let me go. If there are any alive, I can save them."

"...Okay…” He deflated instantly, not even bothering to argue more. If there were any alive, then every second counted. "Just take who you want. But promise to come back safely."

"I will." I gave him a hug and rushed out, snagging people to come with me. Erinys volunteered before I even mentioned Leonster, and Claude insisted on coming along as well. Jamke volunteered, in case of more dragon knights, while Ayra declared she would accompany us just for the extra fighter. Lachesis tried to volunteer, but with Claude and I leaving, the injured really needed her here, since she, Tailtiu, and Lewyn would be the only ones with healing magic. Erinys's ability to fly was too useful to leave behind. So, with that small group, we left, heading south as the sun beat down on us, each of us whispering desperate please.

Please be okay… please be okay… please…!

We had known it would be bad, when Erinys returned from scouting ahead in tears, but even that forewarning hadn't been enough to prepare us. After all, it had been a massacre. The sands were stained with the blood of Leonster knights and their horses, all strewn about like rag dolls. The messy kills reminded me of those Zyne killed, back when Eldigan was alive and just imprisoned. It made sense that Thracia would have similar lances given their war with Leonster, and it was obviously them who struck. Thracia must've struck them from behind, and between the ambush and the sands, they hadn't stood a chance. Leonster boasted one of the finest cavalries, but cavalry was next to useless in the sand.

"Gods upon high…” Claude breathed as we stared at the scene. Broken weapons marked where the knights had valiantly failed to save themselves. Scattered armor showed where some had fallen, and where others had been struck, yet still continued to fight. "Oh, divine gods, have mercy…”

Those were the only words we spoke before we started hunting through the area, searching for bodies. Claude and I checked every single one we found. Given everything I had seen, it wouldn't surprise me if someone was alive. Some of them had less wounds than survivors of the Silessean Civil War. But each one was dead. None of them breathed. None of them had a pulse. None of them…

In my frantic search for some sort of survivor, I nearly tripped over something in the sands. It took me a moment to realize it was a blanket covering some things, mostly because the wind had blown sand over it, nearly burying it. I knelt beside it and pulled back the blanket, expecting some sort of supplies. Instead, I saw… I saw a sight that broke my heart into utter pieces to the point that I couldn't even scream. After all, underneath the blanket was Ethlyn and Quan. They were, side by side, eyes shut as if they were sleeping. Whoever had covered them had made a point to have their hands lying on top of each other, like they were holding hands even now. They didn't move. Even as the wind blew sand over their faces, they didn't move.

"Hey, come on, wake up…” I whispered desperately, attempting to heal them. But I knew it was
pointless. I could see how pointless it was. "It's time to wake up, you two." Ethlyn has half-decapitated. The dried blood splattered all over her and no longer bleeding cuts on her face, limbs, and side showed she had fought desperately for her life. "You're not supposed to be dead." Quan had a hole the size of his head through his chest, straight through where his heart and lungs should be. "You're supposed to be… you're supposed to be…" This wasn't supposed to be how I saw them again. This wasn't supposed to be how we reunited. "Come on…" They hadn't meet Diarmuid. They hadn't teased Lachesis about eloping. "Please?" This wasn't supposed to happen! Why did it happen?!

"Alicia, enough." Claude rested a hand on my shoulder. "Enough," he repeated. "You are burning strength you don't have."

"But…!" I tried to retort. My voice was strangely thick and it took a moment to realize I was crying. I hadn't noticed at all. "Claude!"

"You can't heal…" He closed his eyes, holding onto his calm. Absently, I saw Erinys was sobbing into a stunned Ayra's chest. Jamke was shaking, like he was holding onto his calm with everything he had, watching the skies. "You know."

"This isn't…!" I knew what he was trying to say. I knew what I should be doing. I should be the calm healer. I should be the pillar of strength. That was a healer's duty. When everyone else broke down, a healer had to remain calm. That was part of our training. "I…" I had done so many times before. I had remained calm despite my heartbreak before. Deirdre's disappearance. Eldigan's death. Our exile. Every time, I had held onto my training. "But…" But it was Ethlyn. It was Quan. I adored them to pieces. They were my family. They were my family. "They can't…!" They couldn't be gone. They couldn't be dead. They just… They just couldn't be!

But they were. They were, and no amount of denial was going to change that. They had died, and I couldn't… I couldn't… I…

I broke down, unable to hold only my calm at all. I covered my mouth to at least muffle my sobs, but I couldn't be the support, the calm and soothing presence. I hurt too much. It hurt too much. All I could do was sob. Claude rubbed my back and held out the Valkyrie Staff. It took me quite a while to piece together that he was trying to bring back one of them, but after a moment, he brought it down and shook his head. He couldn't do it. They couldn't come back. They were gone. They were gone.

"...Finn…" Eventually, Ayra's voice filtered through the haze of tears and shock. "Where's Finn?" she repeated slowly, almost dully. She still held Erinys. Jamke was still tensed. "Where is…?"

That sparked us all back into action, searching the area anew as we hunted for some sign of Finn. When we didn't see his body, we began rummaging through random saddlebags, finding Quan's not far from his body. Inside were five letters, with names written carefully in a writing I recognized. There was one for Lachesis, one for Shanan, one for Oifeye, one for me, and one address to 'everyone'. Jamke ripped it open and unfolded it quickly, reading the first few sentences aloud in a trembling voice. But we all nearly cried at relief at them because they revealed he wasn't here. He was in Leonster, in charge of their defenses since Quan had left with some of their best knights to reinforce Sigurd. It was a high honor, for a knight of his age, but more importantly, it meant he wasn't here. He was in Leonster and not dead in the sands. I wouldn't be tripping over his corpse. We wouldn't have to tell Lachesis he'd died.

That bit of relief gave us some clarity, and we began wandering the area again, this time wrapping bodies to carry to Phinora. It was difficult, since we didn't exactly have a sled, but there had been a lot of blankets for whatever reason, so we slowly got everywhere wrapped and made a makeshift
'sled' we could drag back. As we walked around, though, I was still a little dazed and, due to the crying, stuffed up and nursing a headache, resulting in a lot of sniffing, a lot of coughing, and a lot of tripping. At one point, my foot actually kicked up something soft and I picked it up, brushing the sand off to see what it was. But then I froze because it was… it was a stuffed bear. It was a brown and white stuffed bear, just like the one I had given to…

Frantically, I began hunting through the various saddlebags, starting with the ones close to Ethlyn's body and them moving out. The others yelped and wondered what was going on, but I was completely focused on my task, panic giving me a single goal that I had to see through. If I stopped, I'd break down again, just at the implication. So, I ignored everyone and searched. It took longer than I would've thought, but I eventually found a saddlebag a short distance away, in an area strangely untouched by blood, and when I opened it, I found things I recognized as Ethlyn's. But also instead was a little girl's dresses. There was a little girl's ribbons. There was a little girl's toys. There was…

"Where's Altena?" The words were out before I could stop them, and I turned to face the others. In one hand, I held the stuffed bear I had given Altena way back in Agustria. In the other, I held one of the dresses. Their eyes widened in horror when they realized what the items meant. "Where is Altena?" I repeated, the words practically blistering my tongue. Even though I was saying the words, I couldn't process them. "Where is…?" Because, for some reason, for some reason I would never hear, Quan and Ethlyn had brought Altena with them and that meant Altena had been here when... "Where is she?!!"

We searched. We searched until the moon was high in the sky, skin nearly scraped off from the sand and blistering from the sun, but there was no sign of Altena. Quan and Ethlyn were dead, and there was no sign of their daughter. Altena… Altena was lost to the sands. Altena was gone, just like her parents.

Oh, gods, what was I going to tell Sigurd?

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: So, when you capture Lubeck castle, a few things happen. Some meteor mages appear to hit you with long-range magic, and Quan and Ethlyn appear in the south (which is entirely sand terrain) with Leonster knights (all of them are mounted). Even if you never got the Gae Bolg for Quan, he will wield it in this appearance, while Ethlyn will wield an iron sword no matter what was left in her inventory. Immediately after their appearance, Travant appears with a squad of Thracian knights. Who are fliers. On a desert map. And all of them, save Travant, are wielding horseslayers/knightslayers/ridersbanes. As you make your slow way down towards Phinora, ideally by using Erinys to kill the meteor mages because of where they're set up, Travant and company systematically slaughter all of them. Like Eldigan, there is no way to save Quan and Ethlyn (that doesn't involve breaking the game at least. If you capture Phinora, they disappear and if you manipulate the AI to have them capture Phinora first, you are unable to progress). When you capture Phinora, the villagers tell Sigurd about the massacre and he puts the pieces together. I felt like it was in character for the group to at least look for survivors, though.

Altena is also present during the fight, with the reason differing between the game (Ethlyn brought her along because she wouldn't stop crying or something) and the
Oosawa manga (iirc, Ethlyn brought her because Yied was neutral-safe territory). In both versions, Ethlyn was supposed to return to Leonster, but stayed a little longer with Quan. And paid the price. As a reminder, Alicia gave Altena, Ares, and Seliph matching stuffed bears, though I don't believe I ever stated which one got which color.

Since we've finally seen it in action, let's talk about Tyrfing, the last Holy Weapon you acquire during the first generation. It's the Holy Weapon of Baldur, usable only by Sigurd in the First Generation. Like all Holy Weapons, it has 30 might and boosts some stats. In Tyrfing's case, it boosts skill and speed by 10, and resistance by 20. It also grants the Prayer skill to the wielder (which, in FE4, boosts evasion rate once under 10 HP). It appears again in Awakening, where it grants +5 to res instead.

Ayra's line about finding the time she spends with people precious comes from her Level 40 convo in Heroes, while her line about not dying until Isaach is restored comes from one of her voiced lines. Azel mentioning that Arvis never let Azel stay over at Friege unless Reptor wasn't around comes from Memoirs of Velthomer. In game, the Valkyrie Staff can only resurrect people, but I added the 'Fortify' effect to give it a little more use.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Phinora (last interlude of gen1, second to last chapter of gen1)
Sigurd collapsed when we returned with Quan and Ethlyn's bodies, screaming. Lex actually had to carry him because he was unresponsive. The Phinora Elder, kindly, gave us a large manor to stay in, and also let us lay Quan, Ethlyn, and the Leonster Knights to rest in their crypt, to be moved to Leonster later.

That first night, I spent sobbing. I just couldn't believe it. They were dead. They were dead. I had always feared losing people. Most healers did. That was why many healers were isolated. But then Ethlyn had invited me to join the army, and I met all these wonderful people I loved dearly. I found a family. But now she was gone. I'd never laugh with her again. I'd never exchange a secretive smile with her again. And Quan... Quan was gone too. I'd never laugh at his fussing again. I'd never help him tease Sigurd and Finn again. I...

This wasn't supposed to happen. Why did it happen?

"I don't see how your hair gets so tangled when it's so short," I murmured, brushing Sigurd's hair. We were in his room, where I had bullied him into at least sitting by the window. "Goodness…"

"Ethlyn used to tease me about that," Sigurd mumbled. He absently stirred his untouched broth, the first meal he'd 'had' since Quan and Ethlyn died a few days ago. He'd been holed up in his room ever since; I'd actually had to enlist Dew's help to get the darn door open. "I'd tease her back, because her hair tangled just as easily."

"I remember that." There had been many mornings I had helped her brush her hair, much as I helped Sigurd now. "How's your face?"

"It's fine." He absently swiped at the little cut I had left behind. He hadn't shaved, so I had done it for him. I half-wondered if I'd need to get some help throwing him into a bath. "Thank you. I hate wearing a beard. Always itches."

"Of course." I glanced outside, looking at the bright sunlight streaming through the window. It was the only light in the room. Sigurd could barely get himself out of bed; lighting a candle was too much. "You should eat. You promised Oifeye."

"I did, huh?" He sighed, and reluctantly tried to eat. He immediately coughed and choked on it. "Ugh..."

"Try a smaller spoonful." I finished brushing his hair and helped him wipe up the spilled broth. "Though I can send for Azel if it needs to be warmed."

"No, it's fine." He shook his head and tried again. His hand shook so much, though, that he gave up. "This is pathetic, huh?"

"Never." I knew how broken I felt, and I had only known the two for four years. He had known them for so much longer. "But if I need to feed you, I will."
"Let me try again, in a few moments." He looked outside, and after a moment, I went to make him some tea. "You know, ever since she was born, Ethlyn has been one of my most precious people."

"I can believe that." She was always bright and cheerful, and she had loved Sigurd dearly. "Were you always close, growing up?"

"We got closer when I moved past the idiotic 'oh, real men don't show affection' crap. But she's always been one of the lights in my life. After Mother died, I was able to keep my smile because of her." He smiled faintly, pained and nostalgic. "When I was at the military academy, she would write twice a day and visit whenever she could. That's actually where she first met Quan."

"Did she fall in love at first sight?"

"She was certainly charmed at first sight." He laughed, but it was bitter. "I was the first person she told about her crush, and I helped her out as much as I could. I was also technically the first person she told about getting together, though that had been a bit unconventional." I vaguely remembered him joking about that with Ethlyn, back with Deirdre first joined us. "All I ever wanted, growing up, was for her to be happy. Her, Quan, Eldigan… I would pray for their happiness. Now though…" His expression crumbled and he began quietly sobbing. I left the tea to steep and went over to rub his back. "Why? What did I do wrong? I keep thinking, and I can't…"

"This isn't your fault, Sigurd."

"Isn't it? I should've told them to not come."

"You think they would've listened?"

"...True…” He covered his face, laughing darkly. "Gods, I'm falling apart. Some leader I am…"

"Well, we got hit with a lot of things at once."

"I suppose." He rubbed roughly at his face, his wedding ring actually scratching his face. "Hey, how do you remain so calm? I know you're hurting."

"...Part of it is long years of training, Sigurd. Healers are trained to be calm with things are rough, because a second spent panicking is a second that could be spent saving a life." I smiled sadly, having to fight back my own burst of tears. I was honestly barely holding on. All I could think of was finding their bodies, and curse the fact that I never gave Ethlyn or Quan my bracelet. Yes, it had helped me protect Jamke. Yes, it might have spared Claude and me. But gods, if one of them had been wearing it, it might've spared them. "Besides, I'm taking care of you. Speaking of which…"

"I need to eat." He coughed a bit and I found him a handkerchief to clean his face with before bringing the tea over. "Seliph isn't going to remember Ethlyn and Quan. Neither is… is Leif."

"Then we'll tell him lots of stories. You'll tell Leif lots of stories."

"Yeah, and about Alte…" Sigurd broke down again and it was hard to not cry too. As horrific and 'unfair' as Ethlyn and Quan's deaths were, Altena's death was… gods, she had been four years old. She had just been four years old! "Why? Why was she there? Why the hell did they bring her?"

"I don't know." Maybe Quan got overconfident and reacted on misinformation, like when Finn got that gut wound in Noldion. Maybe Ethlyn trusted too much in the soldiers, much like when Altena was with us during the first Agustria campaign. Maybe it was nothing but bad luck and horrible timing. "I doubt we'll ever learn."
"Maybe we can ask Finn." Slowly, Sigurd calmed down again, and I helped him clean his face. "I'm glad he's at least was spared. He still needs to meet Diarmuid, and we need that 'proper wedding' for him and Lachesis." He stirred his cold broth, looking back outside with red-rimmed eyes. "How is she?"

"She's… not doing well." Honestly, Lachesis had reacted much like Sigurd had, which had been her reaction when Eldigan died. She was completely isolated, not eating or bathing or anything. "However, we're all looking after each other. Ayra is bullying her into eating." This loss was hard on all of us. Ethlyn and Quan had been well loved. "We are, after all, a rather unconventional family."

"That's true." Finally, he began to eat, and this time, he didn't choke. "It's really bland."

"You haven't eaten for a few days. You can eat tasty stuff again once you go back to eating regularly."

"That sounds like blackmail." Still, he kept on eating, slowly and shakily. I had to help him drink his tea, though, as his hands shook too much.

Of course, Lewyn almost made all the effort for naught because he burst in with some absolutely absurd story that nearly killed us both from hysterical laughter. But the laughter was good. It was good to remember that we could, in fact, still laugh. Despite how much it hurt, Ethlyn and Quan hadn't taken the laughter with them. In time, we'd heal, even if that seemed impossible now.

Well, at least, that's what I hoped. I was a healer. I liked healing people, helping them past their hurt, and Lewyn's story reminded me of what Chulainn had taught me. 'Who healed the healer?' Why, it was the people she healed, giving back. We would all get through this together. I knew we would, in time.

"Thank you, Lady Healer!" a little girl called as she skipped away with her older sister. The sister bowed respectfully. "Byebye!"

"Be careful climbing trees next time!" I replied, waving. Then I moved onto the next patient, a young carpenter who got a really bad splinter. "Goodness, how did you do that?"

The past few days, I had been treating the people of Phinora. It wasn't just 'being helpful', though. Working so much made it easier to sleep, and made me less likely to miss Caitriona and Conall. I couldn't cuddle with them to wind down from a long day, after all. Chulainn worried, but let me go at it for now. He even covered for me when Claude inquired about how much I was working.

"I'm so sorry, Lady Healer!" a young mother yelped as she tried to get her child to calm down long enough for me to give them a checkup. They were crying up a storm, likely from some sort of pain. "I…"

"It's all right," I reassured. After a moment, I pulled Altena's bear from my pack and held it up, waving the paw. "Hello, there!" I really should've given the bear to Sigurd, but I couldn't. It broke my heart, but I couldn't let it go. "Will you smile for me?"

It didn't take long for the child to calm down 'for the bear', and I was able to fix them up easily enough. Then I continued on, healing everyone who came to me. Crying children were placated by Altena's bear. The adults listened closely to my instructions when it came to medicines. So my day continued, never really changing, until I was just about to stop for the day due to the sun setting.

"My pardon, Lady Healer?" a person whispered softly, catching my attention. They wore a hood to
protect their head from the sun, but they had it far enough back to not cover their expression, worried and earnest. "My friend collapsed and is too dizzy to walk. I know it sounds…"

"So long as we don't leave the city's limits, we'll be fine," I reassured. I looked at them curiously, recognizing the accent but unable to place where. "I was just about to leave anyway, so your friend can be my last patient."

"Thank you so much!" They bowed low, and I thought their eyes flicked over briefly to my bracelet. I could have been mistaken, though. "He's this way!"

They led me towards the edge of town, just within the borders, rambling about how they had been searching for something in the desert before they decided to see if the something was in town. I smiled and nodded, not quite paying attention past 'spent a long time in the sun'. When we found their friend, carefully out of the way and leaning against a building, I gave them a check up and confirmed my suspicion.

"It's heat exhaustion and some very bad sunburns," I diagnosed, already pulling out medicines and going to work easing what I could with my staff. "You should have been more careful with the heat."

"We didn't think it would take that long to find it," the first one admitted sheepishly. They rested a hand on their friend's shoulder. "Will they be all right?"

"Yes, they will, but don't be surprised by silence for now." I continued working, wondering why they would think something would be 'easy to find'. "The desert is very vast."

"We knew the area we were in." They shrugged. Their friend shot a warning look, but closed their eyes, ignoring our conversation entirely. "Noticeably marked."

"I see?" I frowned, not sure what they were talking about. The only unique 'landmark' I had seen around here was the weapons and armor of the Leonster knights. "Regardless, your friend will be fine, as I said."

"Good." They breathed a sigh of relief. "Gods, I hate the desert. Sucks every time."

"You travel it often?"

"I avoid it when I can, but sometimes, mercenary jobs…" They shrugged. "Got to go where the money is, and the tactical advantage we provide gets us nice bonuses."

"Of course." There was something strange about the sentence though, something that held my attention, and then suddenly, it all clicked together. Thracian. The accent was Thracian. That meant… "I've a question." I paused in my work to look at them. Their friend was very firmly staying out of the conversation. "Are you Thracian?" They hesitated in answering. "Are you the Thracians who killed the Leonster knights?" They flinched, but didn't say anything. That was enough. "You…!" Anger flooded me, but I bit my tongue and kept on working, to both of their visible surprise. But I was a healer. Even if I was furious, even if I loathed myself, I was a healer. I would keep to my oath. Besides, if they had been there… "Altena."

"P-pardon?"

"There was a little girl with the knights named Altena." My movements were sharper as I applied medicine to soothe the sunburns, but I did do my best to keep gentle. Sunburns hurt. "How did she…?"
"Oh, the adorable little ball of sunshine?" They smiled and I had to pause again, wondering just why they would describe her as… "She's charming the group, more than likely."

"...She's alive?" Tears of relief pricked my eyes, but I held onto my calm. Barely. "We thought…"

"Not safe to leave a little girl in the sands, and we weren't certain it was safe to fly up to Phinora. Based on the dead knights we saw on the way here, I'd say it wasn't. So, King Travant took her with him, back to Thracia." They shrugged, still smiling. "She was too young to understand death and all, and was laughing at how high she was flying. But then she complained about not having her 'bear'. So, we were sent back to see if we could find it. You can understand why we thought it wouldn't take long."

"Yes, I suppose so." I finished applying the balm and quickly wiped my hands off before pulling out Altena's bear. She was alive. She was alive. "Here, I think this is what you're looking for." I handed them the bear, smiling. "I gave it to her when she was little, and I found it." However, that smile soon faltered as I finally processed one very key piece of information. "Wait, you said Travant took her…?"

"Yes?" They took the bear from me and carefully tucked it into their pack. Their friend breathed a sigh of relief, but still remained silent with their eyes closed. "I mean; he's the one who led the attack."

"What…?" The words hit me like stone. Travant had… Travant had been the one who…

"Yes." Oblivious to my shock, they brushed their hair behind their ear. "This wandering priest named Veld told us that Quan was heading through the desert with some of Leonster's finest. Travant thought it strange, considering how the recent battles had been going, but he also thought it made sense since Lord Sigurd was in Silesse and Quan would have to travel the desert to reach his brother-in-law and help. Since we also had a contract with King Azmur, he decided there was no reason to not check it out."

"King Azmur hired Thracia?"

"He wanted extra security during the wedding, and we've assisted in the subjugation of Agustria and Verdane." They said the words easily, and it was obvious why since it was just a job to them. But it still made my heart ache. "Anyway, we found them and King Travant debated whether or not to strike."

"What was the other option?"

"Ignoring, obviously. I mean; we had a contract and it didn't involve Leonster's bastard knights." They spat out the last words, and I remembered what Travant had told me about 'attacks'. Quan had promised to look into it. I wondered if he even had the chance. "Still, he decided the chance was too good to pass up, so we struck."

"I see." Everything hurt. Everything hurt so, so much. "How did Ethlyn die?"

"Princess Ethlyn? Not sure, truthfully. We were in a different part of the fight." Still, they closed their eyes to remember. I wondered briefly why they were being so open, but when they opened their eyes again, they looked right at my bracelet. That was why. I wore a dragon's eye, and so, they were being as respectful and helpful as possible. "I remember that when the fighting started, she gave her little girl to a knight and told them to ride back. She then dropped her saddlebags to have less weight for her horse to deal with." That explained why her saddlebags had been away from the battle, then, and why Altena's bear had been near. She must've dropped it while the
knight tried to save her. "But I don't know how she died. I know she fought like a demon, but I
don't know if one of us killed her or if she killed herself to avoid being used as a hostage."

"I see." Ethlyn… ah, her final moments must have been filled with such panic. "Quan?"

"He fought valiantly, and even I have to admit to that, even if he was Leonster. That Gae Bolg
caused us no end of trouble." That… made me frown. Gae Bolg hadn't been among the scattered
weapons. Surely, we would've seen it if it had. "But he dropped it when Altena was held hostage."

"You held a child hostage?!"

"I-it wasn't King Travant's idea!" They brought their hands up in a pacifying gesture, and spoke so
quickly that I had no idea if they were lying or not. "Just, you know, desperation and… uh… a-
anyway, King Travant killed him after he dropped Gae Bolg. We took it with us as a trophy.
Morale and all."

"...I see." I was absolutely furious. I was so tempted to scream and draw attention. At this point,
they were no longer my patients. I had completely my treatment of them. I could just leave them to
die, as I had Chagall. I could just leave them to their fates, as I let Annand walk to her death. But I
still had one question. "Who covered Quan and Ethlyn?"

"King Travant insisted on it." Those words felt like ice water. "He carried Quan over to where she
was, made sure they were 'holding hands', and covered them to protect them from the sand. Then
he calmed down the crying little girl and left with her."

"Ah…" With that, the fury… well, it didn't fade. I was still beyond angry at how Altena had been
used as a hostage, at how they had used her against Quan. But to know Travant had also been the
one to honor them like that calmed me enough to admit that these two were just following orders
and doing what they thought was right for their country. They were just trying to make a living,
and to help their people. I remembered what bits I knew of how Thracia was, like how many had to
choose between food and medicine, and how older siblings would starve to death so that their
younger siblings would be able to eat. I couldn't tell them that they were wrong, just because they
killed people I loved. Considering how many people our army killed, I… "Will you deliver a
message to Travant for me?"

"O-of course!" They smiled and straightened their posture proudly. "What is it?"

"Please, tell him the Vala healer trusts that he will take very good care of Altena, until her family
can see her again." I looked up at the sky, noticing it was past sunset. The others would be
worried… "You'd best leave town, though. I'm not sure how the others in the army will react. I'd
rather you not undo my work so quickly."

"Yes, Lady Healer." They bowed to me again. "...Thank you for healing him, even after…"

"It's my job." I stood up and brushed my skirt off. Their friend opened their eyes finally. "Have a
safe trip home." My tongue practically burned with the words, but I felt I had to say them. If they
had told me the truth, then they would make sure the bear and the message would get to Altena
and Travant.

I did leave sharply after that, each motion crisp until I was certain I was out of sight. Then I ran. I
ran as fast as I could, back to the manor, and took a couple of the lesser used hallways to Sigurd's
room. I knocked twice before bursting in. He gave me a confused look in return, since the robe and
sleeping pants hinted he'd been trying to go to sleep, though his standing also hinted he gave up.
"I just had Sylvia asking if I'd seen you, because you were apparently late from your healing duties in town," he noted dryly, tying his robe shut. I was pleased that he was well enough to be sarcastic. "So, what has you not being your normal polite self and-

"Altena's alive," I blurted. He stilled and stared in incomprehension. "Well, I think she is. I didn't see her or anything, but you see, while I was out..." All excitement, however, fled when I slowly realized I had to explain how I had learned that. "Well..."

"...Some Thracians came to you for treatment." However, Sigurd knew me too well and guessed immediately. "And because you're a healer, you did so." Thankfully, he didn't look made. He was still stunned, certainly, but not mad. "But because you're you, you also demanded information."

"...Yes..." I said the word to the floor, simultaneously not regretting a thing and feeling horribly guilty. "I'm sorry. I should've shouted for someone, but..."

"She's alive. Altena is alive."

"That's what they said, at least. I gave them her bear to take back to her." I shrugged, now feeling a little helpless. "So, I mean..."

"There's a chance. There's an actual chance they're alive."

"Yes. They also..." I hesitated, but pushed forward. "They also told me how Ethlyn and Quan died, and it matches up with their wounds. I think. So, that makes me hopeful that they..."

"We'll keep it quiet for now. Just in case." He finally, slowly, smiled. He also began crying again, this time from bitter relief. "I don't want the others..."

"Of course. I'll keep it quiet." Part of me wanted to tell the others, but I could see why. Things were already difficult enough and the more people told, the more hopeful we became. "When this is all over, we'll check and make sure. If she's there, we'll get her."

"After we go to Isaach." He sat down on the bed and covered his face. "Ah, forgive me, but I think I need to be alone."

"Of course." I smiled as warmly as I could. "But I will be bullying you into eating your breakfast in the morning."

I did make a point to hug him before I left, carefully shutting the door behind me. Then I went to find Sylvia and let her know that I was back, I just had a patient that took longer than expected. Afterwards, though, I went to my room and barely shut the door before I collapsed as the weight of a very important fact, one I tried desperately to ignore while around strangers, crashed into me.

Travant killed them. Travant, who I saved, killed Ethlyn and Quan. If I hadn't saved him, they might still be alive. If I hadn't saved him, they wouldn't be dead. But what else could I have done? He had been my patient. I had to heal him. I knew I would regret it, but not like that. I knew I would regret it, even had a letter warning me about it, but not like that, not like this. I acknowledged the possibility, but to have it actually happen was too much. So, I collapsed and curled up in a little ball on the floor, sobbing apologies to their ghosts because I could literally do nothing else.

At some point, Chulainn picked me up off the floor and cradled me in his arms on the bed, letting me sob into his chest. "I was wondering when you'd collapse," he murmured, kissing my hair. I couldn't respond. I was too busy wailing. "I knew you were working too hard."
That was all he said, but he held me tightly until I cried myself to sleep. The next morning, when I woke up, he had a warm bath ready for me, and breakfast in bed, so that I could just… rest.

Gods, I loved him. I'd be a total mess without him.

A couple days after I learned… after my collapse, I decided to sort through my things. It was a random whim truthfully, less to actually sort and more to just remind myself of what all I picked up over the years. There were some ribbons from Ethlyn, for instance, that I never wore. There were some small trinkets from Verdane and Agustria. At least, I thought so. I honestly couldn't remember where I got most of them. But I did remember where I got the crudely carved wooden dragon, even before I found the picture Arion had drawn me, and the letter Hannibal had sent along. The words 'thank you for healing my daddy!' stood out and helped… ground me, I suppose.

Healing Travant had cost Altena and Leif their parents, but it had saved a little boy's father, one who lost his mother brutally to war long ago. It had cost me friends, but there was Hannibal's letter, citing he was Travant's childhood friend, meaning I had saved his. It had cost Leonster dearly, but according to Hannibal, it had helped Thracia. Just because it hurt me personally didn't mean… the world wasn't black and white. Even things that often were 'right' or 'wrong' had their exceptions, like how 'killing' was bad, except during a war or to protect something or as a mercy, or how 'healing' was good, except when all you did was draw out their pain and lead them to an agonizing death or your healing only led them to be in a vegetative state for the rest of their 'life'.

There were good people we had killed in the past, people who fought for what they thought was right. Pamela, for instance, fought against Lewyn in the civil war not because she was a bad person, but because she thought Lewyn wasn't a worthy king for her country. The Cross Knights had fought against us, because they thought it was the way to protect Agustria. Even Travant had only 'fought' us in Agustria because the money Chagall paid was enough to buy Thracia another year of life.

I was sure there were families screaming over what we had done, mourning for the dead that we had killed while doing only what we thought was right. It was 'fair' that we would suffer the same, even though the whole thing hurt me deeply, to the point that I wasn't sure my heart would recover any time soon. But, in a way, it was just like when I let Annand walk off to her death, after healing her up. It was like when I sent out soldiers to fight, after I stitched their wounds.

This was why healers were often isolated. Our oaths required neutrality, and it was so much easier to be neutral when you cared about people 'in general' and not individuals. Though, at the same time, I loved all of my friends, my family, too dearly to ever give them up, even knowing the pain that might come. Maybe this was why people said loving someone required the most courage. Though, it could also just be me being mildly addled by everything. Both were plausible.

"Alicia?" Lachesis's quiet voice nearly made me panic, and I quickly hid the drawing and carving before turning to the door. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," she mumbled. Her hair fell in tangles by her face, and she looked like she'd just threw on the first thing she grabbed, none of which matched. "I thought… about trying to take a walk. But I…"

"Give me two seconds, and I'll come with you," I reassured, already packing my things up again. I knew why she was asking. She thought she'd stop if on her own. "There's a beautiful park in the center of town, by the oasis."

"That sounds good." She smiled wanly, but it did bring some light to her face. "Let's do that."

Once I was cleaned up, I insisted we wait to head out until I brushed her hair. By the time I did
that, she realized just what she was wearing and changed clothes. Only after all of that did we actually head outside. I held her hand as we walked through town towards the park. People were laughing and playing about, and it wasn't long before we saw that others in our army had the same idea.

I knew Chulainn had dragged Sigurd outside, and it looked from here that he had recruiting Midir to help. The knight trio of Chalphy were laughing about something with Beowolf and flirting a bit with some of the girls from town. Most, surprisingly, were grouped by couple. Claude and Sylvia were quietly arguing something, for instance, while Claude cradled Lene against his shoulder. Lex and Ayra were rolling their eyes and teasing each other. Azel and Tailtiu discussed something serious. Jamke and Brigid talked while he braided flowers into her hair. At first, I thought Lewyn and Erinys were the only exception, but a quick look above showed them flying through the sky, laughing all the while.

"It's like everyone decided to go on dates," Lachesis half-joked, half-complained. She leaned into my side, resting her head on my shoulder briefly. "I miss Finn."

"We did remember to give you the letter, right?" I asked. Honestly, the hours after returning had been such a whirlwind and the days afterwards had been just as disorienting. "I don't think I've read mine."

"You did, and I have. He apologized for not taking the opportunity to come see me and meet Diarmuid." She laughed darkly. "If I'd read it in normal circumstances, I would've pouted so much. But now, I'm just so grateful that he decided to be the proper knight and guard Leonster."

"Did your letter mention why Finn was left?"

"Ironically, Quan had noticed Thracia moving and thought they'd attack the castle directly. Since Finn is one of the best knights, and the one Quan trusts most…" She smiled ruefully. "The other reason is because Leif apparently adores Finn, and will only settle down for naps if he's the one tucking him in."

"I see." I smiled, amused. I could see that so easily. "You know; I remember Altena being clingy with Finn too, when she was with us in Verdane."

"She was so sweet…" Her smile wobbled and I almost told her what I had learned about Altena. But I bit my tongue, because Sigurd had asked it be secret for now. There was too much going on and honestly, all of us were a little on edge. "He must be hurting so much. Finn, I mean."

"He… probably doesn't know yet." When would word reach? Would they learn through Thracia? That broke my heart even further. "Hopefully, we'll see him soon, and see him properly."

"Yes, we'll see him alive, not…" Her voice cracked and she hid her face in my shoulder. "Can we walk away from people?"

"Of course."

We didn't start talking again until we were well away from the crowd, walking around the edges of the town. At that point, we talked of random, innocent things. We talked of the clothes the people wore, from the designs to the colors. We talked of the flowers we saw and smelled, noting we didn't know most of them. We talked about various medicines and what was best for treating sunburns. We talked of the children and how we hoped Oifeye, Shanan, and Aideen weren't overwhelmed by taking care of all of them. We talking about anything and everything we could think of that wasn't too sad.
At some point, we reached the front gates of Phinora, and noticed someone in a fine, hooded red cloak looking about curiously. I wouldn't have paid them much mind, but their hood fell back just enough for me to get a glimpse of their face and I swore it was… "Aida?" I called hesitantly. The figure whirled towards me, and her face lit up with a smile. "Aida!"

"Lady Alicia!" she cried, rushing over. She gave me a warm hug and I returned it one-handed. "Oh, I'm glad to see that you're well." She pulled away and cupped my face, before she yelped and stepped back to bow. "Lady Lachesis! I'm so sorry!"

"You're fine," Lachesis reassured. She frowned, very confused, but I didn't blame her. While Aida no doubt knew Lachesis, Lachesis had likely never met Aida before. "You are…?"

"My name is Aida. I assist Arvis with ruling Velthomer and commanding its forces."

"She's also Arvis's best friend," I added, unable to keep from smiling. It was good to see her. "Though that does make me all the more curious as to what you're doing here in Phinora."

"Arvis has a plan. So, here I am!" Aida declared triumphantly, with a grin even. I nearly burst into tears because that was all she needed to say. Arvis… Arvis was helping us. "Might I talk to Sigurd?"

"I'll go let him know!" Lachesis volunteered, face alight with excitement now. The liveliness I associated with her was finally back in her eyes. "Take the long way!" Then she was off, running as fast as she could.

"Well, she's got some energy." Aida watched her and then turned to me with a soft smile. "However, I do see the signs of sudden weight loss and crying, on both her and you. Do you mind summarizing everything that's happened? We heard Langbalt and Andrei died, but that's where our information ends."

"It's been quite the stressful few weeks," I sighed. But I still smiled. This was… this was the best thing that could've happened. "But follow me. I'll tell you along the way."

I did make sure to take a winding way back to the manor, both to give Lachesis time and to tell Aida everything she needed to know. I told her of how Andrei and Langbalt died, and she had noted how fitting both deaths were. I told her how we made the decision to send the children to Isaach for safety, and she'd instantly sympathized. I told her of the ambush in the desert and she had winced, because they were likely Velthomer. I told her how we discovered Ethlyn and Quan dead in the desert and she'd gasped in shock. I managed to get through just about everything by the time we made it to the manor, and we had to stop in the doorway as she gave me another hug. Then we both nearly got tackled off our feet because Azel all but tackled both of us with hugs. After a round of greetings, Azel and I showed Aida to a room we were apparently pretending was Sigurd's study. He hadn't worked once since Ethlyn and Quan died, but you wouldn't know it, seeing him standing behind the desk. Hope had given him the energy needed to pretend to be okay.

"Lady Aida, I am very glad to see you," he greeted warmly. I looked around and noticed it was a small meeting, just people who knew Aida personally. Taletiu and Lex lingered by the way, though Taletiu practically bounced on her toes in excitement and Lex was more relaxed than I'd seen him in weeks. "It's been a trying time."

"So I've heard, Lord Sigurd," Aida replied. She bowed respectfully to him and smiled sympathetically. "Lady Alicia has told me everything. I cannot put into words how much I grieve for all you've suffered."
"Well, it seems that the end is finally in sight." Sigurd stepped around the desk and leaned against it. Azel and I shared a look and a grin. We were excited too. "Arvis has a plan? I'm not surprised. He always has plans."

"Yes, but it has been difficult putting it into motion. Lots of things have been colliding and causing trouble." She sighed in frustration, fiddling with her earring. "I'd honestly hoped I'd get to you sooner, to let you know what was going on, but damn Reptor watches the border too closely." She paused and bowed apologetically to Tailtiu. "Please pardon the curse, my lady."

"It's fine, Aida," Tailtiu reassured. She smiled, though she no longer bounced about. "I'm away my father has been… very terrible for the country at the moment."

"He has, unfortunately, become quite short-sighted in his desire to hold onto power," Aida tactfully replied. "I wish I could spare you, but he maintains the border defenses."

"Velthomer is on the border, though?"

"Yes, but Arvis is in Belhalla, handling things there and, well…" She shrugged, smiling slightly. "He's been very carefully holding Velthomer's forces back, for my use. I have full command of them, ready to assist."

"Wait, really?" Tailtiu's jaw dropped. "Wow…"

"Typical Arvis," Lex, however, laughed. Tailtiu sulked when she realized she was the only one in the room surprised. "So, basically, we get to pin Reptor?"

"Yes, and ideally force a surrender," Aida confirmed. She turned her attention back to Sigurd and, strangely, clasped her hands in front of her, like she was praying or pleading. "However, if I may request something?"

"Of course," Sigurd reassured. He was smiling softly, relaxing. This truly was the best news. "What is it?"

"Arvis has been near frantic with worry. Would you mind terribly if Lady Alicia and Lord Azel head to Belhalla ahead of you all?" She looked at us two pleadingly. We both just stared back in incomprehension. "I do have healers among my soldiers, as well as mage knights. I know they're both skilled, but…"

"I would hate to lose two of my best…" Sigurd looked at Azel and me. "But I would encourage you two to do so. I know you've also missed Arvis dearly."

"Well, yes, we have," Azel admitted reluctantly. He glanced over at Tailtiu, and she nodded vigorously, telling him to go ahead. "Mmm… all right. I'll go."

"It really would be better to have as many healers as possible, though," I pointed out. I scowled when I saw Lex facepalm. "What? It's true!"

"It is," Sigurd agreed. However, he walked over to me and rested a hand on my shoulder. "But I know you've been overworking because of what happened to Ethlyn and Quan. You've been taking care of all of us, especially me. I think you need the break."

"But…"

"In a best case scenario, there won't be anymore battles. In a worse, there will be only one." He smiled warmly. "Should I make it an order?"
"Healers have the authority to ignore orders from leaders." Still, I sighed. Something told me I wouldn't win this argument. I could hear everyone else's responses in my head. "Oh, fine. I'll go ahead too."

"Thank you so much!" Aida breathed, smiling warmly. She paused and looked over at Tailtiu and Lex again. "You two are welcome as well. Arvis has been almost as worried about you two."

"That's sweet, but we're definitely staying," Tailtiu refused. She smiled warmly, but there was a trace of seriousness to it. "I'd like to try talking to my father. Maybe I can help force that surrender. And I know Lex will want to stay close to Ayra."

"I see." Her smile faltered briefly, but she nodded. "Then, might we discuss strategy, Sigurd? You lead such a varied group. I fear I'll need quite a few pointers in integrating my people into your typical formations."

Azel and I quietly ducked out after that, both to gather people and to go ahead and start packing. I also needed to tell Chulainn what was going on. After all, despite my apprehensions, I couldn't help but be happy. I would see Arvis soon. Everything would be okay soon. This was… this was the best!

Early the next morning, Azel and I said goodbye to everyone. Since it was going to be for such a short time, we did our best to keep things short. It was mostly just hugs, and wishes for safe travels, though the number of people who demanded hugs did lengthen things considerably. Tailtiu, of course, nearly tackled me off my feet, and I only remained standing because Lex decided to turn it into a group hug. Ayra had shoved Lex off playfully to 'steal' me for a hug. Lachesis snuck up then to hug me too, while Erinys caught me from behind for a third. I 'broke' away in laughter and hugged Jamke goodbye, touched that he'd see me off. I was surprised Brigid did the same, but she claimed it was because she knew Aideen would want to do so. Midir refused a hug, too embarrassed, but the smile had been more than enough. It was more real that Claude's smile. Claude had the 'perfect healer smile' on when he hugged me goodbye, and I frowned slightly, noticing. But he shook his head and quickly distracted me via Sylvia, who also brought Lene for me to hug. It honestly took next to forever to finally get around to hugging Sigurd goodbye, but I wouldn't have changed any of it for anything.

"Here, you can play messenger for me," Sigurd noted when we pulled away. He handed me a purple and gold tome, one that hummed with power. "That's the Book of Naga. Father kept it safe while he ran, but it really should go to King Azmur and Princess Diadora." He grinned. "You can give it to her when you finally learn what she looks like!"

"You are horrible," I retorted, scowling for all of two seconds before laughing. I would indeed finally meet my brother's wife. I couldn't wait! "You have my word that I'll see it safely to her."

"I figured as much." He laughed softly and regarded me fondly. "Hey, thank you for everything. For joining us from the start and sticking with our craziness until the end."

"Oh, stop talking like I'm not going to see you again." I poked his cheek, sulking. "You aren't getting rid of me that easily. You are horrible at taking care of yourself, mister. Besides, I need to see your reaction when we finally find Deirdre."

"And take care of me when I fall apart if it's a worst case scenario." He shook his head at my frown. "At this point, Alicia, I just want to know. The worst is not knowing."

"I suppose that is true." Still, I would hold onto the hope that I would see her again. "Now, be
careful while I'm away. Make sure you eat, and don't get yourself hurt."

"Tyrfig will protect me." He laughed and jokingly held up his hands in surrender when I scowled. "Except from a Vala, apparently! But yes, I'll be fine. But you be careful as well, okay?" He smiled sadly, yet fondly. "I've lost one little sister. I'd rather not lose a second."

"I won't be dying any time soon, Sigurd. You better not either." I smiled warmly in return. "I'd rather not lose a big brother, you know?"

"Then until I see you again, probably in a few days."

"Until then!" I gave him one more hug and then I darted over to where Chulainn was waiting patiently by the carriage Aida had arranged. She was checking to make sure everything was secure. "You know, Chulainn, you could just come with me."

"I told you last night that I'd stay here," Chulainn refused again. He caught me in a warm hug, lifting me off my feet even. "I'm glad you're going, though. You've been working far too hard. You should spend a couple of days just being spoiled."

"I suppose," I sighed. I tucked the Book of Naga in my pack, filled with all my things just as Azel's was filled with his. We didn't want anyone to have to keep track of them while we weren't here. "Still, it would be fun to see you meet Arvis. It'll be your very first meeting!"

"It will, which means I want to avoid the protective older brother a while longer."

"Now you're just teasing." I rolled my eyes and he grinned. "Well, do be careful, my love. I shall be most vexed if you get injured while I am not around. Please don't befriend any wild animals while I am away as well."

"Aw, but there are these absolutely adorable foxes that I think Caitriona and Conall would love." He laughed when I instantly glowered. "Relax. I'll be good." He leaned in and kissed me sweetly. "I'll see you soon."

"Yes, we'll be reunited soon." I smiled and kissed him again. "I love you."

"I love you too." He kissed me one more time and then looked to the others. "It seems Azel is done with his goodbyes."

"It seems so." I gave him another hug and then he helped me into the carriage. "Stay safe."

"You too." He squeezed my hand and let go, stepping away so that Azel could climb in as well. Aida shut the door and gave everything one last check before giving the order for the driver to take off.

Azel and I crouched by the window of the carriage, waving to everyone until they were out of sight. They waved back, all with bright smiles, smiles that seemed to linger even after we left them behind. Once they were, Azel and I set our packs on one bench and sat next to each other on the other one. He rested his head on my shoulder and I rested my cheek against his hair. After a moment, both of us were dozing because this just helped clarify everything.

It was over. All of our trials were over. We wouldn't have to fight anymore. We would see the children soon. Everything would finally be okay again. Thank… everything...
Author's notes: In game, Quan and Ethlyn die fighting, and if Ethlyn dies before Quan, Travant uses Altena as a hostage to make him drop the Gae Bolg. In the Oosawa manga, Ethlyn sends a knight away with Altena and attempts to fight back to buy time for them to escape. However, she loses, and kills herself to avoid being a hostage. Travant is shaken by her death (due to a previous subplot where Ethlyn saved his life), and Quan almost kills him, but a random Thracian knight uses Altena as a hostage instead. I gave that subplot to Alicia (thinking it suited Alicia, especially in highlighting how dedicated she is to her oath as a healer), and kept the details of the Yied Massacre ambiguous. You can decide whether it's fully like the game, fully like the Oosawa manga (minus the subplot with Ethlyn and Travant), or some combination. Veld, by the way, is a character from FE5.

After Phinora is captured, various couples can have conversations together, giving the biggest hints to 'predestined' pairs (and by biggest, I mean 'only' in most cases). The exceptions are Aideen with any of her predestined husbands (she talks with Midir, Jamke, and Azel in Chapter 4, and with Claude at the start of the chapter) and Lachesis if you pair her with Finn (funnily enough, despite supplementary materials hinting that the pairing is somewhat canon, at least for Lachesis's youngest kid, the two have absolutely no lover talks with each other. In fact, Finn has no lover talks as all, though he can have talks with his daughters in Gen2 if he's paired with Aideen, Ayra, or Lachesis). The couples that have talks at this point are Tailtiu-Azel/Claude/Lex, Erinys-Lewyn/Arden/Naoise, Sylvia-Claude/Lewyn/Alec, Lachesis-Beowolf/Naoise/Dew, Ayra-Lex/Chulainn/Arden, and Brigid-Alec/Jamke/Midir.

In-game, you have to defeat Reptor before talking to Aida, though she will turn into an allied NPC, alongside all her soldiers, before then (as soon as Reptor aggros, iirc). However, we moved the event up for pacing and story purposes. Reptor is interesting in that his magic stat breaks his class's cap significantly (it's 30, when the cap is 22) and he is yet another Holy Weapon user: Mjolnir, the thunder tome. Between his magic stat and Mjolnir, he has 60 attack, going after your no doubt low resistance. In FE4, it boosts skill by 20 and speed by 10. It also appears in FE13 (where it boasts a 20% critical rate and adds +5 skill) and FE14 (where it acts a lot like a Killer Weapon in those games, boosting crit by 25% and having crits do 4x the damage). His low resistance, however, is his greatest weakness, sitting at 10, meaning he's a prime candidate for the Silence Staff (that Alicia is bringing with her along with Sleep, whoops). The suggested strategies for him include Lewyn with Forseti (who will also have a bit of an advantage due to winning the magic triangle), Brigid with Yewfelle, Sigurd with Tyrfing, Chulainn with Luna, and Tailtiu if she's in Wrath range for the auto-critical and wielding a Thoron tome. That said, as a Baron, he's got Great Shield, which will nullify damage 30% of the time.

The idea of Azel (and Alicia) being sent ahead comes from the Oosawa manga. In-game, Sigurd never learns that Altena survived. I added that in for… reasons. The mention of 'healing only leading to an agonizing death' is a nod to Hinoka's A-support with Azama (think it's A), where that exact thing happens. The Book of Naga description is based off of the Heroes sprite for it.

Next Chapter - Why? (Final Chapter of Gen 1)
Chapter 29) Why?

The journey to Belhalla is long and lazy, especially when compared to how we normally travel. Azel and I spend most of the time sleeping, though occasionally, he'll point out landmarks he recognizes through the window and shares stories of traveling along the roads. To avoid Reptor and his forces, we take a winding way to Belhalla, and Azel and I joke that we'll get to Belhalla after the main group at the rate we're going. But eventually, the city of Belhalla comes into sight and, with it, the promise of safety and sanctuary.

It's finally over. Thank everything. Finally, we're all safe.

When we arrived in Belhalla, a Velthomer soldier met us at the entrance and showed us the way inside, easily navigating the sprawling hallways. Belhalla's castle was as large as Agusty's, if not larger, and I was sure it was just as pretty, though I was far too tired to actually study anything. I'd look better over the next few days, and maybe find some gardens to walk through. But for now, Azel and I followed the soldier, nodding politely to those we passed, both rather excited as we processed what all of this meant.

Eventually, the soldier left us at the door of a study, leaving with a quick bow. Azel and I knocked on the door, but frowned when there was no response. We looked at each other in confusion, and he nudged me. After a moment, I called, "Lord Brother?"

There was a long second of silence before we suddenly heard the sounds of someone abruptly standing up and knocking over a chair, of papers and various objects falling, and of someone cursing and scrambling about. Azel and I looked at each other again when we definitely heard the sound of someone falling. But that didn't matter, because after that, the door opened to reveal Arvis. He was thinner than last time I had seen him. His hair was longer, and a bit mussed from the antics inside. But his smile was the same as always.

"You're home..." he breathed, seizing us both in a hug. We hugged him back tightly, fighting back tears. "You're finally, finally home." He kissed both of our cheeks and showed us inside his incredibly messy study. "Come in. Sit. Let me get a fire started... no, Azel, sit and rest. I mean it." Azel rolled his eyes and stuck his tongue out childishly. "Let me... clean up a little... I swear this place is normally neat. No, sit and rest, you two!"

Though Azel and I repeatedly tried to help, Arvis insisted that we just sit by the fireplace and relax while he straightened things up, got the fire going, and sent for a servant to fetch something. I smiled when the servant returned with three steaming mugs of apple cider. It reminded me of the promises both Arvis and Azel made me, and I couldn't be happier, though I did have to wonder if he had this specifically set aside for us.

"Aida sent word you were on your way, but you got here earlier than I thought," Arvis explained after he finally sat down with us. I noticed he wore a pair of beautiful cufflinks and recognized them as Sigurd's wedding gift for him. That also made me smile; Sigurd had ordered them custom. "I'd actually hoped to meet you at the entrance."
"Aw, but then we wouldn't have gotten to surprise you!" Azel teased. The trip over, and the knowledge that we were finally safe, had brought back quite a bit of his cheer, and it was a delight to see him smiling freely again. "Were you surprised?"

"Completely and utterly. I clearly need to be careful when you two conspire." Still, he laughed, not bothered in the slightest. I noticed his smiles were freer than they had been, and was glad the married life seemed to suit him. "But enough of that. Is it just you two? No Lex and Tailtiu? I'd hoped to meet Chulainn, Caitriona, and Conall, at least."

"Chulainn remained with the army to help with the fighting," I explained. When he frowned, I shook my head. "Oh, don't fret so. He's a very skilled fighter and he dare not risk my wrath if he gets injured."

"Of course..." Arvis whispered. His eyes were a little dark, and I frowned because it didn't seem to be just from worry. But I couldn't place what, and Azel didn't seem to notice anything, so maybe I was just paranoid. "Caitriona and Conall?"

"They're in Isaach." I smiled sadly, remembering that parting. It still hurt. But soon, I would see them again. "We had a couple of hard battles, and didn't want to risk the children going through the desert, so we sent them to safety in Isaach."

"I'm not sure how safe Isaach is, at least for Grannvalians." Arvis was definitely frowning now, but the worry in his eyes now seemed 'normal'. "It's been quite chaotic there. Danann has asked for reinforcements many times while trying to keep order."

"Yeah, but Shanan went with the group," Azel pointed out quickly. He smiled at me, and I smiled back, knowing he'd brought that up to reassure me too. "Besides, Alicia's kids are half-Isaachian anyway, and got the Odo blood, with a Mark and everything. They're all perfectly fine. I'm sure of it." He waved off any worries we might've had, and Arvis relaxed after a moment. "But that's besides the point. You should see Alicia's ring!"

"Ring?" Arvis repeated. He immediately returned his attention to me, and I laughed at how his eyes sparkled. "When did you get a ring? You didn't write about that."

"It was right before Andrei ambushed us," I explained, setting down my mug. I took off my glove, though, and held out my hand so that he could see. "Isn't it pretty?"

"It's beautiful!" Arvis took my hand and angled it so that the rings was a little more visible. "So, is this your engagement ring?"

"No, it's a 'bought this because the little brother just would not shut up about it and it is painful seeing him try to be subtle' ring." I giggled, though, especially when Azel looked away sheepishly. "But Chulainn bought a set of earrings for Caitriona that match!" I picked my mug back up and sipped the cider. It was really good. "Though, Conall could also wear them. We don't know if either of them will even like earrings."

"I hope so. It'll be fun, buying them jewelry." Arvis laughed and looked at both of us, fondly and worriedly. "You're both weary. I can see the tiredness in your smiles."

"A lot happened in a short amount of time, Arvis," Azel noted quietly. I winced as I thought of Ethlyn and Quan again. That was going to hurt for a while, even with the relief of things finally being over. "But we're together again, and everything is going to be fine. We'll have time to talk of sad things later."
"I suppose so," Arvis whispered. He smiled sadly at us, but quickly changed the subject. "Say, Alicia, I forgot to ask and Aida has been bothering me about this. Have Caitriona and Conall shown magic talent yet? It's not uncommon for those of Vala to start playing with fire around age one."

"Oh, don't tell her that!" Azel laughed and I comically grimaced, truthfully more than a little worried now. I hadn't known that and hadn't thought to warn Oifeye, Aideen, or Shanan about that. I could only hope there were no accidental fires. "They hadn't when we last saw then, but I'll start with lessons or something once they're back."

"You?" Arvis sulked a bit. "I can teach them, you know. I taught you."

"Yeah, but you're going to be busy! You've got the kingdom to worry about now, and a wife!" Azel grinned and then made a point to look around. "Say, where is Diadora? I've been looking forward to meeting her."

"She's with King Azmur at the moment." Arvis got a thoughtful look on his face, and I went through my pack to pull out the Book of Naga before I forgot, again. I needed to give this to them. I promised Sigurd I would. "Actually, Alicia, if you don't mind, can you look at him? His health began deteriorating after Prince Kurth's death, and while he improved after Diadora appeared…"

"Oh, of course, I can!" I agreed without hesitation. "I'd be happy to!" I scowled when Azel rolled his eyes. "Shush, you."

"You're both complete workaholics," Azel teased anyway, sticking his tongue out. I huffed a bit and stood up, grabbing one of my healing staves and the Book of Naga. Silence and Sleep were next to my pack, and while part of me thought I should take at least one, I decided against it. I wouldn't need them here. "Whatever. It's not like we have to rush in catching up."

"Very true." I leaned down to kiss his cheek and to whisper in his ear. "Hey, don't tell him about you and Tailtiu until I can see too?" Azel was still determined to surprise Arvis with that. He even tucked his necklace under his collar, to make sure Arvis couldn't somehow guess based on that. "He really will have the best reaction."

"Mmm, okay. Just for you, Lady Sister."

"What are you two talking about?" Arvis asked. He'd moved to the door and watched us in confusion. "What are you doing?"

"Conspiring," Azel answered instantly with a bright grin. Arvis frowned suspiciously. "Go on, go on! We're just plotting another surprise."

"I'm doomed, clearly." Arvis rolled his eyes, and Azel and I laughed as I followed Arvis out the door and down the hall. "What surprise? What else is there?"

"You're not getting a single hint from me," I teased, shaking my head. I practically bounced as I stepped, just… happy. It was fun, being able to tease him again. It was nice, to work on someone with an illness and not bleeding out. "You just have to be good and wait."

"I really am doomed!" Arvis groaned. Still, he smiled. "Ah, I missed this. I'm so glad to see you again. I don't think I ever went even a year without seeing you, and then…"

"You went ten years, or nine years I suppose, once."

"Those don't count. I hadn't met you yet." He tugged me into a one-armed-hug, and I laughed,
conceding the point. "This way, though. I can't wait for you to meet Diadora. You'll adore her."

"I already do. She sent me letters, remember?"

"Ah. Right."

"Did you really forget?"

"Shush."

"You did!"

As we walked, I continued teasing him, mostly because I found it so easy and hilarious, and he teased back and protested in equal measure. The servants we passed smiled at us indulgently as they bowed politely, and I wondered how many knew I was his sister. I wondered how many guessed. I wasn't wearing a hood at the moment, simply a jacket, so my hair was clearly visible. With Arvis right next to me, it was very obvious what shade of red it was. But I could fret on that another time. After all, I was still fairly certain Chulainn and I would live in Silese, so it wouldn't matter as much if people knew of didn't know.

"Oh my, I didn't expect people at this hour." An oddly familiar voice caught me off-guard, and I broke off mid-teasing to look for the source. It wasn't hard. The man in a hooded robe was the only other person in the hallway, besides Arvis and me. "Good afternoon," he greeted, bowing his head slightly. The robes were familiar. The voice was familiar. I didn't like that they were familiar. "Are you visiting King Azmur?"

"Yes, Manfroy," Arvis replied easily. While he held himself warily, he still talked politely. He knew this man. "But you need to be careful walking around still."

"As I said, I expected the hallway to be empty. We try to keep things quiet for the ailing king." He smiled slowly, and dread crept down my spine at how familiar it was and at how familiar the calculating gleam in his eyes was. If I didn't know better, I would swear this man was the one who nearly killed me, and kidnapped Deirdre. But... but surely, that wasn't... "Best be careful later. The sky grows overcast."

"I'll keep it in mind." Arvis nodded, and I frowned, becoming more and more confused by the second. It couldn't be that man. But if it was, then what was he doing here? How would Arvis know him? "Until later, Manfroy."

"Of course." Manfroy bowed slightly, his eyes falling on me briefly before leaving, walking down the hall and disappearing from sight.

Still, horribly confused, I opened my mouth to ask Arvis about him, but no sound came out. I couldn't formulate the words, or string together my thoughts coherently enough. Arvis didn't notice my shock, and instead lead me to a door with surprisingly intricate carvings. After a moment, I realized that the carvings very subtly traced out common symbols to Naga. I wondered why for a moment, and then Arvis knocked on the door and it became obvious. This must be King Azmur's room.

"Just a moment!" A cheerful voice filtered through the door, and I froze at it. I knew that voice. I definitely knew that voice. I'd know it anywhere. "Yes?" Just as I knew the person who opened the door, the young woman with long silver hair held back with a circlet and sparkling-warm amethyst eyes. I'd always recognize her. "Ah, Arvis!" she laughed, kissing his cheek in greeting. "I thought you were busy?"
"I was and still am, Diadora," Arvis replied, smiling ruefully. At the name, my eyes darted to the necklace she was wearing and the earrings. Both were the wedding gifts I had sent to 'Diadora'. But the person I was looking at was… "However, two special guests arrived and I thought it would be nice for you to finally meet one of them, at least."

"Oh?" She focused on me then, frowning in confusion, and then her eyes went to my hair. "Valared… oh! Are you Alicia?!" She took my hands in hers, smiling brightly. The smile was the same. Everything was the same! "It's so nice to finally meet you!" Deirdre, we already knew each other! "This is the best day!" What was going on?!

"She's offered to look into King Azmur's health."

"You're the sweetest, Alicia!" Deirdre… Diadora… tugged me into the room with her. "You keep on doing what you need to do, dear. But don't hurt yourself, please? I'd grieve horrendously if anything happened to you."

"I will be perfectly fine, Diadora." Arvis took her hand and kissed it, laughing at her blush. "You still get embarrassed? We're married."

"Oh, go back to work!" She shoved him playfully down the hall and Arvis laughed. I could only stare in total incomprehension. Why was Deidre here? Why was she…? What was…? "I love you!"

"Love you too." Still laughing, Arvis walked down the hall, eventually disappearing from sight.

"I'm going to get him back for that." Deirdre shut the door and skipped over to the older man lying in bed, moving his pillows up. "Grandfather, a healer is here to check up on you. Please be good for her."

"I'm not sure another healer is going to change things, but I'll go through the check up for you, Diadora," the man replied. So, this was King Azmur. I had never seen him before. He looked… old? That was all I could tell. I was completely stunned by everything, confused beyond belief. "The hair… ah, you must be Arvis's sister. The healer he boasts is the best in all the lands."

"I see Arvis is exaggerating again," I instantly deadpanned. At that point, all of my training kicked in and I shoved everything aside to be 'the healer'. "Well, let's see how you are, and if it's treatable, shall we?" I walked over and absently set the Book of Naga on the nightstand, not finding it even remotely important in the current situation. Diadora… Deirdre… giggled and headed over to the curtains to pin them back better. Outside, the sky was grey, like rain was about to come. "When did the symptoms start?"

"When I lost my son." King Azmur said the words simply, yet the raw pain was enough to make me wince even with my training. Then again, I was also terrified of outliving my children. It was a fear most parents could relate to. "So honestly, I'm not sure it's an illness and just…"

"There is no such thing as a pain without reason. If you are ill, then you are ill. That it might be triggered by something emotional doesn't make it any less of an illness." Using my staff, I checked over him carefully, noting the physical signs, as well the parts where he 'should' be fine, physically, but clearly wasn't. "Still, I think I get your meaning. I think your condition is simply age and stress taking their toll. There are medicines that can reduce the symptoms and extend your life, though. I'll make them up later."

"Oh, good. My greatest hope is that I live to see my great-grandchildren." He smiled warmly and, startling, it reminded me of Deirdre's. Though, then again, that made sense she she was… apparently… "Stress, huh? I can see that easily. Running a kingdom isn't easy…" His voice got
softer and softer, like he was just thinking aloud. So, I barely paid attention and worked on easing what symptoms I could. "Still can't believe Byron would kill Kurth, though..." I paused and frowned, wondering why he'd say that. Then again, between how softly he was 'talking' and how disoriented I was, it was entirely possible I misheard.

"So, what's the verdict?" Diadora appeared by the bed again, watching me heal some of King Azmur's aches with sparkling eyes. "Oh, wow, healing is amazing," she breathed, smiling. "I've some skill with staves, but I can't get healing staves to work at all for me. It's weird."

"It's just a little quirk, dear one," King Azmur reassured, reaching out to hug her. She laughed and hugged him back. I remembered how Deirdre had mentioned how lonely she was, growing up. "But with that said, you shouldn't be stuck inside with an old man. Go outside! It's cloudy, yes, but the fresh air will be good for you."

"Well, all right. If you say so." She kissed his cheek, waited for me to be done, and then promptly tugged me out of the room with her. "Love you, Grandfather! I'll be back by for dinner!"

Knocked out of the healer mindset, I went right back to confusion and let Deirdre pull me this way and that, following like a ragdoll, albeit a ragdoll that kept an iron grip on her healing staff. All of this was familiar. It was definitely her. But why was she here? What happened to her memories? She was the Naga Major? How had I not noticed? The silver in Seliph's Mark... the timing of Deirdre's disappearance and 'Diadora' appearing in Velthomer... Thousands upon thousands of tiny hints and clues filtered through my head, easy to ignore and forget at the time, but now... but now, I... Then there was the simple matter how how I never asked what she had looked like. If I had, I would've known. If I had asked what others considered 'basic knowledge', this could've... but no, I hadn't considered it and Arvis and I made it a game, a game that...

"And here are my favorite gardens!" Deirdre suddenly declared. Though based on her wording, it hadn't been 'sudden'. She must've been rattling off locations as we went. I had just been too lost in my thoughts to hear her. "There's always flowers growing here, no matter the season!"

"I can see that," I whispered, looking around as if the scenery would ground me. But it didn't. All I could process was 'bunches of colorful and pretty flowers, despite the cold'. "It's pretty."

"Isn't it?" Deirdre giggled, skipping ahead. I followed slowly, like a puppy, because I had no idea what else to do. "Ah, I'm so glad you're here! I finally get to meet you!" She clapped her hands in delight, meaning every word. But they hurt my heart, because it was Deirdre. She was my best friend. Yet she didn't know me anymore. She didn't... "You know; I sometimes wonder if I came from a place with pretty flowers and trees. There's something so nostalgic about them."

"Maybe you lived near a forest." There was no 'maybe' about it. I knew she had. But what was I supposed to say? What was I supposed to do? She was clearly happy. What could I...?

"Oh, maybe!" She laughed, still skipping ahead. I stumbled over nothing, barely keeping myself from falling on my face. "Oh no, was there a loose stone? I'll get someone to check into that."

"No, no, it's fine." I continued to struggle with what to say and how to react, but as I did, I noticed a very strange sound on the wind. It almost sounded like screams and... and fighting. But that wasn't... why would there be...? "What is that?"

"Hmm? Oh, that's Arvis dealing with the rebels who killed my father likely." Deirdre clasped her hands in front of her and smiled sadly. "I'm sad that they must fight, but sometimes, you just have to kill the evil sorcerer to save the princess, you know?"
"Rebels?" Cold dread dripped down my spine. We were too far away to deal with Reptor right? "What rebels?"

"Well, the ones led by someone named Sigurd." She hummed a bit in thought. I felt like I'd been stabbed. "You know; there's something strangely familiar about his name and... wait, Alicia?!" It wasn't until I heard her yelp that I recognized I was running. I was so out of it, so disoriented, that I hadn't even noticed. "Alicia, not that way! That leads...!"

I didn't stop. I just kept on racing through the halls, as fast as I could. As I ran, I saw meteor spells raining down from the sky. I smelled acrid smoke and saw it spiraling up into the uncaring sky. I smelled blood and burnt flesh. I heard the sounds of fighting, from metal clanging on metal to screams of fury and pain. I knew some of those screams. I recognized them, and that made me run all the faster. I dodged well-meaning soldiers and servants left and right, pushing my way outside. Whenever a way was completely blocked, I turned a different way and kept on going. After what felt like an eternity, I finally found a way outside through a side door and stumbled through, heading for the sounds of chaos, trying to desperately to find my friends, wondering just what was going on. None of this made sense to me. None of this processed. But I could figure that out later. I could figure out everything later. For now, I just had to find...!

I swung around a corner and was 'treated' to two sights. One was the battle itself, where our army was fighting for their lives after getting hit with the perfect ambush of royal guards and Velthomer mages. The second was Chulainn, all alone, being hit with two Meteors at once.

"Chulainn!" I screamed, running towards him. I barely caught him as he fell, both of us crashing to the ground, and winced at all the burns he had. Gods, one of his eyes was seared shut! "Chulainn, hang on!" Thankfully through all of this, I still held onto my staff. So, I began healing him except... except the healing magic... it wouldn't take... "Why? Why isn't it working...?"

"Alicia...?" Chulainn rasped. He opened his remaining eye slightly. It was unfocused, cloudy. I wondered if he'd taken a head injury before this. "Alicia, is that...?"

"Yes, I'm right here." I leaned down to kiss him, wincing at the soot and how chapped his lips were. But even with that, it was still warm, and still sweet, like all of his kisses. "Hang on, dear. I'll heal you right up."

"You need to... get out of here..."

"I will, after I heal you." However, no matter how much power I put into my staff, it wouldn't take. It wouldn't... why couldn't I...? "Then we'll go together."

"You know... this is a better end... than I thought I would have..." He leaned more against me and closed his eye. I kept trying to get my stupid staff to work. "A better life really... than I thought..."

"Stop talking like that." I held onto him a little more tightly and brought up my staff to see if it was broken. But no, it was whole. The gem on top sparkled in the light of the various fire spells trying to kill my friends, as if to mock me. "I..."

"Got to reunite with my best friend... got to make new friends and a new family..." Chulainn smiled warmly, even with the burns to his face. "Fell in love with a wonderful woman... fathered two adorable children..."

"Yes, and we have to go get them, remember?" My voice cracked and I held onto him even more tightly, desperately trying to will the staff to work, for the healing magic to take. "Why isn't it working?! I've healed burns before! I've healed so many before!" So why? Why?!
"Ah, but who is… going to… take care of you? You overwork so much…" He raised his hand and slowly hunted for mine, running his fingers over the ring he bought me. I only wore one glove. I never put it back on after showing Arvis the ring. "You're so stubborn…"

"Right? That's why you…!" I coughed, trying to clear my throat. The air was thick with the smell of smoke and burnt flesh, with the smell of blood and the smell of death. "Just be quiet while I heal you! I will heal you!"

"See? Stubborn." He smiled sweetly, though. "I love you, Alicia. I love you more than anything and anyone. I am so glad I met you."

"I love you too…" My voice cracked again and the tears began falling. "I love you too! So please, don't leave me!" His hand fell from mine. "Don't leave me, Chulainn! Please!" There was no answer. "Chulainn…?" He was still smiling, but he didn't answer me. "Please…?" He didn't move. He wasn't breathing. "Please don't… don't leave me…" But, of course, there was no use pleading. Corpses didn't exactly have a choice when death came.

Still, even knowing that, I continued trying to shake him awake. I continued trying to heal him. I knew it wouldn't work. I knew it wouldn't take. But I couldn't… he couldn't be gone. That wasn't that wasn't fair. He had appeared in my life out of nowhere, a twist of fate where he happened to be in the arena and fought Ayra. He had taken care of me, supported me, teased me, loved me. But he wasn't supposed to leave as abruptly as he entered my life. He was supposed to stay. He had promised to stay. He was… this wasn't… this couldn't…!

"Alicia!" Lachesis appeared at my side, hair patchy from burns and matted from blood. In one hand, she wielded her Earth Sword. In the other, she held a staff. I wondered where her other weapons were. They were probably lost to the chaos. "Hey, we have to move!" she insisted, shaking my shoulder. She glanced down at who I was holding and saw me 'healing' him still. "Oh, right, of course. Sorry, I hyperfocused there." She knelt down and took Chulainn's arm. "Here, I've Hezul's strength, so I can easily carry…" She trailed off as she realized what had happened. Her fingers were right on his wrist, after all. "Oh… oh no…" She dropped Chulainn's arm and stared at him in horror before looking at me, noticing my tears at least. "Oh, Alicia…" Slowly, carefully, she got me to let go of Chulainn and she moved him safely off to the side. "We'll… we'll come back for him." Then she pulled me up, steadying me when my legs refused to work. "I've got you, Alicia. Stay with me. Just like you helped me, I'll help you."

She took my free hand and dragged me behind her as she ran, killing any enemy that tried to block our path with ease. It was a good thing she could, and that the Earth Sword healed her as she killed enemies, as I was as usefull as a doll or a heavy piece of baggage. I couldn't think. I couldn't react. Meteor spells hit the nearby buildings and blasted them apart, sending rubble flying all of the place, killing more people. There was blood everywhere. There was death everywhere. I knew, distantly, that I should try to heal someone. I should try. But would it work? What was the point? I failed to heal… I couldn't...

"Arvis, you bastard!" Sigurd's uncharacteristic anger broke through the cobwebs in my head, and reminded me of how I had promised Eldigan that I'd watch out for him. So, focusing on that, I turned towards the sound, ready to shout and tell him to just run. I saw him at the base of the stairs heading to the castle and, somewhere in the split-second I had, I noticed he didn't have Tyrfing in hand and I wondered why. Had he disarmed because this was all supposed to be peaceful? I wanted to ask. I wanted to tell him I'd seen Deirdre. I wanted to apologize for… for all of this. I wanted a hug.

But the very next second, flames that roared with power drowned him and those nearby, the heat
alone enough to crack the ground. When the fires cleared, there was only ash. Sigurd was gone. Sigurd was dead. There wasn't even a body to bury.

"N-no..." Lachesis whimpered, swaying slightly. Her grey face and wide eyes showed she had watched too. That split-second... "No, why...?" It wasn't right. It wasn't right. Sigurd had always been bright and cheerful, passionate and driven. "Why is this...?" Sigurd had always been the knight in shining armor, larger than life. "What did we do to deserve this?" It seemed impossible that he'd be gone, especially so quickly. To have no chance for final words, for final hugs, for final smiles... "Why do the gods hate us this much?" It shouldn't be possible. This shouldn't be happening. This shouldn't have happened. It was like finding Ethlyn and Quan all over again, except... except... "Why...?!"

There was no answer, and both of us just stood there dumbly, staring at the ash as the wind slowly scattered it. Then someone bumped into us and we were both moving again. It wasn't like we wanted to move or anything. We had both just automatically stumbled to not fall on our faces, and that had been enough to make our bodies move. Our minds couldn't process everything that was going on, but our bodies had decided between 'fight, flight, and freeze' and had picked 'flight'. So we ran. We ran and ran until we found people we knew: Jamke, Brigid, and a dead Midir.

"Damn it, Midir, wake up!" Brigid snapped, shaking him. Blood trickled down her face, and her long hair had been cut at some point. The even ends hinted that it had been deliberate, for whatever reason. "Come on!" Midir's head lolled about on his neck. Distantly, I thought about how this all technically began with me healing Midir. The gaping hole in his gut, though, showed that trying would be pointless. My, how useful I was. I was a healer, and yet, all I could was watch as everyone died. "What... what am I supposed to tell Aideen?!"

"I think we need to prioritize surviving to tell," Jamke retorted, pulling her from Midir. He looked up then and saw Lachesis and me, just staring at them, and dead Midir. "Oh, yay, living people. Hi."

"Hi," Lachesis replied automatically. I attempted to wave awkwardly, but Lachesis held one hand and I still kept my iron grip on my staff with the other. "Midir..."

"Later. We need to get out of here." He helped Brigid stand and the two limped over to us. Automatically, I tended to their injuries, focusing on their legs and arms, so that they could run and they could fight. I could do that much, at least. Amazing. "Thanks."

"I'm glad to help," I mumbled. I smiled brokenly at Jamke, remembering a conversation we'd had once. "Ha... I guess I shouldn't have..."

"Nope," Jamke cut me off, likely remembering it too. "Not a word. Not your fault." Jamke hugged me and kissed my head. "It's his, for abusing that trust. Not yours."

"But..."

"I mean it."

"...Sure..." If only it was so easy to believe as it was to speak. But I could only think of a thousand and one things I should have noticed, but didn't. "I..."

"Sigurd is dead, so we really need to run," Lachesis whispered, keeping everyone focused. Jamke and Brigid both winced. Jamke was good friends with Sigurd, had been since the Verdane campaign, and no doubt Brigid was wondering how she'd explain that to Aideen too. Gods, that was going to be an awkward conversation. 'Hey, your childhood friends and your husband died!'
"Do we know where the others are?"

"Not a damn clue," Brigid growled. She pushed her hair out of her face, and then spun, drawing Yewfelle and firing in a smooth motion. A royal guard fell easily, as did the one behind them. Yewfelle's arrow of light had pierced through both of them. "We were trying to find Dew. We got separated."

"Oh no…" Lachesis teared up. "I told him to stay back."

"So did we. But hey, he's always been quick. Maybe he got lucky. Someone has to get lucky in this scenario, at least." She pointed down a path. "Let's head that way for now. It's as good of a path as any, right?"

Silently, we all agreed, and we moved quickly. I stumbled a few times, not being athletic at all, but Jamke caught and helped me. Lachesis and Brigid handled any fighting we had to do, pushing through in random directions to try and find some path out of the chaos. There was no 'winning' this battle. Surviving was hard enough.

"Hey!" Sylvia's surprisingly cheerful greeting caught all four of us off-guard, and we turned to see her and Claude safely tucked behind a broken building, with Claude healing her leg. To my relief, Lene was also alive and surprisingly untouched. The worst seemed to be the soot and, despite everything, she was asleep in the sling Sylvia kept around her always. "A child's trust is humbling to be certain," she murmured, smiling at us. She'd noticed where most of our attention went. "Hey, Alicia, Claude's injured. Can you…?"

"Of course," I whispered, already moving. He silently asked me to wait until he was done with Sylvia before letting himself be treated. "How is Lene?"

"She's fine. Sleeping because she somehow believes we'll be okay." She shrugged and turned towards Lachesis, Brigid, and Jamke. "Hey, have you guys seen Erinys or Lewyn? Claude and I had stepped away because Lene was bothered by all the noise…"

"Well, this is a fine mess we're in," Claude murmured, wincing as I patched him up as best as I could. There was no point at listening to the conversation the other four were having. The answer was likely 'no, we have no idea where they are'. "I always knew Arvis was clever and ambitious, but…"

"Did you know this was going to happen?" I asked quietly. When I finished healing him, I tugged his sleeve, looking down at the ground. If I looked at him, I might just snap. "Was this why you were always sad? Was this…?"

"What I saw in my vision was nowhere near as extensive or devastating as what we're dealing with." So, yes, he had. I now wondered if he was lying, because saying that he had seen all of this would definitely have led to me screaming. We didn't have the time for that. "And while I did see Sigurd dying, there was a body left behind." He held up the Valkyrie Staff, practically gleaming despite the soot, blood, and mud. I was sure it was mocking us. "I thought the gods wanted me to use Valkyrie on him, a conviction that strengthened with each one I failed…"

"Can you still…?"

"No, you need a body. It won't work without…" He closed his eyes and gripped Valkyrie tightly, enough for it to shake. "Why did the gods give us this? Did I miss the opportunity to use it? I have no idea. At this point, I am as lost as anyone else."
"I see." I fell silent, not sure how to respond or how to react. The screams were slowly growing quieter, hinting that the 'battle' was ending, though meteors still rained down, likely to eradicate any resistance at all. "We should-

Claude suddenly shoved me back, hard enough to make me crash to the ground. I scrambled to my feet, a flash of fury flooding me as I wonder why he'd do such a thing. Then the building we'd been near collapsed, the rubble separating me from them. I coughed at the dust and ash it kicked up and then stared blankly when I noticed just where it had fell. That would've killed me. That definitely, definitely would've...

"Alicia!" Lachesis desperately shouted. I barely heard her, even when I pressed against the rubble to get as 'close' as I could. "Alicia!"

"I'm fine!" I shouted back. The pile of rubble creaked ominously, hinting that it wouldn't stay 'stable' for long. "Are you?"

"Yes, we're all fine! The worst is that Lene woke up crying!" That was so easy to imagine. It had been very loud. "We should… argh, it's covering the whole damn path!" It was and, worse, it continued to creak. It was going to collapse again. "I don't think I can climb… damn it!"

"I'm… I'm going to try and find some of the others and escape!" This was… this was all I could do for her. Gods, this… Why…? "You need to get out of here!"

"But!"

"You need to get to Leonster, to Finn! They need to know what happened here!" A small piece of stone fell onto my shoulder. There was no more time. "Quickly! More is about to fall!"

"But…!"

"She's right! We must run south!" Claude declared firmly. I had to strain to hear him. "Now! Before we're all crushed!"

"Alicia, I love you!" Lachesis shouted desperately. I heard her struggle to stay by the rubble, to say just a few more things. "I'm glad I met you! Thank you for everything! I'll.. I'll see you…!"

"I love you too!" I shouted back. My free hand dug into the stone, like I could claw my way through, but that was impossible. I doubted even Hezul himself could move this. "I'm so glad I met you! Sylvia, Claude, Jamke, Brigid, thank you for everything! I will see you again, so stay safe!"

Another stone fell near me. I jumped back, stumbled, and ran a few steps away. On the fourth step, the rubble collapsed again, along with more of the nearby buildings, very firmly blocking the path. If I had stayed near, I would've been crushed. I hoped the others had managed to escape. I hoped… well, I hoped for a lot of things and honestly, I wanted to collapse and scream. But instead, I made myself run. I tripped quite a few times, unable to keep coordinated. The smoke was getting overwhelming and the buildings were creaking. A few collapsed right next to me, with me barely dodging. Some part of me thought the gods were giving me repeated little 'miracles'. Most of me thought the gods weren't anywhere near, much less helping us.

"Ack!" I yelped as I crashed right into someone hard enough to actually bloody my lip. The person steadied me and I jerked my head up to see it was Lex. He was sooty, muddy, but surprisingly not hurt at all. "Lex…?"

"Hey there," he replied, smiling slightly. "Oh, thank everything. Azel was wondering…" He hugged me, and then just outright picked me up and carried me down the path. I didn't mind. I was
back to being shocked, stunned, and disoriented. "Hey, found Alicia!"

"Well, maybe the gods are giving us some sort of blessing!" Ayra appeared and helped me down. "You don't look… too worse for wear," she murmured. "Now, we have to find Chulainn…"

"Chulainn's…" I began. My eyes filled with tears, though, and I couldn't say the word. "He's…"

"...Oh…" She hugged me tightly. "Oh, they'll pay for that. They'll pay for all of this."

"Lachesis, Brigid, Jamke, Claude, Sylvia, and Lene all escaped south, I think. Midir is…" Again, I couldn't say the word. "Sigurd is…"

"They're paying for all of this." She kissed my head and gently rocked me. I just leaned into her.

"Gods, they should be glad I wasn't near the front."

"Yeah…" I pulled away to look at her. Like Lex, she was uninjured. "There's no blood. I'm glad, but why?"

"Damned lucky," Lex growled. He gestured for Ayra and me to follow him. "Ethnia found Tailtiu in the crowd and insisted on us following her away from the group. Thought it weird, but she must've known what was planned. Thanks to it, we avoided the initial hit, though we got separated from Ethnia. Lewyn wasn't so lucky, though. Damned that cloaked bastard."

"What do you mean?" I asked. However, as we walked down the path, the sound of sobbing slowly grew louder. "Oh no. Oh no, no, no…"

We turned the corner and ended up in what must've been a small market square if this had been a normal day. Now, there were corpses strewn about, small fires smoldering, shattered buildings, and blood turning the ground muddy. In the center of it, I saw Lewyn laying on the ground with gaping wounds bleeding sluggishly, and Tailtiu feverishly attempting to heal him. Nearby, Erinys was bawling into Azel's shoulder and he tried to comfort her. Over her head, he and I shared a look of total incomprehension. The smoke, the screams, the blood… it all clearly stated what happened, but we couldn't… we couldn't…

"Alicia!" Tailtiu called. She looked up, silently crying. "Can you…?" Automatically, stiffly, I knelt down by Lewyn to see if I could do anything. Lex and Ayra both drew weapons, ready to protect us if need be. "Thank you!" She hopped to her feet and helped Azel reassure Erinys, but I thought the gratitude was… well, it was just like with Chulainn. I could see that easily, and though I tried anyway, I saw how the healing magic shied away from him. He might be breathing, barely, but he was too far gone. I couldn't… once again, I was just helpless while…

Then, all of a sudden, the wounds began healing. I frowned, noticing that the healing magic hadn't done that. They just healed on their own, at a pace that defied all logic and reason. They healed and Lewyn took a deep breath and started coughing, groaning and rolling onto his side. The others cheered, thinking that it was just a difference in power or skill that had saved Lewyn, but I knew what I'd seen. I'd had nothing to do with this. This was…

"Lewyn, what just happened?" I whispered, helping him sit up. Nearby, I saw Erinys call for her pegasus, the only mount I had seen in this chaos. I wondered where the others were. They probably died, or scattered in fear. "What did you do?"

"I made…" he began, leaning heavily against me. He coughed, struggling to breath. Now healing magic worked, but I could only ease some of it. "I made a bargain."

"You did?" That didn't make any sense at all! "Who?"
"Forseti." He smiled painfully. "So that he can help."

"...Make sure you tell Erinys." It still made no sense to me, but I supposed it didn't have to. "Okay?"

"I will. Thank you."

"I didn't do anything."

"It's for everything, Alicia. It's for everything you've helped me with, throughout the years." He leaned even more heavily against me, his eyes closed. "I should've seen you and Azel off. I should've warned you about how the wind was nervous about something. I stupidly thought it was just Reptor, since he had a Holy Weapon. I should've listened better."

"All of us probably should've made different decisions." Though, at the same time, I wasn't sure what those decisions should've been. "Come on. Let's get you up."

"Okay…"

"You should just head ahead with him," Ayra was saying to Erinys as I helped Lewyn limp over. Tailtiu held the pegasus still while Lex helped Lewyn actually get into the saddle. "If you fly high enough, you should escape detection with ease and warn Queen Rahna about what happened."

"But I can't just leave you all!" Erinys insisted. She was still crying, overwhelmed by everything. "You all… ah!"

We all looked up to see three meteors flying our way. Azel 'seized' one with his magic and dissipated it. Tailtiu blasted the second one apart with a Thoron spell. Lewyn gestured sharply, appearing to use wind magic to redirect the last one, but in the split-second before the meteor changed directory, I swore I saw a tiny little ball of light that flashed briefly into Annand's form. But that was more than likely me hallucinating. Then again, Forseti...

"See? There's no time to argue," Arya pointed out. She and Tailtiu helped get Erinys mounted and secure. Lewyn leaned heavily against her back, truly unable to do anything else. "Get going. Get back to your son. We'll be by before long. We just have to take a different way."

"Okay…” Erinys reluctantly agreed, sobbing. "But you have to promise…"

"Of course."

"Okay…” Erinys reached out and Ayra gave her a hug. Then Lex did. Tailtiu. Azel. When it came time for my hug, she whispered, "thank you so much. For everything."

"Fly safely," I whispered back. I stepped away and she took off. Lewyn moved just enough to wave us goodbye before leaning fully on Erinys, still struggling to breath.

As soon as she was out of sight, past the smoke, all of us were running again. I quickly fell behind though, because I was just so tired. I had never run this much in my life and I had never been athletic. I cursed myself for how I was slowing the group down, making them frequently stop for me to catch up, and wondered if I should just stop and have them go ahead and leave me behind.

Then, as if my thoughts had summoned it, another one of the nearby buildings collapsed, separating me from the others. Maybe I shouldn't ever think again. Ever.

"I'm okay!" I shouted automatically, pressing against the rubble in the hopes it would help them
hear me better. I heard some sort of movement beyond the stones. "Just run! I'll find another way!"

"Lady Sister!" Azel shouted back. Something hit the stone and the top ones shifted. One actually fell right next to me. "Lex, don't hit it again! It'll fall on us!"

"I love you very much, Azel!" I made myself smile, even though I knew he wouldn't see it. "I am so glad I finally got to meet you!"

"I love you too! I'll see you again! We'll head to Silesse, so meet us there!" There was the sound of squeaking, or so I thought. "Tailtiu loves you too!"

"I love her too!" I yelped as more stones fell, again right next to me. "Get going!"

"Alicia!" That was Ayra. Azel and Tailtiu must've already left. "Alicia, Lex and I will eventually make our way to Isaach, so if you can't make it to Silesse, head there!" she instructed. She sounded surprisingly calm and perfectly sincere. She believed the words with everything she had. "We'll find you!"

"That sounds good!" I replied, making myself laugh. I rested my hand on the stone and my ring caught the light. It reminded me of the conversation we'd had in the desert. "Everything is all the more precious when you might part, right?"

"And I don't regret a single second. But I'll find you in Isaach or Silesse. I promise."

"I love you and Lex very much."

"We love you too."

That was it. I thought I heard the sounds of running, hinting that they were making their escape. I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that they, at least, would be safe. I hoped. But I had to do more than hope. I had to escape. I had to get away. I had to…

Something wet fell on my hand, but when I looked, there was nothing there. That confused me for a long moment, but then a tiny white snowflake landed on my hand and I thought to look up to the overcast sky. It was snowing. It was the first snow of the year, for me at least. We had left Silesse before the first snow hit there. Langbalt and Andrei had attacked when they did to avoid getting caught, and we had also left to avoid getting caught.

But during the first snow last year, Chulainn and I had walked through the gardens with Caitriona and Conall. Since it had been before even the Sillesean Civil War, everything had been peaceful. Chulainn had first predicted Caitriona and Conall's eye colors during that walk, correctly at that. We had talked about living in Silesse once things calmed down. I was going to be a simple village healer again, living quietly. Chulainn was going to be a 'house husband', who would take care of the house and children while I worked. We were going to have two dogs that would likely drive me crazy, but would make him and the children laugh and laugh. We were going to visit the others. We were going to… we were supposed to…

My legs buckled and my knees hit the ground hard enough to bruise. I leaned to the side and crashed into the fallen rubble, ignoring the tiny stones that fell near and on me. My staff tumbled from my hands to roll across the bloody, muddy ground. My arms hung awkwardly next to me, one lying across my stomach for no other reason besides momentum. I knew I should get up. I knew I should move. I knew I still had things to do. I had to escape. I had to find my children. I had to keep my promise to Shanan. I had to reunite with my friends. There were so many things I had to do, but I couldn't move. No matter how many times I tried to will myself to stand up, to keep going, I
couldn't. Nothing would respond. All I could do was stare blankly as the snow slowly fell and covered the blood and soot, as if it could hide everything that happened, as if its prettiness could mask all the death.

I might have stayed that way until the snow and cold took me, but crunching footsteps caught my attention enough for my eyes to dart to the side. Once I saw the cloaked man, 'Manfroy', the one who had kidnapped Deirdre, the one who apparently 'killed' Lewyn… I managed to move my head up and over to look at him properly. It hurt, though, and it took all my strength. But I did it. I felt oddly proud of myself for that.

"Poor sweet child of Vala," Manfroy whispered, voice mocking in its 'comfort'. He continued to walk towards me. "All alone among the snow? You look like you're in pain. I'll make it go away for you."

"Will you kill me?" I asked softly. The words came so easily, almost too easily. "Is that what you mean, or do you mean whatever you did to Deirdre?"

"While tempting to do the former, since you're as unpredictable as the rest of your army, the latter seems much more… useful." He continued to come closer, slowly. "But it'll be fine. You'll forget the pain and find a new path."

"So that's what you did. You took her memories, dropped her off in Velthomer, and then… what?" I wasn't sure how much I cared. I was just… talking. I was talking, because I couldn't move. Maybe I could move if I stopped talking, but… "Why?"

"I don't see a reason in answering that." Manfroy shrugged and reached out towards me. "You'll just forget the answer, as soon as I'm done helping you forget."

"So that I am useful? You intend to use me against Arvis?" That sentence finally sparked something in me, and I drew on the power of my Holy Blood. The snow around me melted into mud and he paused, eyes wide with fright. "I hate to break it to you, but even in this state, I'd still rather die than be used." Fire began crawling across the ground, melting more of the snow. Manfroy stumbled back, shaking at the heat. I remember how he'd flinched at fire, the last time I'd seen him. I'd hesitated then. This time, though… "I should've burned you then. But I can try and fix that-"

"Alicia!" All resolve shattered at Arvis's shout. "Alicia, there you are!" All energy faded when he pushed past Manfroy, nearly knocking him to the ground, and crashed down next to me. "Good, you're not injured," he whispered, looking me over and cupping my face. He smiled gently at me, warmly, and I wondered how he could do that. I wondered how he could wear Sigurd's wedding gift and kill him. I wondered how he could do all of this and still… "Come on. It's snowing. We should get you inside and-"

"Why?" My voice was terribly small and terribly fragile. "Why?" I repeated, tears streaming down my face. I couldn't say anything else. I couldn't do anything else. All I could do was cry and ask… "Why?"

A tear hits her hand and she jerks back to avoid staining her writing. It's a good thing as the very next second, she's coughing up a lung, which might have messed up her writing even more. That would be bad. She had been working on this for quite some time. She doesn't want it ruined at the very end.

Once the fit subsides, she looks at everything she has written and decides that it's as good of an
ending as anything. She honestly isn't sure why she wrote everything down. She just… she just wants it to be known. The truth has been lost, untold, and she remembers Lewyn telling her, once, how interesting it would be to read of a war from a healer's perspective. She hopes it's good enough. She has no idea how to explain how they had just been a group of people, a group of fools really, who had continually done what they thought was right, who had continually fought for their ideals, and who had been rewarded with all their dreams and hopes scattered on the battlefield, lost and unfulfilled. Honestly, writing it all down just makes her wonder if there had been any meaning to their efforts. Still, the longer she looks, the more it just looks… incomplete. So, after a moment, she begins listing the names of the people she had known personally, their ages during final year, and what she has learned about their fates over the years.

Sigurd, 26, deceased at Belhalla (He was incinerated by Valflame, after meeting 'Diadora' when she came outside to try and find me. What a wonderful thing to see, right before the end...)

Naoise, 24, deceased (He was killed by the royal guard buying time for others to escape. It had taken half a day to recognize him. He, apparently, just kept charging at the enemy.)

Alec, 24, deceased (He was killed by the royal guard buying time for others to escape. He was easier to recognize, thankfully.)

Arden, 29, deceased (He was crushed by rubble, holding it up to buy people time to escape before collapsing. His body had been so mangled by it that I'd recognized him more by his armor than his face.)

Quan, 26, deceased (He was killed by Travant during the Yied Massacre.)

Ethlyn, 20, deceased (She was killed during the Yied Massacre.)

Finn, 20, missing (He disappeared after the fall of Leonster in 762. Most think he's alive, as there's been no sign of Leif either.)

Azel, 22, missing (He was last seen disappearing into the mountains of Silesse. I heard something about Friege soldiers finding him, but if so, they're keeping silent.)

Lex, 22, deceased (He was conveniently killed by 'bandits' in Isaach a few months ago, as reported by Danann, his elder brother who never got along with him.)

Midir, 25, deceased (He was killed by the royal guard, protecting Brigid and Jamke. The only survivor of the group that attacked them reported that, at last. The rest of the group had been slaughtered by Brigid and Jamke in retaliation.)

Aideen, 24, missing (She's somewhere in Isaach, hopefully still with Oifeye, Shanan, and the children. I hope her pregnancy, and birthing, went well.)

Dew, 17, missing (He disappeared in the chaos of the initial ambush. There's been no sign of him at all, so he's assumed to be one of the many bodies that couldn't be recovered or identified.)

Ayra, 21, deceased (She was conveniently killed by 'bandits' in Isaach a few months ago, just like Lex. You'd think Danann would be smart enough to come up with a different lie.)

Jamke, 25, missing (Though the body found south near the Thracian border might be his. I haven't seen it, but a couple of the items described do remind me of things he carried.)

Chulainn, 24, deceased (He was killed by meteor spells. He'd been separated from the group
because he'd been helping people escape. Of course he had...)

Lachesis, 19, missing (She disappeared after the fall of Leonster in 762. No one knows anything about her, though I hope she's with Finn.)

Lewyn, 23, missing (He's somewhere in Silesse, though perhaps that bargain he made with Forseti means he's elsewhere. I don't know.)

Sylvia, 20, missing (She was last seen somewhere in Darna. Inquiries lead to no extra information, not even on Lene.)

Erinys, 21, missing (She's somewhere in Silesse, possibly in the north near Thove. With Queen Rahn dead, she and Lewyn rule.)

Beowolf, 28, deceased (He was killed by meteor spells. I don't know the circumstances, but based on the bodies around his corpse, he'd gone out fighting.)

Tailltiu, 21, missing (Though rumors imply she might be in Alster with her family, but if so, they're hiding her from me.)

Claude, 27, missing (He, like Sylvia, was last seen somewhere in Darna. No one knows where he is, or the Valkyrie Staff for that matter.)

Brigid, 24, missing (If that was Jamke's body, then she's probably somewhere in Thracia. I wonder if she and Jamke ever married and had children.)

She finishes the list and smiles ruefully. These were all the people she knew the names of, just twenty-three people in the entire army. There were countless others in the army who had died that day, but she doesn't know them. She wonders if their families still grieve. She wonders if their families buy the propaganda lies. She knows Chalphy doesn't. They remain defiant, even now, chasing out every single lord that tries to rule and every single knight that tries to enforce the laws. Chalphy is part of the Grannvale Empire in name and name alone, and nothing but war is going to change that. It makes her smile.

Someone knocks on the door, but she doesn't respond. Instead, she grabs a new piece of paper and starts writing down tiny details that hadn't been important, but that she still remembered, like what Beowolf's favorite drink was or the exact mixtures for the specialized teas she had made people. She doesn't stop writing and remembering until she smells incense and a hand rests on her shoulder. She knows without looking up that it's Arvis. Every morning, Arvis heads to the crypt to burn incense for Chulainn, and the smell clings to him for a few hours afterwards. Arvis had insisted Chulainn be buried there, with the full honors as her 'husband'. A few had brought up she and Chulainn hadn't been officially married; they regretted it quickly. In Arvis's eyes, Chulainn was family, and her husband, and that was the end of the matter.

"What are you writing?" Arvis asks, peering at the paper curiously. She flips over the page, not wanting him to read it, yet. "Ah, a secret something?"

"Yes," she replies. She puts the last page in the pile with the others, marveling at how large it is. It makes sense, considering how much time is covered, but she's honestly surprised by how much she remembers. "I want it in a safe place."

"There's that vault in Velthomer that can only open to family. I'll put it there for you." He offers her a hand up and helps her walk out of her room when she takes it. "You're meeting Diadora in the gardens, right? I'll walk you there."
"Very well." She follows him slowly, and lets him continue to hold her hand. "You didn't have to escort me, though."

"It's a good excuse to spend time with you." He glances at her and smiles hesitantly. "I love you dearly, little sister."

"I love you too, Lord Brother." Things would be so much easier for her if she could hate him, she thinks. But then again, she's also well aware that if his 'sacrifices' hadn't been her friends, her family, she wouldn't have been nearly as affected. She likes to think she still wouldn't have liked it, but she knows she wouldn't have thought much about it before long, just as she didn't think much of the nameless soldiers she had healed and seen die. "You rule well."

"I try." That is their unspoken agreement. So long as he rules this new empire well, she 'forgives' him. Though, it's less 'forgiving' and more like what she did with Jamke, simply moving past the incident. It's less 'forgiving' and more like how she recognizes that just because she doesn't like something, that doesn't make it inherently wrong. Leaders sacrificed for the greater good all the time. Just because it hurt her, it didn't mean it didn't change things for the better for the 'many'. "I try."

They walk in silence until they reach the gardens, and he helps her to a bench to sit and kisses her cheek before heading to his morning meetings. It's how he and Diadora split their duties, most of the time. He handles the morning things, often the more political, while Diadora handles the afternoon things, often more focused on administrative. At least, she thinks. She honestly had never bothered to try and figure it out. She doesn't care. There's few things she cares about, nowadays.

"Ah, Alicia, you beat me here!" Diadora rushes over, smiling brightly like always. She smiles back, doing her best to make it as warm as possible. After all, Diadora is one of those 'few things'. "Thanks for walking with me!" she laughs, taking her hand and pulling her up. "It's always so much fun!"

"I enjoy it too," she murmurs. It's not a lie. She's renewed, reestablished?, her friendship with Diadora, just accepting the loss of memories for what it is. She's never told either her or Arvis the truth about how Diadora was Deirdre, even telling Arvis that they learned Deirdre died to hide it. She doesn't see the point. All it would do is cause them both pain. She tells herself that it's little different than a widow remarrying. It's just that Deirdre's first husband hadn't died before her remarriage. Some days, she wonders if it's the right decision. Most days, she can't bring herself to care. "Are you sure you're bundled up enough? It's cold."

"I am perfectly fine!" Diadora makes her voice haughty and it gets a bit of laughter from her. "Let's go... this way first!"

So they make their slow way through the gardens, gossiping about this and that. It's something they do as often as they can, because it gets her up and about. Without the walks, she might very well just spend all of her time in her bed, staring at nothing. But once she's up, she can keep on moving, which is often a good thing, particularly when there are rambunctious children about getting hurt and not quite learning that limits aren't always broken by pushing past them stubbornly.

"I'm sorry!" Ishtar blurts as they walk down the path. Ishtar had found her as soon as Diadora left for some empress-y duty and tugged her off, stopping only to let her get a staff. "I swear we were paying attention, but...!"

"We both know Julius is very stubborn," she reassures, ruffling Ishtar's hair. She's always had a soft spot for Ishtar; Ishtar is the same age as her twins. Sometimes, when she's particularly wistful,
she thinks of what good friends Ishtar might have been with Caitriona and Conall. "But you do need to remember that four year olds can have difficulties gauging things."

"Right..." Ishtar droops, but perks up as soon as they reached the small courtyard where she had been playing with Cyas, Julius, and Julia. "Found her!"

"Oh, good!" Cyas breaths, smiling in relief. She can see how he had been using her lessons to stabilize Julius, but she knows he'd been worried it wouldn't be enough. He'd also likely been worried that Manfroy would be by first. "He just collapsed and..."

"Ishtar told me," she murmurs, cutting him off gently. She crouches down next to little Julius, absently comforting Julia as she hovers nearby worried, and within moments, she has it all cleared up. "Bed rest for you for the rest of the day."

"Aw..." Julius whines, sulking even as he recovers from the difficulty in breathing. He cheers up when she leans down and kisses his forehead. As always, her lips buzz a bit, due to the dark red Holy Mark right there in the middle his forehead. She kisses there on purpose, aware that Julius is self-conscious about it. She imagines that when he is a little older, he'll wear a circlet much like Diadora does to hide hers. "Okay." He reaches up to silently ask her to carry him and she scoops him up with some difficulty. He is getting heavier, and she is getting weaker. "Sorry, Julia."

"Nap with you later," Julia replies, smiling. Just as Julius takes after Arvis in looks, Julia takes after Diadora, down to having the Major Naga blood despite being the younger twin. She knows it'll cause some succession issues later, but for now, this is enough. The two adore each other and are rarely apart for long. "Love you."

"Love you too." Julius waves and leans into her shoulder and she carries him out of the courtyard. She knows that, in a moment, Ishtar and Cyas would help Julia to the room for the promised nap. It had happened often enough for there to be a pattern. "Love you, Aunt Alicia."

"I love you too," she murmurs, struggling to carry him. A week ago, she could do this without a problem. That she struggles now screams what she's long since realized. Her body is falling apart. "Time for a nap." Still, even with that difficulty, she does make it to his room, and manages to tuck him in. He's asleep before she's even out the door, and it makes her smile. "Always pushing himself."

"That's what little boys do." The slightly patronizing voice makes her skin crawl and she makes a point of shutting the door to Julius's room before facing Manfroy. "I had heard he collapsed," he continues, pretending not to notice her frigid hostility. "I thought I'd check in."

"I have told you many times, Manfroy, that I have it completely under control," she reminds him tartly, venom in every word. Arvis, she still loves and can 'forgive'. Manfroy? She still wishes she had burned him. She hopes, one day, that perhaps she can play some small part in turning all his dreams and victories to ash, as he had turned hers. "I have also told you that Cowen also has it well in hand. There is no need for you to get involved in his health. We're fine."

"Such hostility." He sighs, shaking his head. "From a fellow heal-"

"You are no healer. Don't you dare pretend to be one." She glares at him. "I'm sure you're quite busy. You should get back to that."

"My, my..." He shrugs and walks down the hall. She notices him wincing and knows his scars are bothering him with the cold. "Well, we'll see what-"
"I'll mix up another balm for your scars later." She smirks when he whirls to face her, startled by her words. "As I said, you are no healer. That you are shocked by my actions each time I do this proves it."

She turns away, walking off with her head held high. She bites her tongue so much in matters dealing with him, not wanting to taint the very real happiness Arvis and Diadora had. So she's always quite pleased when she gets the last word with him, and she is even more pleased by how she's slowly warned the children about him. Cyas and Ishtar both hate him with a passion, and Julius and Julia already keep their distance. She hopes it continues, in the years to come. She simply does not trust Manfroy, though she has little problem with the Loptyrians themselves, so far at least. The children are adorable. There is a little boy named Salem in particular who she teaches staves to and he's always eager to learn more. It makes her smile, teaching is surprisingly fun, and provides another reason to get up in the mornings. Though she wishes...

Well, whatever her wishes, her body reminds her that it's not holding on for much longer. She begins coughing again, hard enough that she has to lean against a wall to stand up, and there's blood on her hand when she pulls it away. She's been falling apart ever since the massacre, and her body is finally giving up. Stubbornness only takes you so far, even when someone is as stubborn as her. She had hoped to hang on to at least see her children again, but...

A hand takes hers and turns it so that the blood is more visible. She looks up and sees Arvis looking sadly at the blood. Part of her winces at making him sad. Another part is sickeningly happy about it. "I'm going to strengthen the search for the children," he whispers. She closes her eyes at the reminder. Ever since the massacre, Arvis has sent search parties to look for the children. For what she thinks is obvious reasons, he's been unsuccessful. "That way…"

"Seeing my children again isn't going to magically make me better, Arivs," she points out tiredly. She watches the blood slowly drip down her hand, thinking of all the times her hands have been bloody in the past. It's been a long while since it was her own blood. "Who do you even have looking for them now?"

"Aida."

"Oh, well, she might keep your promise then." It had been one of the first things she had gotten out of him, when she had learned he was looking for them. 'Do not kill them.' He had agreed instantly, of course. He had no intention of killing children. That was part of the reason why he had done all of this. "She's very good at following your orders."

"The ones she agrees with." That's all he says, and she's grateful. Aida is much more difficult to 'forgive' for her part in the massacre, particularly her part in getting Azel away since Azel could have warned everyone about the meteors as he had in the desert. She knows it's hypocritical or something, but she can't help it anyway. "You're very worried."

"I am not convinced by Danann's story about how Lex and Ayra died." She's also not certain how safe things are here. That's why she's never gone herself to look for the children. It's not 'safe' yet. It might never be 'safe'. "That's all."

"I'll look into it." He wraps an arm around her shoulder and leads her down the hall. "For now, why don't we get you something to drink? There's fresh apple cider in the kitchens. I'll get you some."

He leads her back to her room before leaving to get the promised cider and she lingers by the window, looking out over the lively, thriving city of Belhalla. It had recovered well from the destruction of the massacre, and while she's grateful people can rebuild and recover, some part of
her is bitter that there isn't a single trace of the massacre that had stolen everything from her. The city rebuilds on the blood and bodies of her family, and pays them no mind. It's probably silly to be angry; people rebuilt all the time. But she suppose it's human nature to be at least a little hypocritical.

She gasps when she notices flurries dancing on the wind and presses her hand against the glass to confirm what she sees. It's the first snow of the year. With it, she knows, far better than any actual date, that it's the anniversary of the massacre. By this point, it has been five very lonely, very long years. It has been five years since she has seen any of her friends, has seen her children. It has been five years since...

"I have a horrible feeling that our children are going to take up our blades in the future," she whispers to no one. She wipes her hand over the glass to try and see better and blood smears it instead. She thinks it's fitting. "They'll fight to dispel the regrets we left behind, the messes we created but couldn't fix. I hope they can forgive us for leaving them with such awful burdens." She looks up at the grey sky and smiles bitterly. "Oh gods, if you ever hear a prayer of mine, if you will ever hear a prayer of mine, please let it be this one. Please, watch of them and keep them safe." She closes her eyes and, for a moment, she swears she hears her friends, her family. She swears she hears Chulainn and Sigurd, Ethlyn and Ayra, Quan and Midir and Lex. "So I beg, and so I pray. For their sakes, please... please, keep them safe."

A fortnight later, the bells of the city ring for the funeral of Duchess Alicia of Velthomer, younger sister of Emperor Arvis I, High Priestess, and Healer without Peer. She was twenty-eight years old.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: So, if you've ever wondered why this game is affectionately dubbed 'A Song of Ice and Fire Emblem' (fun fact, the first book of that series was published a few months after this game released, iirc), why there are comparisons between Ned Stark and Sigurd, or why Sigurd has a lot of fire jokes associated with him, here's why! Unlike Awakening (which utilizes time travel) and Fates (which utilizes the baby realms), FE4 utilizes the generation system via killing off the first generation. It's often considered one of the biggest twists in a Fire Emblem story (though between time and the nature of the game, most people know it's coming when they play), and Sigurd remains the only lord to die in his game, and stay dead. (Chrom dies in an alternate timeline in FE13, but remains alive in the 'present'. Hector dies in FE6, not FE7. Celica is 'killed' in FE15, but quickly brought back to life via Mila.)

The fates of most of the males after the Battle of Belhalla (or Belhalla Massacre) is left ambiguous in canon (though Kaga did release some of his 'scenarios', I don't consider them canon), while most of the women have their fates set in stone (the main exceptions to that are Ayra and Sylvia, though you get a few more hints for Sylvia than Ayra). We'll talk more about all the fates and the like when they're relevant. Note that the list up there is to the best of Alicia's knowledge, and she's aware she doesn't have all the information.

Since it's finally made a proper appearance, let's talk about Valflame a bit. It's the Holy Weapon of Fire, having 30 might like the rest of them, and it boosts magic, defense, and resistance by 10 each (it's Awakening incarnation boosted magic by 5 instead). Since Arvis has 30 magic, that's 70 attack going straight after the normally
lower resistance of your units, and combined with the defensive boosts… well, you're going after him with a Holy Weapon or you aren't going to survive. The utter destruction that the battle caused is based off of a drawing made of the battle, shown in *Fire Emblem: Thracia 776 Illustrated Works*.

Yes, I know there's the lovely meme from the original fan translation of 'Arvis, you dastard!', but that didn't flow right in the story. Manfroy attacking Lewyn comes from the opening scroll of FE4, actually, providing far more hints towards a twist at the end of gen2. Annand 'appearing' (possibly) comes from the Oosawa manga (ish. It's complicated). The paragraph before the list of names has some dialogue from the game, and the list itself is based on the end-of-gen scroll that happens. Salem, briefly mentioned here, is a playable char from FE5 (and, in fact, holds the honor being the very first playable dark mage in the series). Alicia's final words, her prayer for the future, is based off of some of Sigurd's dialogue from Heroes (highlighting the influence he had on her).

(Oh, and since this was asked and doesn't involve spoilers. I don't own a physical copy of the mangas, but the Oosawa manga has been translated all the way through Game-Chapter 6 so far, with the translation group slowly making their way through the rest of the series. Serenes Forest has a forum topic about it, and it has links to download all the currently translated pages. Seriously, they're all amazing. Go give them compliments or something.)

Next Chapter - Intermission
They messed up. They had lingered too long, too close. He had known that. They had known that. But they had heard that Aunt Ayra and Uncle Lex were near Isaach Castle and they just… they just couldn't help it. They had to see. It has been five years since they had seen anyone of the army they called 'family'. Five years since they left for safety and then heard of the horror called the 'Battle of Belhalla'. Even now, it hurts. Even now, he expects to see Sigurd riding up with a smile to give him a hug and ruffle his hair. He expects to step into an infirmary and see Alicia mending something, probably with Sylvia or Claude making medicine. He expects to find Chulainn outside in the early morning, and walk with him before lessons. He expects Uncle Lex to appear from nowhere and pick him up to let him ride on his shoulders, with Aunt Ayra laughing nearby. He expects… he can't believe they're dead even now. And if they're not dead, they're missing. The only person he knows of that isn't dead or missing is Alicia, but they're holding her prisoner in the castle. Or something. He thinks that's what it is, anyway.

Regardless, though, they messed up due to nostalgia and have to run. The Grannvale soldiers have already torched the village they had been hiding in, to chase people out into the streets for slaughter. Danann prefers the 'kill everyone' route when it came to 'dealing with rebels'. As if this is his country. He's half-certain someone is going to assassinate the bastard, who he really can't believe is Uncle Lex's brother. But, regardless, the village is being demolished, and so, a sane person would be long gone. To be fair, most are. But he's not, because when he, Oifeye, and Aideen had gotten the children out to safety, they had realized they were missing two: Caitriona and Conall. So, he had run back into the flames, desperately hunting for the two, wondering just why they hadn't followed. They were good about that typically. They had told them how unsafe it was.

"Where are they, damn it?" he growls, coughing from the smoke and heat. Soot is smeared by the sweat, giving his appearance an eerie grey look. Like a ghost, but with more coughing. "Where…?"

"...Nan…!" A tiny voice, barely louder than the crackling flames and the snapping wood of burning buildings. But it's enough for him, and he's after it immediately. "Shanan…!" As he gets closer, he recognizes the voice as Caitriona's. "Shanan! Help!"

"Caitriona!" He pushes straight through a falling apart wall and finds Caitriona curled up in a ball. The fire immediately around her seems to hesitate, like a nervous animal. Distantly, he wonders if she's instinctually using the power of her Vala… Fjal… whatever. If she's controlling the flames. "Hey, there…" He kneels down by her and gathers her up in his arms. "Hey, it's okay…"

"Shanan!" She leans into him, sobbing into his chest. "Shanan, it's scary!"

"I know. But I'm going to get you out of here." He had made a promise long ago. He would protect the children. Even if the people he had promised had died, he still will… "Where's Conall?"

"I… I don't know!" Her voice cracks and she nods to the giant pile of burning wooden beams. "Those fell and he was on the other side and… and…!"
"Okay." That… complicates things, but nothing he can't deal with. The loud snap above their heads, though, shows that this building isn't going to hang on much longer. "Let's get some place a little cooler, yeah?"

He picks her up and almost grimaces at how much she weighs. She's six years old now, too big to carry around while also fighting. He'll have to be sneaky from here on. So, he times his movements carefully, darting from shadow to shadow until they find a stone building to rest near. By this point, Caitriona has stopped crying to simply sniffle and he almost asks why she and Conall didn't follow. But then he sees that she's clutching two things, and curses himself again. They messed up twice. He'd known they were forgetting something, but in the haste, he had thought it was something replaceable, like shoes. Gods knew that Ulster and Larcei had been barefoot when they ran. But no, it hadn't been, because Caitriona is clinging to her stuffed dog and one of the ruby drop earrings Chulainn had bought. Priceless things, and things that children would go back for. It's the only thing they have from their father.

"Okay, what to do…?" he whispers to himself. He looks down the path, wondering where Conall is. There's no sign of him and some part hopes that he had run towards the group, to get help for Caitriona. But he doesn't know, and he wants to search. However, the place is crawling with Grannvalian soldiers, and competent ones from the look of things. He's not sure he can sneak past them. He's not sure he can fight them. "What to do?" He winces as he realizes just what the answer to that is. "Gods, I hate you." And he picks up Caitriona again and rushes out of the city. It's the only thing they have from their father.

"Shanan!" Oifeye is waiting for him on the hill near the village. The plan is to escape into the mountains and then figure out from there. Aideen must've taken the children there already. "Oh, thank goodness…" Oifeye murmurs, taking Caitriona from him. Oifeye winces when he sees what Caitriona is holding, realizing just what happened now too. "Conall?"

"...I'm going back to see if I can find him," he declares. He shakes his head when Oifeye tries to protest. "I have to try, damn it!" He knows it's stupid, and he knows he should just leave with Oifeye now. He's just seventeen, nowhere near strong enough to do anything really. But he has to try. He has to. It's Alicia's son, and he owes Alicia everything, just as he owes Sigurd everything. He can't just… "I…!"

"...I'll wait a couple of more hours. Or try to at least." Oifeye smiles sadly, understanding. Part of him hates how 'wise' Oifeye appears, but then again, Oifeye is twenty-three. Maybe he'd get that same wisdom when he's that old. If he lives that long, that is. "Much longer, though, and you're on your own with tracking us. Too dangerous."

"Got it." He leans down and kisses Caitriona's forehead. "I'll be right back. You're safe." Caitriona smiles sweetly at him and curls up against Oifeye's shoulder. "See you soon."

Then he's off again, back into the city. The fires are just starting to die out, but the smell of smoke continues to choke the air. Blood and iron has joined it, hinting to the fighting and the dead. He almost trips over a couple of bodies, but he pushes forward, looking for any sign of Conall. When he finally does see him, though, he has to hide because… because Conall is surrounded by Grannvalian soldiers, trying to interrogate him. He wants to charge, especially when he hears the leader is named 'Aida', the same name as Arvis's right hand, and the name of the woman who 'lured the traitor Sigurd into a trap'. In other words, trick him.

He hates her. He hates her almost as much as he hates Arvis. They both took advantage of everyone's trust and kindness. He'll never forgive them, and gods, he wants to kill her. But he knows he can't. There's too many. He'd die before he even got close. He'd die and Conall would be
forced to watch. He looks for some sort of weakness in the guard to exploit, but there isn't one. Worse, though, is that Conall is perfectly silent despite the soldiers repeatedly questioning him, clinging to his dog and the other ruby drop earring. Conall knows that there's going to be no rescue.

He leans against the wall of a gutted building and bloodies his lip to keep from crying in frustration. Too weak to protect Deirdre back in Agusty, too weak now to protect Conall. All he can do is hide and wait as someone takes away a loved one he swore to keep safe. Again. It hurts. It hurts terribly. And he has to wait until they're out of sight before returning, just to make sure he doesn't accidentally lead the soldiers directly to the others.

When he stumbles back to the hill, sooty and blood dripping from his mouth, with no Conall, Oifeye doesn't say anything. Oifeye just gives him a hug, makes him hold the now-sleeping Caitriona, and leads the way to where Aideen is waiting with all the children. From there, they push forward to a cabin in the woods they had scouted out a few weeks ago, as a potential hiding place. From there, it's pretending things are 'normal'. While he jumps into a nearby river to get the damn soot off, Aideen and Oifeye make dinner and tuck the children in for bed. They all curl up together, keenly aware that one of them is missing, but they don't protest. They don't cry or ask why. Such things have become far too common for them. They're used to running from death and battle. They're used to people just… disappearing. He sits by them while they sleep, and his heart breaks for them. He's always respected Aunt Ayra, but his respect has grown immensely these past few years, now that he knows just how hard it is to be on the run while keeping a child safe.

"I wonder if it was a trap," Oifeye murmurs, much later, leaning against the wall by the door to better keep an eye out the window. "In retrospect, it was so obvious…"

"Hindsight is perfect," Aideen agrees. She tries to smile warmly, but it's clear the years of running are taking their toll. Not to mention the whole 'hey, your husband is dead, your best friend since diapers is dead, your sister and her lover are missing, and all of your friends are either dead or missing' thing. It's a miracle she'd carried Lana to full term, and that there hadn't been too many complications with the birth, given all that stress. "So, where do we go?"

"Sophara is supposed to be near, right? That's Chulainn's original home." Oifeye rubs at his eyes tiredly. "Maybe there?"

"No, we should get farther from the castle," he whispers, fixing the blankets over Caitriona. She's curled up between Seliph and Larcei, both hugging her in their sleep while she clings to her stuffed-dog. Opposite her, Lana is safely between Lester and Diarmuid, since she's the youngest. Ulster marks the 'boundary' between the trios. Normally, it would be him and Larcei, with Conall between Larcei and Caitriona, but… "Further north."

"Where to?" Oifeye asks, watching him closely. "Silessse north?"

"Not exactly." Though it is tempting. Silessse… they had all been so happy there, civil war aside. "There's supposed to be a village in Northern Isaach, hidden by trees and mountains. They say it's where King Odo… Od…" The Empire has changed so many of the names. It's difficult to keep up with. "Whatever. It's where he's from. It's far from the castle."

"Then let's see if we can find it, then." Oifeye tries to smile, but it's just a grimace. Today's events prove how they can't afford to make mistakes. They lost Conall because of two. He can only pray that Conall will be okay. Aida is loyal to Arvis, clearly, so hopefully… but it's all up to the gods, at this point. That hurts keenly. "In the morning, then."

"Yes. In the morning." Back to moving. Back to running. They had promised to keep the children safe, and they will. Promises are important, even if the people you had the promises to are dead.
"In the morning."

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: So, to clarify, Shanan is the focal point, POV char of this little section, and it takes place around the same time as Alicia's death. If you're curious about Conall's childhood, check out *Memoirs of Belhalla*, a short story told from Deirdre/Diadora's POV that focuses on the family during the early years of the empire.

Next Chapter - Tirnanog (Gen2 starts)
Chapter 30) Tirnanog

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 30) Tirnanog

The Battle of Belhalla or, as it's being more commonly called nowadays, the Belhalla Massacre ended in a brutal assault, and sent most of the politically powerful people to their graves. Once the 'treacherous' Silesse, who sheltered the 'traitors', and the perfidious (that's a fun word, isn't it?) Leonster, who allied with the 'rebels', fell and were conquered, Duke Arvis of Veltomer unified the lands, with only Thracia technically being independent, and the people happily cheered as he and his wife, Queen Diadora of Belhalla, were coronated as Emperor and Empress. The stories say he 'tried' to refuse, but the people refused to accept anyone besides the two of them. It was probably part of his plan to appeal to people more.

Well, to be fair, the Empire did flourish for a while. Taxes were reduced to ease pressure on the commoners. Everyone received free schooling for reading and writing, with free meals provided to help ease the burden of less hours for work. Shelters for the abused were set up and laws were strengthened to protect them. Orphanages received extra funding, and more were built to make sure none were overcrowded. Better sewage systems to lessen outbreaks of illnesses. When an area suffered a drought and poor harvest, the crown itself provided for the people to make sure none starved. All nice and good things, really, and not anything anyone could complain about.

In 775 Gran, though, everything changed. Empress Diadora was assassinated in the dark of night, and Princess Julia disappeared in the chaos. And almost overnight, the Empire became oppressive, tyrannical, and horrific. Increased taxes, inhumane conditions, slave-like treatment, and the Child Hunts where children were ripped from their mothers and sacrificed to Loptyr. The kindest rumors say it happened because Arvis broke from losing his wife and daughter so brutally. Most think that he was always like this, was involved in the death and disappearance of the Naga Majors, and that Sigurd had been no traitor or rebel at all, but rather someone who had seen the true face of Arvis from the start, and had been silenced and turned into a scapegoat. Oifeye thinks it's something different. After all, our parents had believed in Arvis until the end and Aideen often states that they didn't know anything. If anything, Sigurd and our parents had been killed simply for 'convenience', a way to help unify the lands so that they could more easily push the new policies forward and better life for everyone. Arvis is still a dick for how he did it, though. And it's hard to say he didn't deserve losing things as he did. Feel bad about the prince and princess, though. They didn't deserve any of it.

Regardless, everything went to hell starting from 775 Gran, four years ago now. Isaach, where we live, is no exception to the terror. While we were always treated poorly by Danann, mostly for how 'rebelliousness' which was really our refusal to submit, but the recent years have been the worst and things are only getting worse. But the people have their hope still. Shanan, Rightful Ruler of Isaach, set up a resistance group much like the Crusaders of old, based in Tirnanog, often called the 'village of fairies' because of how hidden it was. Their strength grows by the day, and they slowly pick apart Danann's oppressive regime to save the people.

Then, of course, there are the ones dubbed the 'Scions of Light' that everyone places their hopes on. Among those Scions is the one affectionately dubbed the 'Imperial Prince of Light' or 'Heir of Light' depending on what region you live in, Empress Diadora's true first born, the only child of Sigurd the Hero, inheritor of Baldr and Naga. The Scions, by the way, are us, the children of the
tragic heroes who fell during the Belhalla Massacre, and the 'prince of light' is Seliph. No pressure, right?

779 Gran, eighteen years after the Belhalla Massacre, eighteen years after Sigurd and his fellows fell... That's when we rose.

"Riona!" Seliph's voice echoed through the air, but I didn't bother answering. I was focused on my task. "Hey, Riona, are you out here?" Besides, Hestia barked before long to let Seliph know exactly where we were. "Ah, thanks, Hestia!" So before long, Seliph jogged over to the back of the house where I was brushing Hestia. "I swear; whenever we have to brush her, we come out with more fur than wolf," he commenting, nodding to the massive amount of fur next to me. And on me, for that matter. Hestia shed like crazy. That's why brushing her was actually one of our chores. "I thought it was Ulster's turn this week to brush her, though?"

"It was, but then Ulster was asked to help with the repair to the back wall, so I switched with him," I explained, smiling up at him. Seliph smiled back and crouched down to rub Hestia's belly. Her tongue lolled out in enjoyment and she playfully nipped Seliph's pant leg, careful to not actually hurt him. "But why didn't you just check outside? You know I'm usually here if I'm not doing anything."

"Typically up in a tree or on the roof with a book because you can climb like a spider."

"Spider? Really?" I threw a handful of Hestia's fur at him. "Mean!"

"It's true, though!" He laughed and tried to bat the fur off. Instead, it just clung to his hair and clothes. "Anyway, I wasn't sure if you were somewhere kissing Larcei or something."

"Seliph, did you somehow forget that Larcei and I broke up months ago?" I made my voice as dry as possible. "Given how explosively we broke up? Really?"

"You two could've kissed and made up. Literally." He shrugged, smiling. "Though, no, I haven't forgotten your argument. I'm really glad you two are friends again, by the way."

"Yeah, sorry for making things awkward." It was the longest we'd ever gone without talking to each other at two weeks. "Actually, I'm really sorry for making things awkward." I finished brushing Hestia and tossed the brush to the side before stealing Seliph's lap to lie down next to her. Hestia immediately flipped around to rest her muzzle on my chest, silently demanding ear scratches. "And I'm not dating anyone at the moment. I promise; you'd be the first to know."

"Hey, it could've been a new thing." Seliph shrugged and gave Hestia the ear scratches she wanted, leaving me free to simply hug my wolf. "By the way, I've never asked. What was the argument? You and Diarmuid had a very amicable break up when you two decided to stop dating."

"I can't say." I smiled apologetically at him. "It's deals with one of Larcei's secrets, not mine." That said, it might be something everyone guessed. The whole argument had started because I felt like Larcei was just using me as a substitute for Shanan. She... hadn't, actually, but she understood why I thought that. Well, when we actually sat down to talk after the argument, that is. "Ulster might tell, but... well..."

"Right." Seliph nodded, understanding. We all might've spent our whole lives together, but we still had our secrets, especially as we grew up. "Is it something we need to be wary of?"

"Nope! Larcei and I had a good chat and we're best friends again." And honestly, probably never should've dated, given our temperaments. But we'd had crushes on each other and went for it, and
it had been nice for the first few months. We were definitely way better as friends, though. "Worrywart."

"Hey, it was a disruption in our lives and both of you were miserable." He started putting braids in my hair, as he normally did when he had to sit somewhere too long and had nothing to occupy his hands. Braiding took care of that. After all, my hair was just barely shorter than his. "That made us all worry."

"Yeah, like I said, sorry for making things awkward." Hestia whined for attention, since Seliph stopped petting her, so I took over to keep her occupied. "Anyway, what were you looking for me for? Need me to brush your hair again?"

"No, I'm fine." He frowned at me. "I don't always need you to brush my hair, you know."

"Yeah, and that's why it gets matted. You always forget to brush it!" It might not have been a problem if Seliph wore his hair short like most Grannvelians, but he'd chosen to grow it out to emulate Shanan. And then I was the one who'd brush it. "But whatever. What's up?"

"I was heading into the market for groceries, and remembered you had the day off chores wise too." He smiled warmly at me. "Want to come along?"

"Yeah, sounds like fun!" I sat up, careful to not jar Hestia, and grinned. "But we should probably change into something with less wolf-fur." I laughed as Hestia yawned and nuzzled me. "Yes, it looks beautiful on you, sweetie, but not on us!"

"Here, I'll help deal with the fur." He finished off a braid and started picking up part of the pile. "Where do we leave them again?"

"This way!" I grinned at him and winked. "And thanks~!"

Days like this were common, or at least, they became common once we finally made it to Tirnanog ten years ago. Before then, we had moved from village to village, constantly on the move from to escape Grannvale. Even back then, people had placed their hopes in us, and fought to defend us. And died protecting us. It had taken a few years to even realize such a thing wasn't normal. But in Tirnanog, things were… mostly better. At least we never had to run while places burned and people died behind us. That let us learn about peaceful days like this and, even better, live them. Days where we did chores like normal kids, got to enjoy the lazy sunshine… they were bliss. In the life we had before Tirnanog, I never could've had a pet, especially one that required as much attention as Hestia.

I had always loved animals; Aideen said I got it from Dad. So, my childhood was often spent wandering through the woods, especially after we moved to Tirnanog, and finding wounded animals to bring back to Aideen to fix up, and Lana when Lana decided she wanted to be a healer like her mom. Most of the time, we made sure to release back into the wild, because that's where they belonged and I didn't want to separate any from their mommies and daddies. But Hestia had been different. A little wolf-pup, wounded and malnourished, who had the same coloring as my stuffed-dog, the very same mottled grey, and pretty gold eyes. I had begged to keep her, and Oifeye had reluctantly agreed, so long as she behaved and so long as I took care of everything. Two years later, Hestia was firmly part of our odd little family and most of us forgot she hadn't always been here. Shanan had laughed when he returned from a mission to find her. Supposedly, Mom would've had a heart attack. I wondered why. Hestia was so much fun! Though, I did understand that she was a little shit and a handful sometimes. Most of the time, actually. Like when she got super excited at seeing others in our mismatched family and pounced on them. Most could brace themselves before being knocked down, but poor Lana never had the strength for that.
"Ack!" Lana yelp, dropping whatever she'd been carrying as she struggled and failed to keep herself upright, hitting the ground with another yelp. "Ugh… Hestia, I can't do that!"

"Lana, you okay?" I asked, rushing out of my room. I knew I should've made sure I had a good grip on her fur before I opened the door. "Please tell me she didn't bust your head open." It hadn't happened, yet, but all of us did worry that Hestia would one of these days. After all, when standing, Hestia's shoulder was about even with my hip, and she was easily as long as I was tall, if you included her tail. And almost all of that was muscle, meaning she weighed a lot. And she ran fast. "Please."

"No, she at least makes sure that there's nothing dangerous. Save the floor. And her." Lana groaned, and squeaked because Hestia's form of apologizing was to try and lick you to death. "We need to clean her teeth! Her breath is horrible!"

"That's one of tomorrow's chores." I whistled and, after giving Lana one more lick, Hestia returned to my side, letting me actually help Lana up. "Sorry, by the way. I didn't think anyone would be in the hall."

"It's fine…" Lana brushed herself off and picked up her basket, filled with things to mend. Hestia, contritely, began picking up things from the ground to return to the basket. "She's lucky she's cute, though."

"She's well aware of that, I'm sure." I ran my hands along Lana's scalp, making sure there was no real damage. When I was certain, I picked her up in a hug. "Almost as cute as you!"

"Hey! Don't treat me like a little kid!" She laughed, though. She didn't really mind. We did actually discuss this a few years ago. "I'm seventeen!"

"Yes, but you're the baby of the group!" Lana was the only one of us born after the Belhalla Massacre. While Aideen had thankfully survived, probably the legendary Ulir luck kicking in and getting her pregnant at the perfect time, Lana never got to meet her father, and Midir never got to meet her. Though, most of us had next to no memories of our parents, but still. "And you always will be!"

"Grr!" She sulked for all of half a second before going right back to laughing. "Oh, hey, are you heading out?"

"Seliph and I are making a market run."

"I've a list!" She kissed my cheek, kissed Hestia's head when Hestia dropped off the last thing, and raced down the hall. "Don't leave until I give it to you two!"

"We'll wait at the entrance!" I waved her off and looked down at Hestia. She sat down, tail wagging vigorously, happy as could be. "Gods, why are you so cute?" I kissed her nose and pet her head. "Okay. Find Seliph for me." She barked in agreement, sniffed about a bit, and then bolted. "Not that fast! And don't tackle Seliph!"

Thankfully, she didn't, though she had leapt for him. Seliph had just managed to sidestep in time and then rub her vigorously to 'make up' for it. "Are we ready to go then?" Seliph asked as I joined him out front. He tilted his head curiously when I shook my head. "No?"

"Lana's got a list she wants to give us," I explained. Then I smirked. "Actually, if you want to be alone with her…~"

"Hey, she and I broke up years ago!" Seliph rolled his eyes and I giggled. I'd know that, of course,
and both Seliph and I knew Lana was crushing hard on Ulster nowadays. But it was fun to tease. "And I wonder how many things on her list are already on mine?"

"Who knows? But I imagine it's more geared towards infirmary things." I stretched my arms high above my head, looking up at the bright sunshine and the cloudless sky. "Another beautiful day." I hoped tomorrow would be as well.

To our intense amusement, there was a lot of items on both lists. The three of us worked out which things actually had to be doubled and then Seliph and I were walking down the path to the market. For safety's sake, we didn't live in the village itself, just a cleared out house in the woods that had once been some lord's hideaway. It suited our needs, and the privacy was nice, but it did mean we had a bit of a walk to Tirnanog proper.

"Hey, do you want to swing by the church to visit Muirne?" I asked, holding tightly onto Hestia. She wanted to hunt squirrels. I didn't want carcasses dropped on my shoes again. "I can find something to occupy myself if need be."

"Muirne and I broke up, remember?" Seliph reminded gently. He read through the list, probably mentally plotting our path through the market. "Shortly after you and Larcei made up."

"Oh, right." I hopped up onto a nearby log to balance-walk on it. Hestia tried to follow, but Seliph stopped her and held her firmly so that she wouldn't rush off. "I'm honestly surprised you two broke up. You both seemed really compatible."

"She was intimidated by the technical nobility and the Holy Blood." Seliph smiled ruefully. "Besides, someday…"

"Ah, yes, the mythical 'someday'!" I jumped down and pitched my voice to be as dramatic as possible, gesturing grandly to reinforce the image. "The Mythical Someday when we, the Inheritors of Light, rise up to push back the Darkness and free the lands from the Oppressive Empire and their vile evil deeds of Evil!" I bowed with a flourish as Seliph cracked up, holding his stomach even as he laughed. "That all said, if we ever get around to that, you having a 'common born' wife will be the least of people's problems."

"Yes, but she also..." Seliph had to pause to get his breathing under control. He'd laughed so hard that he was red in the face. "Whew… okay. Breathing."

"Yes, breathing tends to be a good thing."

"Yes, yes." He shrugged. "She doesn't want to leave Tirnanog."

"Oh, yeah. That's a dealbreaker." Honestly, that was why I didn't date anyone outside of our group, even though I'd had serious crushes and infatuations on some of the locals here. Most of them tended to be resistance members. I apparently really liked guys and girls who could kick ass. "...Wait, where's Hestia?" Both of us froze as we realized that, during the laughing and dramatics, Hestia had escaped to shove her head in the undergrowth. "Hestia!" I growled a bit and snapped my fingers, accidentally sparking a tiny bit of flame. Thankfully, nothing flammable was immediately near and it didn't fly back to catch my sleeve. "By me! Now!"

After a moment of wriggling, probably to free herself, Hestia did emerge from the undergrowth. I expected her to be chomping on the remains of some chipmunk she'd caught or to just be covered in wet leaves and mud. Instead, she emerged emerged with a snake wrapped around her face and neck, which was doing its best to strangle her before she ate it. Even while occupied with trying to
eat it, her demeanor and wagging tail more or less screamed, 'I FOUND A SNACK!'.

Of course, Seliph and I both yelped and struggled to try and get the snake off of her because we certainly couldn't tell if it was poisonous or not and a snake was trying to strangle my wolf! Between the two of us, I managed to wrestle it off and turned to fling it back into the woods. And accidentally threw it in someone's face because apparently, we were close enough to town that someone had heard the yelling and came to investigate. Seliph helped out just long enough to assist me in getting the snake off the good samaritan who had just been worried someone was hurt and now had to deal with a snake in their face. Then, while I apologized profusely to the person for my asshole of a wolf and for accidentally throwing a snake at them, he sat down on the ground to laugh his ass off and hold a sulking Hestia who didn't like that her snack had been thrown away.

"That had to be the most embarrassing thing ever!" I grumbled, keeping a very firm grip on Hestia as Seliph and I finally made it to the market, a spiralling array of various stalls and shoppers and surprisingly lively considering how isolated Tirnanog was. "You can stop laughing at any moment, Seliph."

"I'm trying!" he protested, voice wobbling. He wiped the corners of his eyes with a knuckle, having laughed so hard he cried. Again. "But you threw the snake in his face!"

"It was an accident, damn it!" I scowled, and then winced as a couple of playing children gave us weird looks. "Ugh, that's it. I'm not talking for the rest of the day."

"I'd pay to see that."

"Hey!"

"See?" He grinned and I rolled my eyes. "Okay, first stop is the bakery."

"Don't change the subject, you jerk!" Still, I made sure I was smiling when we came up to Mistress Caoimhe's stall. I was good at faking a smile, if the need was there. "Morning, ma'am!"

"Ah, good morning, you two!" she replied, greeting us with a smile and a laugh. She had flour in her hair and dusting her apron. "Perfect timing! Can you taste-test something for me?"

"Like we'll say 'no'!" Seliph laughed, bowing respectfully towards her. "Though I can already tell you that it'll be delicious."

"Well, I had to substitute some ingredients due to pricing and availability." She ducked down to fetch something from under her stall and Seliph and I shared a concerned look. But we were back to smiles when she popped back up with a covered tray of cookies. "Here you go! And I've a treat for Hestia as well."

"Oh, good, she's mad that we took away her snake."

"Snake?"

"Don't tell her!" I growled, elbowing his side. Seliph just laughed. "Ignore him. He's being mean."

"If you're certain?" Mistress Caoimhe replied, looking a little confused. Then she shrugged and peered at my face. "My dear, I don't think I've ever seen you change your earrings." Or rather, been scrutinizing my ears. "Eithne has a few for sale that will look very pretty on you."

"I'll keep it in mind, ma'am." No, I wouldn't. Yes, it was weird to wear mismatched earrings, but I wouldn't give up the gold and ruby drop I wore for anything. Dad had bought it for Conall and me,
and Conall hopefully still had the other one. So, I always wore it, in my left ear, and wore a simple white stud in the other. Well, I might consider changing the stud. "But for now, cookies!"

Seliph and I happily devoured the cookies she gave us, and I made sure Hestia behaved while Seliph 'haggled' for some fresh bread. When we left for the next shop, we tucked the extra coin in a place she could easily find. It was just the running 'joke' with us. We'd haggle because it was expected, but we also knew everyone in the market would start at a lower price than they normally would for us, so when we left, we'd always leave the difference anyway. It wasn't like we couldn't afford it. Even after eighteen years on the run, we had a lot of money. Of course, a lot of that money had come from things like Aideen selling her jewelry, but still.

As we passed near the butcher's stall, I tried to hold onto Hestia. I really did. Unfortunately, she wriggled free and raced for the Mister Torin, while he was in the middle of cutting some meat for a customer. She ran right around the back and sat at his feet, happily wagging her tail and being as cute as possible. Seliph, as per usual, laughed at her antics. I facepalmed.

"This is why she acts like this!" I snapped at him. He just laughed harder. "Honestly…" I smiled and waved sheepishly to Mister Torin when he finished with his customer and turned towards us. "I am so sorry. I swear I teach her manners."

"Why, of course you do!" Mister Torin replied, probably louder than needed. He had a naturally booming voice which, combined with how he tended to wear a bloodstained apron, had made him really freaking intimidating when I was a child. Nowadays, I knew it was just how he was, and he'd just given up on getting the stains out of the apron. No matter how many times he and his wife washed it, they stubbornly remained. "Look at her, being very polite. She's waiting patiently, and she's even using her tail to sweep up for me." He laughed and rubbed Hestia's head before fetching her a bone to gnaw on, one that still had a bit of meat on it. Hestia barked in joy and licked his hand in thanks before taking the bone and immediately chewing on it. "Besides, you know I save the bones."

"I wish we could do the same." But no, no matter where we tried to hide bones to use later for broth, Hestia found them. Honestly, we had to be careful because she could get just about anywhere and destroy things when bored. Shanan almost lost a scouting report that way, actually. "But neither here nor there. Thank you for treating my Hestia."

"Still, I can't help but notice how there's less than usual on your stall, Mister Torin," Seliph murmured. It took me a second to realize he was right. It wasn't a 'little' less that suggested sales. It was a lot less, suggesting there hadn't been much to start with. "Is everything okay?"

"It's the soldiers, Prince Seliph," Mister Torin sighed. He then went to work cleaning his knives. "They're overhunting. Hurts the business a bit."

"That's not good." That was an understatement. Not only did it threaten food supplies, but it was going to mess up the surviving animals' behavioral patterns and hurt the environment. "Is it a recent problem?"

"We're just noticing it now, but it's hard to even fish." Mister Torin shook his head. I wondered just how much you had to fish to do that? "Why they need to hunt that much, I don't know. Probably indulging in multiple, luxurious feasts to gorge themselves."

"Maybe…" Seliph and I looked at each other and nodded. Meat wasn't on the list, but… "Oh, right, Hestia isn't the only reason we're here. What do you recommend?"

After buying some fresh meat, and Seliph carefully keeping it away from a nosy Hestia, we went to
our next destination: dairy. Though, to our surprise, Dalvin was actually running the stall. "Prince Seliph! Lady Riona!" he greeted warmly, smiling. Both of us smiled back and rushed over, pleased he was up and about. He'd been recovering from some terrible wounds; the last mission the resistance went on, Dalvin had been pinned down defending some children. "Good to see you!"

"Good to see you, Dalvin!" Seliph replied just as warmly. He stopped just short of hugging Dalvin, probably because of the stall itself. A good thing, since Dalvin's posture was still a bit stiff from pain, and you could see the bandages peeking out from his clothes. "How are your injuries?"

"Healing well, thanks to Lady Aideen, Lady Lana, and Muirne. As you can see, I can stand on my own now!" Dalvin grinned, proud, and both Seliph and I smiled in relief. There had been very real worry that Dalvin would actually lose his legs, due to injuries. "Oh, and there's the adorable Hestia." Dalvin waved her over for pets. "Sorry, girl. I'm not recovered enough to crouch down."

"I'm sure she's just glad you're recovering." Seliph hesitated a bit and glanced to me. I nodded, knowing what he wanted to ask. "Hey, do you think Creidne is up for visitors? We've been worried about her."

"Mmm… yeah, she should like that. At least you, Lady Riona." He smiled apologetically at Seliph. "I don't know…"

"I can wait outside the room or even outside the house if need be." Seliph smiled reassuringly. "Her comfort is most important. I'd just like to check in. Both of you are friends."

"You know where the house is." Dalvin grinned. "However, might I interest you in a few of these cheeses?"

"Which ones do you recommend?"

We ended up buying a bit more from the dairy stall than we'd planned, but hey, it was Dalvin and even if Aideen never charged for healing, the family did lose some income due to taking care of Dalvin and Creidne. The family actually didn't live far from the market, so it was easy to pop over for a visit. Mistress Sorcha, their mother, greeted us with a tired yet warm smile and actually enlisted Hestia's assistance in hunting a couple of mice she was having trouble with. Seliph and I set our purchases safely on the table before heading into the back, since we knew where Creidne's room. We knocked on the door and, after a quiet 'come in', stepped inside. As she had been the last time I'd visited, Creidne was resting in bed, though she was sitting up this time. She didn't wear bandages on her wrists anymore, showing the angry red, but healing, scabs.

"Oh, hey!" Creidne greeted smiling warmly. But she flinched when we stepped a bit closer. "I'm sorry, Prince Seliph. But can you stay by the door?"

"Of course," Seliph reassured instantly. He actually made to stand outside the room. "Is this better?"

"Yes, it is." Her smile sweetened. I was glad to see it. She hadn't been able to smile anything but 'faintly' or 'tearfully' last time I was here. "Thank you."

"How are you feeling?" I asked, carefully walking to her side, ready to stop if she said so. But she didn't, so I crouched by the bed and rested my arms on the blankets. "You look better."

"I feel better. Finally." She smiled proudly. "I managed to sleep through the night without medication! And I haven't dug into my scabs for four days!"

"That's great!" I smiled back, giving her my best. I always tried to smile for people, to make them
feel better. Besides, given the number of people who have died and suffered just so that we could be safe, I didn't really have a right to be sad for long. Or at all. "Do you want Aideen to stop sending the medicine here?"

"Mmm… not yet, no. Just in case. This was the first night and the nightmares..." She shuddered and I hesitantly took her hand to squeeze it reassuringly. Creidne had been caught by the soldiers a few months ago, and... well... defeat could be particularly humiliating and traumatizing depending on how the soldiers felt that day. Creidne hadn't been lucky, though she had been rescued before they could kill her. Creidne tried to commit suicide soon afterwards, though. It had been... horrifying. If Larcei hadn't insisted on checking on her... "But I am getting better. Slowly."

"I'm glad." I really was. Creidne had been one of our first friends in Tirnanog, actually, reaching out to the weird noble kids who had no idea how to make friends. "Though, now that I look, you do look a bit tired."

"I was about to take a nap, actually." She smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry. You came to visit and all..."

"Nah, we just wanted to check on how you and Dalvin were healing."

"Did you see him at the stall?"

"He's a stupid-good businessman. We bought more than we needed." I playfully made a face and was delighted by her laugh. Last time I was here, she hadn't really been able to laugh. Too tired and pained. "We'll leave you to rest, though. We do have shopping to continue."

"Okay." She laughed a bit more and made sure to smile to Seliph. "I do appreciate you two swinging by. Hopefully next time, I can be a better host." The smile said 'I hope next time, I will not flinch as much'.

"We should have a girls' night again soon." I stood up carefully, to not startle her with a sudden movement, and then bent down to kiss her head. She smiled brightly at the gesture, thankfully. "See you later!"

"Bye!" Creidne waved and settled down to sleep. Seliph and I made sure to shut the door behind us and walked down the hall a bit before breathing sighs of relief.

"I really was worried we'd walk in on..." Seliph began, eyes a bit distant. He'd gone with Larcei to check on Creidne that horrifying day, meaning the two of them had discovered Creidne in a pool of her own blood. "Thank goodness."

"I know what you mean," I murmured, also thankful. I hadn't seen that, but I'd been one of the ones who worked on Dalvin initially, so I could take a guess. That had been the first time one of our friends had been among the severely wounded and I didn't like it. Sadly, I knew it wouldn't be the last time. For one thing, Deimne was with the resistance too, and actually out with Shanan on a mission now. "Ah, what are we doing standing here and being gloomy?" I poked his cheek and grinned. He smiled back after a moment. "Back to shopping!"

Sadly, though, we didn't actually get to return to shopping. We had just finished our goodbyes to Mistress Sorcha and praised Hestia for catching the troublesome mice when the church bells began ringing. It was the larger ones, which produced a slow and low tone, and that only meant one thing. Shanan and the others had returned finally. And they brought wounded.

"Hestia, go meet them," I whispered, nudging her. She licked my hand and loped away,
disappearing from sight quickly. The market nearby was a frenzy, everyone preparing for what we all knew was coming. "Seliph?"

"Let's pay someone to take the things back," he murmured. He was already looking around for someone. "Then we'll go."

He found a couple of people before long and, after paying them for the service, we both raced for the church, bursting through the front doors. We were, for once, ahead of the injured, meaning that instead of jumping right into the blood, we got to see Aideen rushing about making sure everything was set. In the back, I saw Lester and Ulster struggling to set up extra cots, just in case.

"Oh, perfect!" Aideen breathed, smiling at us as soon as she saw Seliph and I in the doorway. It was her 'healer's smile', though, ready for work, instead of being her usual happy smile when she saw us. "Seliph, help Lester and Ulster. Riona?"

"Water boiled and needles sterilized, right?" I asked, already heading to the table in the back. Seliph ducked by Aideen to give her a quick hug before joining Ulster and Lester. "Anything else?"

"If you don't mind getting the fireplace going? I hadn't done that yet."

"On it!" I snapped my fingers to bring up a small little fireball and diverted in my path to get the fireplace roaring. It was the only good thing of my Fjalar blood, being able to conjure small flames like that. I could cut so much time for Aideen. And for cooking. "I wonder how bad it's going to be this time."

Probably worse than I expected. It was always worse than I expected.

Yep. It was worse. Way worse, in fact. It seemed Shanan's two-month mission had been to liberate one of the labor camps. So, I'd spent the next few hours bandaging people who were thinner than my pinky, praying that they were healthy enough to not go into total shock when I cauterized their wounds on healer's orders, struggling to hold down people without accidentally snapping their bones while someone else sawed a limb off, and holding the hands of people who looked more like skeletons than people as they passed. It wasn't the first time. It wouldn't be the last. Danann liked the labor camps. It gave him more time to indulge himself.

"Well, this lot doesn't seem to be as disease ridden as the last group," I noted lightly while rubbing soap into Hestia's fur. As usual, she had let herself be used as a crutch to help the wounded wobble the last few steps to the infirmary, and let herself be hugged by many of the injured who desperately needed some comfort. That meant she was filthy with mud and blood and other things that smelled way worse. "And they're free now! They'll be able to recover in safety and warmth!"

"For now," Larcei pointed out sourly. She was helping me with washing Hestia, mostly because she found it as soothing as I did. There was something nice about seeing the blood wash away. "Do you have to find a silver lining to everything?"

"Well, I could be all doom and gloom, but I don't see how that'll make things better." I leaned around Hestia and flicked some water on her. "I mean; you're being all doomy and gloomy and you're just a sourpuss."

"I am not!" Larcei splashed some water on me, making me squeak. "Take that back!"

"Never!" I laughed, but then quickly yelped as Hestia splashed both of us, clearly thinking that was the new game. "Hestia, no!"
Hestia, of course, decided to take a while to listen, meaning that while Larcei actually dried Hestia off when we were done washing her, I had to mop up more than half of the bathwater from the floor because Larcei and I had decided, in our great and vast wisdom, to wash Hestia in my room today instead of, say, outside like smart people. And Larcei and I had to change clothes again on the account of being absolutely soaked because Hestia had been really eager to play. By that point, the others stumbled inside my room, freshly scrubbed and wearing clean clothing, no doubt following the screams and scoldings to figure out where we were.

As soon as we were all there, we just… set up as we normally did when after finishing up post-first-wave chores for the infirmary. Lana always took the extra shift for healing, while the boys carried the dead outside to be properly buried, and maybe even identified if we were lucky. Before Hestia arrived, Larcei and I would do the same; now, we'd pull an extra shift later to make up for 'skipping' to wash Hestia instead. But some things never changed, no matter what happened or how old we got. Hestia would lay down with a blanket draped over her, and we three girls would use her as a pillow (instead of using actual pillows as we did before Hestia was here) with Lana in the middle to make her feel safer. Then the boys would claim our legs as pillows, always more or less in the same order. Seliph would lay down in my lap, and Diarmuid would steal one of my legs. Lester and Ulster would lay on Larcei's legs, sometimes claiming her lap if one needed that extra bit of comfort. Then, once settled, we'd all just sit there in silence and slowly relax. Slowly wind down from earlier, to the point where we could actually think and talk. It was a carry-over from when we'd all curl up together for naps when we were little. I sometimes wondered where Conall would've set up, if he hadn't been kidnapped. When napping, he'd always been next to me, so maybe he would've been on one of my legs too. I didn't know.

"There were children in this group," Diarmuid whispered, breaking the silence. He held up his hand and I wondered how many of the dying he held the hands of. ...If that sentence even made sense. "It's getting worse."

"It's always getting worse," Lester pointed out. He had an arm draped across his eyes, blocking what bits of light came in from the window. Despite how long it all felt, the sunshine hinted it was late afternoon at worst. "It's been getting worse since before we were born."

"Children in a labor camp, though…" Diarmuid dropped his hand. Seliph silently reached over to take his hand and squeeze it reassuringly. "What sort of labor can they do reliably anyway? Especially when so thin…" He smiled bitterly. "Was it to use them as hostages, actually? Make sure the adults didn't rebel?"

"You don't think the arrows were enough of a deterrent for that?"

"When your other choice is the camp and slow death and maybe hope for rescue?"

"...When one of them learned that we were helping, their eyes lit right up." Lester curled on his side, facing away from Larcei, Lana, and me. He was trying not to cry. He didn't like crying around people, even us. "It was painful to see."

"At least they didn't use all of their meager strength to reach out to you," Seliph whispered. He closed his eyes as I ran my fingers through his hair. All the chaos led to it falling out of his normal ponytail. "They learned I was the son of Sigurd and Deirdre, and a few almost fell out of their beds. A few whispered oaths of loyalty even. It was..." Unnerving. It was always unnerving. It was always daunting, seeing their eyes on us, knowing what they expected. Especially when we weren't allowed to...

"I want to fight," Larcei growled. She closed her eyes, probably to keep from crying. "I mean; that's not new. I've been wanting to fight."
"Yeah, ever since Creidne…"

"Yeah." Larcei winced and Lana leaned over to rest her head on her shoulder. Larcei and Lana had been berry picking with Creidne when the soldiers ambushed them and Creidne was caught. In fact, Creidne was only caught because she'd run a different way to lessen the chances of the soldiers getting them. None of us doubted that saved Larcei and Lana a fate worse than death, but it still hurt. It was still yet another damn case where someone suffered to keep us safe. "Damn it. We're all adults, technically. Why can't…?"

"We have to be patient," Ulster mumbled dully. We knew even his patience was running thin, and he was easily the calmest of all of us. He was even calmer than Lana, who was training to maintain a healer's calm. "We have to wait for a good time to strike. Otherwise, all you're going to do is start off burning quick, and then die down and be less effective."

"When is that going to be, though?" Lana asked sleepily. She was definitely dozing now. "People younger than us are serving in the resistance. We can fight. We have our means of warfare." She woke up enough to glare sleepily at… someone. It was hard to tell who and, for all I knew, it could've just been that scratch on the wall left over from Hestia being very enthusiastic about a dust ball. "I swear; if one of you says something stupid like nuns and warfare don't mix…"

"Did we say something like that? You're not even a nun."

"Someone in town."

"Ah."

We all fell silent again, too tired to try and string coherent thoughts together again, dozing as we took comfort in each other's presence. The seven of us have known each other all our lives, and we'd been together just as long. For a significant portion of our childhood, we only had each other, which was part of why Conall's capture hurt us even now. Just being near each other, knowing we were all still here, still alive, still together… that was more comforting than just about anything else in the world.

The only thing more comforting was a mug of warm milk with honey. It was an Isaachian treat, the comfort drink for everything. Shanan had made it for us the first few years, but after we moved to Tirnanog and Shanan started being away far more than he was here, Oifeye had asked the locals to teach him how to make it properly. And that was why, after we had time to rest and relax, Oifeye would always find us, carrying a tray with seven mugs all perfectly made and a treat for Hestia.

"Rather thought you all would be outside," Oifeye noted as he passed out the mugs and we all arranged ourselves into a circle. When he gave the last mug to me, Hestia stood up on her back legs to brace her front paws on Oifeye's arm and take her treat off the tray herself. "Hestia, it's not like I'm going to hide it from you." Hestia made a 'wrr?' noise that I swore was her 'who, me?' noise before laying down beside me to eat her treat, a bit of raw meat. "I'm glad we had fresh meat for some reason. I thought I'd have to hunt a treat down for her."

"Riona and I managed to get some shopping done before this," Seliph explained, sipping the milk. All of us began smiling again at the taste. It truly was the most comforting thing in the world. "How are Deimne and Shanan?"

"Deimne was mildly injured, and is being treated at home by Muirne. Shanan was a bit more wounded, but Aideen is handling that now." Oifeye smiled warmly, tucking the now-empty tray to his chest. "So, he'll actually make it for dinner tonight." That would be nice. It would be the… second dinner we'd had with him these past six months. Well, it wasn't like we could be mad about
it. When the resistance formed, everyone had elected Shanan as the leader, something Shanan took seriously. As things got worse, he had to be away more and more often to try and make things better. "So, whoever sets up the table tonight needs to remember to set up for him."

"That sounds great!" Seliph smiled warmly, but the rest of us shifted awkwardly, thinking of just why Shanan was rarely here. And, after a moment, Seliph asked the question we always asked. "Oifeye, can we fi-"

"No." Oifeye's reply, however, was the same as always. "It's too soon."

"But people are dying!" Seliph almost stood up, but stopped and instead just clenched his free hand into a fist, digging into the floor. Since I was next to him, as usual, I rested my free hand on his reassuringly. "So-!"

"No." However, Oifeye must've sensed all of our tempers about to snap, because he focused on Diarmuid and Lester. "That said, I'll be doing a patrol in a couple of days. Why don't you two come with me?" The question was enough to startle all of us into compliance or whatever the word was, with Diarmuid and Lester just nodding dumbly. It was the first time Oifeye had invited any of us on a patrol. "Excellent. We'll talk more about it after dinner." And then Oifeye left. To be charitable, he probably left to make medicines for Aideen, who would need them as soon as possible. He was the best medicine maker in the entire town, and had taught all of us so that we could make some while pulling infirmary shifts too. But, it did…

"Anyone else think he just ran away?" Lana asked dryly, leaning into Ulster's side. We all sighed and nodded. It really did feel that way. "Okay, good, it's not just me being grumpy about his refusing. Again." It was enough to make me grind my teeth in frustration. How many more people would die before Oifeye said that we were ready? "Why just you two, though?"

"To reluctantly be fair, Lester and I are the only ones trained to fight on horseback, even if all of us know how to ride," Diarmuid sighed. He set his empty mug on the floor and then massaged his wrist. "I'll try to badger him into agreeing to at least let us go on small missions while we're out, though."

"That'll be a start I suppose," Larcei grumbled. She paused and shook her head hard enough that I thought her earrings would go flying to hit either Seliph (who was next to her), Ulster (who was also next to her), or Lester (who was across from her) in the face. "That came out wrong."

"More addressed at Oifeye, not at me." Diarmuid laughed softly. "I'm used to your utter lack of tact, Larcei."

"Oh, shut up." Larcei scowled, and then batted at Ulster's shoulder when he snickered. "You definitely shut up."

"Regardless, Oifeye is right in that a lot of this needs to be talked about later," I pointed out, finishing my milk. I set my mug down next to Diarmuid's and Hestia took the 'invitation' to scooch her head into my lap. Her muzzle was a bit bloody from the meat, but I scratched behind her ear anyway. "Let's rest a little longer, and then ask Aideen what shifts we have for the infirmary." That was how it always was. None of us ever shirked, except when we were sick. "Hey, who's cooking tonight?"

"I think that's Ulster and me?" Lester replied, frowning a bit as he tried to remember. He glanced at Ulster, who nodded after a moment. "Yeah, us. Why?"

"Oh, in that case, let's make sure we have plenty of stomach medicine."
That sparked a bit of tired laughter, and even more tired protests from Ulster and Lester, and slowly, we began teasing and laughing again. A few more moments, and then it was back to being the hope of everyone.

But how long would we just be their hope? How long before we could finally live up to their expectations? How long…?

The downside of having a pet, even a pet wolf, was that you had to wake up at stupid hours in order to let them out, so that you didn't wake up to a 'messy surprise' by your bed. Most nights, Hestia woke me up at somewhere between 'really freaking late' and 'gods damn this hour early', because she couldn't open the outside door on her own. Every other door and contraption? Yep, better make sure it's locked if you don't want her inside. The door outside? Nope, though she had tried, and broke the door in her attempts.

Regardless, I woke up, yawning every other breath, and walked Hestia out and tiredly telling her to not hunt or anything. I had no intentions of being woken up in a few hours by a half-eaten animal hitting my face, again. After a couple of little… whatever it was called when a wolf leapt at something, but then pulled back immediately… she did decide that obeying the girl who saved her life and gave her treats was a good idea and trotted back to me. I petted her head and leaned down to kiss her nose before leading the way back inside. Once inside, though, she decided she didn't want to return to the room yet and walked down a different hallway. I was tempted to just let her so that I could get back to sleep, but it was entirely possible she was looking for mischief, so with a couple of growled curses, I followed her down, sleepily grumbling more curses along the way.

"Shanan, you can't go to Yied!" Oifeye's surprisingly angry-worried tone, however, woke me right on up, and I quickly ducked down by a partially opened door, wondering what was going on. Hestia tried to nose it open further, but I held her back. A quick look around showed we were right outside Oifeye's office. "It's too dangerous!"

"Everything is too dangerous, Oifeye," Shanan instantly retorted. At least I had my answer for why Hestia went down here. She must've smelled them and wanted to say 'hi'. "And I know we have a particular dislike of the Yied Desert…"

"Yes, we lost so much when the others left to cross the desert…" Oifeye's voice was soft and pained. I cautiously peered inside and saw him near tears as he stood by his desk. That made me wince. Oifeye had basically been our father growing up, and always maintained a calm, confident air when around us. So it was easy to forget that he was hurting. He was always hurting. What happened eighteen years ago haunted him always. "Then there's what happened to Ethlyn and Quan…"

"Yeah, I know." Shanan bowed his head, eyes closed to hide his own tears, fists clenched at his side, standing in front of Oifeye. I was startled by the number of bandages I could see. He had looked like he'd had minor wounds at worst during dinner, but in different clothes that showed more skin, I could see there were significantly more. How badly had he been hurt? It was probably an exaggeration, but he looked like he was half-covered in bandages, after treatment. "I know, Oifeye. But Balmung might be at the Yied Shrine. And if it is, I should try to get it."

"Balmung has been missing since your father died." Now Oifeye's voice was sharp. "But now, conveniently, when we're causing the most trouble…"

"Yes, I know it can be a damn trap. But it also does make sense. The final battles of the Isaachian Campaign were fought near there, and it would make a good trophy." Shanan opened his eyes, his posture still rigid. "And if it is there, the morale boost would be worth the risk. And I could protect
"Yes, but..." Oifeye sighed and rested his hand on a pile of papers. "No, you're stubborn. You're not suggesting you go. You're telling me that you're going." He drummed his fingers on the pages, and then switched to the desk itself. "We won't be able to go with you."

"I know. I'll be heading alone." Shanan smiled, relaxing finally. But he quickly became serious again. "Keep an eye on the outer perimeter. Grannvale's forces seem to be closing in on Tirnanog. I think they've noticed it's become a blindspot. The seclusion has been wonderful for keeping them safe, but Danann's finally starting to figure things out." He scoffed suddenly, and rolled his eyes. "Thank everything he's nowhere near as clever as Uncle Lex. We would've been found out long ago in that case."

"Still, if he's figured it out, we might need to move..." Oifeye went behind his desk and pulled out a map. "Maybe we should actually cross into Silesse... I'm sure Lewyn and Erinys would shelter us. If they're still alive, that is."

"I'm sure people will shelter you anyway. Silesse has never been a friend to the Empire." Shanan leaned over the map too, no doubt to take a look as well. "You might be able to secure a ship to sail the Thove. Otherwise, you'll have to head south to Lubeck."

"Why are you talking like...?" Oifeye frowned, but then laughed ruefully. "Of course. You wouldn't be able to come with us. You can't leave Isaach."

"No, I can't. I can get away with it to go after Balmung, but otherwise, I'd have to stay for my people." Shanan grimaced and continued with a surprising amount of sarcasm. "Of course, I'm sure you all won't really know the difference, considering how much I've been around."

"You're basically ruling your country in all but name, and some political nonsense. We understand."

"Doesn't mean I have to like it." Shanan sighed and brushed his hair behind his ear. "I know I'm doing what I need to, and I know I'm protecting them and my people. But it feels like I turn around and they've aged ten years."

"Ha! It feels that way when you're here raising them!" Oifeye laughed nostalgically, smiling. "But they're not children anymore."

"Lana is seventeen, right?" Shanan's own smile was bitter. "Isn't that how old you were, when we lost so much?"

"No, I was eighteen. It is older than Finn, Ethlyn, and Lachesis were when they joined the army, though." Oifeye sighed, smiling disappearing. "They're asking to fight. It comes up more and more."

"...On the one hand, I want to say 'no'. We promised to keep them safe and, damn it, I owe it to everyone to keep them safe. ' Shanan closed his eyes again, and I thought of how Aideen had told me, once, that Mom and Sigurd had helped save his life. Mom had healed him, and Sigurd had given him a home. She said it was why Shanan kept a closer eye on Seliph and me. "But I can admit they're skilled. I know they are. Hell, I taught Riona, Seliph, Ulster, and Larcei, to a degree."

"While I've taught Diarmuid and Lester, as best as I could, and Aideen has taught Lana." Oifeye looked down. "But that's training. They've never been in a real fight before."

"Neither had we, during our first real fights." Shanan smiled bitterly. "I won't tell you what to do."

"everyone better."
You and Aideen are the ones who raised them and thus, you've got way more say in this than me. But I will point that out, at least. If experience is all they lack…"

"...Logically, I know you're right." Oifeye leaned against his desk and pinched the bridge of his nose. "But what if they get hurt? What if they die? The three of us promised to protect them. I've raised them. I can't…" Oifeye's voice actually cracked and, to my shock, he was actually tearing up. Automatically, I made to stand, but then remembered I was eavesdropping. If Oifeye knew I was here, I knew he wouldn't be anywhere near this… vulnerable. 'I can't lose them, Shanan. After everything…"

"...Yeah, I understand…" Shanan rubbed Oifeye's back reassuringly, and I winced at that bit of knowledge. It was so damn obvious. Of course he'd be hesitant in letting us onto the very dangerous battlefield. We would get hurt; it was impossible not to, in a fight. We could die. Of course he'd be terrified. What father wouldn't be scared, sending their children to war? Though, at the same time, was it fair to ask that sacrifice of others and not take it up ourselves? I didn't think so, and so much of the world wasn't fair, but that didn't mean we shouldn't try and make it so. "What is that noise?" Of course, in my introspection, I'd forgotten to make sure Hestia was quiet, and that meant she had nudged the door open, making it creak. "Who's there?" Shanan stepped out into the hall, and, of course, immediately found me sitting by the door, with Hestia, eavesdropping. I awkwardly waved, smiling sheepishly, and he closed his eyes and sighed. Whoops.

"Is everything all right?" There was the sound of Oifeye approaching, but Shanan held up a hand. "Yes? No?"

"It seems Hestia escaped from Riona's room to say hello." Shanan beckoned to Hestia and she immediately leapt over my knees to rub up against him. She also jumped up to brace her front paws on his chest and lick his face. "Yes, yes, good to see you too, Hestia." Shanan rubbed her back and then gently pushed her down. She darted inside the room and the yelp hinted she'd done something similar to Oifeye. "I'll go make sure Riona's okay, and that her door isn't in need of repairs. Again."

"That's a good plan." Oifeye sounded more cheerful, laughing a bit. I wanted to look to check, but definitely knew that wasn't a good idea. "See you in the morning, Shanan."

"In the morning," Shanan partially closed the door, mostly to hide him nudging my leg and pointing down the hall. I nodded and scooted to the side before standing up and following him down. I was a bit surprised when we headed outside, but then smiled when he headed for the tree by the house that made it easy to climb onto the roof. Of course, I just scaled the side of the house itself, but that was because I was a show-off.

Still, when he joined me on the roof, and sat down beside me, I whispered, "do you really have to leave?"

"If I'd had Balmung when Conall was captured, even as weak as I was, I could've gotten him," Shanan replied. I winced at the reminder. Conall, my precious twin, had been kidnapped by Grannvale forces thirteen years ago. While we hoped he was well, we didn't know. Tirnanog didn't get a lot of rumors from Belhalla. You'd think a 'new prince' would be a big enough rumor to reach here, but then again, it had taken us two years to hear about Deirdre's death. "And Grannvale's forces are just getting stronger. More serious."

"You know Conall's kidnapping wasn't your fault, right?" Really, it was my fault. Conall had wanted to get to the others and then tell them that we didn't have our stuffed-dogs or the earrings. I'd insisted on going back for them ourselves. "I mean… we were…"

"No, we should've made sure you had them before we left." Shanan's sad smile proved the words
didn't have any effect, just like all the other times I'd tried to reassure him. In Shanan's eyes, he had failed. It hurt that I couldn't change his mind on that. "So, I'll be leaving in the morning."

"So soon?" _That_ startled me. He rarely left immediately after returning, even after all these years. "But that's..."

"Sooner I go, the more likely the blade will be there. If, you know, it's not a trap." His smile became bitter. "That's always a possibility. Us falling for a previous one cost us Conall."

"Still, though..." I bit my tongue to stop the rest of the sentence. Oifeye was right. This was Shanan _telling_ us what he was going to do, and no one could stop him when he got an idea in his head. "You have to promise we'll see you again, alive and well. I'll have Hestia pin you down if you don't."

"Now, that's something I want to avoid!" Shanan laughed, and I noticed how tired it was. "I promise, Riona."

"Okay." I made sure I smiled, to hide my worries, but I did feel a little better. Promises were important. That's something all of us had learned, growing up with Oifeye, Aideen, and Shanan. Yes, circumstances might happen and force you to break them, but you had to hold onto them as long as you could, even if the person you promised was dead. Promises meant you'd fight just a little harder to fulfill them. "Don't forget."

"I won't." He ruffled my hair and I playfully made a face. "So, what all have I missed? Dinner was quiet, and I picked up bits and pieces."

"Well, Lester fell into a well two weeks ago..." Then I rattled off anything I could think of, little bits of gossip mostly. The overhunting. How Creidne was recovering. How Hestia had jumped the fence around the local cattle and scared them, which Hestia yawned at during the retelling. Little things, really, some of it sad, but mostly things to make him smile. In the morning, he'd be off again and we'd be kept close inside the protective walls of Tirnanog. Everyone else risked everything for us, but here were were. Safe. Protected.

I was tired of it. But I made sure to smile despite it. Because with everything everyone sacrificed, I didn't have a right to be sad.

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Caitriona; Riona

Class: Myrmidon; Skills: Pursuit, Luna, Charisma, Miracle

The 19-year-old daughter of Alicia of Velthomer and Chulainn of Sophara, the older twin of Conall. While she loves her name, after Conall was captured, she shortened it to 'Riona', which before only he called her, because she was desperate to hear it again. Nowadays, she prefers it, since it's less of a mouthful.

Has Holy Marks for Od and Fjalar intertwined on her left collarbone and chest. Their blessings give her boosts to stamina, her ability to suffer damage, her skill and accuracy, and her magical power. Due to her Fjalar blood, she is capable of conjuring small flames that are just hot enough to cauterize injuries (if focused solely on that) and sterilize needles (though killing a person outright would be difficult due to size and concentration needed). Due to her Od blood, she has very keen sight, letting her track people's movements quickly and easily as well as giving her an edge at finding weak points in guard.

Trained to fight primarily by Shanan, with a focus on the more pragmatic fighting Chulainn taught
him. Meaning kicks, punches, etc are more than fair game, and she has no qualms at all about setting someone's clothes on fire to drop their guard for the kill.

She keeps it quiet, but some days, she thinks Hestia is another 'gift' from her dad, given how she'd found Hestia on the anniversary of the Belhalla Massacre and because Hestia had the same coloring as her toy. This, more than anything, is the reason why she begged to keep her. She likes the idea of her dad looking out for her, even now.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Welcome to Gen2, and our new POV char, Riona. With the new POV char comes a difference in the notes on everyone, bringing in their classes and skills because Riona would actually care about that. All Holy Blood gives a boost to HP (which I tend to think of as stamina and the obvious ability to suffer damage). Od gives a +30% to skill, while Fjalvar gives a +30% to magic. There's more of a focus on just what the Holy Bloods do to give their 'boosts', because it's something Riona would've learned (unlike Alicia, who didn't know more than the basics). As for the changes in some of the Crusader names, I purposely did that to reflect how different the world is in Gen2.

Since we're finally into Gen2, let's talk about Inheritance. Children inherit all of their parents personal skills (for example, Chulainn has Luna, while Alicia has Miracle and Charisma. Riona inherited all three, and then gets Pursuit because of her class) I think someone once asked why I picked those skills for Alicia. Miracle was done to help justify in 'gameplay' a few close calls Alicia had during her story. Charisma was picked by a friend.

The children character's starting gold is (father's gold + mother's gold)/10 + 2000, hence the comment about money above. I highly doubt the average citizen in Isaach has 200 gold, much less 2000.

Stats are complicated, but the growths aren't too bad, being [Main Parent's growth rates] +[Secondary Parent's growth rates /2] + Holy Blood bonus. For the most part, the kids growths are ridiculous. You know how the children chars could be total gamebreakers in Awakening? Yeah, like the marriage system, that started here.

Their starting inventory is what they could use in their 'main parent's' inventory upon the end of Gen1. A child's main parent is determined by their gender, with most following their same-gender parent (I.e. Ulster's is Lex). The exceptions are Ethlyn's kids, as well as Brigid's, with the genders switched. Riona and Conall are also exceptions to that, with Riona's 'Main Parent' being Chulainn, and Conall's being Alicia. Which is another reason why Conall got kidnapped; justification for him inheriting Alicia's things. (I'm going to deal with other inherited things via story.)

If you didn't pair up one of the women for whatever reason (do not say anything about what's better or not gameplay wise, please and thank you), then the children are replaced with substitute characters. I like the idea of them existing still, though, so while there's been mentions in the past (Jeanne back in Noldion), we get to see a few here. Muirne is Lana's substitute and Deimne Lester's, while Dalvin and Creidne sub for Ulster and Larcei. Creidne being captured while protecting Larcei and Lana comes
from the Oosawa manga, though Creidne didn't survive in Oosawa. As for the implications of rape… Oosawa heavily implied it happened before she was killed, and the game itself heavily implies that it happens to many captured women, so I decided to include it. I promise that things like this won't come up often, though the risk/threat of it will be mentioned a few more times.

Starting the gen prior to Shanan leaving comes from the Oosawa manga. The opening text for the chapter is based off of the in-game opening text (with some bits to show 'what is known' by the general populace). I don't think the games ever mentioned 'labor camps' and the like, but it made sense to me. The mentions of 'patience' and 'burning quickly' are nods to the skills Ulser and Larcei have in their Awakening cameo. Lana mumbling about 'nuns and warfare don't mix' comes from the original fan-translation.

It's never stated just when the Empire became the tyrannical entity it is when Gen2 actually starts. Fuyuki's manga never addresses it, and Oosawa picked an earlier time. I picked 775 because that's a year before FE5 starts and some dialogue there can imply the Child Hunts are recent. As for when this story starts, in game, gen 2 starts in 777. I delayed it to 779 for a couple of personal reasons. I'll also be expanding the timeline, covering about two or three years instead of the one in-game. Despite the shorter time skips in between, there will still be three interludes between each Game-Chapter.

While Hestia is dubbed a wolf, I am taking her behavior more off of wolfdogs, huskies, etc for ease (I have far more experience with dogs). The incident with the snake is based off of a story I saw on someone's blog and identified with hard because one of my own dogs did a similar thing, but with a turtle. As for why Riona has a wolf, one reason is a nod to A Song of Ice and Fire. I also found the idea amusing, considering how much Alicia disliked the idea, and I found the idea interesting. 'Hestia', by the way, is the Greek goddess of hearth, home, domesticity, and family, and heavily associated with fire'.

Next Chapter - Light Inheritors
Chapter 31) Light Inheritors

Shanan left shortly after breakfast, to everyone's surprise. Not mine, of course, but that was due to my accidental eavesdropping. But, regardless, he left, with the people wishing him luck. Some were practically vibrating from excitement. Balmung, the Phantasmal Blade, had been missing for some twenty years at this point. Its loss was just another reminder of everything Grannvale stole from it, in the name of 'peace'.

For the rest of us, life is as normal, save for Diarmuid and Lester preparing on going on patrol with Oifeye. Wake up, tend to Hestia, eat, do chores, do a shift at the infirmary... normal. We do our best to not fidget at it. We know how much of a blessing it is to have them. But people were dying. People were suffering. People placed their hopes in us.

This wasn't right. How long until we could make it fair?

"Thanks for coming with me," Lester noted as we walked into Tirnanog. It was super early, with the market not even set up yet, so it was unusually quiet. "I really do appreciate it."

"It's not like it's really out of the way or anything," I replied with a shrug. I adjusted my grip on Hestia, to make sure she didn't go chase and eat some discarded trash. "Though, I do wish you had waited an hour or something before visiting Creidne. I'm sleepy."

"I'll be leaving in an hour."

"Oh. Right." I sighed, and didn't even pretend to be mad when he snickered. The whole point of this was him saying goodbye to Creidne before leaving for a few days. Wasn't surprised he wanted to. He and Creidne had actually dated for five years before suddenly breaking up last year. Both were still good friends and all, but it had confused the living hell out of all of us. Including Lana and Aideen. I was half-convinced it was because of the 'Mythical Someday', but they never said. To be fair, it wasn't anyone's business but their own, but still. Still!

The two of us continued lightly conversing until we reached the house, and knocked on the door. Dalvin did a double-take when he saw us. "Is everything okay?" he asked worriedly, looking between us. We both smiled reassuringly. "Okay, not emergency. Shelter from a prank again."

"No, actually, Oifeye is taking Diarmuid and I on patrol," Lester explained. Both of us stepped into the warm kitchen, smiling at all the smells wafting about. Dalvin must've been finishing up breakfast. "And I wanted to say goodbye to Creidne, if she's awake and up for it. I'll understand if she's not."

"Let me go ask." He pointed to me. "What did you bribe her with to get her up so early?"

"She's along in case I accidentally trigger her, and you need help calming her down." Lester smiled faintly, but bitterly. "I know that your parents run errands in the early morning."

"Ah, okay." Dalvin smiled back, kindly if sadly. "That's appreciated. I'll go ask her, then."
Dalvin headed into the back, and Lester and I made ourselves comfortable via making sure Hestia didn't steal anything. He came back letting us know that Creidne did want to at least try and speak with Lester, so Lester went to Creidne's room and I helped Dalvin get things together for the stall. And the two of us argued over whether I should pay or not when Hestia successfully stole and chomped down on some cheese. I eventually pretended to give up, while hiding some coins in an easy-to-find spot anyway. By that point, Lester returned, smiling, and helped with the last of the preparations. Dalvin quietly went on back to check on Creidne, before returning with a warm smile. Creidne was fine. That was amazing. So, Lester and I helped Dalvin set up the stall itself for the market, though we did have to leave in the middle of it to chase down Hestia. Because Hestia knew if she acted cute, she could get treats from everyone and that was so much better than just treats from family.

"Sometimes, I think Hestia is smarter than us," Lester commented when we finally caught her. Hestia immediately barked and panted happily as she kept pace with us. "Make that most of the time."

"She is certainly clever," I agreed. Still, I pulled a bit on her ear, not hard, but enough to make sure she was looking at me. "I think someone isn't getting treats from us for the next day." Hestia whined at that and pressed herself into my side. "You can go a while without eating, you know. I know you can. I did read up on wolves."

"Right, Shanan found that book for you while he was out." That was honestly how we got most of our books. Shanan, or the people of Tirnanog who were brave enough to venture farther than the nearby villages. "In the wild, wolves gorge on their meals, right?"

"That's what the books said at least. They can go days without eating and then feast when they make a kill." However, to be fair, even if Hestia could, she had never been raised that way. "But all that said, I was just talking about treats. She can just deal with her regular meals since she got all the treats this morning." Hestia licked my hand. "You can't always sweeten me, you know."

"Just most of the time." Lester snickered and ducked under my half-hearted swat. "Oh, we've people staring." We did, some of the younger teens in town, probably planning out a fun little market day. I smiled and winked at them, and then had to muffle a laugh when they began giggling and blushing. Lester rolled his eyes. "Of course you did that."

"What's wrong with winking?"

"Nothing." He shrugged and smiled and I tried to decide if I should poke him for more information or not. "Ah, Diarmuid!" However, I decided against it because we'd made it to the church for the first infirmary shift. Diarmuid and Lester insisted on taking it, because they wouldn't be here for a while. I'd drawn the short straw when rearranging the chores schedule. "You're early."

"I figured you all wouldn't be long," Diarmuid explained. He looked past us at the group of teens still surreptitiously looking at us, and smiled and waved. They immediately went back to blushes and nervous laughter. Now that I was looking properly, I could see it was a mixed group of boys and girls. All were blushing. How adorable~! "I also figured you two might need a quick place to hide thanks to Hestia."

"She charmed the whole market out of treats," Lester explained. He sighed and shook his head. "However, if you two are done charming everyone into blushes messes, again..." He made his voice as dry as possible. Both Diarmuid and I grinned and shrugged. "Let's get to work helping the wounded get more comfortable and the like."

"What's wrong with being friendly?" Still, the three of us headed inside, Hestia immediately going
to one of the children to cheer them up. "You're just jealous. Maybe if you smiled more…"

"I am not!"

We bantered a little more in that vein, mostly Diarmuid and I teaming up against Lester, and then went to work, mostly with checking if any had died during the night and helping people change clothes, go to the bathroom, etc. Normal things for a normal morning. If we could have days like this forever, then I'd be happy. But I also knew that there were people who didn't get days like this, people who protected this happiness of ours by giving up their own. I was helping them, after all. That just wasn't fair. When was it our turn to sacrifice for the good of everyone? I didn't necessarily want to fight, but…

No. No, that was wrong. I did want to fight. Everyone had fought so hard so that we could make it to this day. I needed to repay them, with smiles and blade. All of us did.

It was really strange not having Diarmuid and Lester about. None of us had ever been separated for more than a day before, and the patrol would easily last a week. Two days into it, and we all kept trying to not panic. It was… a bit worse with me because I kept remembering the days immediately after Conall had been kidnapped. Those days of confusion, of wondering why I couldn't see Conall, of just not understanding why we couldn't go get him back… I'd spent a lot of them sobbing, feeling like half of my heart had been ripped out. It took a while for my smile to return. Seliph and Larcei in particular had devoted themselves to getting it back.

"You know; I do wonder how Conall is," Ulster said randomly, showing I wasn't the only one reminded of those days. He and I were sitting on the floor, making medicine while Larcei and Seliph cooked dinner. It was supposed to be Lana's turn tonight, but she was napping against Hestia, absolutely exhausted from a shift at the infirmary. We'd have to swing by there later to make sure Aideen got food. "It's strange we don't get rumors."

"Would they tell us if they did, though?" Larcei asked, bringing up a good point. She cut up some vegetables for whatever dish she and Seliph were making. Knowing how we all normally worked, it was 'winging it completely'. "I mean; if Conall is fine-"

"He is fine."

"Bad wording. I know he's fine." All of us 'knew' Conall was fine. It was the belief that got us through the worst of things, back then, and it was one we held to firmly even now. Both Ulster and Larcei believed particularly hard, because they also believed that if something was wrong, I'd know. Twin thing. "But point is, it's weird that we haven't heard anything. Shanan should've gotten something by now."

"Not necessarily," Seliph countered gently. He was stirring some sort of sauce for whatever we were having. It smelled good, whatever it was. "I don't think Shanan would keep that from us. He knows how much it hurt."

"Right, I think so too," I agreed. I finished up one potion and began working on the next. All of us had made medicine enough times over the years that we could almost do it in our sleep. Doing it while talking was easy. "I know they keep things from us, but that... I don't think they'd do that." At least, I didn't think Shanan would keep it from me. And I'd tell the others in a heartbeat. Less even. "But then that just continues the oddity. Yes, it took a couple of years for us to learn about..."

"About my mother's death." Seliph's voice was quiet, and all of us winced. The worst was how he
referred to her, at least in my eyes. It was always 'my mother', not 'Mother'. None of us knew why she married Arvis when she had been married to Sigurd, why she had chosen to let Arvis just murder Sigurd in the worst of ways. We all knew to be careful bringing it up around Aideen, Oifeye, and Shanan. They had been particularly hurt by that betrayal. "And that was just because the rumor took that long."

"But there's a difference between 'two years to get information about a death' and however long it's been since Conall's been gone," Larcei grumbled. She chopped the vegetables a little more fiercely and Seliph looked at her worriedly. Wouldn't be the first time she got mad and cut herself while chopping vegetables. "It's just… I don't even know. Why wouldn't something like that spread?"

"...Well, actually, what do we know about the crown prince and princess?" I asked, just thinking of that. All four of us stilled because the answer was 'basically nothing'. "We know their names. Julia and Julius. We know that Julia is Major Naga."

"I think the merchants mentioned that Julius took after his father in looks, and Julia took after her mother?" Larcei frowned and paused in cutting. "I… can't think of anything else."

"Then maybe it's a deliberate thing, to try and keep children out of gossips?" I sighed heavily and shook my head. "Well, whatever. It is what it is, and I'd like to change the subject, please."

"I hope Lester and Diarmuid remember to not let Oifeye cook." Larcei easily found a new subject, one that made us laugh. Oifeye was great at medicine making, but his cooking skills were atrocious. 'Tastes like steel' was the best thing one could say about it. "Did we send them stomach medicine?"

"I think Aideen slipped some into their packs, just in case!" Now the mood of the room lightened, and all of us began giggling. Lana mumbled something in her sleep and rolled over. Hestia licked her cheek before settling down again. "Anyway, speaking of cooking, dinner will be ready soon, so Ulster can you wake up Lana while I set the table and-" And someone knocked on the door, confusing the hell out of all of us. "Who is out and about at this hour?"

"Less that and more 'why did they come out here?',' Seliph murmured. He headed to the door, while Ulster and I stood up. Larcei checked that nothing would burn and then went to wake up Lana herself. "Yes?" He opened the door and we were all really confused to see a near panicking Deimne there. "What's going on?"

"We've got children missing," he explained quickly and tiredly. He coughed a bit, struggling to breathe. Did he run here? That was a distance Larcei, Ulster, and I did for training! "No one has any idea. Mind-?"

"Let us clean things up and make sure we don't burn the house down." Seliph was already moving back to the stove. I went to help him, 'seizing' the flames to bank them quickly. "What else can you tell us?"

Deimne told us all that he knew, not much, while we poked Lana awake and got him some water. Then we headed into town to see if there had been any developments. Sadly, there were none and, worse, there was no real 'pattern' to who disappeared. There were six missing, and only one or two were friends with each other. The youngest was seven; the oldest was thirteen. So, everyone split into pairs, with Hestia and me focusing on the children who had been missing the longest since Hestia could follow a trail somewhat. When the trail seemed to lead into the woods, Seliph insisted on joining us. Just in case.

"Gods, it's dark," Seliph whispered, tossing up a small globe of light that followed us. Naga's
heritage let him do that, and it was very useful in a lot of scenarios. "It's still chilly at night too."

"Well, it's only just now spring," I replied, hopping over a root. Hestia didn't bother keeping to a
path, doing her best to follow the scent as closely as possible. "I hope they didn't get caught by a
fallen tree or something."

"We're near a stream, so I hope they didn't slip on rocks." Seliph sent the globe of light to the right
briefly, so that I could see the slight sparkle of the stream. "Why would they go so deep into the
woods?"

"Is that a question you and I should ask?" I gave him a droll look. "How many times did we get lost
in the woods and scare the living hell out of everyone?"

"Even we didn't go this deep." He had a point there. "Hestia, you sure they're this way?" Hestia
paused a bit to sniff about and then barked and kept going. "Okay."

"I hope we're not too far off the mark." Yes, Hestia had an amazing sense of smell, because wolf,
but she wasn't exactly trained for things like this. "I trust her but…"

"It does make you worry." He ducked under a low hanging branch. "It's so quiet as well."

"...Wait, why is it so quiet?" It could just be us, but there really should be more noise. It wasn't like
every animal went to sleep when the sun went down. "Oh, hell, this is one of those moments, isn't
it?"

"The 'it's quiet, too quiet' moments in a story to let you know there's something wrong?" Seliph and
I stopped walking and I snapped my fingers to let Hestia know we had. "Should we head back for
reinforcements?"

"That's…" I bit my lip, thinking. It would probably be smart for us, but… "I'm worried about the
children. Let's at least make sure…"

"Sounds good to me." He smiled reassuringly, and I relaxed slightly. "I couldn't decide either."

"Let's hope it's nothing more than a predator or something." I paused, thinking of how deadly
Hestia could be. And how bad it would be for something like that going after a child. "Let's just go.
Hestia?" Hestia trotted back over to me and I rubbed her head. "Good girl… let's keep it up, okay?"
Hestia licked my hand and bumped her head against my hip before trotting down the path again,
Seliph and I following closely with the little globe of light giving us just enough light to not trip.

Eventually, Seliph and I began hearing noises again and Hestia fell back to stay firmly at my side
instead of leading the way. Feeling rather unnerved, we crept closer, until we came up on a small
clearing. Three people in dark robes tied up sobbing children, all six of the missing ones from what
I could remember about descriptions. All of them carried tomes, one of fire and one that seemed to
draw the shadows it, and all of them wore knives on their belts. They talked quietly, rhythmic
pattern hinting it was some sort of prayer. It wasn't until we heard 'Loptyr' that Seliph and I
realized what was going on. This… this was a Child Hunt. I'd heard about them, but to actually see
one was…

Seliph and I both continued to stare dumbly, idiots trying to process things. As we did, one of the
youngest caught sight of us and, in sheer desperation, shrieked, "Seliph! Riona! Help!" And blew
whatever cover we might've had because all of the priests whirled towards us.

"What's this?" one asked, stepping a bit towards us. Their hood made it hard to note features, but
the embroidery on the edge, which the others didn't have, hinted they were the leader of this group.
"Mmm… too old for Loptyr…" They studied Seliph closely. I tried to subtly nudge Hestia away, to the children, but she refused to leave my side. "Wait, Seliph… I know that name. The 'prince of light', the son of Sigurd…" Their eyes narrowed on me. "Riona is not familiar, but with the Fjalor-red eyes, you must be Velthomer's missing princess. My, what a prize that stumbled up." They smiled slowly. Dread and fear warred for supremacy. I knew this feelings. I hadn't felt it in years, since we came to Tirnanog, but I knew it. The fear of knowing someone was hunting us, and they had found us. "What a prize indeed. We can't kill the girl. Our prince will be most upset if we hurt his cousin. But the boy… for the boy we can draw out the death."

They stepped closer, but quickly backed away as Hestia slowly walked forward, snarling with her hackles up. Another of the trio, an obviously brave or stupid soul, tried to grab her, but she snapped at him, barely but purposely missing their fingertips. The third tried to throw a spell at her. I tackled them to protect her and thus began the fight. Because Hestia knew a threat was here, and I had to protect my wolf.

It was… it was scary, though. I'd never been in a 'real' fight before. Training? Sure. Sparring? Yep. Beating up bullies? Oh, definitely. Fighting for my life? Not so much. And Shanan was right. Nothing could prepare you for that sort of thing. I was dodging and ducking around spells, and trying not to flinch and scream with the spells splintered tree trunks and exploded branches. I kicked people in the face and tried to not panic when they tried to grab me. I was so frazzled that it took me a moment to even notice that they weren't using many fire spells. And this was just three people. Nothing like a 'real' fight. A real fight had much more going on.

One of trio decided to remind us of that, and threw a fire spell immediately after casting whatever that other spell was. But not at Seliph or me. No, they threw it at one of the children, the youngest, the one who'd yelled for us to help, probably to try and make Seliph and I submit. A few of the older ones twisted to try and shield, but that… that would've only led to all of them dying. Instinctually, I threw my hand out and 'reached' with my magic. I had no idea what I was doing. This was just something I knew I could do from my lessons, 'seizing' the fire of someone's spell. I'd never done it before. Never had an opportunity to practice before. But I was panicking, desperate to prevent a child burning alive in front of me, and this was all I could… "Mom, please, help…!"

I had no idea how it happened. Maybe it was desperation. Maybe it was the Holy Blood and innate magic power. Maybe Mom really did help from beyond. But somehow, I 'seized' the fireball and whipped it into a priest's face. The whipping was totally an accident. I'd been so surprised it worked that I had jerked back and the fireball had moved with my hand. But it had definitely freaked the group out, and I shakily used that as a distraction to try and untie the children. My fingers caught on the knots, but Seliph was by me in an instance to help me, as shaky as me, but two shakies equaled one competent apparently. Mostly competent. Hestia still had to come over and help, her bloody muzzle hinting she'd bitten some of the priests. I worriedly checked her for injuries, but there wasn't a sign of even muscle strain.

"Hestia, get them back to town," I whispered once the last of the knots came undone. The youngest child hugged me tightly, sobbing, and I patted their back and stroked their hair. Seliph comforted a couple of the others. "You all, follow Hestia. She will get you to safety. And someone get her to Lana, Muirne, or Aideen when you get there, please." Hestia whimpered a bit. "I'll be fine. They won't. Please, sweetie?" Seliph had to push us all down to avoid another spell. No time. "Hestia!"

She still whimpered, but she licked my cheek and nudged the children into following her. Seliph and I immediately whirled to our feet, with both of us standing as living shields to help them escape. Thankfully, sort of, the priests were far more interested in us than the children. So, the children managed to get away, and Seliph and I were back into the fight. By this point, the shock had worn off, mostly, helping us think a little clearer. Mostly. At the least, Seliph and I were able
to quickly tag team, taking advantage of our sight and his strength to bash the burnt-faced priest's skull into the nearby trees.

I quickly snatched their knife to stab them in the back, just in case, and attempted to stab the one that came after me next. Unfortunately, skilled as I was in blades, I had no real experience with using a knife, so while I did manage a stab, I also lost my grip on the thing, because of how slippery the hilt was, and cut my own fingers. And I couldn't recover the knife because the priest shot a spell at point-blank range and I had to roll out of the way very, very quickly. As I popped back to my feet, I got a single idea. A crazy idea, but this was a bit of a crazy situation.

"Dad, if you and Mom are watching, I could use a bit of luck…!" I hissed, snapping my fingers to conjure up a small fireball. Then, as the priest got closer, I ducked under their guard and punched them in the mouth. Pain spiked down my hand and wrist, but I used the shock of the hit to pry their mouth open and threw the fireball straight down their throat. They choked on a scream, coughing madly and stumbling back, clawing at their throat. I whirled to roundhouse kick them in the head and hooked my leg around to drive them to the ground. Then I stomped on their throat, twice, to crush the windpipe.

I had just enough time to marvel at how that actually worked when a bright flash of light blinded everything. I blinked rapidly, eyes watering, and my vision cleared just in time for me to see Seliph steal the last priest's knife and stab them in the throat, ripping it out for good measure. The priest fell and, after a brief moment of triumph, Seliph's expression faded for blank shock. He looked down at his bloody hands and arms, just staring. I almost asked what was wrong, but then I looked down at the body at my feet. I looked at the slumped body by the tree. I looked at my own bloody hands and realized just… just what happened. We killed people. We'd seen people die often. Protecting us. On the whims of soldiers. Infirmary. Death was common. Death was familiar. Death was normal. Killing? Killing wasn't, except now…

I wasn't sure which one of us moved first, but both of us bolted for the edges of the clearing to vomit up everything we'd eaten for the past month. Then, tearing up, coughing, horribly snotty from it all, both of us stumbled over to the nearby stream to rinse our mouths out. The sour taste was nearly enough to make me dry heave again, and my abdomen actually ached. Everything ached, really. Worse than any spar or training session.

After a few rinses, and a couple splashes to the face, the world didn't seem quite so bad and I sat back on my heels and took a moment to breathe. However, I noticed Seliph was trying to get the blood off and he…

"You're digging into your skin," I whispered, reaching over to take his hands gently. He didn't look at me, but I saw the tear marks on his face. "Here. Let me." I waited until he nodded before washing the blood off, first from his hands, and then from his face. There was nothing I could do about the blood on his shirt, but I could at least do this much.

When I finished, he caught my hand and held it palm up, where the cuts from the knife were bleeding. "You're hurt," he murmured, nodding to my other hand. I glanced down to see my knuckles were bloody, and there were distinct cuts where I'd hit teeth. "Here." And then he began carefully getting the blood off me. Mine was limited more to my hands and clothes, and I winced when they stung, but made sure to hold still until he was done. Neither of us had anything for bandages, so this was the most we could do. "The children."

"Hestia has them." But I knew what he meant. "Let's catch up."

"Yeah." Neither of us moved. "Okay. Right." Both of us tried to stand then, but we both collapsed, our legs not working right as the shock of everything really hit us. So we leaned against each other
briefly, taking strength and comfort from each other. I still couldn't quite get my legs to work, but Seliph found the strength and he pulled me up, careful to not grab my injuries. Then we stumbled back to town, a little globe of light hovering over our heads to light the path. Seliph nearly fell a few times even with the light, but I caught and helped him when that happened. We helped each other.

I didn't regret killing the priests. That might've been the worst thing. But there had been a choice between killing them and dying myself, and I had no regrets picking the former. But that didn't mean it settled well on me. That didn't mean Seliph and I didn't puke at least two more times each on the way back. That didn't mean Seliph and I weren't quick to duck back home and shake our heads when the others looked at us worriedly. That didn't mean we didn't barely eat dinner with everyone as Lana tended to my injuries. That didn't mean Seliph and I didn't stay up far too late that night, sitting outside with Hestia while the others slept, too scared to sleep.

We'd talk to them about it later. In the morning, maybe. In the morning, when the shock faded. Maybe.

After breakfast the next morning, one that Seliph and I picked at, Seliph and Lana went shopping and Larcei, Ulster, and I did morning chores. Well, they did morning chores and I attempted to do the same. But after five minutes of me pushing dirt around instead of sweeping and me nearly falling over from dizziness, Ulster ordered me to go take a nap instead. I was rather reluctant, but I did decide to at least curl up with Hestia. She licked my cheek and nuzzled me comfortingly and I soon nodded off, thankfully too tired even for nightmares. I ended up sleeping through half of the morning, and someone, probably Larcei, draped a blanket over me.

When I woke up, I felt like the world wasn't quite so bad, though I did lay there with Hestia a little longer before actually getting up. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and yawned, and Hestia pressed herself into my side, almost toppling me over. I petted her head and scratched behind her ears before taking stock of what was going on. Ulster was sweeping, which should've been my chore, and Larcei was doing dishes. I thought about trying to figure out what chores still needed to be done, but Ulster caught my eye and nodded to the table. A mug of warm milk with honey, now a bit lukewarm truthfully, rested there. I used some basic fire magic to gently warm it back up before sipping it, finally smiling at the familiar and comforting taste. I didn't sit down, just leaned on the table, enjoying the quiet and the sunshine. Enjoying the reminder that not everything was bloody.

"So, you two were bloody, and you were injured…" Larcei began after a moment, pretending to be more focused on the dishes. She scowled when Ulster glared. "Oh, come on! You're wondering too!"

"That doesn't mean I'm going to just outright ask like a tactless idiot," Ulster retorted instantly. He poked her leg with the broom, getting dust on her legs. "She barely slept!"

"Which is why I want to know what happened!" Larcei flicked soapy water at him. "She can say if she doesn't want to say anything. I mean; we all know that."

"You could still wait at least a few hours after she wakes up to-WHOA!" Ulster yelped and hopped back a couple steps, desperately trying to keep balance as Hestia playfully jumped on him. "Hestia!"

"Hahaha! I wi-EEK!" Larcei shrieked as Hestia went over to her and nearly sent her crashing into the sink. "Hestia!"

"I think she thinks you two are playing," I observed, fighting back giggles. I probably should've
warned them that Hestia's tail had been wagging, and she'd been slowly stretching her front legs forward and raising her butt in the air in a 'play bow'. But I knew stopping her was pointless and this was more amusing. "And she wants to join in."

"Hestia, you're going to break the dishes!" Larcei scolded, trying to fend Hestia off. Hestia just barked and play-bowed again. "Focus on Ulster. He's not handling fragile things." Hestia tilted her head, actively considering it, before doing just that, knocking Ulster flat on his ass. "That's the way!"

"Oh dear," I finished my milk and passed Larcei the empty mug. Ulster, meanwhile, wrestled with Hestia, taking care that she wouldn't accidentally hurt him. She did her best, but she still had very sharp teeth and could get very excited. "Anyway, to actually answer your question, I'm sure you all already guessed."

"Well, I did kind of hope I was wrong." She winced and set the mug into some water to soak. "Come here…" She drew me into a hug, soapy hands and all, and I rested my head against her shoulder. "Sucks that you two had to be first. I'd rather hoped we'd all have our first fight together, so that we could help each other better afterwards."

"The hug is nice." It really was. It helped ground me again. "Did the children say anything?"

"The children were whisked away to the infirmary, babbling about this thing and that. Nothing coherent." She pulled away and cupped my face. "Light stuff for dinner tonight?"

"That sounds good." My stomach did a little flip hinting that it was more than 'good'. I honestly wasn't sure what I'd keep down. "Thanks."

"Who were they?" Ulster asked, successfully flipping Hestia onto her back. He rubbed her belly vigorously and Hestia flailed about happily, barking a bit. "Did you find out?"

"Hmm? Oh, they were priests or… something…" I trailed off as something hit me like a bucket full of bricks. If the priests were here for a Child Hunt, if the Loptyr priests had made it here for a Child Hunt… "Oh no."

"...They know where the city is. They know Oifeye and Shanan aren't here, likely." Ulster became more and more stoic with each word. Larcei tensed, and I just… I just slowly sank down, crouching, with my head in my hands. That was so obvious. That was so fucking obvious. But Seliph and I had been so rattled that we… "Do they know if we're here or…?"

"One of the children called our names. They recognized both of us. So, I don't know if they know we're here, but they were clearly looking." Each word intensified the guilt and shame. "I am the most idiotic person in all of Jugdral."

"I'd argue all of us are, for not thinking more about why only children within a certain age range were taken, when younger ones would've been easier to lure away." He stood up, brushing some of the wolf fur off of his shirt. Hestia rolled onto her feet, sensing the tension in the air. "Though, maybe the adults thought of that." Ulster sighed, and rubbed the back of his neck. "Come on. We'll go see someone. Better to make sure."

"Right…" Slowly, I stood back up. I could beat myself up over this later. Right now, we had to… "Outside. Let's run."

However, as the three of us made it outside, Hestia next to me and eager for the run, we saw Seliph and Lana rushing back down the path. And, in the distance, we heard a bell. A high pitched bell
frantically clanging. We'd never heard it before, but we knew what it meant. Soldiers were here. We're under attack. And, as Lana and Seliph slid to a stop right in front of us, we knew... we knew what was about to happen.

"Well, there's no Oifeye here," Seliph pointed out softly. The guilt in his eyes told me he'd realized the same thing I had, probably as soon as the soldiers had appeared. "There's no Shanan. There's no Aideen; she's in the infirmary." Seliph looked all of us in the eye. "What's our decision? What do we do?" Did we run as we had done in the past? Or did we...?

"We knew this day was coming," Larcei whispered. Though she was mostly serious, she was also vibrating with excitement. "We've always known it. If they're here, then let's meet them, head on. All the way. I'm tired of running."

"We're all tired of running," Ulster agreed quietly. He closed his eyes and nodded. "Shanan did ask that we keep an eye on you, Seliph, but it seems like the best way to do that at this point..."

"Is to fight alongside. All of us."

"Exactly."

"...Hestia, go help Aideen," I ordered, kneeling down to look her in the eye. She whimpered and licked my nose. "I know, sweetie, but we'll be fine. I'm worried Aideen will need your help keeping the injured safe." She licked my face and nuzzled my cheek before reluctantly loping off, heading off the path. "Good girl."

"Well, that's Riona's answer," Lana noted with a small amount of sarcasm. She smiled nervously, but nodded. "But I agree. We owe the people of Tirnanog far too much to simply run."

"This is our home. Isaach is our home. We should protect it, at least."

"Yes, I agree as well," Seliph whispered. He looked at all of us and smiled bravely. His hands shook, though. I knew he was scared. Honestly, we all were. But... "Well, let's change into clothes better suited for fighting. I doubt wolf hair is going to scare them much."

"They never had to brush a wolf," Ulster instantly deadpanned. That startled laughter out of all of us. "Let's move quickly then."

Inside was a bit of a whirlwind of motion, mostly because we all accidentally kept crashing into each other in our haste to get to our rooms. But, eventually, I made it to mine and I headed for where my practice clothes were. Then I paused and instead went to my closet, to the dress hidden in the back there, carefully out of sight. This was something Creidne and Muirne had made me, as they had done for Larcei, for 'when' we were allowed to fight. I didn't want to fight my first real battle in just any sort of clothes. I wanted to wear the clothes they had lovingly made me, as a reassurance that they knew, one day, we would fight too.

So, I quickly changed into it, the long blue dress with slits up the side to allow freer movement. I found a pair of white and gold boots, a little fancier than my normal boots but still well made and easy to fight in, and put on my belt. It took a bit to find gloves, but eventually, I found some white, fingerless ones to pull on. Satisfied, I went to get my steel blade, but then a thought wormed its way into my head, one I couldn't let go. So, as I braided my hair back, I snuck over to Shanan's room to see if... well, he had left with a simple steel blade, something the average mercenary would carry. That meant he had left his silver blade, the one Dad had given him, here. And it was easy to find, just sitting there by the nightstand. So easy, in fact, that I had to wonder if Shanan had left it out, just in case.
Regardless, I tied off my braid and picked up the blade, noticing it was the same weight as the steel blade. After a moment, I popped it partially out of the sheathe and stared at it, absently noting my distorted reflection in the blade. Then I fully sheathed it again, and hooked it onto my belt. "Dad, I hope you don't mind..." I whispered. I mean; I was technically stealing it from Shanan. But I... "I'd like to at least pretend you're helping me through this."

With a weapon acquired, I left Shanan's room and quietly shut the door. Then I checked the kitchen area to see if anyone else was done. Finding no one, I decided to check on the others. Starting with Seliph because his was the closest. That all said, when I did step in, I had to stare for a moment. After all, he was mostly done getting dressed, save for one thing I couldn't quite believe.

"You're wearing a cape?" I asked dryly, leaning against the door frame. Seliph barely even looked at me. "A cape? Really?"

"It's Grannvelian," he protested. Still, he was struggling a bit to actually get it on. "I thought it would be important. Noticeable or something."

"Ugh, this is painful to watch." So, after sighing, I came over to help. And almost immediately got frustrated with it. "Why is Grannvelian clothing so complicated?"

"I am literally the last person to ask. I've never been. None of us have."

"Okay, true." It took a moment to realize just what we were doing wrong. "Oh, wait, this part is supposed to go over your head."

"It is?" He made a few funny noises as I wrestled it over his head. "Hey, more warning!"

"Sorry?" Still, once we got that on, it wasn't too hard to figure out how to set it up with the shoulder armor things. "Think I've got it from here. You fix your hair."

"Thanks."

We'd just gotten the cape on properly when the others jumped into the room, all ready to go as well. Larcei tossed me my practice armor and winked when she noticed that, just like her, she was wearing the clothes Creidne and Muirne had made, purple to my blue. Lana was wearing a surprisingly nice dress, though one that was also among the easiest to clean, and a scarf around her waist to act as a belt for her medicinal pack. Ulster was probably dressed the simplest, in regular practice clothes and armor, but when he noticed how 'fancy' we were, he just laughed.

"Unlike the rest of you, I'm patient," he teased. The rest of us shrugged and laughed, with Lana helping me with the practice armor. Only Larcei, Ulster, and I wore any, unless one counted Seliph's shoulder pieces. I hoped it would be okay. I hoped Larcei and Ulster would be fine with their steel blades. "Lana wants to grab a staff from her mother's room. Any other place?"

"Just one," Seliph murmured. He tied a headband on, as he always did for training. But we weren't 'training' anymore. "Oifeye's room."

"Sure."

We made it to Aideen's room easily and Lana actually seized a couple of staves. Then we stepped into Oifeye's room and looked around for what we knew Seliph was looking for: the silver sword Oifeye had received from Sigurd. Oifeye had stopped using it once we moved to Tirnanog and kept it hidden. Too painful. But we were able to find it, via Lana finding the loose floorboard under the bed and Larcei wiggling underneath to fetch it. Seliph took it with a trembling hand and partially unsheathed it to check how it was. The shining gleam proved it was in perfect condition, showing
that while Oifeye hadn't used it, he had taken care of it. So, Seliph sheathed it and attached it to his belt. Ready. We were all ready, and that was when the weight of what we had decided really hit us. The Mythical Someday… it was today. Diarmuid and Lester were going to be mad we started off without them, but we couldn't turn away. We couldn't run away. We were tired. Tired letting Grannvale simply do what they wanted. Tired of letting other people die for our safety.

Still, we were uneasy. It would be our first real battle, the first battle of the ‘war’ we had always known we’d fight. For Larcei, Ulster, and Lana, it would also be the first real fight they’d had. So, we all reached out and pulled each other into a group hug, giving each other as much support and comfort as we could. One last moment before we leapt through destiny’s doors and made our own path from the mess.

Tirnanog’s bell continued ringing, hinting that the church had turned into some sort of sanctuary, as well as an infirmary. Aside from that, there was fighting abound and small fires hinting where the soldiers had tried to drive people into ambushes, but failed to get anything too far thankfully. Not so thankfully, from what bits I could see here, everyone who could pick up a weapon had and everyone was fighting for their lives. I could see the dead sprawled out in the bloody streets and was afraid to look closer. I’d seen dead before, in the infirmary and over the long run to Tirnanog. But this just… felt different. And I was scared. I was really scared. But we had to do this. I knew we had to.

"I hope Hestia made it through all this safely," I whispered, pressed against the wall of a house on the edge of town. All of us were hiding, trying to figure out how to actually… you know… enter a battle. We'd never done that before. "It sounds like it's still going strong." It would've been hilarious if, after all that build up, the battle was over before we got here. But, at the same time… "What are we going to do?"

"That's a good question," Seliph murmured. He frowned a bit, thinking, while the rest of us tried to not fidget. I swore Lana had counted her medicines twenty times by now. "Well, we could always just go with what Larcei will pick."

"Charge?"

"Yep."

"Hey!" Larcei instantly snapped, stomping her foot even. The rest of us started laughing. "That isn't… I mean…"

"It's exactly what your suggestion would've been," Ulster pointed out. Larcei's scowl just made it all the funnier. "With that said, and I can't believe I'm saying this, but with that said, I think I agree."

"You do?" Larcei instantly lit up, but then she looked over at Lana, who awkwardly waved because she was part of the reason why we were so hesitant at stepping in. She hadn't learned how to fight yet. She'd had her hands full learning how to heal. "But Lana…"

"That's why." Ulster smiled slightly. "You three will draw attention, and I'll help Lana through while you keep them occupied. That'll get Lana to a place to set up a field infirmary."

"Oh. Yeah, that'll work." Larcei drew her blade, and Ulster, Seliph, and I followed her. My heart was pounding into my ribs. This was… "Okay. So let's…"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Lana insisted suddenly. She tugged my sleeve until I bent down slightly and
then kissed my cheek. "I've seen resistance members do this a lot." She went to Larcei and Seliph to kiss their cheeks too. "It's for good luck! I'll give you one later, Ulster."

"You're the sweetest!" I laughed, mostly because Larcei was too busy giggling, Seliph was smiling, and it was hard to tell if Ulster was stoic or sulking. But then I got a mischievous thought and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "You just want a good excuse to kiss Ulster on the cheek." She quickly mimed for quiet, proving me completely right, and I kissed her head. "You're the best."

"Make sure you come for checkups after the battle!" She gave us all stern looks before smiling. "I'll see you then. Good luck!"

With that, Seliph, Larcei, and I rushed into town, splitting up fairly quickly on accident-purpose. I headed down the market path, wincing at the beautiful stalls that were splintered and ransacked. I tried to ignore the blood I saw, and the bodies. Instead, I focused on everything else, reminding my turning stomach that the smell was nothing worse than what I'd dealt with in the infirmary, and then made a sharp turn when I heard the sounds of active battle close. As I came up on the fight, I discovered it was a group of resistance fighters, led by Creidne, fighting off some soldiers. And she was doing a damn good job of it, seeing the bodies by her feet. But she wasn't recovered. She still had her injuries, bleeding through the bandages, and the trauma was still fresh. She was fighting a battle on two fronts, both physical and mental, and it was hurting her performance. So, as I closed the gap, I saw one soldier disarm Creidne and another grab her arm with a vicious, sickening smirk...

"Get the hell away from her!" And I slipped the silver blade up and under the chestplate of the soldier holding Creidne to bypass the ribs. "Damn bastards!" I snapped, twisting the blade out and kicking the body away as it fell. A different one grabbed me, but I stepped close to ram my knee into their groin as hard as I could, and when they fell, I stabbed them through the face. "Tired of all you!" I brought the blade in front of me, glaring at the remaining soldiers, and part of me wondered if I'd messed up some sort of strategy. Some sort of plan or something.

But the resistance fighters near suddenly cheered and fought the remaining soldiers with renewed fervor. At first, it startled me, but it soon became obvious why this was happening. They'd been waiting for this day. They were excited today was the day we finally joined the battles. So, despite how scared I was, I kept up a grim smile and confident smirk. No matter how much my knees wanted to shake or I wanted to collapse and be sick from all the smells and blood, I held firm and didn't let myself slump.

Quickly, I hunted for the person with the fanciest armor, guessing whoever it was would be the leader. Noting they were towards the back, I slowly walked towards them, doing my absolute best to channel Hestia in all her predator-glory, the 'back off if you want to live' aura. It seemed to have the intended effect, seeing as soldiers stumbled back to keep away from me and gave me a very clear path. The leader-soldier snarled at me, brandishing their sword as if that could intimidate me. And, to be fair, it did. But I wouldn't let it show. Not in front of the people who had their hopes answered today. In fact, I felt I had to continue to inspire them and match this leader in intimidation.

"Well, I have always wanted to try this..." I whispered. Slowly, I ran my free hand over my blade, bringing fire to my fingertips. It was... incredibly difficult to get the fire to wrap around the blade, even more to hold it. This wasn't very efficient at all and was very stupid. But the look of horror on the leader-soldier's face just before I sunk the fiery blade into their neck meant that at least the intimidation part had worked. Though I did lose all concentration when I ripped my sword out. As the flames flickered away from the blade, the smell of burnt flesh filled the air, but there was no blood. The flames had cauterized it. "Okay. Good to know. Don't do that again." Not worth the

"Lady Riona!" one resistance fighter called. I turned and tried to not freeze when they all saluted. Including a smiling Creidne. She was the only one I could think of a name for at the moment. My mind was totally blank. "Orders?"

"For now, let's find the main part of the fighting," I answered after a moment. I was proud that my voice didn't shake and that I didn't trip over the words. "If we can take out their leader, we can circle around and crush the rest." The resistance members nodded sharply and raced down the road, towards the town's entrance. Only Creidne remained. "So... uh... I hope I didn't mess anything up..."

"Nope, you didn't," she reassured, laughing a little. She looked me over carefully and I fidgeted with my dangling earring nervously. And wondered if there was blood on it now and how easy it would be to clean. "It looks nice on you. Good. I thought the color would suit you." She smiled proudly at me, but there was some sadness to it. "You're going to fight."

"Yes, because we're tired of people suffering while we stay safe." I reached out and brushed her hair out of her face. I winced when I smeared blood across her cheek, but she just continued to smile. "It's time we returned the favor."

"I understand." She ruffled my hair. "Better keep up, then."

"You know it." I smiled, doing my best to keep up the brave face. For her especially, I wouldn't falter. "Let's see if you can catch me!" Then I was off, following the others, with Creidne only a step behind.

We found another fight before long and we crashed into the soldiers like a wave. During the fighting, I tried to activate Luna, but couldn't quite manage it. Shanan was right. It took a lot of skill to find the right mindset to activate Luna while in the middle of fighting for your life. So, instead, I just focused on fighting as 'normal', while rallying the soldiers when I noticed them flagging. Smiles, encouragement, quick pats on the back... anything I could think of, really. It seemed to work. They fought with a little more vigor at least.

At some point during the fight, I ended up back to back with Ulster. Wasn't sure when he got near, but hey, person. "Where's Lana?" I asked, taking that moment to breathe. "She safe?"

"She's over there," Ulster answered, gesturing vaguely in a direction. Still, I managed to find her fairly quickly, skillfully tending to people while others guarded her. Only those who knew her well would be able to tell how frazzled she was; anyone else would just see the perfect healer demeanor. "Deimne and Dalvin were guarding her, but Dalvin's injuries reopened, and Deimne took a bad hit. They went with Muirne to the infirmary. She's been helping escort the badly wounded."

"Makes sense." I glanced around, wondering who else was near. I barely saw Seliph a distance away, leading the way towards someone in the back. Probably the leader. "This is such a mess."

"Isn't it?" He laughed tiredly, leaning on me slightly. "Been trying to use Astra. Managed only one."

"Better than me." Thankfully, there weren't any heavily armored folk here. Just basic soldiers. I'd just really wanted to use it for morale. "You know; it occurs to me only now that we don't have a lot of variety in our weaponry."

"Swords, swords, and oh look, more swords."
"With some bows here and there to break the monotony." I nudged him with my elbow, still not turning around. "Hey, you've Neir blood. You can do axes. Be totally hot."

"Don't make me laugh!" Still he laughed anyway, and I noticed the resistance fighters nearby perked up at the sound. "Back to it."

"Yes." And we pushed off each other for that little extra boost to cut down the next fighters.

Again and again, I killed. It felt like I'd been killing forever, and after a while, I just fell into well worn habits, brought on from training, too tired to think about anything. Too tired to be scared. Too tired to be anything but calm. Too tired to care about the people I killed. The resistance fighters talked of how 'killing got easier' the more you did it. I wondered if it got easier because you just got too tired to care.

I set one annoying soldier's clothes on fire and whirled to cut off their head while they were distracted. Nearby, I finally saw Larcei, blocking a blade with her bare arm before shoving her sword up under her enemy's chin to sever the neck. She brushed her hair behind her ear and nodded to the smoldering clothes of the soldier I'd just killed. I shrugged, pretending to be innocent, and she actually laughed.

That laughter was soon drowned out by cheers of triumph. We all turned towards the entrance of Tirnanog, where Seliph had just killed the enemy general. The remaining soldiers fell quickly and easily, too distracted and uncoordinated without their leader. It wasn't long afterwards that the battle itself ended, with Tirnanog damaged but recoverable. Victory. Our first battle was a total victory and everyone wanted to celebrate. We stayed for the celebrations, but as soon as we could get away, we did, both to throw up until we dry heaved and to get out of the bloodstained clothes.

But we did it. We took those first steps. No turning back now.

Dinner that night was basically spiced broth because our stomachs couldn't handle anything more. While Larcei made that, Lana whipped up some ginger concoctions and I handled the traditional warm milk with honey. Seliph and Ulster tended to the weapons and practice armor, and did a special bit of laundry for the clothes we'd worn during the fight. Hestia returned while the clothes soaked, with a note from Aideen stating she'd be late at the church, and Seliph and Ulster washed and brushed her. Once everything was ready, we forewent the table and just sat around the fireplace to eat and drink. Lana and I curled up against Hestia. I wanted my wolf and Lana wanted the extra comfort. Field infirmaries were rough, and it had been the first time she'd run one.

"We'll have to march soon," Seliph whispered, some time after we finished eating. We were all nursing one of the drinks, but it was hard to tell which one was which. It wasn't like we'd coordinated the mugs. "They sent soldiers to what had to be a blindspot, and then they don't come back. Obvious what happened."

"Best that we push forward to continue using that surprise," Ulster sighed, stretching out his neck. He winced as the gesture irritated his pulled muscle. All of us were dealing with muscle strain. I swore I could feel my heartbeat through my whole body, all the way to my feet. "If we're lucky, we might be able to secure… damn, can't remember the name."

"Ganeishire. That's the closest castle." Seliph finished whichever drink he had and tried to lay back. However, he bumped my knee on accident. "Oh, sorry…"
"Here, just use my lap," I replied, shifting him so that he could. He took the invitation easily and I absently played with his hair. "How far is it from here?"

"It's easily a week's ride, if not more," Lana answered, shifting to rest her head on my shoulder. Since Lester actually owned one of the few horses, she had more knowledge about them than, say, the rest of us. "But we'll be walking. And battling."

"So, anyone know how much food we'll need?" What did you even need for a march? No one had ever taught us anything like that. "We're clearly on top of things."

"And we have to calculate all that to include all the people who come with us..." Lana sighed, whimpering a little. "I'm going to be working nonstop with medicines."

"Well, we can make them too," Larcei did point out. Perhaps jealous of all the cuddling, she crawled over to lay down in Lana's lap. Lana reached down to run her hands through Larcei's hair, carefully picking apart the tangles. "We won't let you do it alone."

"That said, we'll have a lot of work ahead, running the army, right?" Ulster pointed out. He fidgeted a bit and Seliph waved him over. With a sheepish smile, he joined the cuddle-group, using my legs. Hestia, noticing that all her humans were near, yawned and curled a little more around us. "How do you run an army?"

"Damn, do any of us know that?" Total. Silence. "Ugh... damn it, why wasn't any of this in our lessons? What are we going to do?"

"Maybe we should've waited."

"With the city burning? What else were we supposed to do?" Larcei reached over and prodded Ulster's cheek. "They came after us. We didn't go after them. We just..."

"We'll figure something out, I suppose," Seliph murmured. He closed his eyes, looking a little green. It was obvious why. He would be the leader of the whole damn thing. "But the food thing is definitely..."

"Being tended to by those who know what they're doing." All of us yelped and scrambled up when we heard Aideen's voice, involving no small few amount of bumping heads and accidental kicks in our haste. "Good, I did manage to make it back before you went to sleep," she giggled, smiling softly at us. She wore a different dress than she had this morning, and her hair was still damp from a wash. "I was a bit worried."

"Ah, Aideen..." Seliph looked around at all of us and we all awkwardly squirmed. This was... uh... something we forgot to consider. Oops. "We were... um..."

"I know." Her smile saddened. "You weren't wrong. I always knew the day would come where you'd march off to war. After all, the people of Isaach have done so much for us. I always knew that you all would eventually wish to do all you could to help them. I only have myself to blame for that; I did raise you."

"Aideen..."

"I had hoped that, on that day, I could come with you to help. But there are too many injured here. Muirne, the dear, can't tend to the survivors of the labor camp on her own, especially with everything else." Her smile began wobbling and she looked down to try and hide her tears. I felt my heart break at the sight. Lana outright winced. "You have to promise to come back, though. I... I won't let you leave unless you promise to..."
All of us, in near unison, raced over to hug her, nearly tripping over Hestia in the process. This had to be the absolute worst for her. Duty dictated she remain behind while loved ones marched off to war. Again. The last time it happened, no one came back, not even her husband or twin sister. Now, though, the children she had raised, the children whose every illness and injury she had tended to, the children she had held when there were nightmares... we were leaving.

"We'll come back, Mother," Lana whispered. It seemed best that she'd say the words. "We promise." Slowly, we all pulled away and let Aideen calm down. "Hey, have you eaten? We just made some broth, but we can make something for you!" The others raced about to do just that, and to clean up so that we could sit with her while she ate, to have a 'dinner' together before we left.

I, however, lingered a bit, waiting for Aideen to completely calm down before I whispered, "I know we never said this enough growing up, but thank you, Aideen." I smiled at her as warmly as I could. "Thank you, for being our 'mother'. Thanks to you and Oifeye... well, we missed our parents, but we didn't feel like we were missing something. We had a mother. We had a father. Our family was odd, but it was still family." I hugged her tightly again, fighting back tears. Aideen just began crying again. "And we're going to come back, triumphant, and we'll escort you to Jungby, so that you can see it again. And anywhere else you'd like to go. We'll pay you back."

"Oh, goodness, don't talk of paying back." Even through the tears, she managed the perfect 'mom' tone and 'mom' look. "You 'paid me back' by giving me utter joy," she scolded, hugging me back just as tightly. "You all gave me a reason to live after I lost everything. You all taught me how to laugh and be happy again." She cupped my face and smiled as I lost the fight with my own tears. "So, no talk of 'pay back'. You all have done that your entire lives, and I have enjoyed every second of it."

"O-okay..." I wished I could be more elegant, or eloquent, but now, I was just blubbering. "We'll miss you."

"And I you. That's why you all must come back." She kissed my forehead and helped dry my tears. I had a feeling we'd be saying our goodbyes privately in the morning to hide all of our crying. "Ah! I need to finish making those clothes."

"Clothes?" I frowned a bit and then looked at the others. They'd stopped what they were doing to look at her oddly too. Amusingly, even Hestia, still by the fire looked, confused. "What clothes?"

“Well, as I said, I've known this day was coming for a while. So I've been making you all clothes to wear while you were away." She giggled, face lighting up with a smile again. All of us just stared. "I know you'll eventually have to change them out for newer ones, if only for the seasons, but I-WAH!" And all of us tackle-hugged her again, though we were careful to make sure a couple of us were behind her to not knock her to the ground. Because how else could you react to the best mother ever?

We would return. We would return to our family here. It hurt to leave. But we just... we just couldn't take it anymore. We were tired of standing by and watching others die. The stories might say we were 'chosen' or something, but we knew we weren't. If we were 'chosen', it was by the people who needed hope.

Oifeye had once described the Belhalla Massacre being the day the world grew dim, and being a little less bright. I'd heard others say that Deirdre's assassination was the day the light disappeared. But no, it didn't. It lived on, with us, because the people around us had raised us with love and care. They had raised us and showed us what it meant to be a 'hero'. Now, we stepped up to the task everyone else gave, to live up to their expectations.
No pressure, right?

Seliph

Class: Lord; Skills: Pursuit, Nihil, Leadership

The 20 year old son of Sigurd of Chalphy, and Deirdre of the Spirit Forest (Diadora of Belhalla). He has mixed feelings on his mother, both loving and hating her for... everything, but he's rather curious about his half-siblings and hopes he can meet them under peaceful circumstances.

Has Holy Marks for Baldr and Naga, with the Major Baldr taking the form of a wing on the left side of his back and the Minor Naga being a smaller 'wing' near the top, giving the impression of a partially unfurled wing. Their blessings gives him a significant boost to stamina and the ability to take damage, as well as boosts to his strength, skill, luck, magical power, and resistance to magic. Due to his Naga blood, he is capable of conjuring globes and bursts of light of varying intensities. Due to his Baldr blood, his body is capable of drawing more strength from his muscles than typical and his sight is quite keen, giving him an edge in determining where a person is moving.

Though Oifeye has given him basics in knightly combat, Shanan was his primary teacher and emphasized a more pragmatic way of fighting, a style often considered at odds with his gentle demeanor. It's suspected that Shanan emphasized the pragmatic way of fighting out of a desire to try and give Seliph as different fighting style from Sigurd... and hopefully not meet the same fate.

Is honestly absolutely terrified of marching out to war and about killing people, to the point that no small part of him does wish they'd ran. However, despite his fear, he resolves himself to it as he is tired of Grannvale's tyranny and the devastation it has left behind. That his friends stand by him gives him the courage to continue with his resolve, and inspires him to match them.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Having Seliph (and Riona) come across a child hunt comes from the Fuyuki Manga. Aideen making clothes for the group before they leave comes from the Oosawa manga (because apparently, my notes like to remind me that I don't know everything off the top of my head since I swore was done with Oosawa influences at this point... whoops?). In-Game, Aideen is briefly mentioned in the sibling talk between Lana and Lester (every pair of siblings gets their own talk, and yield a +1 luck for the sister) at staying in the covent and that's about it. There is nothing in-game that calls Balmung any sort of name (like how Mystletainn is known as the 'Demon Sword'), but I picked Phantasmal Blade for the boosts it gives, it being connected to very dodgy swordmasters, and for its Noble Phantasm name in the Fate Universe (Balmung: Phantasmal Greatsword, Felling of the Sky Demon).

As a bit of a reminder, characters don't necessarily know everything that's going on in the world. That's part of the fun. I am assuming that Diadora's amnesia wasn't something widely spread to avoid unsavory people lying and taking advantage of the situation. (It shows up often in Memoirs of Belhalla because that's written in her POV and she's interacting with people she trusts.) As a result, none of the Tirnanog group has any idea why Deirdre would marry Arvis when she was already married to Sigurd, or why she'd 'abandon' her son.
Luna is a sword skill that, well, relies on skill to use, so here's the justification for why (since I established it to be more like an ability that can be activated). 'The Light Lives On' is an alternate title for Game-Chapter 6, though I'm not sure it was ever used in the translation patches. It continues on from the last words of Gen1 in game (‘And the light...’). Light Inheritors is the name you'll see in most translations nowadays, hence the title. (Technically, I think Ulster and Larcei start with iron blades + inherited items, but I switched it to steel.)

Leadership actually isn't a 'skill', but rather a mechanic I'm listing under skills for ease. Leadership stars have appeared in three Fire Emblem games to date: FE4, FE5, and FE10. They work a bit differently in each of the games, though the basics are the same: boosting hit and skill. In FE4, a single star simply denotes a leader, while each one after that boosts the hit and evasion of characters within 3 spaces by 10% each (this includes the leader). Both Sigurd and Seliph have leadership stars, with Sigurd having two (thus giving a 10% boost to hit and evasion to those within 3 spaces) and Seliph... well, that's interesting. When you first enter Gen2, Seliph will have two like Sigurd, but once you reset and load the game, he'll have three (thus giving a 20% boost to both hit and evasion). Since leadership stars act a bit like the charisma skill, so I decided to put it under 'skills'. Speaking of Charisma (or Charm. I always forget the localization dubbed it 'charm'), Diarmuid inherits it from Lachesis (it's her personal skill), hence the comment about Diarmuid being charming and all. (Gen2, aka when I actually talk about the parent's skills because Alicia didn't care but Riona does.)

Larcei and Riona are more or less wearing the same battle outfit that Ayra did, with their own personal changes (like color in Riona's case). Everyone else pretty much wears their official art's outfits for this first battle. (I felt I had to have Riona wonder about the cape, mostly to help highlight the differences between countries, and you have no idea how tempted I was to put in an Incredibles reference.)

Neir boosts defense growths (meaning that the murder twins, aka Larcei and Ulster, will be ridiculously dodge and tanky if Lex is their dad due to a 60% defense growth and being myrmidons). Baldr blood gives boosts to HP, strength, skill, and luck (20% for HP, and then 10 each for the rest), while Naga blood gives boosts to HP (10%), magic (20), and resistance (20). Since Seliph is Major Baldr, his boosts from Baldr get doubled. (There is no physical description for the luck boost as I could not think of a way to physically show that. Also, standard note, bare-arm blocks typically result in you losing the arm or at least use of the arm or some kind of major damage. It is used here solely as a representation of how the Holy Blood separates your units from those without Holy Blood.)

Also have the first of the inherited items, with Seliph getting Sigurd's silver sword from Oifeye (indirectly), and Riona getting the silver blade Chulainn passed to Shanan. (Shanan's starting inventory is a steel blade, which I decided to keep since he gets his best weapon in a talk two seconds later anyway.)

Next Chapter - Together
Well, no turning back. We've jumped into battle and committed ourselves to the war. Gods, help us all or something. Is this a good time to pray? Might be. Regardless, we spend most of the night packing, with Aideen helping us out as she was an old hand at it. She broke down crying a couple more times, but that was fine. All of us cried some point during packing too, and not even Larcei denies it. I mean; it was hard to hide how much she cried when Aideen showed her the dresses she'd made for her, based off of some of Aunt Ayra's clothes, the ones in the portraits we had. All of the portraits came with us. Even that lone picture of Deirdre that Seliph had.

Early in the morning, Aideen made us all a warm breakfast and had us check that we had everything we needed and wanted. Because, once we left, we... we weren't going to come back. Not for a long while. ...I might just be sick. Great start, right?

Under the pale, sparkling light of dawn, amidst the early morning fog, the resistance fighters of Tirnanog, led by the Scions of Light and their Imperial Prince of Light, stood, ready to depart. Or, well, they would if the people of Tirnanog ever stopped hugging and saying goodbyes! For some reason, whenever I imagined us marching off, I imagined much more... something much more stoic. Quiet. Serious. I should've known better. For all of its isolation, Tirnanog had always been a lively and warm place. So, of course, our departure would be the same.

"I'll be sure to send Oifeye, Lester, and Diarmuid after you lot when they return from their patrol," Aideen reassured, hugging me because I happened to be 'first' in the accidental lineup. Because she could see my nerves, though, she decided to also tease a bit. "You sure you don't want me to keep your stuffed-dog safe here, Riona?"

"Aideen!" I protested, flushing in embarrassment. Then I just shook my head. Nope, it wasn't leaving my sight, especially since its absence had cost me Conall. Besides, Seliph was taking the stuffed-bear Mom had gotten him when he was a baby. And I felt like... it made me feel like Dad was watching out for me. "Mean."

"When you return, you can pull a prank to get me back." She kissed my cheek and then brushed the hair out of my face to study me. "You really do look like Alicia. It's easy to see Chulainn, but you definitely took more after her."

"Did I?"

"Yes. Though you're much brighter, happier, than she ever was. Than he ever was. I'm glad for it. Makes me think I did an okay job, raising you."

"You were the best. Are the best." Honestly, the only people I could even think of... if my parents had lived, if they had survived, I would've probably have preferred being raised by them, because they were my parents. But they had died, and Aideen had filled that void easily. Given the circumstances, given everything... "There is no one that I'd rather raise me."

"Living, that is." Her smile was kind, and a touch sad. She missed my parents too. She missed
everyone in that army so very dearly. "I wish they could've seen you. They would've been so proud."

"They're still watching." Or so I hoped. It made me feel less… I didn't know. I've never been lonely; you couldn't with this crazy little family. But I guess it did make me feel less 'abandoned', even though I knew my parents never had a real choice in the matter. They chose to send us to safety, and then had died, proving that they had been right to send us away. "If we hear anything about Brigid, we'll send word back right away."

"Only if it's safe." Her eyes did will up with tears at the thought, though. The last anyone heard of Brigid was that she'd disappeared during the Belhalla Massacre, one of the many missing, presumed dead. "I've waited this long for word. I can wait longer."

"Of course." I hugged her tightly. "Love you, Aideen."

"Love you more, Riona." She kissed me on the cheek again and then went to the next of us in the line, Seliph. I struggled to not cry and, instead, looked around at the… at the very sizable crowd, actually. Before the next person came to hug me, that is.

Practically the whole town had come to see us off. In fact, I swore the only ones here were the ones too wounded to safely stand, like Deimne, and Muirne, who had kindly taken the first few shifts in the infirmary so that Aideen could see us off worry free. We'd said goodbye to them earlier, when we visited the infirmary to do one last shift and to let the wounded know we were leaving. Their eyes had lit up and, almost heartbreakingly, each of them had given us something, one of the few things they still had. I got precious dolls from children, small tokens some adults had held onto for good luck. And we couldn't refuse them. This was their way of helping us. This was their way of saying, more than anything else, 'I believe you will save everything'. Those little tokens held the weight of their worlds. I was honestly terrified I'd break under the weight, and not be strong enough to carry it. But you couldn't show that to them. You couldn't show your fear to the people who believed in you so, so much…

"Ah, I wish I could march with you," Creidne murmured, giving me a hug like so many others. Everyone got hugs, even Seliph and Ulster, though she was noticeably more hesitant with them still. But that she could was wonderful. "But Aideen thinks it'll be bad for my healing."

"I'll kill your share of soldiers too," I replied, smiling at her. It kept me from crying, and not just because I seemed perpetually on the edge of tears this morning. Creidne had been our first friend and I had always assumed that during that Mythical Someday, she would be with us. But her health took priority. "And if I see that one, I swear I'll rip him apart."

"Good." She flinched at the mention, and I gave her another hug to make up for it. The worst of her… attackers… hadn't been there when she was rescued, and likely was still alive. She'd babbled out a description in the hours that followed her rescue and she was in too much shock to process anything. I'd made sure to remember. I knew Larcei and Lana had too. "He deserves it."

"More than deserves it." I kissed her cheek and winked. "Just you wait! We'll be back, victorious, before you know it!"

"I look forward to your triumphant return!" She kissed my forehead and then ducked behind Dalvin, who talked with Seliph. I could see the strain on her. Being around so many people was taking its toll. But she endured for us. She endured to see us off. Gods, did I ever adore her.

"If only my injuries were healed enough, but like this, I'll just slow all of you down," Dalvin murmured to Seliph, catching my attention. He smiled forlornly, yet proudly, at us, and I had to
fight to keep the smile on my face. Like Creidne, I had always assumed he would be with us too. But, also like Creidne, his health took priority. "I think, by the time you all liberate Isaach, I'll be healed enough to at least guard Isaach while you all go free the rest of the continent." The smile became a confident grin. "So, don't worry about your backs."

"Then we know we've got the best of guards," Seliph replied. He hugged Dalvin gently, to not aggravate his injuries, and Dalvin did his best to hug him back. "Nothing to fear, except what's in front of us."

"As it should be." Dalvin moved to give us all hugs, each one tentative not from hesitancy, but because of his injuries. "As it should be."

Others swung by to give us hugs, and even some little treats to eat along the road. But, eventually, I reached the one goodbye I kept putting off, and knew I couldn't avoid it forever. "Well, here we go," I whispered to Hestia, crouching down to get her one last pet. She licked and nuzzled my cheek. "Keep Aideen safe while we're away, okay?" I kissed her nose and winced as she whined. She didn't like this, and I'd miss her terribly. "It won't be forever. I'll see you soon." I nudged her to Aideen. She sat down to make it more difficult. "I love you too. We'll be back." Aideen helpfully reached down to grab Hestia's fur. Hestia continued whining and whimpering. I simply kissed her head. "See you soon."

There were a few more goodbyes, a few more hugs, but as the sunshine began dispersing the fog, we all left because, otherwise, we really wouldn't ever leave. A few of the fighters began crying as we walked past the front gates, determined to push forward and fight, but unable to fight off the ache in their hearts. I lingered near a few, doing my best to cheer them up, though I felt like crying too. But I didn't. I kept my smile. I had to. From this point forward, keeping the smile was going to be very important. I mean; we were leaders now. Leaders had to be confident or something. And given everything, I really didn't think I had a right to be sad. Maybe later, when the war had been going on longer. But now? No, not really.

So, I'd always keep smiling. Someone had to.

"You're so forlorn!" Seliph teased me, some time later. I had no idea how long we had been walking, or how far had gotten. I just knew the sun was high and we'd walked enough that people were starting to wince from hurting feet. "We can still turn back and get Hestia, you know."

"Who brings a wolf to a war?" I immediately retorted, scowling. Maybe because he was bored, or maybe because he was nervous, but Seliph decided to tease someone in our group, and with Larcei and Ulster quietly talking, and Lana further back with one of the carts to check her healing supplies, I was the target. "Don't be ridiculous."

"You're especially easy to tease today!" He continued snickering. "If we were younger, wouldn't the older people say-"

"If you mention anything about that bullshit of 'oh, they are only bullying you because they like you', I will conveniently step on your foot." I rolled my eyes and Seliph laughed outright. "They weren't saying that after I punched the idiot."
"Oifeye was so torn between 'wow, that was a good punch' and 'Riona, please do not be like Larcei and use violence to solve every issue'."

"Aideen agreed with me!" Well, she did once I explained that, no, I didn't punch that boy at random. I did because he was picking on me, and then made Lana cry when I kept on ignoring him. "What was his name? I can't remember."

"Neither can I." And all humor about the situation disappeared when we remembered why that was. He and his family had been caught by soldiers while traveling to visit family in a nearby village and taken as prisoners 'suspected of rebellion'. The adults had been executed. The children had been 'relocated to a safe area', a gilded prison that apparently hadn't been so bad, all things considered. Food, shelter, and just a few more guards than a typical village. Easy to play off as a good thing. But it had become the first of the labor camps after Deirdre died, and we never saw that boy again. "I wish I knew the names of all who had…"

"Same." Both of us fell silent then, unsettled by the reminder of everything we were fighting to prevent. He reached over to take my hand, and I stepped closer to briefly rest my head on his shoulder. Just a little bit of comfort. In the silence, I tried to focus on everyone else, with my attention being drawn to Larcei and Ulster, still talking nearby.

"Stop bouncing about so much," Ulster chided, smiling in fond exasperation at Larcei. He reached over to snag her collar to keep her near him. "You'll trigger a trap or something."

"Gods, Ulster, you're maybe a minute older than me, so stop acting so old!" Larcei groaned, rolling her eyes. She did settle down a bit, though. "I'm just glad to be finally… you know…"

"Yes, yes. Be careful not to burn yourself out."

"Well, someone has to make sure your patient ass actually gets moving. Otherwise, you'd wait forever!" Larcei stretched her arms out, sighing happily. "Hey, maybe we can learn what happened to our parents." She glared when Ulster opened his mouth. "Don't you dare say they're dead. They're definitely alive."

"Right, right." Ulster smiled sadly. "Of course."

"They are."

"Of course."

"I mean it."

"I know."

They went back and forth like that for a while longer and I stopped listening as I thought about Aunt Ayra and Uncle Lex. I'd heard a lot about them growing up, of course. Ulster and Larcei's parents… Shanan's uncle and aunt… dear friends of Aideen… people Oifeye had highly respected… I wasn't related to them by blood. Well, I supposed technically I was with Aunt Ayra, Od blood and all, but it was very distant. So, I really wasn't. But I called them that anyway, most days at least, because Uncle Lex had been Uncle Azel's best friend and Aunt Ayra had been one of Mom's dearest friends, and a childhood friend of Dad's. It just… felt right to call them that. I was sure, if I'd gotten more time with them, I would've called them that and they would've been happy at it. I mean; Aideen had never corrected me. In fact, she would give me odd looks when I didn't call them that.

Regardless, we hadn't heard much about them in years, not since we lost Conall. In fact, we had
been so close to Isaach Castle because we had heard they were near. And since then, the most had been something about them maybe being dead because of bandits. Maybe. Larcei believed that if they really were dead, Danann would claim credit for it and celebrate. I knew Ulster believed Danann would keep it quiet, to maintain plausible deniability, especially given that, at the time, the Empire wasn't all that bad and Danann might not have been able to get away with it. I personally thought that when it came to our parents and their friends, they were dead or missing and presumed dead and to hope for anything else was… it was just setting yourself up for pain, when we were already setting ourselves up for a lot of pain anyway, what with going to war and all.

Aunt Ayra and Uncle Lex had died. I was certain of it. Not to bandits, because that seemed too 'common' of a death when compared to everyone else. But soldiers? Landslide? Trapped and ambushed? I could see any of those easily. But regardless of how, they had died, and right now, they were watching over us like the rest of our parents. I worried when we'd get it confirmed, because I knew it would burn Larcei terribly. I knew Ulster would try and hide the ache, because he'd been proven right and gods, he did hope that he was wrong.

"I'm surprised at how cheerful everyone is," Seliph murmured. He smiled sadly at everyone. "I wish I could be so chipper. I'm…"

"Hey, it'll be okay," I whispered, nudging him. I saw a couple of fighters glance at us worriedly, so I smiled and winked at them. To my amusement, the younger of the couple blushed, while the older one just rolled their eyes. I almost remembered names for both, but they fell back before I could remember. "You know; considering we spent ten years in Tirnanog, you'd expect I remember more of their names."

"Samson and Charles, brothers." Seliph, however, rattled that off easily. So easily that I couldn't help but sulk a little. "I'm better with names than you."

"I suppose." It was still annoying. "Which one blushed?"

"Samson. Though I think most blush when you and Diarmuid decide to be charming."

"Should I test that on you?" I giggled when he choked on a laugh. "Feeling better?"

"A bit, yes. Though, sadly, the weight of knowing we'll have to kill more people..." Seliph sighed and looked at his free hand. He could still see the blood on them. To be fair, so could I. That was a memory not going away soon, even if I knew they deserved it. "Did you notice how, during the fight, you just stopped caring? You became too tired to care."

"I did." It was very unsettling, to just… not care about people's lives. Even if they were the enemy and trying to kill us. Someone had loved them, right? Not all of our enemies could be psychopathic loners, no matter what stories liked saying. "We still threw up afterwards, though. In the moment, it's all about survival." Like those first kills. It had taken a bit for it to click. "I'm worried there might be more of those priests in Tirnanog."

"Same here, but I trust the others."

"True." Though now I was a bit nauseous, remembering those priests. But as I remembered, I realized something very… "Seliph, do you remember what the priests said?"

"More or less." He glanced at me with a frown. "Why?"

"Did that priest say that they couldn't kill me because of their prince? Not their emperor?" I distinctly remembered that, and that was odd. "Why would my cousin's opinion mean more to
them than my uncle's?"

"You know; it always surprises me to hear you refer to him as your uncle."

"Because I hate him or because he's technically your stepfather?"

"I… that…" Seliph grimaced and sighed. I just laughed. "My family tree is so tangled."

"One of these days, we should really try to plot it all out. All of ours." I continued laughing before smilingly warmly. "And yes, I hate him. But I feel like denying him is like denying Mom. And I love her. I'm proud to be her daughter, and I'm proud to have her blood in my veins, just as I am proud of Dad. I can tolerate being related to that asshole if it means I'm related to Mom." Besides, it also meant I was related to Uncle Azel. I didn't remember anything about him, but Aideen's stories were always so sweet. He and Aunt Tailtiu had disappeared after everything. I wondered if they had kids. If they did, that meant I had cousins! Cousins I had a decent chance of meeting without having to fight! "Though we got distracted."

"We did and, I agree, that is odd. Maybe it's a sign that Arvis no longer cares about anything?"
Seliph frowned worriedly. "I hope that means my siblings… half siblings…"

"Are you worried about them?" I had to grin. "Despite never meeting them?"

"Regardless of my feelings about my mother, they are still my siblings, and I'd love to meet them." He looked up at the sky, like the fluffy clouds held answers. "I'd also love to learn why my mother made the choices she did. But I doubt I will, since she's dead."

"Maybe someone in Belhalla can tell us." I laughed, more to cheer him up than for any sense of humor to the situation. "Hey, maybe Conall will!"

"That would be amusing, and then we can badger him on why we haven't heard anything about him!" He laughed as well, but it soon faded. "I hope we don't have to fight him."

"I do too." It was honestly my biggest nightmare. Conall had lived so long in Belhalla. It would make sense if he had people he wanted to fight for. It was… it was also possible that he didn't care about us, anymore. Even though my heart ached and I felt sick at the mere thought, I couldn't deny that possibility. We had to acknowledge even the things we thought were impossible. Not doing that… not doing that had cost our parents. "If we do, can we try to capture instead of kill?"

"We can certainly try." Some shouting up ahead caught our attention, and worry spiked through me. Like smart people, we had sent soldiers ahead to scout, so… "Here we go. Damn."

Within seconds, the scouts returned, yelling about enemies, no doubt the first wave of reinforcements to the group that attacked Tirnanog. Sadly for us, between timing and the open area, we saw them before long, and, more importantly, they saw us. And while they weren't a large group, I winced when I saw the heavily armored soldiers. None of us had any real way to deal with them. Well, technically, I did, but hell if I knew how to use it. But when people looked at us worriedly, I made sure to smile. So long as we pretended, everyone else would believe. You know; in the hands of a less moral person, that would actually be more than a little scary. And I did have to wonder if that was how Arvis managed to seize control and get people to support him for so long. Then I had no time for wondering anything because battle.

"How do people do this for most of their lives?" I growled at one point during the fight. It was a small group, especially compared to what we fought in Tirnanog, but the heavily armored soldiers caused us no small amount of trouble, just as predicted. Worse, they knew it, so they took point,
despite their slower movement, to crash into us. "How do people join the army knowing and willing to do this?" They had to be some form of insane, or absolutely desperate. Gods, this was exhausting. I was too exhausted to even be sick. I was too exhausted to be upset by the injured. Numbers alone kept our people from dying, for now. But… "Hey! Back off!" But rambling thoughts weren't good for a battle. My distraction just led to people almost dying, meaning I had to be all dramatic and cut down enemy soldiers 'right in the nick of time' or whatever the phrase was.

"Lana!" I wasn't sure who yelled, but I whirled and saw an armored soldier attacking her. So far, she'd avoided any major injuries, Ulir luck kicking in likely, but she had suffered some and she had no means of defending herself. Luck couldn't hold forever.

So, since I was close, I darted forward, intending on being a distraction. It was just… it was startling how calm I was by all of it. I should be panicking. My friend, basically my little sister really, was in danger. Yet, for some reason, I was just… calm. She was in danger, and I had a goal. I had to get there to protect her, to distract the soldier so that she could get away. And I did. I set what bit of cloth I could see on the soldier on fire to throw off their guard and threw myself forward as Lana scrambled back, intending on chipping at the soldier until I could get a lucky hit.

But then my blade sparked with blue stars and a rush of cool, strangely gentle power flooded through me. Two steps later, the soldier's corpse was falling, blood spewing everywhere, because I had used Luna, on accident, and cut through the armor like wet paper.

Of course, I was so stunned that it had actually happened that an archer managed to get my leg and it crumpled from the pain. Just in time for another soldier to bear down on me. They were lightly armored, so I grit my teeth, braced myself to try and block or burn something or… well, anything to get their guard down. But then I stared in shock as a mottled-grey shape leapt over me to tackle the soldier to the ground. They had just enough time to scream in shock before having their throat torn out, and I was left staring at Hestia as she growled and snarled at the nearby soldiers.

"Hestia?" I called hesitantly. She didn't react. She continued growling, hackles up and fur bristling, warding off the nearby soldiers through sheer intimidation. "Hestia." That time, her ear twitched and she glanced at me, muzzle bloody from her kill. After a moment, she relaxed slightly and trotted over to me, licking my nose. "...You silly girl..." I reached up to pet her, fighting back tears. "You're supposed to stay safe with Aideen." She yipped and nuzzled my cheek, a little more forceful than usual to convey her annoyance. "Yeah, I guess it isn't fair for most of your pack to leave you behind and leap into danger." I hugged her, still trying to not cry. I had wanted her to be safe. No matter how much I'd miss her. But I… I was so happy to see her. Seliph was right. I'd been miserable. "Okay. Okay, we'll go together. But you better not die on me, Hestia." She barked, as if to say 'no dying on me either'. "Agreed." I shouldn't have given up so easily, but I knew better. Once Hestia made up her mind, there was no stopping her. She was my wolf, yes, but she was still a wolf. She was no tamed dog who obeyed every order. She was a wild animal who had claimed me as pack, family. "Agreed."

"Riona, leg out," Lana ordered, scrambling over. I swung around so that my legs were in her lap, clinging to Hestia as Lana removed the arrow. There was nothing for the pain, so I tried to not whimper when she snapped the arrow and wiggled out the pieces. "Thank you for coming to my rescue. Knight in not-so-shining armor."

"Have you seen how heavy that armor is?" I joked back, a little breathless from pain. Not fighting, and the shock of seeing Hestia again, had knocked the battle-fever right out of me, so I felt every little bruise and scratch. "I wouldn't be able to even move with it!"

"Well, thankfully, it's armor and keeps you from getting hurt."
"Except magic."

"Except magic." She sighed, grimacing. "I wished I'd paid more attention to how you quickly cleaned the area around wounds. Gods, I swear I'll have bunches of infection to deal with later." There wasn't a single clean face on the battlefield. Sweat, blood, mud… the worst part was how used to it you got. Not to mention the smell. "Okay, let me check this later." She leaned over my legs to poke Hestia. "And you! You big… big silly!" She tried to be scolding, but her smile gave her away and, anyway, Hestia always could see through us. She just barked and licked her face clean. "Ugh… you're going to be the worst to heal up. I just know it. And your breath is going to be absolutely horrid. You're getting teeth cleanings every day! I mean it!"

Lana pretended to grumble a little more, before clinging to Hestia for the comfort. I stroked her hair a few times before standing up, hopping on my formerly wounded leg to make sure it was fine. Lana sat back on her heels, ready to be the healer again, and as soon as she stood up too, Hestia loosed a loud howl, one that echoed on and on. The enemy soldiers yelped at it, and I saw some of our fighters look a little stunned. But they knew of Hestia, and they recognized her at my side, so they recovered much more quickly. That let them take advantage of the soldiers' shock and tear into them mercilessly.

Hestia was very smug about that. I wasn't going to 'hear' the end of this. I just knew it.

Ulster, being the calmest and most stoic of us, did actually try to get Hestia to go back home. She, in typical 'I am a wolf and, thus, I am a little shit and a technical wild animal', completely ignored him and instead, charmed her way into getting some treats from the fighters. Ulster got points for effort, but by nightfall, even he had given up. Hestia celebrated by helping with the hunting, chasing some deer near the hunters for easy shooting. The extra meat did wonders for morale, which was already rather high. No deaths, surprisingly. Then again, small forces. By the time we captured Ganeishire, or whatever the name was because damn I was tired, I knew we'd have many graves and bodies to send home for burial.

"Aw, do you feel better now, Hestia?" I cooed, rubbing at her neck. Hestia barked happily before tearing into her… whatever it had been. Thought it might've been a deer's heart. Once. Now, it was Hestia's 'dessert'. "I bet it's nice to get the taste of human out of your mouth. Must've tasted horrible."

"Well, someone's mood has improved considerably," Seliph teased, sprawled out on the grass. Supposedly, it was to look at the stars, but really, it was because he was too tired to properly sit. "I told you we could've gone back for her."

"Oh, shut up." I glowered at him. "Don't act like you weren't happy to see her too."

"I am. And deathly worried. But, hey, that seems to be what war is about. It's not like I'm not deathly worried about everyone else anyway." He sighed, closing his eyes. "First night away from Tirnanog. Feels weird."

"It does." I looked around, noting where Lana was tending to some scrapes Larcei had picked up. Ulster was doing a patrol, and wasn't here with us. Yet. "For the first time in ten years, we're sleeping outside."

"Well, not quite true. We did have those little campouts. But I get what you mean." He sighed and sat up. And promptly yelped and nearly fell back because he'd accidentally pinned his hair. "Ugh…"
"Over here." I stopped petting Hestia and snagged a hairbrush from his pack. "We need to brush it anyway."

"Thanks." He moved to sit in front of me, wincing when I found some bad tangles almost immediately. "Well, here we are. Marching to war. Yet some things don't change, huh?"

"Nope." I giggled, amused. "But I'm glad for it."

"Same."

All of us sat in relative silence, save for Larcei's continued grumbling about how much her cuts hurt. If I closed my eyes, it would have been easy to pretend we were in that little house in the woods. Brushing Seliph's hair after training… Hestia curled up asleep next to us… Larcei complaining because she managed to trip and hurt herself because she didn't watch what she was doing… Lana tending to her with a smile and a laugh… Diarmuid teasing her… Ulster helping Lana with medicine and bandages… Lester fretting over everyone… Aideen making dinner… Oifeye making more medicine by the fire… maybe even Shanan sitting and watching all of us with a warm and tired smile… it was so easy to pretend. But then the cold wind would blow and make it clear that we were outside and, from there, the happy little memory faded away. It would be a long time before we had days like that with all of us. Maybe… maybe we would never have them again, not like that at least.

"Everything is clear, so watches are set," Ulster reported, joining us as he finished his patrol. He leaned over Larcei's shoulder, frowning as Lana fixed up the last of the scrapes. "I told you to not rush forward like that."

"Shut up," Larcei grumbled. She kissed Lana's cheek in thanks and then bounded over to curl up with Hestia. "Ah, my favorite pillow!" Hestia barked happily, tail wagging, and leaned around to lick Larcei's cheek. Only the blood on the grass remained of her treat. "Though, Lana's right. Her breath is horrible."

"We don't have any of her stuff with us." Ulster sat across the fire from Hestia, still pretending to be mad at her for this. "No grooming, no teeth cleaning… we'll have to buy some, when we next see a village. Town."

"It's not like we can't afford it."

"We do need to maintain our weapons. Some of ours are very expensive to maintain, you know." Ulster looked pointedly at Seliph and me, but we both ignored him. Yes, silver weapons were costly. But they were strong enough to offset it. And, you know, the weapons had been our dads'. "Not to mention Lana's staves."

"Oh, don't worry about my staves," Lana laughed, rubbing her hands. I guessed to ease any aches. "Mother gave me some tips for getting a good bargain. She learned from her friend Dew. So, I'll be fine~"

"Wait, really?" Ulster asked. He looked at the rest of us curiously, but we shrugged. Had no idea what she was talking about. "Wonder why she taught only you."

"Because it involves taking advantage of a very pretty face." Lana's deadpanned retort made us all laugh. "So, I mean, Seliph could probably make it work." And that just made us laugh even harder. I barely finished brushing Seliph's hair before falling on my side, laughing so hard. Seliph nearly fell on me because he was laughing so hard. "But Larcei is too excitable to make it work because it does involve some patience, the last thing we need is a more charming Riona…"
"I don't know. Between her and Diarmuid, we might be able to flirt our way through some battles." Ulster smirked when I yelped in protest. "Sorry, 'being friendly'."

"Don't kill me with laughter!" I complained, wheezing. The worst part was that, even through the laughter, I could see Ulster and Seliph actively considering that. "Seriously!"

"Ah, we'd better calm down before everyone thinks we're insane," Larcei managed, rubbing at her eyes. Hestia briefly 'helped' via licking her cheek. Then Hestia came over to nuzzle me. "And yes, I said everything. I'm sure even the grass is thinking we're crazy."

"We are. Who else launches an attack against an Empire?" I swung around so that I could rest against Hestia, coughing a bit. I'd laughed way too hard at that. "I mean…"

"Hey, the Crusaders did."

"Does anyone claim that they're sane?"

"Mmm… actually, no, I don't think I've heard that." Larcei crawled over to Seliph, who was laying on the ground, since I'd moved. "Meh, whatever!" And Larcei promptly began tickling Seliph, making him practically shriek with more laughter. "Got you!"

Ulster quickly leapt to Seliph's defense, tickling Larcei while Seliph 'escaped to safety'. I was tempted to join in, but I noticed Lana kept rubbing her hands, digging in a little. That… worried me. So, instead, I watched her a little longer, even as Larcei, Ulster, and Seliph called a 'truce', and I frowned when I noticed she… she was actually rubbing her skin raw. Like she was quietly, yet desperately, trying to scrub something off her hands. Maybe the blood of the wounded...

"Lana, over here," I called quietly, waving her near. She came over immediately and I rummaged through my pack for some of the lotion Muirne had made for us. 'Leaders need to look nice and neat, just like healers,' she had shyly explained when she gave them to us. I wasn't quite sure what she meant, but I did know I could use them now. "Hands out."

"Okay?" she replied, frowning a bit. But then she smiled when I began rubbing the lotion into her hands, paying special attention to the places she'd been digging. "Oh…"

"You're done for the night, and you've gotten all the blood off." Absently, I saw the other three watching us, and quickly began dividing duties. Ulster and Seliph handled medicines. Larcei first cleaned the last of the blood off Hestia's muzzle before sitting down to weave some bandages. Things Lana would've been doing later, but she needed a break. "Unless there's an emergency, you get to relax."

"...Right…" Lana laughed sadly. "I do hope we can recruit someone else who can use staves. I understand now why Mother always mentioned how crazy things were with the injured, and that was with three people." And this was with much less people.

"According to the stories, none of the healers really had 'free time' until almost everyone knew how to use a staff." Okay, that was an exaggeration, but still. "We'll keep an eye out, and maybe we can teach people, once we're settled in a defensible castle."

"That would be fun."

"Wouldn't it?" I grinned at her. "But until then, or even afterwards, if you notice you're digging into your hands, we'll do this. More than any of us, you need your hands." Lana's hands didn't kill people, like ours. They saved people. I thought it wonderful, though I knew I could never be a healer. Healers had to be neutral, and I couldn't do that. I knew I couldn't heal people I hated.
"You're the strongest of us, really. Let us spoil you."

"Okay." She leaned forward and rested her head against my shoulder. "I'm tired…"

"I know." All of us would have to make a point to keep an eye on her. "I know."

"You know; I was about to ask why no one had bothered us, but now that I'm looking…” Larcei began, half to change the subject and half because she was already bored with weaving. She nodded at the other fighters, and I tried to not wince at the noticeable distance. More than noticeable, even. Our group had our own campfire. We might as well have been two separate groups entirely. "Already started, huh?"

"Looks like it," Seliph murmured, carefully grinding out some of the herbs we'd brought with us. He handled prepping; Ulster would handle the mixing. Ulster was very good at measuring. "Ah, well, we've been expecting it."

"I know." Larcei looked down at her weaving, movements a little sharp from frustration. "I just thought… you know… it would be a while longer."

"Yeah…"

We all fell silent again, this time from the sadness of realizing how isolated we were going to be in the coming days. I finished rubbing lotion into Lana's hands, and put the lotion back in my bags. Lana went to Larcei to help with the weaving, but I remained where I was, petting Hestia absently, watching the group. It just seemed… I wasn't sure. Just because we were leaders… well, Seliph might have to stand apart. The others might choose. But me? I felt like if I distanced myself, I would lose something. Sight of what we were doing. A part of me. Something else. I wasn't sure. But I… I knew I'd lose something. And I didn't like that. Oifeye's stories about war always talking about how everyone lost some part of them as the battles wore on. Some lost their lives. Others lost their sanity. Friends, family… once war came, everyone lost. Just some people happened to survive. But I did want to minimize what all I lost. Perhaps it was selfish, but I was sure… I was sure it was important nonetheless.

So, I hunted through the group, caught the eye of someone I knew by face and name, and smiled at them. "So, Cathall, are you here to hide from your lady love?" I asked teasingly, with a wink. Cathall, infamous for the bantering-bickering he and his girlfriend had, groaned. "Oh, dear, what happened this time?"

"You are mean, Lady Riona!" Cathall complained. The other fighters laughed. "Very mean, at that!" But slowly, he began telling the story of the latest argument, and that sparked other stories. Carefully, after a few stories, we crept closer until we were part of the main group. No one thought anything of it. Some even joined in to help us with medicine and bandage making. The people prodded stories out of us, laughing and joking. The distance between 'us' and 'them' closed and we were able to enjoy a night by the campfire with everyone, just like any other soldier.

As things went, the chances of us being able to do this would diminish. More people. More battles. More reports. More everything. If this gained the momentum everyone was so certain about, then things would eventually get too large for us to do simple things like this with everyone. So, I wanted to do it now, while things were still small. It just… felt important.

I was worried when we marched off the next morning, wondering if Hestia would be able to keep up. I wasn't sure why I worried about her. If anything, she kept glanced at us in annoyance because we were moving too slow for her! But she stayed faithfully at my side, and I did have to admit that
having her near was very relaxing for me. Plus, it helped me really feel like my parents were watching out for me. However, there were a few problems. One, she was still a brat and I had to deal with waking up to half-eaten animals hitting me in the face because she decided I'd been sleeping too long. Two, none of our training involved incorporating a wolf in our fighting. For some reason, it never occurred to us.

"I wonder if Hestia should stay near Lana," Seliph mused as we walked. Once again, the two of us ended up by each other. This time, I was sure it was because Seliph wanted to pet Hestia. She walked between us, just to sneak more pets. "She'd be a good guard for her, and could fetch things for her?" Hestia barked and leaned into my side. "Or she'll be staying near you."

"Or that," I sighed, kind of wishing Hestia would at least mildly cooperate. "Because gods know she won't listen when she's particularly convinced she knows more than her dumb humans." I scratched Hestia behind the ears. "Though, I do worry about Lana, Hestia. You like her too."

Hestia licked my hand. "Yes, yes. Well, we'll figure something out." Some shouting caught our attention, and I saw one of the scouts coming back. "Already?"

"It could be that the ones we fought yesterday were just a scouting group. Would explain the small numbers." Seliph sighed anyway, though. It would've been nice to have gone a little longer without having to fight. "Based on the lack of panic, I'd guess they hadn't seen us yet…" He glanced at our surroundings, mostly hills and even mountains. "Say, Riona…"

"Ulster, Larcei, and I can easily scaled the steepest parts." All three of us were good at climbing, as was Diarmuid. We teased he was an honorary Od for that, but really, it was just Hezul's strength letting him compensate. Athletics versus acrobatics. "We can help others with the less steep, if they can't make it on their own."

"Let's gather the others, then."

Seliph quickly confirmed his suspicions while I found everyone and we all began carefully setting up. Lana and her infirmary were the hardest to figure out, though ultimately it was decided she'd set up on a bit of elevated ground to sacrifice some accessibility for protection. It was a hard decision, and I had no doubts we'd regret it later. But with our numbers still so few, we did have to prioritize safety. Her being up high also let us all hide a little better as we waited for the soldiers to march through. My eyes narrowed as I studied them, noting they were quite the mixed group and much larger than yesterday's. That group really must have been a scouting party, though I questioned the wisdom in sending heavily armored soldiers in scouting. But that didn't matter. The enemy made their decisions, and we made ours. I was sure the enemy would question the wisdom in us attacking, though we were determined to even our odds slightly.

When the entire group, minus some possible stragglers, had gathered in the middle of our 'set up', Seliph gestured sharply and a bright light burst right in the middle of the enemy soldiers to blind them. As they screamed, I sighted as many bits of clothing I could and set them aflame, just to cause even more confusion. Because as bad as being blinded was, and as bad as being on fire was, both were infinitely worse. In fact, the only thing worse was attackers from above, jumping down to slaughter your fellows. Which is exactly what we did, with Ulster and Larcei leading the assault, though Seliph and I followed quickly, with Hestia keeping close to me.

Oifeye and Aideen taught us how to keep our morals during a battle, during a war, to make sure we didn't lose ourselves to the fighting and be nothing more than unrepentant slaughterers. Shanan taught us that anything went when it came to a fight, that when your life was on the line, you had to use everything you had because your enemy was going to do the same. Balancing both was the name of the game when it came to leading a war. It was easy to see how many nightmares and
unsettled stomachs we'd have for a long while. When, you know, we weren't actually fighting for our lives.

One soldier grabbed me and tried to push me into the nearby rock wall. I stepped in close and rammed my knee into their groin, pretending I was aiming at their stomach to trick my body into putting even more force in it. Their face went ghost white and they crumpled, curling up in pain. I flipped my blade around and stabbed them in the neck, twisting for good measure. Another soldier tried to strike, but Hestia caught their leg in her jaws and crushed it, so they fell screaming instead. I knelt down and used my sword as a lever to cut off their head. I grimaced at all the blood, but Hestia licked the worst of it off my face and I stood up to continue fighting, with her assisting me as she could.

Hestia and I just… fell into that pattern as the battle wore on. She'd harass and harry the nearby soldiers, scaring the living hell out of them and confusing them into leaving protective formations. I'd take care of the ones who left, often by scaring them further with some flames before killing them. The ones Hestia did catch in her jaws, I mercy-killed. I mean; it wasn't as if Hestia had a lot of options. Wolves had two things for a fight: their feet to run and their teeth to bite. That meant a lot of her prey would die slowly. That all said, it wasn't so bad, really. Certainly more coordinated than I would've thought. Made me half-think that, while I had been practicing and training, she had been watching, always planning to leave with me. But that might've been a little much to expect from a wolf, even one as clever as Hestia.

"How are you holding up, girl?" I asked her when we got a brief moment to breathe. She leaned into my side, panting but strangely not all that tired looking. Certainly, she looked better than I felt and, even better, she wasn't showing any injuries. "You fall back to help Lana if it gets too much for you, okay?" She barked, and I hoped that was in agreement. Knowing her, it honestly could've been anything. "Okay… where to next…?"

'Next' ended up not coming up, or at least as I expected. Because as I was figuring out where to go next in the chaos, Hestia's ears perked up and she looked down the road, back towards Tirnanog. I wondered why for a moment, but then I saw three shapes coming our way, fast, and I laughed brightly because I knew who they were. Diarmuid, Lester, and Oifeye caught up with us. And so, I laughed, because finally, our group was together again.

Oifeye immediately rode around the edges of the field, skirting around battles before galloping close towards the heavily armored soldiers. At first that confused me, but then I figured it was because he knew it would give our group the most trouble. And then I saw his sword: an armorslayer, made specifically to break through armor, with a wider tip to hook underneath the armor and cause even more damage. A bit convenient he had it, but again, he had to know they'd be the soldiers we'd have the most trouble with. He probably brought it specifically for that reason, and had it on hand just in case. Dozels's soldiers were known for their strong defenses, both in armor and formation. It made sense.

Lester, meanwhile, also rode the edges of the battlefield, though in his case, it was because he was best suited to hit and run tactics with his bow. A… different bow than his usual one, actually. It was red and gold, and there was definitely some sort of enchantment on it as he was firing much faster than he normally did. A good thing, since the sudden covering fire bought time for the wounded to escape, and the less wounded to take the kills. But it was still a little odd. Quite a few soldiers tried to target him, but he weaved through easy, Ulir luck kicking in. You could seriously make strategies around it.

Diarmuid, however, went for what had to be the showiest entrance ever. As he rode straight
through the battle, not giving a single damn, he leaned over to pick up one of the soldiers and tossed them up in the air. And then killed them as they fell via stabbing them in the side and letting gravity do the rest of the work. Because he could.

"I know Hezul is all for strength and all, but wow, that was dramatic," I laughed, catching up to him. Diarmuid simply slowed to a stop and grinned at me. "I think you made it for the tail end of this."

"I'm pleased we made it at all," Diarmuid replied, leaning down to squeeze my shoulder. Then he noticed Hestia, sitting next to me with her tail wagging happily. "Uh… why is Hestia here?"

"She decided her dumb humans couldn't survive too long without her."

"That makes sense. Also explains why Aideen didn't call for her when we briefly stopped in Tirnanog." He gestured to his packs. "We've got a few things from Aideen that were apparently forgotten."

"Somehow, I'm unsurprised." I sighed and looked around, noticing that with the additional three rattling the enemy, we more or less had the battle. "Let's finish up."

"Sounds good." He ruffled my hair, and I made a face at him. "Oh, by the way, Lester and I are annoyed."

"Look, they attacked us! What were we supposed to do?" I rolled my eyes. "Oh, go on, child!"

"I'm not even a full year younger than you!"

"You're still younger!" I was the second-oldest in our little group, after all. Seliph was oldest. "So, off you go."

"Fine then, grandma." He rode off before I could retort, so I rolled my eyes and whirled on an archer trying to shoot Diarmuid in the back.

Another archer then tried to attack me, but Hestia tore their arm off. More or less literally. It was more of 'she used all of her considerably strong bite to crunch their arm bones into bits, which had the side effect of the arm tearing off'. But the first was easier to explain. It also reminded me to keep an eye on Hestia. If she ever decided to turn on us, or people in general… that would be bad. That would be very bad.

Still, when I called for her, she returned to my side in an instance, ready to continue helping me, and when the enemies all fell, she instantly ran to the side and munched on some wild berries to get the taste out of her mouth. Afterwards, she helped out in Lana's infirmary, just as she usually did, though she did pause every once in a while to go catch and eat a snake that slithered near. I gave up trying to stop her after the first, mostly because once things wound down, and we got ourselves mostly cleaned up, Lester and Diarmuid rounded on us.

"I can't believe you left without us!" Lester complained. His hair was still damp from his quick wash. "Seriously? All that talk and…!"

"We needed to keep up the surprise! We didn't know when you'd return!" Larcei protested at once. All of our little group, save Lana and Hestia, had gathered outside the makeshift camp we set up to tend to the wounded. Surprisingly, we still had no dead. No way that was going to keep up, but for now, it was nice. "Look, Ulster was the one who came up with this idea!"

"We sure that's not because you would've charged?"
"Hey!"

"Now, now, we do have to pretend to be mildly, somewhat respectable while in public," I half-teased, mostly because I knew it could turn into a full-blown argument if we kept at things. I wasn't sure why I was the one playing peacekeeper, what with Diarmuid and Seliph also here, but whatever. "Still, you're here sooner than expected. Honestly wasn't sure you'd get here before Ganeishire."

"Ah, well, we…" Lester began. He hesitated before passing over his strange new bow over. Confused, I inspected it and discovered what had to be the most ridiculous, stupidest, yet also incredible, coincidence ever. It had the crest of Jungby carefully carved into it. "We ambushed a patrol of Jungby soldiers, likely there to harry and subdue the Silessean pegasus knights." Okay, maybe not as ridiculous and stupid as I thought. "Oifeye thought it looked like the Brave Bow Mother bought Father. And… I mean…"

"I understand." Midir had been one of the confirmed dead from the Belhalla Massacre, apparently dying to protect Brigid and Jamke. "You had to see…"

"Yep. And it was. It's the weirdest damn thing ever." Lester smiled, but it was certainly tearful. "Wonder if it was Father's way of saying. Here, you are strong enough now."

"It's nice to have something like that," Seliph quietly agreed. He rested his hand on the silver sword, then winced and looked at Larcei, Ulster, and Diarmuid. "Uh…"

"Don't worry about it!" Larcei scoffed, grinning. Whatever trouble her temper and energy could bring, it did also mean she was quick to reassure people. "I mean; our parents are definitely alive somewhere."

"I highly doubt that's the case," Diarmuid instantly retorted, earning a scowl. Diarmuid was like me, and believed that any of our parents who were missing were dead. There were rumors of his parents being in Leonster, but Leonster fell and there had been nothing since. Diarmuid was certain both died, or died soon after. "Though, if we do make it to Leonster, I might be able to find something from them. Maybe. Depends on how much was stolen and sold off."

"Gods, why do you have to be so cynical?"

"I prefer 'realistic'. I think anyone who charges off to fight for the world can't be entirely cynical."

"We did hear rumors of some sort of uprising in the south, though!" Lester pointed out brightly. Talks like this always made him feel awkward. He had a surviving parent. "So, maybe… uh…"

"Let's talk about other things before we get into another argument," Ulster suggested, running a hand through his hair with a tired sigh. He'd long since gave up on such arguments. Diarmuid, though? He'd argue with Larcei constantly over it. "Come on, Seliph. Smile and make them feel bad."

Someone cleared their throat before Seliph could even protest, and all of us slowly froze as we noticed that it was our turn to 'feel bad'. Because Oifeye was standing near, clearly had been for a while, and now watched us so, so sadly.

"Oifeye…" Seliph began. The rest of us squirmed and tried to ignore the awkwardness, while contributing to it as well. "We…"

"You know; during the Silesian Civil War, I was asked to be a messenger," Oifeye replied, his voice soft and his eyes almost distant. "I had helped as a tactician, been near battles many times,
but that was the first time I had a 'mission' of my own. Riding through the dead of night, in the
snow even, to let Sigurd and everyone know that Silesse Castle was under attack. And I was very
proud of it, but the others… they didn't seem quite so happy."

"That does… sound dangerous…" Seliph looked down briefly and I looked around to see the
resistance fighters slowly gathering around. Watching this. Knowing what this meant, because they
knew Oifeye. They knew us. "But we…"

"I couldn't understand that look of bitter pride on Alicia's face when she saw me off that night.
Now, though, I do. There is little as bittersweet as seeing the children you watched grow up begin
walking their own paths, especially when those paths lead to danger." He smiled then, and it was
still so sad. It was scared. But it was still a smile, just for us. "I wish we were more prepared. I
wish you all never had to deal with this. But that is neither here nor there. War came to you, and
you decided to fight back. I couldn't be prouder." His expression became more serious, but that
smile didn't change. It hurt to see, and it hurt even more to know we couldn't do anything to really
change it. "This isn't the only uprising. There's small ones all over the continent, and that can be
our distraction. If we move quickly, we might be able to secure Isaach before reinforcements
arrive."

"Then let's do our best." Seliph smiled warmly and turned to the other resistance fighters, who also
looked at us proudly. "Check with the wounded, then, and gather our things! With Lana's
permission, because I'm not crazy enough to fight a healer…" That got a ripple of laughter out of
everyone. "We're going to liberate Isaach!"

Larcei

Class: Myrmidon; Skills: Pursuit, Astra, Nihil, Vantage, Paragon

The 19 year old daughter of Princess Ayra of Isaach and Lex of Dozel, the younger twin of Ulster.
She's keenly aware that her uncle is the one hurting her home, and she loathes him with a passion
because of the feeling of betrayal. Though, when she's at her calmest, she can acknowledge that
Danann likely wouldn't see it that way, at all.

Has Holy Marks for Od and Neir on her upper left arm, intertwined and wrapped around like
armlets. Their blessings give her boosts to stamina and the ability to take damage, skill, and the
ability to resist physical damage. Due to her Od blood, she has very keen sight, allowing her to
track movement easily and allows her to quickly determine weaknesses in an enemy's guard. No
one is quite certain how the Neir blood allows a resistance in physical damage, with theories from
'miniature barriers' to 'extra strong skin', but it allows her to block weapons baredhanded.

Like most trained by Shanan, she is a pragmatic sort of fighter, though she and Ulster were both
taught the 'royal family style' since… well… they're part of the royal family. She favors it a bit
more than Ulster, though she does make sure to take advantage of her Neir blood to do blocks she
normally wouldn't be able to do.

Hotheaded and passionate, she's been dreaming of the day they would go into battle, though she
recognizes that it's no joke. She hopes that it'll help the adults to stop treating her like a child, and
recognize that she, and the others, have grown up and need to find their own paths. And she hopes
to tear some soldiers into pieces for what they did to Creidne and some of the other village girls.
Author’s notes: So, on turn 2 (or 3, can’t remember), Oifeye, Lester, and Diarmuid appear as reinforcements (a bit reminiscent of the Prologue, actually). Hezul Blood gives a +30% to strength growths, hence Diarmuid being able to easily throw a soldier up in the air. (Fun tip: the trick Riona uses to knee the guy in the balls since he was so close is a really good self-defense tip. If they're farther, you'll want to aim to use your shin instead.) Lester having Midir's Brave Bow is a nod to how random enemies in Gen2 will conveniently have non-inherited items as their droppables (well, some make sense, but still). I do not know where the brave bow is dropped (I want to say Game-Chapter 8?), but since in-game, Lester is goddamn useless without it, we're having that conveniently happen before. (Lester is a child unit who is very easy to mess up.)

Yes, Hestia is coming along; I'll be treating her a bit like a Beastmaster!Ranger's Companion in DnD. Wolves howl for three primary reasons, including letting pack members know where they are and warning non-pack members away. Wolves are also built for very long distance travel (capable of traveling 50+ miles per day in search of food) thanks to quite a few factors, but especially their relatively long legs and even longer stride. Though wolves are primarily carnivorous animals, they're known to supplement their diet with fruit.

Oifeye mentioning of uprisings in other countries comes from his in-game talk with Seliph, as does his wish that they had more time to prepare. His remembrance is from the events of Chapter 21) Dance in the Skies.

Larcei firmly believing Ayra is still alive comes from her sibling-talk with Ulster (I switched it to both parents here). And yeah, look at that skill line up. Aside from Pursuit (which is a class skill), all of the rest are inherited (Astra and Nihil from Ayra, Paragon and Ambush from Lex) Astra is five consecutive, full powered normal hits in the Jugdral games, unlike FE9, FE13, FE14, and FE15 (which halves damage) and FE10 (which negates critical hits). Also unlike those games (save FE15 where it's an activated weapon skill), the activation rate is (skill)% instead of (skill/2)% (I think I mentioned this before, but FE4 is almost hilariously unbalanced sometimes.) Nihil protects from battle skills, like in future games, but also protects from critical hits and effective damage (so if a flier has it, bows don't deal effective damage, and it protects from Wrath crits). Paragon works just as it does in future games. Vantage in Fe4 works much like how it works in FE13 and FE14 where the unit attacks first only when below half-health. Larcei favoring the Isaachian Royal Swordsmanship more than Ulster is simply my explanation for why she shares a promotion with Ayra (and Shanan), while Ulster doesn't (Ulster, actually, shares his promotion with Chulainn).

(People have asked this enough times that I'll just have it here. Alicia's growth rates [with Holy Blood Bonus] were: Hp - 60%, Str - 15%, Mag - 55%, Skl - 30%, Spd - 45%, Lck - 30%, Def - 10%, Res - 10%. For those curious as to why these values were chosen, a friend did them for me.)

Next Chapter - Siege
Chapter 33) Siege

We're all together again and thus, we're off to see Ganeishire! The wonderful... something, something... Ganeishire! None of us actually know much about Ganeishire, truth be told. We know it's one of the major cities of Isaach, and that it's the one closest to Tirnanog. Danann supposedly ruled from there, for a time, before setting up in Rivough. No one seems to agree on exactly why Danann doesn't rule from Isaach Castle, with tales from resistance fighters bothering him to the ghost of King Mariccle himself scaring the shit out of him. Though there are also those who think it's simply because Rivough is the closest Isaachian city to the Yied Desert, and to Grannvale.

Regardless, though, we make our way towards it, having some minor skirmishes along the way. When we get there, it'll be our first time attacking a city. It'll be the first major battle... well, there go the nerves. This was going to be fun, fun, fun.

There weren't a lot of places to hide near Ganeishire. It was mostly just some cliffs nearby, leftovers of the nearby mountains, ones where you had to use a spyglass to see anything significant about the city. There were remnants of old forests that had once surrounded the city, but had been cut down for whatever reason. Firewood? Prevent people from hiding? Who knew? Maybe not even the people in charge, for now.

"Looks like the scouts are still having some trouble getting in," Lester observed through the spyglass. Our group, plus Hestia, was all seated or standing at the cliffside closest to Ganeishire, watching and waiting. Oifeye had encouraged us to walk up here, both to look over the city that would become a battlefield and because we were all becoming a little frustrated. More than a little. "Again. The guards are apparently very careful." And thus, we had been camped out here for a day and a half, irritated.

"Of course they are," Seliph sighed, leaning against me briefly. He had been tugging his own hair from nerves and frustration, so I'd undone my braid for him to play with instead. Less likely to actually pull something out. "Probably to prevent exactly what we're wanting to do."

"No doubts about that." Lester sighed as well and brought the spyglass down to rub his eyes. He'd been making off and on observations for a while now. "Do I have red marks from the spyglass?"

"I'd hope not," Lana replied, barely looking up from her mending. She'd brought a bit to have something to do while we sat and waited, though we were careful to make sure she sat further back just in case the wind caught something. "Because then that's all that pressure right on your eyeball and do you know how gross it is to try and fix someone's eye?"

"I do, in fact, remember being around to watch Mother do that, yes," Lester immediately retorted, voice dry enough to use for kindling. It matched his droll look. "And I definitely know I don't want you anywhere near my eyes."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means Lester knows you'd be upset and if there's one thing he hates, it's having his little sister
crying," Ulster immediately 'translated', cutting off the potential argument or whatever. No doubt that would've played a part, but it was also a reminder that Lana wasn't yet as skilled as Aideen. Eye wounds were particularly tricky to deal with anyway. "Regardless, if things keep up like this..."

"We're not going to be able to attack," Larcei grumbled, curling her hand into Hestia's fur. She, and Ulster for that matter, rested against Hestia, sprawled out on the ground instead of sitting and hanging their legs over the side like Diarmuid and me or just sitting cross-legged on the ground like Seliph, Lana, and Lester. "Civilians will be caught in the crossfire."

"Precisely." Ulster sighed and attempted to sit up. Hestia reached around and bumped him back down with her muzzle though, since he was closest to her head. "I guess she thinks I need more rest."

"You were out scouting until recently." Larcei rolled over so that she could scooch into Ulster's side, quietly comforting him. "But this is getting frustrating."

"Quiet reminder that Oifeye's suggestion is still there," Diarmuid gently said. We all sighed because we all did know it was still there. When word first came that scouts were having difficulties sneaking inside, Oifeye had suggested we make ourselves as 'big' and 'grand' as we could, using *that* as our warning to the civilians. And honestly, it probably was the smarter thing to do. "I know we're not really keen on it, but..."

"I really don't want to risk their lives," Seliph whispered. Despite the quiet, his words were firm. "I'd honestly rather they surrender or something, and we didn't have to fight, but we know that won't happen. So, if we're going to risk lives, it should be the people who have actively volunteered, not..."

"Not people who happened to be caught in the middle." In future battles, such things might not be avoidable. So we wanted to avoid it, while we still had the choice. "Which is why you want people inside to warn the civilians, even though that could show our hand sooner. So that they have more time to hide and not be used as hostages."

"I know it's naive and foolish, but I still believe it's the best way forward." Seliph's voice continued to be firm. I wished I could see his expression, but each time I tried to glance back, he nudged me forward. He was definitely doing some sort of elaborate braid for my hair, to be taking so long. "That said, I know that we can't wait much longer. If my way yields no results by the end of the day, we'll go with Oifeye's plan." He tied off my braid and rested his head against my back. "But, please, let's try my foolish way a little longer."

"If it was really foolish, we would've stopped you." Still, we were feeling the time...

"Hey, Lester, let's switch," Larcei suggested, hopping to her feet. Lester tossed her the spyglass and curled up on Hestia too. Ulster moved over so that Lester could be near Hestia's head and get licks. "You've been staring at them for a while. Let's see if my fresher Od eyes can find a weak point." She hummed a bit as she looked out, frowning a bit. "Hmm... that's interesting."

"Did you find something already?" Lana asked, startled. So were the rest of us, with Seliph even straightening to give Larcei a weird look. "I mean... uh..."

"Like I said. Fresher eyes, and I was specifically looking for things to exploit. I'm a bit better at that than Lester, who was making general observations." Larcei brought down the spyglass and smirked. And it was her 'I have a great idea' smirk, which never meant good things. In fact, it normally meant pranks or things we'd want to strangle her for. "Mainly it's the main gates
themselves, which we've been ignoring. It's just two people from what I saw, and on the younger side."

"Okay?" Lana frowned a bit, because the words didn't make sense. Larcei then nodded at Diarmuid, and somehow, that was all Lana needed. "Oh. Oooooohhhhh…"

"Actually, that might work," Ulster murmured. He sat up and looked right at Diarmuid. And me. For some reason. "That might work very well, actually." Except I had no idea what they were talking about, until I remembered an off-hand thing Ulster said a few days ago. Then I groaned because there was no way… no way…!

"You're not serious," I said. Ulster only smirked. "Oh dear freaking gods above, you're serious. And don't joke about being always serious because we know damn well you're not."

"I'm serious about serious things."

"Not the damn point!"

"Missing half the conversation here," Diarmuid sighed, poking my head. His confusion had been replaced with suspicion, rightfully so. "What are you two talking about?"

"Something Ulster joked about the night before you caught up, or I thought he was joking about." I looked to the others beseechingly, only to see them also actively considering it. All of them. "There's no way it'll work. Diarmuid and I aren't that charming."

"Wait… oh, wait, what?" Diarmuid shook his head, catching on now. "No, no, and no. It won't work. She's right. We're not that charming."

"Won't know unless we try," Lana chirped, giggling. It was her nervous giggle, meaning she wasn't sure this would work either. But she was throwing her vote in for it, because… because. "Wouldn't be the first time you two charmed your way out of trouble."

"That was getting out of being yelled at for breaking things!" Diarmuid retorted. I just covered my face, not believing this at all. Seliph's sympathetic pat on my back did nothing to make the situation better. "Not infiltration!"

"Well, you are trying to break things. Just more ideological this time. You're trying to break our enemy." Lana smiled and it was the same smile she had when we tried to get out of taking medicine when sick. "Soooo…"

"It's not going to work!"

Diarmuid and I argued against the idea for a while longer, but eventually, we gave up. It was difficult to argue against Seliph, Ulster, Larcei, Lester, and Lana. I felt vindicated when they told Oifeye and Oifeye protested, though. Made me think Diarmuid and I were at least making sense. But Seliph convinced Oifeye to let us try, thanks to taking advantage of the sincere belief he could put on like a mask, and so, within the hour, Diarmuid and I were walking right up to the front gates of Ganeishire. To somehow convince the guards to let us in. Somehow.

"If we start the battle, I'm blaming them," I muttered as we approached. This was utterly ridiculous. "I mean it. I will."

"You and me both," Diarmuid sighed. He wasn't any happier about this than I was. "Ugh… I knew talking us out of trouble would bite me in the ass someday. I knew it."
"Not like this though."

"Not in the slightest." Still, when the guards could actually see and hear us, Diarmuid put on his warmest and most charming smile. "Good morning to you!"

"Morning, sir, lady," one replied, bowing their head slightly. The other one nodded, though I thought I noticed a bit of a blush on their face. "Are you seeking entry to Ganeishire?"

"If it's not a problem," I confirmed, doing my best to smile as well. The first guard softened a bit, and I studied them both quickly. The one that might be blushing was noticeably younger, but Larcei had been right. Both were on the younger side, and their nervous, yet relaxed, postures hinted they were newer recruits. "I can see you're on high alert."

"There's talks of rebels and resistance. Always has been, but some of our soldiers haven't returned from scouting."

"That doesn't sound good." For a number of reasons. They knew we were coming. Or, at least, they suspected. "I suppose that's why you're glaring so suspiciously?"

"I… oh, my pardon." The first guard smiled slightly, sheepishly. "I fear I am a tad… grumpy."

"More than a tad!" the second one laughed. It hurt my heart to see them both just so… normal. In the coming battle, they'd probably die. It wasn't fair and, worse, there was no way to make it 'fair'. "His shift was all messed up for the week and he's got a crying child wondering why he had to cancel their picnic."

"That's awful," Diarmuid murmured, wincing in sympathy. Then he was back to the smiles. "I hope you can get off duty soon."

"We'll be off in an hour or so, thankfully." The second guard shifted a bit, nervously, and the first one nudged them with a grin. "Good tavern not far from here, if you're wanting to visit."

"That sounds good." Diarmuid continued to smile, but he did give me a slight 'what the hell' look. I just kept up my own smile. "Ah, but does that mean we can head in?"

"Yeah, you two are nice and all. I doubt any rebels would be polite to rank and file soldiers like us." The second guard snapped their fingers. "Oh, but your weapons do have to be bound. Safety reasons. You can remove them only at the blacksmith. If you want someone to tend to your weapons, Jake's the best one."

"That sounds wonderful, and completely reasonable." Diarmuid unhooked his sword and passed it over to the second guard. I did the same, but passed it to the first one, still wearing the warm smile. "Thank you so much! Now, what was that tavern again?"

We made a little more small talk as the weapons were bound, and as Diarmuid got directions to the tavern and a few other places of interest. Mostly things like how long they'd been soldiers (not long) and about their families (the first guard had a three year old; the second was the eldest of five siblings). Some basics on rules (try not to bother patrolling soldiers, please don't steal, etc). Then we were let inside, no more questions asked. Because… because I didn't even freaking know.

"That… that shouldn't have worked," I said softly once we were a good distance away from the main gates. I couldn't believe this. "That shouldn't have worked. Why did it work?"

"I have no idea," Diarmuid replied, as stunned as I was. Noticing some people staring at us, he smiled gently to relax them. They smiled back and went about their business. "Also, correct me if
I'm wrong, but did I get a date out of it?"

"You did. You really did." I sighed heavily, facepalming. This was ridiculous. "I can hear everyone's laughter now. Gods damn it all."

"Well, at least we're inside." That was true. "Even if I am now terrified about the bad luck we're going to have to counter this bit of 'good luck'." Also true. "And terrified of how bards and storytellers shall spin this as divinely blessed." Also-also true. "Let's listen in and figure out where to proceed from here."

"In about an hour or so, you need to go to that tavern. Maybe some drinks will get some more information." Deciding that I had to tease in order to process any of this, I smirked at him. "Or, you know, pillow talk." I laughed when Diarmuid sputtered and choked on laughter and protests, turning quite red in the face. "We really should've gotten names. Oh well. Get theirs later."

"I hate you." His continued laughter, however, took any and all heat out of the words. "Right, listening now."

I continued teasing him, of course, but he teased me back and at that point, it was less to deal with the situation and more to blend in. If people thought you weren't listening, they talked a lot more. And what they talked about was rather interesting, actually. It seemed the main general in charge, Harold, was rather… well, not liked, but no one actively hated him either. His helper, though… whoever General Richard was, the people wanted him dead. Rather fascinating, really, to hear the people be so ambivalent on one, and feel such intense hatred for the other. That all said, Ganeishire was a bit of a ruin, with the people openly speaking of support for Shanan. It was telling that this Harold let them, but what it said, I wasn't sure. Did it mean Harold believed in our cause? Or did it mean he didn't think we were anything to be concerned about? It could honestly be either, or a reason I wouldn't know to consider.

"Miss? Miss!" It took a couple of seconds to realize that a store owner, a young man not much older than Diarmuid and me, was waving at us. "You two, get inside, quickly" he urged, half-reaching out to actually grab us. Diarmuid and I glanced at each other in confusion, and then tensed as we noticed quite a few others were hiding. "General Richard is doing his 'market walk'. You don't want to catch his eye."

"Well, I can see why the people want him dead if he gets this sort of reaction," I mumbled, heading inside the rather nice store with Diarmuid, the wares being of candles and perfumes. It smelled heavenly, really, and I was strongly tempted to look around. If, you know, I wasn't thoroughly creeped out by the current situation. "Thank you, sir."

"My sister caught his eye. We never saw her again. The man's eyes were dark and he shut the door to make it seem like he was closed. "The bastard… I really do hope Prince Seliph has moved like the rumors say. I hope his group guts him."

Not knowing how to react to that, considering that Diarmuid and I were… you know… part of that little group, we ducked down underneath a window, so that we could peek out, but still remain hidden. It was telling that the only ones who remained outside were the very young and the very old, and mostly males at that. And, before long, we saw this 'General Richard' walking past, chest puffed out and an arrogant smirk on his face. Enough to be annoying anyway, but I froze when I saw the brown hair, the brown eyes, and, most importantly, the scars on his cheek and neck, like someone had clawed him. I… I knew someone by this description. I could never forget that description. Creidne, bruised and bloody, sobbing out that description as she was dosed with miscarriage teas and things to help her get some sleep while Aideen tended to her bruises and scrapes… I could never forget. I could never forget…!
"The hell are you doing?" Diarmuid hissed, snapping my arm as I tried to leap out and cut the bastard down. I tried to rip out of his grip, but instead, he tugged me into his arms to *make sure* he had me. And, damn that Hezul strength, I couldn't escape! "We're here to get information."

"But that… that bastard…!" I growled. I almost didn't bother keeping my voice down. In fact, I might not have, but Diarmuid's shoulder muffled me enough anyway. "That general… he's the one who… who…!" I struggled to escape again. "Let me go! I'm going to rip him apart!"

"Now is not the time to emulate Larcei." Diarmuid sighed. He didn't get it. He didn't understand. I could punch him for it. "I'm reminded why you two had such an explosive argu-"

"Creidne!" I spat out the word and he paused. "Creidne! He… that man…!"

"...Not now." He pulled me closer, effectively pinning me. "You go out, you might get him. Actually, you probably will. But that'll start the fight sooner. That'll drag all these people into it."

"But…!" Distantly, I knew he was right. But all I could think of was Creidne and how she had… and of how…! "He…!"

"Later. Not now. We'll slaughter him *later.*" He continued holding me. I continued to struggle. But he was stronger than me, the strongest of us, and so, we stayed exactly where we were until that general was long, long gone.

Everything was just a sea of white noise afterwards, as Diarmuid said something to the shopkeeper, probably some sort of thanks, and then dragged me out of the store, and out of the market entirely. Dragged me over to a quiet spot near the walls, an alcove where few would go, where few would linger. An isolated place. A safe place.

"I'm sorry," Diarmuid murmured after a while. He winced and I could see he was on the edge of tears. "But, right then, it couldn't-"

"Diarmuid, shut up for a few more minutes," I ordered, the words snappier than I would've liked. Logically… logically, I knew he was right. Logically, I knew that this would not be the last time I would have to swallow my feelings to do what was best for the army. Logically, I knew that, as a leader, there would be times… I knew all of that. But… but I… "I'm still in a mood to punch you, and I'd really rather not." Because I knew it had hurt him too. Even if he hadn't been there to see the worst, all males had been kept away because Creidne kept screaming, Creidne was still his friend. He'd still worried terribly over her, had cried at her suicide attempt. I knew… "So please, shut up a little longer."

"Okay." And he did, because that's what I needed. Later, when I was calm, I'd poke and prod him about what *he'd* need. Once I was calm, we would switch roles. But it was hard. It was so, so hard to calm down. Almost as hard as choking back my tears.

I didn't cry, when Creidne was brought back. I had wanted to. I had wanted to scream, to rage. I had wanted to demand why she had to suffer, why anyone had to suffer like that. I had wanted to bawl because she was so badly hurt, so badly traumatized, and it was all because she had kept Lana and Larcei *safe.* Another person who suffered to protect us, but worse. It was worse, because it was Creidne and she hadn't protected them for the 'hope' we represented but because she loved us so, so dearly… Gods, I had wanted to wail. But I hadn't. I hadn't. I hadn't because everyone else was. I hadn't because it felt like *someone* needed to smile for her, and no one else was, so I decided it should be me. I had sat by her as Aideen mixed up all the medicines for her and smiled warmly at her whenever she glanced my way. Telling her that it would be okay now. Telling her that she was safe now. Holding her hand, when she let me, and smiling at her until she smiled back, finally...
believing that we were all real. That we were no hallucination. That Shanan had really rescued her. That she really was safe and away from that general…

But I remembered. I remembered all that terror, all that pain. I'd locked it up, because it didn't feel right to have. I'd locked it up, because Creidne had needed someone, anyone, to smile. But it still hurt. And to just sit by… to just sit by…! Even if I didn't have a right to be hurt, it still did, and I had never hated myself more for it.

After I finally calmed down, and watched as he punched a couple of trees so that he could calm down, we returned to the marked and I bought Diarmuid sweets. He only accepted when I said we'd share, but I insisted on buying them. Sweets for apologies, sweets for gratitude, and sweets because Diarmuid had the biggest sweet tooth and the fastest way to help him feel better was giving him candy. Or bribe him into not saying a word about anything, like how I'd nearly jeopardized everything for my own selfish reasons, like a child. Then, while he went to the tavern for that drink-date with the guard, I returned to the candle-shopkeeper to actually buy a few things as quiet thanks for looking out for us. His sympathetic smile told me Diarmuid must have mentioned a friend of ours had been one of General Richard's victims, and it didn't escape me that he'd slipped a little extra of the perfumes into my bag of purchases. I made sure to leave a bit of extra coin in a place where he could easily find it. Partly because I knew he deserved it, and partly because that little bit of 'normality' helped ground me further. A little thing I did in Tirnanog, back before… it helped me calm down further. I had to be as calm as possible. It was much harder to fake a smile when you really wanted to gut someone.

After leaving the shop, I promptly got lost and had to ask around to find the tavern. And by ask, I meant, 'hey, where is the tavern where charming blonde boy is having a date?' because, amusingly, people were able to tell me where to go by that description. Diarmuid, being friendly and polite, was certainly popular based on the crowd. Some might call it charm, but I thought it was just another indication of how hard their lives had been, to be so enthralled by kindness. Regardless, I joined him, the guard, and all their new and old friends for a surprisingly good and friendly meal. Afterwards, everyone went about their lives and Diarmuid and I decided to go to that blacksmith the guards recommended, mostly just to see what we overheard there. After a bit of asking around, we found it, and it was packed. Clearly, this Jake person was very good at what he did. Sadly, though, the crowd didn't talk about anything important, just typical town gossip. Fascinating, particularly in how much people knew about other people's sex lives, but rather useless for a fight.

"Well, you two are new faces!" the blacksmith, Jake, declared with a laugh when we finally managed to make it to the front counter where he did business. He had a kind and warm smile, the smile of someone who genuinely enjoyed what he was doing, and his laugh was boisterous. "What can I help you with?"

"If you've the time to spare, I wouldn't mind you looking at my sword," Diarmuid explained, passing over his steel sword. I still hadn't heard how he had one; he'd left on patrol with an iron sword. I assumed he stole it from the enemy. It's not like they'd need it, and it also wasn't like the soldiers didn't claim weapons from dead resistance fighters. As well as anything else potentially valuable. "I've been doing what I can, of course, but…"

"Always good to have an expert eye, yes?" Jake laughed again and, after untangling the rope binding it, unsheathed the sword to study it. "Oh, very nice… this is a good piece. A couple of small things, maybe, but otherwise, it looks quite good."

"I'm glad to hear that!" Diarmuid smiled warmly. "So, what small things?"

"Just a bit of sharpening, and if you don't want the hilt checked now, I'd recommend it in a few
more battles." He sheathed the sword again and tied it back up. "Your choice, really. Won't cost you too much. More if you want to reinforce the hilt."

"Reinforce?"

"Looks like you throw a lot of strength into your hits, honestly a bit more than this sword is made to handle. Quite the accomplishment, really." He shrugged, but Diarmuid and I tried to not squirm. Hello big issue of Hezul blood; Diarmuid had actually broken a few practice swords before he got a handle on his strength. "Regardless, reinforcing will lessen the chances of, say, your sword snapping in half because you hit something really damn hard."

"Oh, huh, I never noticed that." Diarmuid became thoughtful. "Hmm… how much?"

"I'll pay, if you want to do that," I offered. While there was a 'group fund' for the army, each of us also had our own individual things. For our group, Aideen gave us a hefty allowance. She had apparently been collecting it over the years, selling more of her jewelry, to make sure we had personal funds. "I mean; you bought lunch."

"And you bought sweets before that," Diarmuid countered. He glanced at me, nodding at my own blade. "Are you doing to get your own weapon checked?"

"Well…" Truthfully, I did want to. This Jake clearly knew what he was doing. But silver blades weren't exactly common, so… "Hmm…"

"Now that's interesting," Jake murmured, voice becoming surprisingly quiet as he leaned a little forward. His eyes were on the hilt of my sword, studying it closely. "Might be wrong, because of the rope binding it to it's sheath, but that design of hilt is normally used for silver weapons. The color, a silver blade." I… well, uh… people could tell different weapons apart by their hilts? "Not a weapon most are able to afford." He leaned forward a bit more, studying both of us. "Are you two, perhaps, with King Shanan?"

"We…" I began. I glanced at Diarmuid and after a moment, Diarmuid nodded. "We're with Seliph, actually."

"Ah, then given the strength and clear wealth, you must be two of the Scions." Jake smiled softly, nodding. "All right. Let's look at your blade, my lady…?"

"Riona. I'm the daughter of Alicia and Chulainn."

"Lady Riona of Sophara." He held out his hand, and I passed him the silver blade, trying desperately to not blush. 'Of Sophara'... I had never claimed that title as my own, but I couldn't deny how happy it made me feel. "And you, sir?"

"Diarmuid, the son of Lachesis of Noldion and Finn, a knight of Leonster," Diarmuid explained, laughing. I elbowed him in the side, knowing he was mostly laughing at me. "Nephew of Eldigan the Lionheart."

"And oh the bards do sing of the tragic tale of the Lionheart, killed while desperately trying to protect his lands and friends," Jake noted, a touch melodramatically. But there was clear respect in his eyes, which was expected. Just as Sigurd had been spun into a tragic hero, Eldigan and Quan also had their tales embellished, often to the point of absurdity. Some stories state Eldigan died fighting Sigurd, protesting against 'Grannvale's cruelty' even over his dear friendship. In reality, Eldigan had been executed by his own king, trying to stop the war. "Well, while I fix your blades, why don't you hop next door, my lord and lady? My wife, Anna, runs the store there, and if you
want information, she's your best source."

"Ah, thank you!" Diarmuid grinned. "But, let's work on the price first. We insist on paying, and full price at that."

"Now, I can't do that."

"Sure, you can! I insist!"

There was a cheerful bit haggling, while I kept track of the difference to pay back later, and then we headed next door to the local armory, run by the Merchant Anna. Rather smart to group them together, truthfully, and it was easy to see the incredible quality of the items as soon as we walked in. Diarmuid's eyes were drawn to a beautiful, and expensive, silver sword hanging on the wall, and I had to admit that I studied the 'enchanted blades', swords imbued with magic through the runes carefully carved onto the blades, very closely. While I had no training in magic beyond the absolute basics, by choice, I was very strong magically, thanks to the Fjalar blood. Honestly, I was probably more magically powerful than physically, thanks to that. But they were a tad expensive, even with our funds, especially when we were supposed to be gathering information. Honestly, we'd probably been in town far too long, but... well...

"Why, hello there~!" A woman with red-hair tied in a ponytail walked up then, regarding us with a sly smile and her finger on her cheek for some reason. "Welcome to my shop!" she chirped, giggling. Like her husband, the cheer in the laugh and the warmth of her smile showed how much she loved her job. "Anything catch your eye in particular? Adorables such as yourselves do get a discount."

"Tempting as the discount is, truth be told, we're here to talk to you," Diarmuid explained, smiling charmingly. I noticed a few of the store helpers glancing at us, and winked at them. To my amusement, they giggled, blushed, and quickly returned to their work. "You're Miss Anna, yes? Your husband said that if we want information, you're the one to talk to."

"Depends on the information." Anna crossed her arms, still smiling, but her eyes studying and serious. The way she shifted hinted that if things came to a fight, she could defend herself. Easily. Then again, we were literally in a room filled with weapons. "What are you looking for?"

"We're..." Diarmuid glanced around before whispering. "We're with Seliph."

"Oh?" Her smile took a distinctly mischievous light, but the serious remained. "In that case, come to the back with me."

"Thank you." Diarmuid continued to smile. "Later, we'll come back for that discount."

"Ah, someone knows the way to a merchant's heart!" Anna laughed. "This way, this way. Girls, you're in charge!"

'The back' was the break area, from the looks of things, complete with fine tables and chairs and fancy teapots. Being a merchant was clearly profitable, which was probably more than a little obvious. But still, this place was rich, and I was raised by nobles. Former nobles in exile who had to hide, yes, but still. It was like those fancy-smancy tea parties Lana would sigh about when we were little and didn't quite understand that things were bad and why we were on the run. It was almost uncomfortable, really, because it felt like the life we 'would' have had, if our parents hadn't died. And I wasn't sure how much I liked that.

"This blend is good, though it is foreign," Anna rambled, serving tea for Diarmuid and me.
Diarmuid and I just smiled. I, personally, half-wished I had a mug of warm milk with honey instead. "Regardless, what sort of information are you looking for?"

"Really entrances and exits that aren't as guarded," I explained. Diarmuid and I exchanged an exasperated look. "We... ah... just got lucky at the main entrance."

"Pretty face, pretty smile, and sometimes, people forget you've a pretty mind too." She winked, amused, and then sat down at the table with us. "But there's plenty. Ganeishire was an old town converted into a refugee camp, during the Holy War. So, there's lots of ways in and out as a means of escaping and no matter how nice the guards are, we do keep our secrets."

"What can you tell us about them? We noticed some younger and inexperienced ones...?"

"They're not the norm. Most of the ones here are older veterans, sent to the middle of nowhere because they can't stand Danann." She sipped her tea and smiled warmly. "So, you might get lucky in that fashion."

"They can't stand Danann?" I held off on my tea, though Diarmuid did start drinking his. "Really?"

"However you feel about Langbalt, he worked hard and he was very fair to the people in his care. And he was at least clever. Danann got all the worst aspects and none of the good ones. So, a lot of the older soldiers refuse to follow him."

"And they don't get killed for it?"

"If Danann tried, they'd revolt. He's too lazy to deal with that. Too lazy to bother killing them anyway. So, he just sends them away so that he doesn't have to hear to their grumbling. Because listening takes more effort than he's willing to exert." She rolled her eyes, and I did have to laugh at that. "Regardless, you can see if they'll be willing to surrender based on that. They take their oaths seriously, though, so it might not work."

"Still, it's a potential tactic." And one that could minimize battles, if we could word things well. "An interesting one, at that."

"Is there also a way to quickly, and quietly, warn people of the battle coming?" Diarmuid asked. Noticing he'd drunk the tea surprisingly quickly, I decided to try it and was treated to some sort of light herbal mix. Something about it reminded me of my vague memory of Mom's smell, the faint scent of fresh herbs meant to heal, calm, and soothe. A scent Mom never noticed because she was so used to it, but had meant comfort and laughter to me, too little to know or remember anything. A scent that, no matter how many medicines Oifeye and Aideen made, no one seemed to replicate. Aideen always smelled of quiet perfume, gifts from patients, and Oifeye always smelled of horses and steel. "We don't want them to be caught, though we recognize the risk in letting our enemy know."

"That's so sweet~" Anna giggled. She looked between us and nodded. "Of course. We've ways. Some of it is to hide from certain generals..." Her voice became a growl at the end, and I stiffened, remembering how quickly the town had hidden when General Richard walked through. "Others are the Child Hunts."

"Are they so widespread?"

"Thankfully, not in Isaach. Danann lets people do whatever, and Harold here refuses to let the priests do any of the Child Hunts, much like Iuchar and Iucharba. Surprising, considering those two are Danann's sons, but someone clearly made sure they learned morals." She shrugged. "But
the priests do slip through anyway, like rats."

"I see." Diarmuid glanced at me, and I subtly shook my head. I really didn't want to talk about that. Even if I was slowly getting used to battles, or at least too tired to care, that was still… "So, everyone will be able to hide quickly?"

"Yep." Her eyes went hard suddenly. "That all said, we… or at least I… want a promise."

"What's the promise?"

"General Richard needs to die."

"Oh, we can do that." Diarmuid continued to smile, but I saw the edge in it. "He… ah… hurt one of our dearest friends."

"Oh, good, I don't have to explain further." She smiled back, and it was distinctly vicious. "We'd like to see the body as well. Just to be certain, you know? Might even help his living victims to see him dead. I don't know. But just a confirmation. Doesn't have to be long. Just a confirmation that he really is dead."

"We'll talk it over with Seliph. I'm sure we can arrange something." Diarmuid gestured to his empty cup. "What blend is this, by the way? It's delicious."

"Oh! I'm glad you like it! It's from Agustria, you see. Popular in Noldion."

"It is?" Diarmuid's eyes lit up, and I couldn't blame him. He was always eager to learn about Aunt Lachesis's home. "Really?"

"Yes, so it's got a couple of flowers unique to it…"

Anna rattled off about the tea for a while, and then, once the pot was empty, actually led us to one of the hidden side entrances. We thanked her profusely and escaped, keeping close to the outer walls until we were sure the guards were looking away before darting down the road to return to camp. That was about the point we really realized how late it was; the sun was setting. That was way longer than expected. Way longer.

"Welcome back, you two!" But despite how long it had been, Seliph greeted us with a warm smile. He was the second to greet us, though. Hestia had been first. "Is Hestia done licking your faces off?" he teased. "She's been ever-so anxious."

"For now," I laughed, kissing her nose before nudging her off my arm and back to all fours. While she hadn't knocked Diarmuid and I to the ground, she had used our arms as balancing points to get to our faces. "And yes, we're back. Sorry we were gone for so long."

"You're fine." Still, his welcoming hug clung a bit, hinting to how much he had been worried. "You find out anything?"

"We did." I waited to continue as the others ran up, giving Diarmuid and I their own hugs. "Got some entrances, some warnings…"

"Excellent!" Seliph smiled proudly, and I knew no small part of it was him being proud that this was working, so far at least. "We'll send in scouts tomorrow."

"Yeah…” I trailed off, and looked at Diarmuid. He nodded, knowing what I was thinking about. "There is one bit of information that we should share before the group because it'll shape the
strategy. I'm sure of it."

"Oh?" Seliph looked curious; Ulster caught my tone and frowned. Larcei, Lana, and Lester were stoic. "What is it?"

"None of us are allowed to go anywhere alone."

"Got the name of that general who hurt Creidne. Richard."

"I paused, more to calm my heart than for any sort of drama. The others reeled from the news, guessing what the next bit would be. "And he's here."

"Well, I hope the locals won't mind us killing him." Seliph looked at me worriedly, and I ducked my head automatically. "Is that the only thing?" At my nod, he smiled and clapped his hands to get everyone's attention. "In that case, let's meet up with Oifeye and then hear the full report. We'll come up with a plan."

As the others walked away, I saw Ulster sling his arm around Lester's shoulders, while Diarmuid held Lana's hand and Hestia pressed herself into Larcei's side and licked her hand reassuringly. I tried to follow, but Seliph caught me in a hug before I could take more than a step. Sighing, I rested my head on his shoulder and he kissed the top of my head, just letting me rest. Knowing that I would've almost lost it, and how much it hurt.

"We're definitely killing him," Seliph murmured after a moment. When I glanced up, I saw he was looking over my head at Ganeishire. "I'd rather we not fight too many battles. I'd rather our enemies surrender. I'm scared of fighting, and I know I am nowhere near as strong as I ought to be. But that man will die. I will not accept a surrender from him."

"Or if we do, it's just to send him to an executioner's block," I whispered, reaching up to hug him back. That might be fun. Even if there was a small part of me who disliked that I found any sort of killing 'fun'. "The people of Ganeishire want to see his corpse."

"We'll let them. And then we'll bury it."

"Do we have to?" I sighed when I said the words, though. I knew we did. No matter how much you hated a person, you should still give some respect to the corpse. "If it can be arranged…"

"You and Larcei cannot pair up, but if we can arrange it, I'll do my best to have you two fight him."

"Seliph pulled away to look at me, smiling. "I mean; you two are some of our best fighters. It only makes sense."

"Thanks." I smiled back, relieved. Relieved that he understood just why it was important for me to at least see it. Why it was important for us. I knew that, if Lana could fight, he would've made sure she could see it too. "Remind me to buy you something in the market. It's really nice there."

"I'll think of something, then." He took my hand and led me back to the camp. "But for now, let's hear that full report. And I desperately want to hear how you two got in. We were watching through the spyglass and…"

"I still can't believe that worked and I swear to everything that if you make that a 'go to' thing…!" I scowled when he laughed. "Seliph!"

I knew that he brought it up then not just because of interest, but because he knew I'd get annoyed and I wouldn't focus on that general. From there, it became easy to relax again, to be the one with the confident smile again. Seliph always did know how to make me feel better. Always had, really.
Two days later, we set everything into motion, after talking extensively with everyone about the plan. Most would attack head on, after some scouts snuck in to take command of the main gates and warn the civilians that it was time. However, Ulster, Larcei, Diarmuid, and me wouldn't be with that main group. Instead, we would use a different entrance and sneak into the castle itself, ahead of everyone else. Officially, it was to assassinate the enemy generals, providing they refused surrender. Unofficially, it was Seliph keeping his promise to me as well as... he said something caught his attention and, so he wanted Ulster and Larcei to head in ahead of everyone to see if he was right. But he didn't want them alone, just in case, so Diarmuid and I were asked to tag along. Hestia had wanted to come with us too, but since we were supposed to be sneaky... well, it didn't escape any of us that Seliph had grouped the four best climbers together. So, Hestia was convinced to stay near Seliph and Lana to protect them instead. Barely.

"Well, here we are, with no conveniently open windows in sight," Ulster noted blithely. Surprisingly so, considering it was him. Then again... "So, how many dates did you and Riona accidentally get while getting us directions, Diarmuid?"

"I know we're in a serious situation, but don't think I won't push you into the mud," Diarmuid instantly retorted. Larcei snickered and I sighed. "And they weren't dates! Stop exaggerating!"

"Fine, fine. Offers for tours around the city."

"It wasn't even that!" Diarmuid scowled, and I just facepalmed. I would admit that the locals had been a little on the blushing side, but... "In case you didn't notice, they were looking at you with starry-eyes too."

"Wait, really?" Ulster frowned. Now I shared an exasperated look with Larcei. Ulster could be horribly oblivious. "Why?"

"Yes, wh ye would they be starry-eyed at the heroes who are going to liberate Ganeishire and, eventually, the world," I retorted, making my voice as melodramatic and dry as possible. "That surely doesn't make any sense at all."

"But that's neither here nor there!" Larcei added, bouncing a bit. Her eyes were serious, and she was a touch green because more killing, but she was excited to get started. "Let's get down to business!"

"To defeat the empire!" I still kept my tone melodramatic, and got some laughs. "Though I think it's 'up to business', truthfully. We're climbing, right?"

"To the roof, yeah. If there's no windows open." Larcei shrugged. "Though, I can hear that little voice in the back of my head that sounds like Aideen going 'please don't'."

"Not to mention Oifeye." All of us shuddered and silently agreed that Oifeye would never learn that we did this. Ever. "Here. I'll head up first. I think either Larcei or I are the lightest, and we both know you two are too smart to actually pick-"

"You're definitely lightest," Ulster instantly deadpanned. Both Diarmuid and I burst into laughter and Larcei scowled. "You've seen how-"

"Thank everything we're alone because if anyone saw us, they'd seriously question putting their hopes in us," Diarmuid noted dryly. All of us were quite sarcastic at the moment. Probably because we were all incredibly nervous. This was the first siege, the first major battle. And, on a personal level... "I know we're bantering to hide nerves, but still, family of my heart, we are important leaders on an important mission that involves lots of blood and guts, not a group of cats with
particularly small attention spans to be herded."

"I suppose we are going overboard." Ulster smiled sheepishly. After all, he started the whole round. "Riona, that looks like a good place to start climbing up."

Taking the hint, I headed up, finding a path surprisingly easy. I'd expected more difficulty, given this was a very proper castle. But the edges of the stone were worn and dented, as if no one had properly maintained the castle for a while. Not to mention the decorations on the side. I did have a couple of scares where something I swore was secure wasn't, and I definitely bruised my knees and shoulders catching myself when I slipped. But I made it up before long, and even had time to stretch a bit while Larcei climbed up. Soon after she joined me on the roof, though, we heard the 'slam' of a door and turned to see a couple of dumbstruck archers climbing out from a hatch. Who were no doubt wondering how we ended up on the roof, just as we were startled about there being people here at all. Larcei and I recovered first. Barely. As in 'no time to draw weapon, so throwing now!' barely. Larcei *really* threw the one she grabbed, sending them sailing through the air, screaming bloody murder. Mine was more of a 'trip and drop' sort of thing, though that had a very unintended consequence. I nearly dropped them right on Diarmuid.

"You okay?" I yelped, leaning over the edge in a panic. In order to avoid the sudden falling screamer, Diarmuid had to actually let go of one of his handholds, leaving him dangling by his fingertips on one hand. And he was already halfway up, so it was quite the distance to the ground. "I'm so sorry! I thought you were taking our path up!"

"Need slightly different handholds for the skill difference!" Diarmuid reminded. I winced, kicking myself for forgetting that. "I'm fine, though!"

"You sure? I can climb down to help!" Especially since Ulster was almost up to backup Larcei, should the need come.

"Just fine!" Diarmuid swung his legs for a bit of momentum and pulled-jumped to another handhold, catching it with both hands. "Don't throw anymore here, though."

"Got it!" I did watch a little longer, worried, but Diarmuid did seem to have it under control, so instead, I went to the still open hatch and peered down. Just in time to see more people on the way, no doubt wondering why there were screams.

They froze when they saw me looking down at them and I smiled automatically at their shock. Then, noticing they were still stunned and that the ladder was wooden, I reached down as set the ladder on fire. It took a bit more concentration than I'd like, more than starting a campfire, but it went up before any of them unfroze enough to actually climb up to me. Then I closed the hatch and sat on it to keep them from continuing up. Larcei gave me a weird look at first, until she heard the thudding of people trying to open it, and the screams of people dealing with fire. Then she sat down too, leaning against my back. Both of us taking a very brief break while we waited for the boys.

"Well, at least we have a way in?" Ulster sighed as he joined us on the roof. He glanced over the side worriedly, back at Diarmuid. "Okay, he's climbing up well..." He turned to Larcei and me, and gave us the weirdest look ever. "Why... why are you two sitting?"

"We're on the hatch," I explained. The thumping had finally stopped, so now, Larcei and I were really just waiting on Diarmuid. "I set the ladder on fire."

"Ah." And Ulster needed no other explanation. "Diarmuid, you good?"
"Just fine!" Diarmuid replied, voice drifting up. Before long, he actually joined us, rotating his wrist a bit. "Sorry, nearly getting hit by a screaming person slowed me down."

"I'm really sorry about that…" I mumbled. I fished through my pouch, one of the medicinal pouches that Lana insisted we carry, and found a bit of the pain reliever balm. "Over here. You can't tell me your wrist isn't hurting."

"Just a little." His slight smile was pained, hinting it was more than a little. But it was just like him to try and play it off because I felt so guilty. "Won't say 'no' to the balm." And that more than 'hinted'. Diarmuid was stubborn about medicine. Probably because he used to be so frail and he frankly got tired of always being the ill one. "Thanks."

"No problem." I started rubbing it in, careful to not hurt him. Thankfully, it was his offhand, but still… "Sorry."

"It's fine. No one died." Diarmuid paused when I gave him a skeptical look. "Okay, the person you threw died. Not me."

"Speaking of people dying…" Ulster began. He was by the now-open hatch, looking down with Larcei. "Riona, why is it that you burned the ladder and not just their clothes? We could've used the ladder."

"W-well, it would've gone up anyway if I did that!" I protested, face burning with an embarrassed blush. In retrospect, I really should've. Oops. "I mean… it was wooden!"

"We might've had more than ash." Ulster shrugged though, not really bothered. "Whatever. Larcei and I will jump down first. Because Neir blood. Dozel isn't know for its mages."

"Thank everything because only Seliph has any sort of resistance to magic." Diarmuid and I were the next 'best' at it and that… that wasn't really saying anything. "Head on down, then. Diarmuid and I will catch up."

It was a surprisingly long drop down, one that made my ankles and knees ache on the landing. A couple of hops and rotations loosened them up again, though, and so, the four of us raced through the halls. We passed by a few screaming servants, no doubt wondering where the hell four crazy armed people came from, and we actually did stop and nudge a few into nearby rooms as a silent 'things are going to be chaotic, please hide and be safe' thing. Though, given the screams, I was more or less certain all they inferred was 'AH, CRAZY PEOPLE!'. Couldn't blame them for that one. Based on the noise, the main force of our resistance force had crashed through the front. No one expected us already in the castle, racing through to try and find the generals.

That wasn't to say the place was completely devoid of soldiers, of course. Just that we didn't come across any for a long while, not until we hit the more inner portions of the castle. Even then, there was something odd about it. None of them seemed particularly enthused about the fighting, focused far more on defending than actually attacking. It felt off and I knew I held back a bit, more looking for a way to slip through than actually kill any of them.

Weirdness really started when one, a soldier with noticeably better armor, struck Ulster with his axe. Ulster blocked it with his bare arm and kicked the soldier back. However, instead of pressing forward like a fighter normally would, the soldier continued walking back, studying Ulster closely. They then gestured sharply and all the other soldiers stopped fighting, some even jumping back to return to formation. The four of us stood there awkwardly, not quite sure what was going on. Especially when that first soldier, probably some lieutenant or something, just continued to study Ulster. It wasn't as if we could return the favor. All I could see was 'noticeably older than the ones
who had been guarding the gate a couple days ago' and 'brown eyes'. Their helmet completely covered their hair.

But, after a long moment of the awkward staring contest, the soldier, lieutenant, whatever… they smiled sadly. "Neir blood, and Lord Lex's face…" they murmured. "I'd heard Lord Lex had married the Isaachian Princess, Ayra, and fathered two children." Well, technically, they hadn't married, much like my own parents, but… "You are…?"

"I'm the elder one, yes," Ulster replied calmly. He held himself proudly, almost defiantly, daring the person to say a single mocking word. "My name is Ulster."

"Lord Ulster, huh?" They sighed heavily, and we had just enough time to be shocked by the title before being stunned because they dropped their weapon and kneeled. That's when I remembered what Anna had said about the 'older' soldiers here, and figured out what Seliph had meant by 'gamble'. And had to resist facepalming for not piecing it together sooner. "In that case, I surrender." More weapons hit the ground with dull clangs and I could only stare as I watched every single soldier just… give up. Even with their leader surrendering, this was… this was a little… "We surrender." We were so paying for this eventually. We really were.

"I… er…" Ulster looked to Larcei, who threw up her hands in a 'I have no damn clue' fashion. "While I am thankful, I also wonder…"

"Our oaths are to Dozel house. However, we do get the freedom to choose what lord to serve, if there are multiple lords. Crusader Neir was insistent on that, just in case there was an inadequate successor." They continued to smile. Sadly. "Considering Danann, I think I'd rather take my chances on Lord Lex's children."

"You think that highly of my father?"

"Lord Lex was kind. He was reckless and a hothead, with a distinct love of fighting, but he was always kind. And he was loyal." That smile warmed, but it remained sad. I didn't like what that sadness hinted. "While Danann got most of Lord Langbalt's worst traits, falsely believing such behaviors would earn his father's favor, Lord Lex inherited most of his best and had those traits encouraged by his mother. Those traits led to Lord Lex and Lord Langbalt to fight, and led to him fighting for Lord Sigurd. But even then, Lord Langbalt was always proud of him. He walked his own path, after all." They chuckled. Sadly. Yeah, I wasn't liking that. "Lord Lex was always the first to protect the people, the first to protect loved ones. His first fight with Lord Langbalt started because he worried Lord Langbalt's envy of the other houses, of the acknowledgement they got while Dozel was ignored… Lord Lex worried it would hurt their people. Their soldiers. Us."

"That sounds like… the stories I've heard about him…" Ulster said the words quietly, with a faint smile. I glanced around, half-expecting a trap. But there was none. Diarmuid was looking too, and nodded at me to confirm that. Larcei was a little too surprised by everything still. Couldn't blame her. "I only have one memory of him."

"Do you?"

"Yes." Ulster closed his eyes to better remember. "Someone was attacking Mother. Someone large and scary, with a giant axe. I was scared, and I tried to go to her, because Mother made everything safe. It made the large man almost attack me, but he froze for some reason. He froze and stared before reaching out… I was so scared, crying even. But then Father was there in front of me, protecting me. Angry, righteous, and safe. I knew I was safe, because he was right there." He opened his eyes again, and I caught the trace of tears. But Ulster ignored them. "We're after the generals."
"General Harold entered the field. General Richard is going to reinforce at the signal, bringing us with him." They pointed down the hall. "Just head straight down the hall. He's in the giant room, with large double doors. We'll get the rest of ours to surrender, with your permission."

"Of course." Ulster smiled warmly, as did Larcei. "Thank you!"

The two ran down the halls, for some reason, being totally trusting. Which, while Larcei was excitable and reckless, was a bit odd for Ulster. But, then again, bring up our parents and we tend to not be as pragmatic. Had a feeling this was also part of the 'just in case' thing Seliph had mentioned, so I shrugged, smiled at the soldiers, and ran after Larcei and Ulster. Because while they couldn't be distant enough, Diarmuid and I still could. Thankfully.

However, as soon as we were out of sight of the soldiers, Diarmuid caught up to me and rested a hand on my shoulder, making me stop. "I'm not sure they noticed… well, I know Larcei didn't," Diarmuid began softly. Very softly. "Not sure if Ulster did. But the way they talked about Lex…"

"Everything was sad," I whispered. It still bothered me. "Like how Oifeye talks of Sigurd." That special tone you used when you talked about someone you respected, after they had died. "I wonder how."

"I'm sure we'll find out sooner or later." And when we did, Larcei was going to crack for sure. Ulster might too. "We're falling behind."

"Let's go."

The further we ran down the halls, the less guards we encountered. The few we did simply let us by, making me think the guards here had been considering surrender anyway. It was Ulster and Larcei that made them decide, because of their remembrance of Uncle Lex, but the thought had been in their heads before we ever showed up. Made me feel slightly better about all of this. Slightly. It was still rather startling. I hadn't expected any surrenders here, no matter what Seliph had hoped. Plus, the way they had talked implied they were going to join us? Who recruited people from the enemy side? What sort of craziness was…? Then again, Aunt Ayra had nearly killed Uncle Lex when they first met, and Jamke had been an enemy to start. But the Jamke thing had been a series of Ulir luck. Which the four of us didn't have. And I doubted Lester and Lana's luck would spill over to us. So, it was weird. It was very weird.

"Oh, hey, outside…" Diarmuid whispered, slowing to a stop. Larcei, Ulster, and I also stopped, realizing that we were running right past a balcony. "Should we…?"

"I'm a bit worried about that signal," Ulster murmured. He hesitated before nodding. All of us sheathed our swords again in unison. "That said, I think it would do us all some good."

"Yeah, I think so-ACK!" Diarmuid had to jump back because Larcei nearly trampled him in her haste to see outside. "Yes, Larcei, I do so love having my feet bruised and broken. I was just thinking of asking you for a dance to really get them bruised."

"She is not paying the slightest bit of attention." Ulster sighed and joined Larcei outside, resting against the balcony. "Oh, wow…"

Diarmuid and I joined them, and I almost asked what so held their attention. But all words died as I looked out as well. From up high, it was easy to see where Ganeishire had once thrived. From here, you could see the badly patched roofs and the hastily fixed walls. From here, you could see the crumbling buildings of abandoned districts and the overgrown gardens left behind by previous
inhabitants. From here, you could see the massive size of the graveyard and where it had been hastily expanded to account for all the dead. You could even see which of the deceased still had living relatives, because of the number of flowers set on each.

Also from here, you could see the battle and it was… it was unlike anything I had ever seen. Yes, I'd been part of battles. Yes, I'd run away from battles. But from up here, you could see the order in the chaos on the field. Oifeye's lessons in tactics, brief as they were, mentioned 'formations', something I thought fell apart the instance a battle started. But from up here, I could actually still see them. Yes, you could see the individuals fighting on their own and the bits of a free-for-all, but overall, everyone on both sides was set up to maximize their effectiveness.

Automatically, I hunted for my family, wondering who was where. Lana was easy to find; she was set up behind three 'walls' of fighters, healing and encouraging those nearby. Oifeye and Lester rode along the edges of the battle, taking advantage of their mobility to sneak behind the enemy's formations and disrupt them. Oifeye also shouted orders, using his tactical prowess to act as an 'on the field' tactician. Lester focused much more on hit and run tactics, and covering fire for the injured. His father's brave bow certainly did increase his damage output.

Seliph was, surprisingly, harder to find and, honestly, I found him more because a large wolf was rather noticeable and Hestia kept close to Seliph in the ordered-mess. He was more in the center of things, shouting encouragement and orders while killing enemies that came close. Though I knew he had to be terrified, he didn't let the people see anything but the confidant leader. Though I knew he'd be sick later, he fought without reservation. It was… it was strangely… I wasn't sure what I felt, watching. He felt so far away, and not just because I was way up on a castle balcony and he was fighting below. It felt like he was fading into the distance, and I… I didn't like that. At the same time, I wasn't sure why I felt that way. We all knew that when we marched, he'd be the leader. Nothing about this situation was surprising. And we were going to be with him for all of this. So, it was… it was very strange.

Just as strange was the relief and warmth I felt when Seliph suddenly looked up, right at me. He stared for a half-second, forever in a battle, before smiling brightly. Automatically, I smiled back, feeling the urge to laugh suddenly. But I quieted the urge, and that was a good thing, as Seliph quickly pointed towards a man in literally shining armor, shouting orders to the soldiers. I caught what he wanted instantly and leaned out over the railing to better sight them. Someone, probably Diarmuid, held the back of my dress to make sure I didn't go tumbling off, so I focused solely on that distant figure and concentrated. The distance made it difficult, but I managed to set some of his clothes on fire before too long. Just a tiny bit, sadly, but it had the intended effect of scaring the living hell out of those nearby and making their formation crumple. I looked down again at Seliph, and he gave me another warm smile before returning to the battle, petting Hestia while he took a short break from the fighting.

"Looks like they're handling themselves well," I murmured, hopping back on my feet. To my confusion, Larcei and Ulster were watching me with sly smiles. A quick look to my other side showed Diarmuid was amused. "...I'm missing something. I'm really missing something."

"What makes you think that?" Larcei asked innocently, widening her eyes to add to the effect. Now I definitely knew I was missing something. "We're just glad everything is well."

"Yeah, last time you guys acted like this, you were trying to lead me into a prank." I only avoided it because Shanan had triggered the little 'trap' instead, when he returned home unexpectedly early. "So, you'll have to forgive my suspicions."

"Like we can set up a prank now!" She rolled her eyes. Ulster actually facepalmed. I was definitely
missing something and I didn't like it one bit! "Whatever. We've a dastard to eviscerate."

"...Dastard?" I had a feeling she used that word just to distract me and, damn it, it worked. "You want to call him a craven while you're at it?"

"Maybe a craven cur."

"Hey, don't insult dogs like that!" I scowled and she laughed. "Ugh, whatever. Don't tell me the secret. I don't care." Yeah, I did. Because, while I knew we all had our secrets, this one clearly involved me. But I was good at pretending. "Jerks." Sometimes.

"H-hey!" Larcei tried to grab me as I stormed off, but I danced out of her reach before continuing down the hall. "Riona! Wait up!"

I ignored any and all attempts the three made it apologize or whatever, hyperfocusing on our task to not round on them for what was likely a very stupid thing. Particularly when we were in the middle of important things. But damn it, it was so beyond irritating. And I knew even with the apologizing, they wouldn't tell me. Otherwise Larcei would have just blurted it out. None of this helped my nerves one bit and since I was ignoring them, I couldn't switch to bantering to try and calm down. It was honestly more than a little pathetic, to get so riled up. We weren't in Tiranog anymore, where I could get away with things like this. As a 'leader' for the army, I didn't even have the right.

That all said, all bits of annoyance, self-pity, guilt, and what-have-you disappeared as we arrived at a set of very large double doors. Which were, of course, locked. Because why wouldn't they be?

"Well, it's not like we're being subtle anyway," Diarmuid noted after we all spent a moment sighing. He studied the door a bit, contemplating something. Larcei used that opportunity to sneak over and hug me. I sighed and leaned into her, not returning the hug to let her know I was still a bit annoyed, but accepting it to tell her to not worry about it. "All right then." And then Diarmuid punched the door. Twice. And kicked it once. The punches bloodied his knuckles, but dented the door and lock. The kick broke it entirely, leading the doors to crash open with a deafening thud. "There we are."

"One, Hezul strength is freaking ridiculous, and I am forever afraid of any Hezul Major," Ulster deadpanned. I, stunned into silence, just grabbed Diarmuid's hands to tend to the bloody knuckles. Larcei tentatively crept to the door and poked it. It creaked and groaned, and a splinter or ten fell off. "Two, we should work on your tendency towards dramatics."

"I'm not that dramatic." Diarmuid shrugged. "But it was locked. How did you expect us to get inside? We can't pick locks."

"There's this thing called 'ambushing'." Ulster gave him a droll look. "Which Larcei and I are particularly good at."

"Well, too late now." He smiled innocently and charming. Ulster facepalmed. Larcei continued staring at the broken door. I finished up tending to Diarmuid's knuckles. "Besides, how do we know there's not multiple exits?"

"That this general might've already used?"

"Hey, you're the one who stopped us for conversation."

Sensing that this could go on for a bit, mostly because all of our nerves were beyond frayed, Larcei and I glanced at each other and actually ran inside the room, forcing the boys to yelp and follow us.
Of course, we didn't have far to go. General Richard was inside the sparse, but fairly nice, room, staring dumbly at the broken door. Larcei stiffened at the sight of him, recognizing him from the description as well. Here… here he was. Here he really was and this time… this time…!

"Good afternoon!" I greeted blithely, with the brightest smile I could manage. General Richard's attention slowly turned to me. "Sorry for the mess! You're late, though."

"Late…?" he repeated. His eyes went to Larcei. Then Ulster. Then Diarmuid. Then around, clearly expecting more people. After all, we broke the door. Well, Diarmuid did. Almost a bit of a shame no one knew where Eldigan's son was, whatever his name had been. Hezul Major antics would be ridiculous. "For what? The signal hasn't…"

"You've a meeting with the death gods today." I continued smiling, continued being cheerful. I hated him too much to even glare. "We're here to show you the way."

"Death… wait…" General Richard stepped back, finally putting the pieces together. He took a couple more steps back, towards the axe resting on the wall. "The rebels…!"

"Four of the Scions of Light, if we must be technical and dramatic. Like Diarmuid's breaking the door suggested." I crossed my arms, but I heard swords unsheathing. I glanced around and saw that, surprisingly, it wasn't Larcei. Larcei was too busy glaring balefully at the general. Ulster and Diarmuid had both drawn blade, prepared to gut him. "So, General Richard. I've a single question. Are you going to meet death prone with a blade in hand or on your knees?"

"I… I surrender!" General Richard brought his hands up, but I saw the calculating light in his eyes. The shock was passing, so now he was trying to figure out the best way to kill us. He thought we were naive kids, and thought we'd be the 'honorable knightly' sort. "So-"

"Surrender denied~!" I kept on being cheerful. Now I heard Larcei unsheathe her sword. "You're not surviving this day." Distantly, I realized how 'mean' this all was. Yes, he was an older general, a veteran, but it was still four-to-one, four with Holy Blood at that to give us an extra little 'boost'. Underestimating him would be stupid, particularly when all four of us were a little nervous and a little angry. Yet… "You're not seeing tomorrow's dawn. Either you die in this room, or you die on the executioner's block. I prefer the former."

"I've just been following orders!"

"We know what you've done. We know your victims, the ones you didn't kill when you got bored." It took everything I had to not scream. But I still smiled. Smiling was easy. "And Danann is dying too, for everything he's done. So if it was his orders? He's dying for them too. You can prepare the way to hell for him. After all, as I said, you're late for your meeting with Death."

"Spoilt brats!" He lunged back and to the side, barely dodging Ulster when he surged forward in ambush. "You think war and battle are games?" He palmed the axe, snarling. "I'll-"

"You act like we're not used to death." Yes, we were naive idiots. Yes, we were inexperienced leaders. Yes, we were green fighters. But… "And you act like someone like you even has a chance at scaring us." Now I drew my own blade, and mentally prayed that Mom and Dad were watching and would help me where they could. "Say hello to death for us, will you? We're sending a lot of your ilk their way, so it's best to be polite."

He snarled and tried to strike. I wasn't sure who he was aiming at, but all four of us jumped back to dodge. And that's when the battle began. And it wasn't… well, as I mentioned earlier, underestimating him would be stupid. Regardless of our feelings for him, he was a general and a
veteran of many battles. He knew his limitations far better than we knew ours. He knew how to read the ebb and flow of the battle better than us. And he was strong. When he did hit, the pain was horrible. I took one to my leg and had to quickly fall back to bandage it up before I bled out, only managing to have that time because Ulster and Larcei shielded me. Then I had to be the sole assault while Diarmuid also fell back to tend to his own injuries. The worst was when he managed a really bad hit on Larcei, a blow that certainly would’ve killed her if she’d not been of Neir blood.

But even with all that, we had our advantages. There were four of us to split the battle, and only one of him, and our Holy Blood gave us an advantage in stamina. So, he tired faster than us. He wore clothes, clothes easily seen even with all the armor, and they were quite flammable. He wielded an axe, possibly enchanted since he always seemed to swing twice when I expected only one, and all four of us wielded swords. The lack of magic meant that Ulster and Larcei could block him, when he didn’t get lucky, gaining minor injuries and freaking him out because who wouldn’t freak out over someone blocking an axe with their unarmored arm.

At one point, though, he did manage to grab Diarmuid, being the slowest and least dodgy of us four. He tried to angle Diarmuid to give the axe at his throat, no doubt attempting to take hostage. But the close proximity… well, if he could grab Diarmuid, then Diarmuid could grab him. And joints were relatively fragile. And Diarmuid was strong. So, it worked just about as well as you’d expect and ended with Diarmuid rather casually twisting General Richard’s wrist around to at least sprain it badly, if not outright break it. Either way, Diarmuid escaped and General Richard was down a hand. Not his dominant hand, but still, the pain had to be excruciating, even with battle fever numbing things.

"Your life is mine!" Larcei snapped then, surging forward. Her sword sparked and shone with green sparkles and when she struck, I saw the 'five' for the 'one' I’d always seen when Shanan activated Astra. And that was more than General Richard could take. He fell to pieces. Literally. Blood everywhere, limbs falling off… Larcei successfully used Astra in battle, for the first time, and killed him. He was dead. And in pieces. Three pieces to be precise.

In stunned silence, we stared for a moment before automatically running to each other. Hugs, winces… helping each other properly tend to our injuries. That sort of strange quiet that immediately followed a fight, except we didn’t have the older fighters shouting to get everything organized. We didn’t have Lana to scold us. It was just us, awkwardly trying to process everything while also trying to not bleed out and get a very angry Lana on our asses. Us, trying to not throw up because even if we hated this guy, it was still a death and gods, it was a violent way to go. We were used to death. We were becoming used to killing. This sort of violence? The worst we’d seen before this was Hestia's leftovers. Which, you know, were probably worse because wolves ate more or less everything of their kill, but you know…

"So, is he dead?" Larcei asked quietly once we were done bandaging. She sounded so small, so fragile, that none of us pointed out that with all the blood slowly spreading across the tiled floor, he definitely was. "Is he…?"

"We can always make sure," Diarmuid offered quietly, already moving to the body. When he brought his sword up, I nudged his leg and handed him my silver blade instead. It was the strongest of ours, and bones could be tricky to cut through, even for a Hezul Minor. "Thank you." Diarmuid sheathed his own sword and then, quick as you please, Diarmuid chopped off Richard’s head, turning the number of pieces from 'three' to 'four'. "There. Definitely dead."

"Good…" And Larcei’s legs buckled and she collapsed to her knees, bursting into tears as her sword hit the bloody ground. Diarmuid dropped my blade and immediately ran over to hug her, so that she could cry into someone's shoulder. "Finally… finally, I could pay Creidne back…! Finally,
I could…!" She went from sobbing to wailing, clinging to Diarmuid's arm. "Finally…!"

Her wails and Diarmuid's quiet comforting being the only sounds, Ulster and I decided to check around the room, making sure no one was around, and going to ambush us. Something we should've done earlier, really. But still, a sweep about the room showed nothing, and so, Ulster sheathed his sword, and I picked up mine to do the same. Ulster passed over a bit of cloth to wipe off the worst of the blood, and then we just stood there awkwardly, because Larcei was still sobbing and Diarmuid was still doing what he could to comfort her. And we couldn't just... you couldn't tell someone to just 'stop crying'. Well, not these sorts of tears, at least.

"What are the orders for the body?" Ulster asked after a moment. He nudged the largest part curiously before shrugging and going to the axe a short distance away. It had clattered and spun in the aftermath, it seemed. "I don't remember."

"That's because there wasn't any," I replied. Seliph left it at our discretion, since there was no guarantee we'd run into him. Just a hope. "So, I suppose we can just carry it out. Locals want to see it."

"I hope this is the only time we're doing bodies on display."

"Probably." Much as I hated the man, I could admit that putting him on 'display' might be a bit much. Well, I could admit it now. "We'll bury him and make sure no one can actually do anything to the body before and after. They just want it confirmed that he is dead."

"Makes me feel a bit better." Ulster smiled a bit and then picked up the axe to study it. After a moment, he used his sleeve to wipe off the blood. And then froze. "This... this is..."

"Ulster?" I frowned worriedly and when he didn't move, I crouched down next to him. "Ulster, hey, what's wrong?"

"I..." His voice was a croak, and I was startled to see tears welling up in his eyes. "This..." He gave up and just shoved the axe at me. "Here."

"Okay?" Confused, I studied it, wondering just what I was looking for. But then I saw something that was really damn odd. On the handle was Isaach's royal seal. But Isaachians weren't known for their axes, especially one so finely made. "That's..."

"Aideen... she said not a lot of people knew." Ulster spoke slowly and as soon as he mentioned Aideen, I knew... I knew why this shook him so. I figured it out, just from that. But Ulster kept going. He had to say it, in order to process it. "But when Father and Mother got together, he had that carved onto his best weapon, his Brave Axe, as a sort of joke. Something about having the family he was marrying into on the weapon that best showcased his birth family. I think. It made sense when she said it."

"Oh." I knew the story. It was an enchanted axe, one of the 'Brave' weapons, something Uncle Lex had gotten from a fairy who lived in the waters by Verdane. He'd gotten it for being honest, and had used it through all the battles, all the campaigns. Right up to the Belhalla Massacre. "Oooohhh..." I carefully set the axe on the ground, stretching awkwardly to try and get it away from the blood, and gathered him up in my arms, just in time for him to start silently crying. "Oh, shit."

"I-it doesn't mean anything!" Larcei suddenly snapped. I looked back and saw her still sobbing, but obviously, she had heard all of that little exchange and was now crying for a different reason entirely. Diarmuid continued stroking and kissing her hair, his slight smile so incredibly bitter.
"They just… they just got his weapon! Maybe he was captured! Maybe he is still…!" Her voice cracked and she shook her head roughly. "He's still alive! He is!" But it did make a considerable dent in her 'very firm' belief. Because his best weapon, his preferred weapon, was here. It was here, in the hands of a most horrible person, someone Uncle Lex would've never entrusted it to. It could be Uncle Lex was 'tricked', but for him to give up his best weapon… that didn't… "He is!"

"Of course," Diarmuid whispered. I knew he didn't believe it. We all did. But it was just what you had to say in a situation like this. "I'm sure he's just fine."

"Exactly!" It was hard to understand that single word because she was sobbing, wailing, so hard. "Exactly!"

Diarmuid and I just held Larcei and Ulster, comforting them as much as we could as both sobbed. We remained there, isolated from everything, until Oifeye walked in, with Hestia, to inform us that the battle was over. Seliph had killed General Harold himself, when Harold had refused the offer of surrender, and Hestia had come with Oifeye to actually track us, since we weren't outside. He saw how much Larcei and Ulster were crying, of course. And he saw the axe and smiled sadly, recognizing it instantly, before leaving to make sure people would avoid the area and give Larcei and Ulster the time they needed. Hestia remained, of course, bloody from the battle, and favoring one of her back legs. But she was otherwise uninjured, having just been lucky or having been treated by Lana, and so, she licked and nuzzled both Ulster and Larcei, giving them what comfort she could and letting them cling when they needed the extra warmth.

When everyone was finally composed enough to leave, Ulster carried the axe out. Larcei carried General Richard's head, by the hair. Diarmuid and I carried the rest of the pieces. Hestia kept close to Larcei throughout the entire trip back outside. Larcei needed it, to pretend everything was fine when we left and presented the body to the locals. To pretend we were the glorious victors, instead of children badly missing the parents they barely remembered.

Pretend, pretend… it was like the games we used to play, the make-believe stories of 'playing house' or 'exciting adventure to seize the treasure'. Except we didn't exactly have a choice to 'end' the game. Not now, at least.

The evening air was full of songs and laughter, the wind dancing about as lively as the partiers below. Despite how tired everyone must be, everyone insisted on throwing a huge impromptu festival, with all the food and songs such things implied. After all, Ganeishire was finally free of Grannvale, for the first time in almost twenty years if I had my timeline correct. Plus, it was the first true victory of the resistance, our first 'real' victory in the war. Everyone had affectionately taken to calling us the Liberation Army, instead of simply the Resistance. I didn't mind it much. It was better than the quiet whispers that followed us as we passed. Whispers calling us 'the Crusaders', fighting a 'Holy War' against the 'Evil Empire'. Creepy as hell, really. We weren't chosen by gods or anything. We were chosen by them, the people. But there was no countering that. We couldn't prove that we weren't 'chosen by fate'. And, you know, the Holy Blood we inherited didn't exactly help with 'but we aren't warriors of the gods' thing. It did give us advantages those without Holy Blood didn't have. Something that we'd always known, but didn't quite realize. Not until these battles, at least, where it became all too clear just how… different… we were. Not invincible by any means. But different nonetheless.

"Ah, and here you are." Oifeye's voice startled me, enough that I almost tumbled off the railing of the balcony I'd been hiding on. "You must've been quite deep in your thoughts, to not hear me," he noted, grabbing my shirt to make sure I didn't actually fall. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't worry about it!" I dismissed, waving my hand to emphasize said 'dismissal'. I turned to
face him properly, leaning against the railing. "You were looking for me, though?"

"Yes." Oifeye leaned against the railing himself, looking out over the festival-party-thing. It looked like everyone was having fun. "I wanted to check on you, since you're hiding up here on the balcony instead of dancing through the crowd."

"Oh, I'm fine!" I made sure to smile. "Just a little-"

"You're better at lying than Alicia, but you lie about the same things." Oifeye laughed, genuinely amused. And sad. He was always just so sad, especially when remembering our parents. "Though she'd always retreat behind that 'healer's mask' of hers and use her training to set all pain to the side, working it out by taking care of others. Now, Chulainn was very good at hiding what he felt. Alicia and Ayra were the only ones who saw his true feelings."

"I'm not…!"

"You've always been the first to hide your own pain behind a smile. You've always been the one to say 'someone needs to smile, so it might as well be me', no matter how much your heart ached. The one exception was when Conall was taken." He smiled, just a touch smug, and I groaned. "I raised you, if you'll recall."

"Yeah, I know." I sighed. "Ugh… why do I bother trying to hide anything from you?"

"Because you know I have a lot to fret about and like to make sure you only contribute by climbing far too high or you punched a bully's teeth out."

"I only did that second thing one time." And it had only been because his teeth had already been loose. Baby teeth and all. "But I am fine. Just rather tired."

"And unnerved by the hero worship?" Again, he was smug and, again, I could only groan because, damn it, he was perfectly right. "We can continue with the guessing game, but I think I'll win it."

"Ugh." I scowled and then sighed. He was definitely my 'father', even if he wasn't my 'dad'. Hiding really was pointless. "Okay, okay. I'm a bit nauseous from the battle as well, achy from the fighting, and still processing things."

"Now, was that so hard?" He was definitely far too smug, but his smile softened and he ruffled my hair. "All things I'd expect, really. I do wish there had been more time…"

"Oifeye, would you have ever thought we were prepared 'enough'?"

"You all? Of course. Me? Not so much." He smiled sadly, glancing at the bandage I had on my arm, some scrape from Richard. I was wearing a sleeveless shirt, so it was really visible. And it was a sign of how, if something had gone a little differently, I might've been down an arm. Or dead. Much like the bandages on my legs, also visible thanks to the slits on my skirt. "I really do understand now why they were all so conflicted, and why everyone always seemed to worry about me, those last couple of years."

"...I'm sorry…” I could only look down because what else could I do? What else could I say?

"No, don't be. You were attacked, and you chose to not run away. You chose to stand your ground and protect what you loved with everything you had."

"Well, it's only fair."
"You know; that's something Sigurd would say." Oifeye chuckled, clearly remembering. "Though, Alicia did believe in some sort of fairness in the world. Life wasn't fair. It just wasn't. But you could make it a bit fairer. Though I think she and Sigurd briefly argued over 'how much' fairer you could make things, at the beginning. It's hard to say. She became much more hopeful, living with the army." It was a shame all of their hopes were answered with nothing. "Regardless, if things had to start, I'm a bit relieved they started as they did."

"You are?" That made me frown. "You're happy Tirnanog got attacked?"

"No, I'm relieved that it's different." Oifeye fell silent, gathering his thoughts. I looked below and saw the party was still in full swing. At this rate, it would be dawn before anyone thought about stopping. "When Creidne was..." He paused again, this time trying to think of a tactful way to continue. "When Creidne was captured, that was the first time all of you, together, insisted on fighting, insisted on going. Before, you took turns. Before, you waited until there was a quiet moment."

"I remember that." We'd just been so afraid, and we knew... we knew what would happen. Did happen. "Aideen was the one who refused." The first, and only, time she ever got involved in those discussions. "Even made us stay in the manor."

"She was scared, because it was just like how everything started for us." He laughed softly, but it wasn't a very happy laugh. "Well, not just like everything. But everything started because Aideen had been kidnapped and Sigurd went to save her." Which honestly just summarized everything about Sigurd from what I understood. Recklessly loyal, willing to fight an entire country's army just to save a friend, and endlessly kind. "Ah, but that's enough reminiscing. Should I divert people from you a while longer? There have been requests from the people to see 'the charming blonde girl, daughter of the healer who saved King Shanan and of Sophara's true lord'. Well, all of you, of course, but you're the one I wasn't sure I had to continue coming up with excuses for."

"Uh..." I had no idea how to respond to that one. I should've expected stuff like this. Making appearances. That wasn't new, of course. We did it with the infirmary, while doing our shifts. But being requested? That was new. For me, anyway. Seliph would be requested. Not the rest of us. But now, I supposed we would be. "Er..."

"So, yes, for a while longer." Oifeye grinned when I scowled. Gods, I hated when he did this. Well, not really, but it was irritating! Mostly. "You know; Ulster is down the hall."

"He is?" That surprised me. I would've thought... "With Larcei and Hestia?" Hestia knew something was wrong, and had seriously unsettled Larcei, so Hestia had stayed near, radiating comfort.

"No, Larcei is actually with Lana. Last I saw, both were curled up on Hestia, while Hestia licked Larcei's cheek." Oifeye fell silent and I winced. As we all guessed, anticipated even, there had been deaths. Less than expected, since Ulster and Larcei's presence, and relation to Uncle Lex, had led many of the Dozel soldiers to surrender. But there were still some. Lana, of course, took it hard. We all knew it was impossible to save everyone, but this was the first time Lana had been in charge of such efforts. So she felt each death keenly. "Focusing on someone else helps ground her. Rather like Ayra and Alicia, actually."

"Really?"

"Ayra was only able to make it those first few months after leaving Isaach by focusing on Shanan, and Alicia, as I said, almost always dealt with her own pain and panic by taking care of others. Part of why she was such a good healer." He smiled softly, and sadly. "I think I'll go back to check on
them, though. After getting them some treats, some warm milk with honey, and making your excuses."

"...Just temporary. I'll be back out soon." But I did want to check in on Ulster, especially if he was alone. "Hey, Oifeye?"

"Hmm?"

"Thanks. For everything." I smiled as warmly as I could. "I'll thank you again later, when all of this is over, but I do want to make sure you knew and that we'll pay-"

"Ah. There is nothing to repay." Oifeye ruffled my hair again. It was his most common gesture of affection. "When we heard of the Belhalla Massacre, I was devastated. It was hard to breathe, much less actually get up and do things. But I had my promises. I had to take care of you all. And gradually, you all brought laughter back into my world. Happiness amidst the broken shards. Raising you all has been my greatest joy, and it is no exaggeration that you all are my reason for living." He smiled kindly; I had to fight back the sudden burst of tears I felt. It made sense he'd feel this way. Wasn't even a surprise, since Aideen had said much of the same. But still... "There is nothing to repay. Never has been, and never will be. All that I ask is that you be as careful as you can, and that you remember that you are allowed to be happy, truly happy. That all of you will live long and happy lives is my only wish."

"...What am I supposed to say to that?" My voice wobbled and I looked down, really struggling to hide my tears. "Love you, Oifeye."

"I love you too, Riona." He kissed my forehead and wiped away the stray tears that slipped down my face anyway. "I love you too."

Oifeye lingered for a moment, mostly to make sure I wouldn't completely dissolve into tears. It was a near thing, but I managed, so he gave me a hug and left to tend to Larcei and Lana. After a moment to collect myself, I left the balcony as well, heading 'down the hall'. In retrospect, I should've asked Oifeye the exact location, or at least which way to walk, but I hadn't, so instead, I wandered about for a while, wondering just where Ulster was. Eventually, though, I did find him in a large, open room. It wasn't large enough for, say, a ballroom, so I wondered what it had been used for in the past. It was clear by the dust in the corner that it hadn't been used at all. But now, Ulster used it, to practice with his dad's brave axe. I lingered in the doorway, just watching, rather surprised by how easily he adapted to it.

"It's amazing, really..." Ulster murmured when he finished. He knew I was there. He'd known as soon as I walked in. "The only training I have with an axe is chopping wood. But it's almost an extension of my hand, just like a sword."

"Must be the Neir blood," I mused, trying to keep my tone light. I leaned against the doorway, nodding at the axe. "Told you it would be hot."

"Oh, for-!" He laughed at the memory. It was a tired laugh, but one nonetheless. "But that's right. We joked about it, briefly. About how we lacked weapon variety."

"And I suggested you take up axes." It had been a joke, at the time. It didn't feel as funny, anymore. But we laughed anyway. "Are you?"

"Yeah. I'm going to. I'm going to use this." He smiled sadly, fighting back a fresh wave of tears. A few slipped down his cheeks anyway. "I like thinking he's watching out for me. Like how you and Seliph wield your fathers' blades. Like how Lester uses Midir's bow."
"Yes…” I walked over to wipe away the tears. "You're not going to be like…"

"Larcei has clung to that belief too long for her to just give it up. I… I never…” He choked on the words. Because he had. He had believed, to a degree, that his parents were still somewhere. 'They were captured.' 'They were prisoners.' 'They just couldn't find Tirnanog.' There were a thousand and one reasons for them to be missing besides 'they are dead'. You could come up with just as many now. "Ha… I'm an idiot."

"Someone has to hope.” In a way, I was 'lucky'. I knew, for a fact, that my parents were dead. There had been pretty elaborate funerals for both of them, according to the rumors, and both were buried in the family crypt in Belhalla. If there was one thing I liked about Arvis, it was that he had buried my parents with each other, though no small part of me wished they'd been buried anywhere else. Anywhere besides the place where Dad had died and Mom had lost everything. Like Silesse. We'd all been happy in Silesse, or so Aideen always said. "I'm not sure holding onto hope about our parents is wise or anything, but someone has to hope."

"But even with that hope, you have to acknowledge even the painful possibilities. Otherwise, we'll just walk to our deaths, just like our parents." He took a shuddering breath and nodded. "I think… I think I'm just going to go to bed. Larcei said she was going to stay with Lana."

"All right." I made sure to smile. "I'll be sure to eat everything yummy in your place."

"...Oh, right, there is food." Ulster actively began debating it, using his hands as makeshift scales, to my amusement. "So, question, if I sneak out to grab some…"

"If you need a distraction to cover an escape, I'm your girl." I took his hand, still smiling, and walked out with him. "Plus, there's a stall just making warm milk with honey. Should be easy to snag some."

"I'm convinced." He smiled softly, quietly conveying his thanks. "Let's drop off the axe, and then hunt down the treats."

"Sounds good to me!"

It didn't take long to find something for Ulster to munch on, and I dragged Seliph into some dancing to serve as the distraction for Ulster to quietly escape back to the quiet of his room with a handful of goodies and a mug of warm milk with honey. Continuing to be the distraction, to make sure no one would ask where Ulster went, I laughed and joked with everyone as if nothing was wrong, as if my own heart didn't ache. Ulster, Lana, and Larcei couldn't join in, they all hurt too much, so I would take up their share. Perhaps we had the right to be sad, finally, but we had to take turns. We had to pick up each other's slack. Because we were the leaders, and leaders had to be confident. Leaders had to inspire. Leaders had to pretend the weight of everyone's expectations wasn't crushing them into the ground.

So, I smiled. I laughed. I joined in with the dancing and singing, the joking and the laughter. I devoured all the treats and praised the cooks. I listened to the stories of the people, asking questions and actively listening. I played silly games with Lester and Diarmuid, dragging the children into a rowdy but fun game of tag. I stuck near Seliph when I saw him flagging, and helped him keep up appearances because everyone wanted to at least say 'hello' to their savior, the Heir of Light. I found the shyer people hanging on the sides and talked to them, making sure they were comfortable. Anything I could think of to encourage the people, and to be the person they expected us to be.

Someone had to be the cheerful one. It might as well be me.
Ulster

Class: Myrmidon; Skills: Pursuit, Vantage, Astra, Paragon, Nihil

The 19 year old son of Princess Ayra of Isaach, and Lex of Dozel, the older twin of Larcei. Though his coloring is Isaachian, his face, build, and height all speak to his Grannvelian heritage, to the point that those acquainted with Dozel and its ruling family can instantly recognize him as Lex's son.

Has Holy Marks for Od and Neir on his right wrist, the two intertwined like a bracelet. Their blessings give him boosts to stamina and the ability to take damage, skill, and the ability to resist physical damage. Due to his Od blood, he has very keen sight, allowing him to track movement easily and allows him to quickly determine weaknesses in an enemy's guard. No one is quite certain how the Neir blood allows a resistance in physical damage, with theories from 'miniature barriers' to 'extra strong skin', but it allows him to block weapons barehanded.

Though taught the Isaachian Royal Style by Shanan, he favors a more pragmatic approach to fights, truly believing that as soon as a battle starts, 'honor' is left to the wayside in favor of people's lives. Is taking up axes to help diversify his fighting, and is already a terrifying force to be reckoned with, thanks to the axe's strength, his natural skill, and Neir's blood giving him a natural talent for the weapon

He's surprisingly ambivalent about Danann, probably as a counter to Larcei's intense passion. He does look forward to seeing Danann die, for the treatment of the people, but he doesn't view Danann as a traitor. Then again, this could be because, unlike Larcei, Ulster doesn't view Danann as 'family' at all. Just another criminal and tyrant who needs to be killed.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: So, 'General Richard' is unique to the story and yes, he was wielding Lex's Brave Axe. The Brave Axe is droppable in this chapter, though by a completely different general, and is always droppable because none of the children characters can inherit axes. In the main game, Ulster cannot use axes ever, but he can in the Binary patch, so we're bringing that in for the next bit of inheritance (though I am listing his class as the same thing as the main game for convenience). Ulster's memory about Lex comes from Chapter 27) Blood Ties, with the vagueness being because of his young age, though his ability to remember it at all is because the event was fairly traumatizing.

As for the soldiers surrendering, something mentioned in Game-Chapter 6 is how Sigurd's kindness and ability to inspire loyalty left behind things that could continue to help, even after his death. This is easily seen through Seliph being sheltered in Isaach and through Seliph being accompanied by the children of Sigurd's allies. Because of the varied nature of the children's parentage, Sigurd is the only one mentioned in that fashion, so I wanted to bring in the other parents. So, here's a way Lex indirectly helps his children, with his kindness and loyalty having earned the soldiers' respect to the point that, given how far Danann has fallen, they yield.

Seliph, thanks to his Minor Naga blood, has a 30% growth rate. Diarmuid, if Finn is his father, has a 10% growth (and if I calculated things correctly, so does Riona). The others in the Tirnanog kids group have a 7% growth. The thing about Ulster and
Larcei being good at 'ambushing' is because their skill 'Vantage' is known as 'Ambush' in the Japanese version. "Your life is mine" is one of Ayra's skill-quotes from FE Heroes.

FE4 doesn't actually have things like vulneraries. You're entirely dependant on healers, unless the unit happens to have a Renewal/Life ring, of which there are only two in the entire game, one dropped by an enemy in the first gen and one granted by a special/secret event that occurs after killing the final boss of Game-Chapter 10 with Seliph. Castle guards and churches do also have self-healing (the guarding the castle thing working like thrones in other Fire Emblem games), but churches cost money to heal. Yes, the church charges gold at 5 gold per 1HP healed; this is actually part of why Travant was surprised Alicia didn't charge for her healing (but I… uh… forgot to bring that up when it was relevant… whoops…). But considering who raised these kids, it felt odd that they wouldn't carry medicine on them, so here we go.

Speaking of things I forgot to mention, people have asked why I associate HP with stamina, and a big part is actually the Fatigue system used in FE5 and FE15. Namely, doing things leads to 'fatigue points' accumulating and when that number exceeds a unit's max HP, they are considered 'fatigued'. In FE5, that means the unit has to sit out the next battle. In FE15, they suffer a max-HP reduction until it's fixed via provisions. Also, in FE4, you don't 'gradually increase' weapon ranks and, instead, they're set depending on your class. And your Holy Blood. If you're a major, then your weapon rank automatically becomes (*), which means you can wield every weapon, including the Holy Weapon. Otherwise, it'll boost your weapon rank by one 'rank'. It's this natural boost that I'm referring to when mentioning how Ulster is good with axes despite no formal training. And speaking of mechanics for FE4, FE4 is actually the first game in the series to utilize the weapon triangle. In FE4, it gives a +20% to accuracy if you're at the advantage, and inflicts a -20% to accuracy if you're at the disadvantage. (It's also the first game to introduce a magic triangle, using the anima one later reused in the Tellius games. Light and dark are outside the triangle, unlike future games, and both have the advantage against the anima magic while being equal to each other.)

Jake and Anna are recurring characters throughout the Fire Emblem series (more Anna than Jake). Anna's only appearance in FE4 is through the 'storage' system of the game, so I thought it would be fun to bring them both in here. (And now they are blessed by the RNG goddess! Or something) As for why Jake is a blacksmith… well, in FE4, you can actually repair your weapons by taking it to the Blacksmith in the castle towns, a feature unique to FE4 iirc (the repairing without using the hammerne staff, not the blacksmith). Thought I'd showcase that feature too. FE4 is also unique in that each individual unit has their own supply of gold (rather than a group fund like most other FE games), so I brought that up as well. As for the hilts, most fire emblem swords have different hilts depending on the weapon (for example, a silver sword and a silver blade have different colored hilts).

Next Chapter - Interlude, Ganeishire
Interlude - Ganeishire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Interlude - Ganeishire

Ganeishire is liberated. The very first city to be freed... the very first victory in our 'war'... it's a big moment to be certain. Everyone celebrates and greets us with cheers and smiles. However, it's not all fun and games. Now that we have a defensible city, we have to prepare. We have to build not just a 'resistance', but an 'army'. It's a big difference, literally. More people, more supplies, more... everything. It's kind of crazy. More than kind of, actually. And it's even more intimidating.

Well, someone has to do it. And by 'someone', I meant us. Because our only other choice was to run away, and we were tired of that.

"Riona?" Seliph's voice slowly dragged me from my book, a very smutty story Lana recommended. It was surprisingly good, with a fun and interesting plot and sex scenes that were more than 'insert thing here'. "Riona, I know you're up there. Hestia's whimpering."

"Aw, is she?" I asked, pushing myself up slightly to lean over the edge of the castle's roof. Sure enough, there was Hestia, giving me her best 'puppy dog eyes' despite being very far down. Seliph petted her to try and reassure her. "She was hunting with Ulster earlier. Didn't think they'd be back yet."

"The hunters returned an hour or so ago," Seliph replied, laughing. I glanced up at the clear sky, noticing the sun was higher than I would've guessed. I'd been here since a little past dawn, after finishing all my morning duties. We were easily late morning, early afternoon. Whoops. "Anyway, what are you reading?"

"The Assassin's Bride." I marked my spot and closed the book before swinging my legs around so that I was sitting on the edge, kicking my feet. "You might like it, actually. Still got scenes that'll make you blush, but the plot is amazing!"

"Lend it to me when you're done, then." Seliph grinned. Or I guessed. He was kind of tiny from up here. I could see the red ribbon he had tied around his arm, though. It matched the one I wore on my wrist. "Maybe we'll do that group read thing again."

"Oh, this one would be good for that!" Of course, we might not have the time, but maybe we could figure out ways to do work while we did? We'd helped each other with lessons while doing a group read before, after all. "Though, maybe we should do one none of us have read? Lana's read this one, and I'm halfway through."

"We'll discuss it with the others." He laughed, warm and bright, but that only made his sudden serious look all the more... well, serious. "Hey, you got any shifts or duties coming up?"

"Nope. All my stuff is late afternoon and evening today." I adjusted the ribbon on my wrist and smiled down at him. I knew what he was going to ask. "Want me to come with you?"

"You mind?"
"Of course not. I'll be right there." I tucked the book into my sash and stood up. Hestia barked excitedly, tail wagging, because she knew I'd be back with her soon. "Oh, but keep your voice down because otherwise, Oifeye is definitely going to-

"Riona!" Spoke too soon. There he was. Damn it. "Riona, how did you even… oh I don't care!" Oifeye grumbled, storming over to where Hestia and Seliph were to glare up at me. I didn't get why he was so surprised. I did this all the time in Tirnanog, and there was no reason why I'd stop just because we weren't there anymore. "Get down from there this instance!"

"You want me to jump?" I asked dryly, even as I hunted for a quick way down. Seliph, meanwhile, was laughing his head off. "I'm not sure I'll bounce to my feet from this height."

"You know exactly what I meant!" Oifeye glowered at laughing Seliph. He didn't notice Hestia slowly doing a 'play-bow'. "Lord Seliph, you shouldn't encourage such dangerous behavior!"

"I'm perfectly safe! Besides, you let me keep a wolf as a pet."

"That was reluctant and-AUGH!" And Hestia decided that Oifeye's yelling was the start of a new game and jumped on him. "Hestia, no! I'm trying to scold Riona!"

"Not listening~!"

"Riona!"

Thanks to Hestia pinning Oifeye, Seliph and I managed to escape before Oifeye could give me a lecture from hell that I'd pretend to listen to and promptly forget about. Hestia caught up to us before long as well, wagging her tail and yipping excitedly. I had to keep a good grip on her fur when we entered the chipper market, smiling and waving to people as we passed. Quite a few greeted us in return, stopping us to say something about how grateful they were that we freed Ganeishire. Some even just stared at Seliph, eyes sparkling in wonder. Seliph did his best to not squirm, and I took to actually calling out to those people to make them squirm in turn. Hero worship and the like was sadly inescapable, but that didn't mean I had to put up with them making Seliph uncomfortable. It was still unnerving, even if I knew we had to get used to it. Besides, it was hilarious making them blush.

We left the market quickly, and Hestia loped a bit ahead, excitedly heading for the gates. I had to call her back to my side, though, as we weren't heading outside. Instead, we made our way towards one of the residential areas of the city. It was much quieter here and not just because most of the town was either working or at the market. The dark ribbons tied outside people's houses were the other reason. Black for family, red for friends. Every house bore red ribbons, but only a few had black. Seliph paused outside of the closest one, looked around for some sort of identifying mark, and closed his eyes to gather his nerves. I took his hand and leaned into him reassuringly and he smiled at me before knocking on the door.

"Welcome home, Papa!" Almost immediately, the door swung open to reveal a little girl in a newly made black dress, smiling brightly. That smile dimmed, though, when she saw Seliph and me and she looked up and down the street to find it was just us, with Hestia. "Oh, he's not home yet," she mumbled, sighing. Then she scowled and stomped her foot. "He's super late."

"Hello there, little one," Seliph murmured. He kept up the smile, though I could see the strain already. "Might we come in?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess." She paused and then gasped. "Wait! You're Prince Seliph and Lady Riona!" She bolted inside. "Mama! Mama, mama, mama! We've guests! Super-duper-important
"Well, she's a bundle of energy." Seliph glanced at me and then stepped inside. I followed, but had Hestia wait by the open door. It just seemed proper, especially since the girl's mom stumbled into the room, hands dirty from working in the dirt, looking a little frazzled while her little girl skipped about in excitement. "Ah, hello there. I apologize for showing up so unexpectedly."

"No, no, it's fine, Prince Seliph," she murmured, smiling kindly. And tiredly. Like her daughter, she wore black. "But what are you…?"

"You're Muirenn, yes?" Seliph asked softly. He hesitated a bit, but I nudged him encouragingly. "The wife of Uaithne?"

"Ah, yes, I am." She clasped her hands in front of her and looked down. "We… ah…"

"Oh, are they going to tell us when Papa is coming home?" the little girl asked, tugging at her mom's skirts. She smiled brightly before scowling. "I mean; I don't see why Papa gets to play so long in the dirt." And here came the awkward silence. "You get mad when I do it!"

"Hey, little one, you want to pet Hestia?" I offered gently, crouching down to look at her with a smile. Someone had to distract her, clearly. "My wolf right there." I pointed for emphasis, and Hestia's ears perked up at the thought of pets. "She's super soft. Bathed her just yesterday to make sure of it."

"Really?" Her eyes widened and she looked to her mother for permission. As soon as her mother nodded, she squealed and raced for Hestia to pet her. "Wow! Soft-soft!"

"I apologize for all the fur she'll get on her, but that should be enough to keep her busy." I straightened and shifted so that I could keep an eye on Hestia. Hestia sometimes forgot humans were a little more fragile than her. "I take it the funeral was recent?"

"Yesterday morning," Muirenn confirmed, smiling sadly. She bowed to us. "Thank you, so much, for handling all the costs."

"It is, literally, the least we could do," Seliph whispered, doing his best to not wilt. We found out the day after the battle that some of Ganeishire's people had jumped into the fray alongside our fighters, determined to assist us however they could. Sadly, a few of their number had been among the many dead. Oifeye said the losses were 'minimal', but that was hard to swallow when looking at a tired widow and a child who didn't realize yet that her dad was never coming home again. "I wanted to check in on you, though. And all those who lost family, of course. Is there anything you need?"

"No, I am afraid what's needed now is simply time. Your people gave us more than enough money to make it through the next few months."

"Is it truly enough?" Seliph winced. "I know you can't place a price on a life, but…"

"Ha… you're a bit more awkward than people think, huh?" She laughed softly, with a kind smile. "The last thing my husband saw, Prince Seliph, was you standing proudly over General Harold's body. The last thing he heard was that Ganeishire was free." Her eyes were serious, yet still so very kind. It almost hurt. "I won't pretend it doesn't hurt. I wish he had lived. But he died with a smile on his face, knowing that the future would be safe for our little girl. Knowing that we would not have to fear her growing older and either being prey for a Child Hunt or prey for soldiers. If one has to pick a death, that's a good one." Her smile wobbled and her voice became thick. But she
didn't cry. She was too tired to cry. "I only ask that you keep pushing forward, Prince Seliph. I only ask that you really do make that future."

"You have my word, ma'am." Seliph bowed to her. "You have my word."

We lingered a bit longer, mostly so that her little girl could play a bit more with Hestia, before leaving to head to the next house, a family who lost their son and were trying to adapt to that missing place at the dinner table. Then the next one, a man who lost his wife and sister and struggled to take care of his newborn daughter. Then the next. Then the next. Seliph remembered every name. I focused more on being reassuring and distracting the children. Hestia let herself be the distraction, most of the time, though sometimes, she went right up to someone and refused to leave their side until we left because she decided they needed the comfort more. We spent quite a bit of time at each house, making sure they were going to be fine. We even helped a few with chores, and I pretended not to know how to do a couple so that they could 'teach' me with a smile and a laugh.

However, as we crossed through the market to head to another residential area, someone threw mud at Seliph's face. Annoying enough on its own, but the way the crowd gasped, you'd think he got hit with shit or a rock or something. But I couldn't tease about it. I couldn't try to lighten the mood. After all, someone just 'attacked' one of Hestia's humans and she never tolerated that.

"Hestia, no!" I snapped, barely catching her by the fur. Even then, the force of her lunge made me fall in the mud and I had to wrap my arms around her to pin her down. "No, no, and no!" I had to pin her, because Hestia was snarling, hackles up, and honestly, only the fact that she loved me stopped her from breaking free and biting whoever threw that at Seliph. Or killing them. Hestia only played nice with people she liked, and she did not like people who threw things at her pack. "No! Calm! Stay by me!" None of this was helped by how aggravated the crowd was. "By me!"

It was a giant mess. Some people tried to help me wrestle Hestia down, and I had to snap at them to keep away because she would bite and I refused to be responsible for missing fingers or limbs. Others fussed over Seliph, with him desperately trying to calm people down because 'it was just mud' and there was no reason to react so poorly to something so incredibly simple. Still others had apparently caught the thrower and began scolding them. When Hestia was calm enough to at least stop fighting me, I looked up to see if I could find said-thrower, and realized she had to be the young girl glaring balefully at the ground. And she was young. Too young to really be able to 'moralize' things, but old enough to know what was going on. Too young to think in concepts of 'the greater good', but old enough to know pain. And the bloodshot eyes and tear stained cheeks showed she was in a lot of pain. The black clothes she wore said why.

"You should not be so angry," someone was saying to her. I felt my own temper spike. While I was annoyed at her throwing stuff at Seliph, because it was Seliph and I had to deal with an angry Hestia and getting covered in mud, no one had a right to restrict her emotions! "Your family would weep to see you so angry."

"Why would you say that?" Seliph demanded instantly, voice just barely loud enough to be heard. He stepped away from the fussers and frowned heavily. I might be too busy to scold, but he wasn't. "No, let her have her anger. She clearly lost someone in the battle. I have always been told that anger was an important part of the grieving process. Please, do not rob her of that."

"B-but, Prince Seliph…" The speaker was lucky I couldn't see them well with the crowd. I would've thrown mud at them. "To be angry at you is…"

"Why should she not be angry at me? I led the battle where she lost someone dear to her. I gave the orders that led to their death." Seliph looked right at the girl, eyes and tone sincere and respectful.
"Resent me if you want. Hate me if you need. Feel what you have to in order to make it through the pain. You should mourn however you wish." He smiled kindly and walked to the girl, kneeling in front of her. She was silently crying now. "That said, I do ask that you do not throw things at the soldiers. Your mourning should help you move forward, and should not harm yourself or those around you."

"You..." the girl began. But that broke the dam and she began sobbing. "My papa... and my brother... and my mom..." Each word struggled to escape the tears. "They all..."

"I am so sorry for your loss. If I could spare you this pain, I would," Seliph murmured. He took her hand and squeezed it reassuringly. "But they wanted a world where you were safe. And I will make that world. I sadly cannot take up all of their dreams, but I can pick up that one. You have my word, whatever it is worth to you."

"And you lot should be helping a girl with her loss, not scolding her when she lashes," I added, standing. Hestia was calm enough for me to let go of her, so I scowled at the people, hands on my hips and everything. And pretended I wasn't covered in mud because of Hestia. "Or did you all think our resolve would falter just because of one person's anger?"

"We've all made our decisions, and we will not falter from the path." Seliph stood and addressed the crowd. While I was annoyed, he was calm. "So please, help each other. Don't punish the hurting. Try to help them heal. We will have to move forward, much as I would like to tend to everyone's individual hurts."

"Freaking hell, trust us a little more. Besides, Seliph has been hit with worse than mud in the past. Hestia likes dropping her half-eaten kills on our faces." Sighing, I walked over to the girl and wiped away her tears. Sadly, I accidentally smeared some mud across her cheek, but she didn't seem to notice. Or care. "As for you... why don't I walk you home?" I absently noticed the red ribbon I wore was the only thing not mud-stained, a damn miracle considering everything. But I was glad for it. We all wore red ribbons to mourn the dead. "Seliph, can you take Hestia outside the city?"

"Yeah, I'll handle her." He grabbed Hestia's muddy fur and pulled-nudged her down the road towards the gates. "Thanks."

"Of course."

I walked the girl to her home, in the residential district where Seliph and I had been heading. The girl was staying with her grandparents, and I stayed a short while to talk and make sure they were well. And reassured them that everything was fine, that a little mud wasn't going to hurt. Afterwards, I ducted through one of the 'secret' entrances and met Seliph outside. Or more watched Hestia frolic through the flowers until I found where Seliph was laying down in the grass. Mostly by almost tripping over him.

"You're so muddy!" Seliph teased, grinning. He still had some dirt smudged on his face, something I hadn't noticed while he was being all cool and all. "Almost as much as Hestia. Lana's going to be so mad!"

"If I thought that was going to happen, I would've left Hestia back at the castle," I grumbled, sitting down next to him. He held out his arm and I took the offered 'pillow' laying down to watch the fluffy clouds pass by. I was sure some mud got on his sleeve, but whatever. "I'd suggest a leash, but she chewed through all the others ones. And the collars."

"We'll have a good talk with her after she's run and hunted herself out." Seliph sighed and rolled on
his side to look at me. "Surprised that there aren't more angry ones, truthfully. More people who are like 'why did you not save my loved one?' or something."

"Considering the crowd's reaction? They probably avoid you to not deal with the trouble." I didn't like that the girl had been 'shamed' for a natural reaction. "I prefer the angry ones. I know they're actually looked at us."

"And not what we represent. Yes, I do too. That girl felt more honest…” He sighed. "Maybe it was a mistake to walk about."

"No, I don't think so." I rolled onto my side too and poked his nose to make him squeak. "I think it's a good thing. That's why I came with you. Trust me; I would've told Hestia to sit on you or something if I thought it was stupid."

"True. But maybe we'll do the rest another day. For now, though, we should let Hestia run a bit to calm down." He smiled. "Can I braid flowers into your hair?"

"Oh, yeah, sure." I smiled back. "Let's do that."

I ended up braiding flowers into his hair too, and we decided that it really was best to simply return to the castle. We'd visit the rest tomorrow morning. For now, it was back to work. After I changed clothes and Lana scolded me severely for how muddy my clothes were. And after I watched her scold Hestia for how muddy her fur was. Hestia's reaction was to rub against her and get mud on her. Because Hestia.

The courtyard of the castle was filled with people. It was filled with lots of people. Ulster did his best to keep everyone in organized lines, one for people getting health checks from Lana and one for the people officially signing up for our little army with Diarmuid. Because lists were important. Lists let you keep track of names, ages, allergies, and potential health concerns. Lists let you read out names to determine who went missing during a battle. Lists let you know exactly who and where to contact should the worst occur. Lists made everything extra official. There was something terrifying about it all. More than terrifying, really.

"Looks like Hestia decided to help Ulster," I murmured, watching Hestia keep near Ulster and use her sheer size to herd people. Though there was something amusing about a wolf herding people. "I wonder if Lana needs help…" Of course, I couldn't just go down and ask. I had my own duties. I just managed to finish up my morning stuff early, so I came out to the balcony to rest and watch the crowd. "Wow, though, there's a lot of people." Part of me wanted to count, but it was a bit difficult with people going in and out of the lines. But it was a lot. "I've never seen so many people in my life."

"They're from the nearby villages." Lester appeared at my side, resting against the railing just like me. He smelled of horses, hinting he just finished tending to them. He had stable duty today. One of those chores that would slowly be taken over by others, so Lester wanted to do what he could now. "And to think, we're still outnumbered ten to one," he noted, looking out over everyone. "Or twenty to one."

"Gods, we're insane." But who was more insane? Us or the people who followed us? "All of us are completely and totally insane."

"I don't think the sane survive when the world goes mad."

"That went more philosophical than I intended."
Whoops.

Both of us fell silent, watching the people below. Ulster, with Hestia's continued help, slowly managed to get people into the proper lines, though there were so many that they twisted about anyway despite the 'clear' system of 'check health with Lana and then sign up with Diarmuid'. I knew there were helpers somewhere, there had to be, but I didn't know who was who. So I simply watched Lana check on everyone with a smile, and Diarmuid work on getting those all important lists done.

"So you've been cleared for duty?" Diarmuid asked with a warm, bright smile. He was seated at a table with a bunch of pens and paper, perfectly serene. Too serene. I knew he was internally screaming over all the people. "Excellent! Please write your name here…"

"Ah, I don't know how to write…" the person groaned. They winced at how loud they were. "Is that…"

"Oh, no, of course not!" Diarmuid took a pen and turned the paper. "Okay, so, what is your name? And is it that you can't write or read and write? We'll give you lessons."

"Both. Thank you, my lord!"

"The least that we can do. So, your name?"

"Ah, yes, it's…"

"You know; I never realized how privileged we were," I noted, tuning the conversation below out. I wouldn't remember the name. I was too high up to see more than basics about them, so I couldn't even use that to try and help. "That's the tenth one that I've seen that didn't know how to read and write. I always thought…"

"Thought it was universal, but in hindsight, the Tirnanog kids only knew because Mother held lessons," Lester summed up. He sighed and leaned into my side. I rested my head on his. "It makes sense. Even in exile, we're the children of nobles. But it is still a little…"

"Helps expand our horizons, and helps show us how little we know of the world."

"Yep." And that wasn't a comforting thought. "Do we have an age limit?"

"Sixteen. Same as the resistance. Of course…"

"Pretty sure some of them are lying about their age." He nodded to a couple of people in the line for Diarmuid's sign up. While they could be baby-faced, there was something young to their features and they looked a bit lanky-gangly. Like they were still growing into their full height. "I doubt we can call them out on it, though."

"Worse is that we do need every sword." Though the younger ones could probably be used as messengers? That would allow them to help without… "Gods, we're responsible for all these people. We're responsible for their lives." And their deaths.

"We are." Lester sighed. "Never realized the scope. And, worse, it's just going to get bigger."

"It is." I honestly felt like I was going to buckle under the weight. But we couldn't. Someone had to fight back, and we were just so damn tired of… "I wonder why no one else stood up."

"I asked Oifeye about that. Apparently, many have. But they all were obliterated quickly." He
smiled bitterly. "How we're going to avoid the same fate, I have no clue."

"Neither do I." We did have Holy Blood, but that didn't mean we were naturally good leaders. It just meant we had some extra boosts to help us not die in a battle. Not that we were invincible. "Well, Oifeye is a good strategist. We're willing to be pragmatic. We have titles that people flock to."

"That's true. So, maybe coincidental inheritance stuff helping us out?"

"Maybe." That was so much bullshit, but what could you do? We just had to take advantage of what we had and hope that would be enough. "Distraction. We're much too serious. We should be chipper."

"Don't know how you manage to fake it and it's not like they're looking up here anyway." He drummed his fingers on the railing, clearly thinking. "Oh, have you asked the Dozel soldiers about Conall?"

"Nope." I almost laughed at his skeptical look. "They're not exactly very talkative. They're with us because of Ulster and Larcei, and because Danann's an asshole." They were not with us because they believed in us. They simply were willing to gamble that Uncle Lex's children were better people than Danann. "I've tried to ask, but they get super formal and I feel like even if they did know, they wouldn't tell me? Or they'd tell me the basics like 'he lives in Belhalla'." I almost shrugged, but then remembered he was resting against me. "So, no, I haven't. I do want to, but… well…"

"Damn, I thought that would last longer." Lester sighed and hunted about for something else to talk about. And then frowned heavily and leaned forward. "Hold up. Why are those guys posturing in front of Lana?"

"Hmm?" I leaned out to get a better view, and had to bite back a laugh when I saw what he was talking about. "Oh dear gods, they're flirting with her!" And poor Lana had no idea what to do about it. She kept the calm smile, but even from here, I could see it getting stiffer and stiffer. "Hey, Ulster."

"Uh… Riona? I'm Lester."

"I think I know that." I leaned out a little more, and Lester grabbed my shirt to make sure I didn't fall. "But I want to see his reaction!"

"Why?"

"Gods, you cannot tell me you're oblivious to Lana's crush on him. She's told you." I found Ulster and, sadly, he wasn't even looking that way. He was still working on keeping everyone organized. "Ugh… workaholic."

"You know, as an older brother, I am contractually obligated to automatically dislike matchmaking my sister."

"Oh, please. If anything, you should be helping her out! Besides, it's not like you don't know and like Ulster." I started waving, balancing on one hand, and Lester grabbed the back of my shift with both hands. "Come on… look up, you dummy."

Amusingly, Ulster did, in fact, look up right then. I pointed to Lana, whose smile and stiff posture stronger hinted she was about to club someone in the head with her staff. His eyes narrowed immediately, and he bent down to whisper something in Hestia's ear. Hestia licked his hand and
bounded over to Lana, shouldering her way through some flirtatious patients to nuzzle Lana into a sweeter mood. The flirtatious ones promptly stumbled back, because wolf and wolves were always bigger than you expected, and Lana promptly moved to the next ones in line. Ulster swung around to escort the previous flirters to Diarmuid's 'sign-up' line, with Diarmuid being perfectly oblivious to what just happened and greeting them with bright and charming smiles. Hestia promptly laid down next to Lana and there were no more ridiculous flirts holding up Lana's line. For fear of getting an annoyed wolf on their ass.

"Well, that's solved!" I laughed, settling back on my feet. Lester breathed a sigh of relief that I wasn't one slip away from death. "But ugh, I wanted Ulster to have a bigger reaction."

"Like what?" Lester asked dryly. He pinched the bridge of his nose, unamused. "Calling them out dramatically?"

"If Ulster did that, we'd have to check him for a head injury or twenty." I rolled my eyes. "No, no, I wanted... something."

"Very descriptive."

"Shut up." I stuck my tongue out at him and he shook his head. "Come on! She's been crushing on him for a while! And they'd be super cute~!"

"I am contractually ob--"

"Play the overprotective older brother thing too much, and I am contractually obligated as Lana's friend to kick your ass." I grinned and he shuddered. Lester was easily the better rider, and gods knew he was a good shot, but Ulir luck or not, I still handed him his ass on a silver platter when it came to sparring. "Still say you should learn some close combat stuff."

"You kidding? I have my hands full with training bows and keeping up with riding. And, you know, all of our other duties. Which are going to increase dramatically in the coming weeks and months." He scowled when I snickered. "Should make you learn bows, so that you appreciate how hard it is."

"No way in hell. If I'm going to learn another weapon, it'll be magic for the headstart Fjalar blood gives me." But even as I said the words, I grimaced. I wasn't fond of the idea. Not in the least. "Though I suppose some of us might want to consider diversifying."

"Less than you think, considering the new recruits." He shrugged. "Besides, Dozel is infamous for its axe users. And we all know..."

"Ugh... don't 'weapon triangle' me!" I could recite it in my sleep! Oifeye made sure we knew it, when we started our weapon training. "Yes, yes, I know! Swords beat axes!" That's what saved us when killing General Richard, who was thankfully buried in an unmarked grave. None of us could bring ourselves to give him a gravestone or anything. Not after what he did, especially to Creidne. "There's a magic triangle too, right?"

"Yep. Fire trumps wind, which conquers fire. Light and dark magic, however, are separate from the 'triangle'. They are superior to the elemental magics, and are equal yet opposite to each other." He recited it easily, and shrugged when I gave him an incredulous look. Lester did have some aptitude for magic, thanks to Aideen, but he'd never shown an interest. "Lana did learn the basics, remember? I helped her with memorization."

"Oh, right." I forgot Lana learned the basics of combat magic amidst everything she had to learn to
be a healer. So much memorization. No wonder the stories about Mom mentioned she stuck close
to a few people. She must've spent so much time studying! "Wait, weren't you supposed to be
making medicines for Lana?" I paused and looked up at the sky to see where the sun was to get an
estimate on the time. And judging by where it was… "And I… uh… damn it." I was going to be
late.

"We're such amazing leaders." Lester facepalmed and I just sighed. "Truly. Why do people place
their hopes in us?"

"Hell if I know." Except that they were desperate. "See you at dinner!"

I bolted then, racing through the halls and swinging around the corners. I scared a few of the
servants, but I shouted apologies over my shoulder and kept on running. I really scared them when
I took the stairs ten at a time, but I landed perfectly and continued on. As it was, though, I did have
a group of people waiting awkwardly at the practice yards, probably wondering just why they'd
signed up for an army where one of the leaders was late to her own lesson.

"Hello~!" I greeted brightly, slowing to a skip and stopping with a bounce. The energy made many
of them smile. "Sorry for being late. Had to make sure people stopped flirting with the healer while
she was trying to work." It wasn't a lie. That just hadn't been the only reason why I was late.
Besides, it worked as an explanation, especially because no few facepalmed, no doubt knowing the
people I was talking about. "So, first things first. You all probably know this, but I'm Riona and I'll
be your instructor today. You'll have Larcei tomorrow if you're willing to keep going. If you want
to switch to a different weapon, you just let Oifeye know and he'll reassign you. Any questions?"

"I heard something about self-defense lessons as well?" one woman asked. She had a fierceness to
her eyes, a defiance to her posture. Her face and neck were scarred, each looking very deliberate,
like someone had tried to carve her up like an apple. She was also the only one here who looked
me in the eye, something that immediately made me like her. Because she looked at me, not my
title. Not what I represented. "This might not be the place to ask, Lady Riona, but…"

"I think that's an excellent question, Miss…?"

"Niamh, my lady."

"Miss Niamh." I smiled brightly at her. "The answer is that we offer that in the evenings and it's
available for anyone that wants to take it, whether or not they're in the army. They'll go on for
however long we're in Ganeishire."

"I see." She smiled back. "Are we allowed to show our own tricks?"

"Of course! We're always up for new ways to maim people!" I giggled and quite a few of the group
laughed. "More seriously, we're well aware that some tricks we use aren't the best for others, so it's
actually highly encouraged to share." For instance, if things got really bad, then I could just set
people's clothes on fire with a thought. That wasn't something most could do for obvious reasons.
"And just for emphasis, it's open to both girls and boys." We had a few boys hesitantly ask if they
could join in when we first made the announcement. "It's open to all ages as well, and if you need
babsitors, I promise, you'll find many who are willing to watch them." Lana was actually a bit
excited by the thought, though she tried to hide it. "I can't think of anything else to rattle off. So,
any other questions?"

"No, that's sufficient." She curtseyed and stepped back into the group. "Thank you."

"Of course~!" I giggled and looked all of them in the eye. I tried to not let my nerves show. I'd
never really taught anyone before. But if we were going to have them fight, it was only right to make sure they knew how. "Well then, if that's it for questions, let's start with some warm ups, shall we?"

I tried to not think about how I was teaching people how to kill others. I tried to not think about how many of them would be dead after the next battle. I focused on the present, laughing and teasing in equal measure as I did my best to teach. I owed it to them, after all.

Armies required a lot of paperwork. You knew it from the super-official-lists, of course, but there were bunches of others. What exactly they were, I had no idea. Why? Because Oifeye handled them for us. Supposedly, he was getting things organized to show us, but part of me felt like he was going to take it all on himself so that we had more free time to flounder about to find our footing. It was just like him. Plus, you know, he was a complete workaholic anyway.

"Oifeye, break time~!" I called, letting Hestia open the door for me so that I didn't have to balance the tray awkwardly. Hestia promptly pushed through and raced for Oifeye, nearly knocking him out of his chair entirely. "Hide important stuff quick! Hestia's bored."

"I think I noticed!" Oifeye… tried to snap. He was laughing too much, though, as Hestia braced herself on the arm of the chair to lick his face. "Did someone clean her teeth recently? Her breath isn't actually that bad."

"Lana and I did this morning." I set the tray on the corner of the desk and set out the plates and bowls of food around the piles of paperwork. "So, anyway, we have some beef dumplings, paired with a cheese sauce, and some freshly prepared noodles in beef broth. And some tea and ale for you."

"Are you planning on eating this too?" Oifeye eyed all the food warily, pushing Hestia down to the floor. "Surely this is too much."

"You missed breakfast. And lunch." I grinned at his blank expression. He hadn't noticed. "So, I made this special for you~!" I snagged Hestia when she began sniffing the food curiously and tugged her towards me. "Though, before you protest, it is the planned dinner for tonight. I was helping with the prep and asked if I could use some to guilt you into eating."

"And the ale?"

"That's at the insistence of… someone I'll remember the name of in about three hours from now." I giggled. "Apparently, you need good ale to keep up with all the work you're doing!"

"That seems like someone trying to sell me some ale." Still, he smiled softly. "Huh. I don't think I've had much alcohol since leaving Sigurd. Alec, Naoise, and Arden would drag me into drinking contests as a means of getting me to be social. Beowolf and Chulainn would join in, and drink everyone under the table."

"I can sneak the ale to someone else if you'd rather."

"No, no. I think I avoided it to lessen the chances of drowning my sorrows. And I want to remember them. Someone needs to." He reached for the mug of ale, but I poked his hand to stop him. "Hmmp?"

"Food first. Otherwise, it's just going to go straight to your head."

"Ah, yes, of…" Oifeye trailed off, frowning. "Wait, how do you know that about alcohol?"
"Deimne and Muirne's family made the alcohol for Tirnanog, remember?" Meaning that Deimne would share the family allotment with friends, while Muirne made sure we were smart about it. "Besides, adult. Remember?"

"Not sure how much I like hearing you all snuck alcohol..." Oifeye sighed and I just grinned. And tightened my grip on Hestia because she was really curious about the food. Like she hadn't just ate a big deer an hour ago. "Ah, I suppose that's the least of my concerns nowadays."

"Maybe just a little. Maybe." I used my free hand to thumb through the papers, curious about what he'd been working on. All I saw were long strings of nonsense. "Did you write these in code or something?"

"Shorthand." He began looking around for something and then picked up the silverware from the tray. I'd forgotten to set them out. Oops. "Lets me work faster." And prevented us from helping, damn it. "Ah, damn, I forgot..."

"Yes?" I tried to not bounce a bit. If he forgot something, then I could help! With something besides making sure he didn't accidentally starve himself. "What is it?"

"Lord Seliph and Diarmuid were handling some inventory things for me, but I forgot to ask them to drop off my weapons with that blacksmith you all like."

"Jake? I can do that." I giggled, pleased. "Are they in your room?"

"Yes, they are." He smiled softly at me. "Thank you. And I'll be sure to eat before returning to work. Promise."

"You better! Like I said, I made it just for you!" I had to pull Hestia out of the room with me, because she really wanted some of his food. "Lock the door. She's still hungry. For some reason."

"She's like a toddler. Always hungry." Oifeye chuckled. "I'll handle that. Thank you."

"Of course!" I shut the door and continued dragged Hestia down the hall. "Stop acting like you haven't eaten!" Hestia whined and looked at me pitifully. "You literally just went hunting!

Hestia continued to be a brat until we were a good distance away from Oifeye's study. Then she was playful, racing ahead of me and barking like she hadn't been sulking about not stealing Oifeye's food. I rolled my eyes and ducked into Oifeye's room to pick up his swords and lance before heading out into the market. People greeted me with laughter and smiles, and I made sure to match their cheer, followed by yelping because Hestia charged some treats out of some curious kids. Laughter followed me as I scolded her and when we actually stepped into Jake's to drop off the weapons for maintenance, I had to apologize to Jake because Hestia decided to try and steal his hammer. Because it apparently looked like a fun chew toy.

"Ugh, you're just being a little shit to get back at me for not letting you have any dumplings," I muttered, glowering at her as we popped into Anna's. There was no reason to not say 'hello', after all. "How did you end up so spoiled?" She barked and I thought she was just 'confirming' my thoughts. However, she soon dashed through the main room and around the other customers to tackle Seliph. Because apparently, Seliph was here. "Sorry!"

"Nice to see you too, Hestia," Seliph wheezed, struggling to get her to stop licking him. She'd headbutted him in the gut in her enthusiasm. "Why don't we have a leash for her again?"

"She chews through them. She's a wolf, not a dog." Still, when I whistled, Hestia returned to my side fairly quickly. "You okay?"
"I'll live." He took a few deep breaths to even out his breathing. And strangely held something behind his back. "Wasn't expecting that."

"Few people expect Hestia to tackle them." I scratched her behind the ear, and Hestia panted happily, wagging her tail. "If I weren't more worried about the trouble you'd cause outside, sweetie, I'd tell you to stay there."

"Oh, gods, the last thing we need is an unsupervised Hestia. She'll get bored in two seconds." Seliph began fidgeting, and still kept something behind his back. Suspicious. "So, what brought you here?"

"I was running an errand for Oifeye, and then decided I'd swing by and see if I could say 'hi' to Anna." However, there was sadly no sign of her. Either she was in the back or was taking the day off. "So, what did you get me?"

"What makes you think I got you anything?"

"Because I've known you all my life, you always get fidgety when you have a 'surprise' for someone, and you're being very careful to hide something behind your back." I grinned and he scowled. "So?"

"Ugh." He sighed and held out a beautiful sword. I took it curiously, wondering why he'd get me a sword when I had Dad's silver blade. Then I unsheathed it and saw the orange-red blade and the runes carefully etched into the steel. Power thrummed through me and I tucked the sheathe under my arm to free up my hand and trace the runes. They warmed to the touch and I felt a 'call' to my blood. "It's a Fire Sword. Boosts the user's magical power and lets them throw Elfire spells at their enemies."

"It's amazing..." I had to admit I was only paying half-attention. The sword held most of my attention. "Wow..."

"So, you like it?"

"I love it!" I beamed at him, giggling. But then I remembered the price. "Oh, wait, this is expensive..."

"Not that much. And I got a discount because I bought it when placing the bulk order for the army." He grinned and I softened, not finding it in me to argue. It would be rude to refuse for price, and besides, it was such a wonderful gift. I'd repay him, of course. "I'm glad. Diarmuid mentioned that the magic swords caught your eye when you two were here."

"They did, indeed." I sheathed the sword, smiling at it. A way to use my magic without actually studying tomes... Aideen had offered to teach me, of course. She knew tomes, like most High Priestesses, though she had only ever learned the basics. But I had always... even if I accepted my blood ties to Arvis, I didn't like it. I just tolerated it because I loved Mom so much. It had extended to my magic as well, where I tolerated it because I loved Mom and because it was just so damn helpful. But in war, you had to use all your weapons, to their fullest. This would let me... "Thank you. Really, I appreciate it."

"I'm glad." Seliph laughed, relieved, and he bent down to snag Hestia when she tried to go 'investigate' something. "I was a bit worried you'd be mad. Since, well..."

"Of course." Seliph knew of my conflicted feelings towards my magic. "Though, why get me
anything? There's no holiday or anything, right?"

"Er... no reason!" He looked away awkwardly, making me frown. Some of the other patrons began giggling, for some reason. "Anyway, what errand did Oifeye forget about?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes." I wasn't sure I should let him get away with changing the subject, but then shrugged. He'd tell me when he felt like it. "Just dropping his weapons off at Jake's." I hooked the new sword onto my belt, wondering how I'd carry two with me in battle. I'd ask Oifeye when we got back. I knew Ulster was having some difficulties figuring out how to carry his sword and axe around. "They needed maintenance, but he forgot."

"Probably too busy being up to his ears in paperwork that I'm ninety percent certain is supposed to be our job." Seliph pointed to the door and we both left the store, Hestia following us closely. "Or, well, ninety-five percent."

"Oifeye is going to 'dad' us all through this." Couldn't be mad about it, though. It was just how he was. "Besides, we've no idea what we're doing."

"And that's not stuff you can really afford to make many mistakes over. If any" Seliph sighed and pet Hestia as we made our way deeper into the market for some reason. "Still, we need to learn."

"We do." It wouldn't be 'right' if we were just figureheads. People placed so much on us. We had to try and meet their expectations. "Why aren't we heading back to the castle?"

"Need to meet Diarmuid. He was arranging food deliveries and, more importantly, has all the lists of the things we need."

"Ah, I see." I thought about asking more, but Hestia's ears twitched and she suddenly lowered herself, growling. "Hestia?" She didn't react to me. Instead, she began pushing her way through the crowd, away from the main path. "That's..." I exchanged a look with Seliph and both of us chased after her. As dangerous as an unsupervised, bored Hestia was, it was nothing compared to an unsupervised, growling Hestia.

We followed Hestia out of the market, and down one of the side alleys. Then we both stiffened when we saw what had caught her ear, and just why she'd immediately started growling. There was a girl surrounded by men, and though I couldn't see the girl very clearly, she was on the ground, curled into herself, while the men leaned over her. Hestia growled loudly, making them yelp, and she shouldered through them to stand protectively in front of the girl. She'd done something similar when Creidne was brought back, recognizing before the rest of us why Creidne kept screaming despite being 'home'. There were some things she knew were wrong, no matter whether it happened to 'pack' or not.

"Well, this is a lovely sight," I began dryly, voice dropping to a low hiss. As the men turned to face us, Seliph rested a hand on my shoulder, a silent warning to keep my temper. It would be very bad, on many levels, if I let it loose. I had a weapon and a Hestia, after all. "I trust this is simply you all being particularly obtuse?"

"It seems to me that she'd prefer you all to leave," Seliph added with a 'kind' smile. The cold tone made it as 'kind' as a knife in the back, and the group noticeably blanched as they finally recognized us. "You should be more careful of such... aggressive invitations in the future. Wolves can rip off arms, you know."

The men said something. I saw their mouths move. But I didn't even bother to listen and just gestured for them to get the hell away from here. Which they did. Quickly. Running into each
other quickly. I rolled my eyes and scoffed, stepping away from Seliph to go to the girl. I expected her to be very traumatized or hesitant. That was why Seliph hung back and let me go to her first. But, instead, the girl… the girl seemed fine. In fact, she was petting Hestia with a delighted look on her face, like the incident hadn't happened at all.

"So soft..." she breathed, giggling. Despite Hestia's size, and Hestia still being rather aggressive with snarling and growling, the girl showed no signs of hesitancy. Not even a trace of fear. That was… odd. "You're so cute too. Thank you for helping me, pretty one."

"Her name is Hestia," I said, petting Hestia's head to soothe her. Slowly, Hestia relaxed and then she nosed the girl, probably wondering why the girl wasn't afraid. The girl giggled in response. "I'm called Riona, and that's Seliph over there."

"Yuria." She smiled at me, still petting Hestia. She had silver hair held back by a circlet and amethyst eyes. Something about the description seemed… familiar. However, what startled me was how her smile reminded me of Seliph's. "So soft."

"She's a pain to bathe to keep her fur that way." I held out my other hand and pulled her up when she took it. "Anyway, you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine." She brushed off her skirts, and bowed to us. She wore unusual clothing for Isaach, with more layers than typical. Then again, the packs she carried hinted she was a traveler. "Thank you so much. I was separated from my guardian in the crowd, and then..."

"I can guess from there." My voice was a bit more caustic than I intended, so I winced and waved Seliph over. "Come here while I calm down a bit more."

"I wish we had gotten their names," Seliph sighed before smiling gently at the girl. With both of them smiling, I really noticed the strange similarities in their smiles. "Regardless, please forgive Riona's temper, and my own."

"No, no, it's fine," Yuria reassured. She looked between us curiously, but I just focused on taking a few more deep breaths. Hestia pressed into my legs reassuringly. "Um... but do you mind helping me find...?"

"Of course we will." It wasn't like we could leave her alone. "Anything distinctive about him?"

"In this crowd? Plenty." She laughed. "But he has green hair."

"That's unusual." Well, in Isaach, it was. Silesse, on the other hand… from what I'd heard, it was the most common hair color. "So, green hair. Got it." He glanced at me, and I nodded. I was calm enough. "Then here, follow us."

"Thank you!"

Without thinking about it, I took Yuria's hand as we stepped out into the market crowd, with her firmly between Seliph and me and Hestia on my other side. She gave me a slightly weird look, but didn't pull away. If anything, she stepped closer, looking this way and that. Her eyes sparkled with curiosity, and it was almost as if she was trying to absorb every single sight around us. When we came upon the middle of the square, always a lively place with people relaxing and eating from the various food stalls, she gasped at the musicians playing on the makeshift stage, giggling like she had never seen anything like it before.

"This is so amazing!" she gushed, bouncing a bit to the music. It was a simple folk song, popular at festivals. "Ah, I don't remember ever being around so many people before!" That... that was an
odd sentence. "Oh, goodness, I hope I'm not being rude…"

"Of course not," Seliph reassured. It was rather heartwarming to see someone so giddy. "Ah, Hestia…" He sighed and I groaned when I saw Hestia's tail disappear into the crowd. "Damn it. Forgot to hold onto her."

"I'll get her!" And before we could stop her, Yuria was off after Hestia. Oh dear.

"Well, uh… huh." Seliph reached back to fix his ponytail and shrugged. "I can still see her in the crowd. Should be fine, right?"

"I hope so," I murmured. I braced myself against his shoulder and got on my tiptoes so that I could see her more clearly. Thankfully, her hair was very distinctive. "She's cute."

"I suppose," Seliph replied. He smiled slightly. "She caught Hestia. Might be having some trouble getting her to come back, though."

"Yeah, probably should've warned her about that."

"Well, she did run off." He snickered and I had to laugh. "That all said, there's something strangely familiar about her. And yes, I know that sounds like a really bad pickup line."

"You said it, not me." I nudged his side, grinning, and he rolled his eyes. "However, I agree. There is something familiar about her. But distantly. Save for that smile. That one… well, not 'bothered', but it was the only word I had."

"Like you've heard the description, but never met." He frowned. "And she's caught in the crowd. Let's meet her."

"Sounds good."

It took some pushing, but we did manage to make it to her and I playfully fussed over Yuria while Seliph scolded Hestia for disappearing on us. Hestia barked and led us to a food stall, clearly wanting some of the meats cooking. I almost refused, but Yuria's stomach happened to grumble then, so Seliph and I bought food for all of us and we found some space to sit on the outskirts to eat in relative peace. Yuria shared hers with Hestia, giggling as Hestia licked her hand, and I had to pin Hestia before she took all of Yuria's. And share mine with Yuria to make sure she got a full serving.

We had just finished our food when Yuria gasped and leapt to her feet. "Lewyn!" she called, waving to someone in the crowd. "Over here!" Both Seliph and I stilled at the name, and my jaw dropped at the man who stepped out of the crowd and walked towards us. His face was older than the portraits, but there was enough similarities that it was easy to identify him, especially with Yuria calling out his name. This was King Lewyn of Silesse, a member of Sigurd's army, dear friend of our parents, and one of the many who went 'missing' after the Belhalla Massacre. I couldn't believe any of them were alive, but he admittedly had some of the best chances. Still, though… what were the chances? "I'm so sorry!"

"No, no, I should've made sure you and I were closer before we stepped into the crowd," Lewyn dismissed, shaking his head. He rested a hand on her shoulder and studied her curiously. "Still, you're quite chipper. The mood of the market infecting you?"

"Well, the music is lovely. Almost as lovely as your flute. But I met nice people!" She gestured to us excitedly. "And they have a cute dog!"
"Based on the size, I'd say that's a wolf, actually. Quite the unusual pet." His eyes narrowed at us, but after a moment, he smiled. "Ah, but I think I know you two. Seliph and Caitriona. Alicia would've had a fit, to see you with a wolf."

"That's what Shanan said," Seliph replied, shooting to his feet. I was a little too stunned to do anything but sit and pet Hestia. "Ah, but yes. It's nice to meet you, King Lewyn."

"Just Lewyn. I am no king." His voice became a little bitter. "Silesse fell, and my mother went to her death with dignity. The rest of us simply do what we can to survive. So, I don't know what Oifeye and Aideen told you, but don't call me 'king' again."

"I... I'm sorry."

"...Nah, I'm just giving you a bit of a hard time. Bit of an old habit and, admittedly, I did the same with Sigurd." Lewyn smiled and leaned forward a little. Seliph smiled awkwardly in return. "So, you all started it, did you? The grand and glorious fight against the empire? A good place to start. Isaach's people have always been strong, their hatred for the Empire doesn't have many moral conundrums with Danann being an idiot, and it's far enough away that reinforcements will be difficult."

"Yes, it's a good place to build momentum to push forward." Seliph glanced at me and I made myself stand up and lean into him to give him a bit of support. This was all sorts of bizarre, really. "Though, I do wish Shanan was with us." Yeah, it did feel a little odd to liberate Isaach without him. "But he's in Yied, searching for Balmung."

"Ah, so he did hear that rumor. I did as well." He smiled, nodding. However, I thought I saw a calculating look in his eyes and that made me frown. "So much is moving, and so very quickly..." He closed his eyes, thinking, and then nodded once more. "Ah, but that's neither here nor there. I know this isn't very polite, but might you do me a bit of a favor? I was here to see the fuss and to ask Oifeye, but hey, you're right here."

"What is it?"

"Well..." He gestured to Yuria, who bowed again. "See, I found Yuria badly injured years ago in Belhalla, and we've been living in the outskirts of Silesse since then. However, Jungby Knights have been patrolling deeper and deeper in Silesse, so we left. I intended on going to Leonster, but..."

"I do not travel easily," Yuria whispered, looking down sadly. Hestia immediately nosed her hand to try and cheer her up. "I slow him down."

"Now, now, Yuria, you travel very well, given everything," Lewyn reassured gently. He patted her shoulder. "But it is true that I want to move faster than Yuria can travel. You mind watching out for her?"

"Oh, of course we don't mind," Seliph agreed easily. I smiled when Yuria looked up hesitantly and she tentatively smiled back, relieved. "Though, may I ask why you're going to Leonster, though?"

"Well, it's chasing some rumors." Lewyn shrugged and crossed his arms. "But they say Prince Leif of Leonster has been fighting and."

"Leif?!" Seliph's eyes lit up and it took a moment to remember why that was. Leif was his cousin, the child of Ethlyn and Quan. "He's alive?"

"So far, according to the rumors. And, more importantly, has been holding Leonster against
Friege's armies for quite some time, despite some tactical disasters." Lewyn chuckled. "Spirit and morale can overcome quite a few disadvantages. Tacticians often forget to account for that."

"He's alive…" Seliph, of course, was focused on that point. "How did he…? I mean…"

"Well, Finn, of course." Another one was still alive?! But wait, Uncle Finn was... "Finn has been raising and protecting him." Uncle Finn was Diarmuid's…!

There might have been a bit more, but a 'thwump' behind us made me turn, and I yelped when I saw Diarmuid standing there, papers falling from nerveless hands. I'd forgotten all about Seliph needing to meet him, and no doubt he'd been storming over to ask where the hell we'd been. But now, though, he stared at Lewyn in total shock, jaw dropped and everything. Because what other reaction were you supposed to have when you learned the dad you swore was dead… was really alive.

"P-pardon, but can you repeat that?" Diarmuid asked shakily. Seliph rested a reassuring hand on Diarmuid's shoulder and I picked up the papers quickly. Hestia remained near Yuria, who looked so confused. "That… That thing about Finn…?"

"The rumors state that he's been protecting Prince Leif, and is currently in Leonster," Lewyn repeated, frowning a bit as he studied Diarmuid. But, after a moment, he smiled. "Wait, you're Diarmuid, aren't you?"

"I... I am..." Diarmuid started crying, though he quickly covered his face to hide it. I shoved the papers at Seliph and helped wipe away the tears. "You're... you're heading there."

"I am." His smile became gentle. "Would you like me to carry a message?"

"Just... just that I'm looking... looking forward to meeting him..." Diarmuid looked down, desperately trying to hide his crying. "I a-appreciate it."

"Of course." Lewyn turned to Yuria and pulled a tome out of his bag. "For you, just in case. I'll be back to assist Seliph as soon as I can." Yuria took the tome with a smile and nodded, understanding. "Good girl. I'll see you soon." And then he was gone, disappearing into the crowd as easily as the wind. That was... uh... that was a thing.

Seliph and I glanced at each other and nodded, silently knowing exactly what to do. He quickly helped Diarmuid leave the area, mostly because if people knew he was crying, they'd be swarming us before long. Hestia followed them, providing another comforting presence for Diarmuid. I shrugged and smiled at Yuria, who held the tome to her chest, still looking a little confused by everything.

"Finn is his father, and Diarmuid thought he was dead," I explained, taking her hand again to lead her to the castle as well. We went at a much slower pace, since there was no immediate need to escape. "So, Diarmuid just got a bit overwhelmed."

"Oh, I see," Yuria murmured, nodding. She smiled kindly, laughing. "I'm sure their reunion will be wonderful."

"Meeting, actually. It's a tad complicated." And that was a conversation for another time entirely. "So, you know magic?"

"A-ah, yes, I know some!" She looked down at the tome in her arms. "I'm best with light magic truthfully, but Lewyn taught me wind magic because the tomes are easier to obtain." She smiled sweetly. "I know staves as well."
"You do?" Well, I knew who Lana's favorite person was going to be as soon as I introduced her. "That's amazing!"

"Oh, goodness..." Yuria looked down shyly, giggling and blushing. "So, is it really okay that I stay with you all?"

"Of course it is." Though, I had to admit. It was very odd to have 'new people'. Odd and a little uneasy. But I couldn't let her know that. It wasn't her fault by any means. "We're a weird group, but you'll be fine."

"J-just one question?" Yuria blushed a little more and leaned forward to whisper. "Are... um... are all of you so good-looking? You, Seliph, and Diarmuid all..." She blushed even more, turning as red as an apple. "Like... wow..."

"Yep~!" I laughed at her little whimper. "You get used to it, though. Trust me, within a few days, you'll barely notice!"

"I somehow doubt that." Still, she smiled. Even if she was red to the roots of her hair and the tips of her ears. "So, the castle?"

"Yep!" Yes, I couldn't let her know how uneasy I was about having a new person in our group. She was much too sweet. "This way, this way!"

"Ha! I knew it!" Larcei declared triumphantly, with a bright laugh. She even rolled on the floor, laughing so hard. "I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!"

"Oh, shut up!" Diarmuid snapped back. His disbelieving, cautiously optimistic smile took all the heat out of the words, though. "Logically, who would expect...?"

"Just admit it! I was right!"

"Never!"

Laughter filled the room as we clustered together in Seliph's room to celebrate learning that Diarmuid's dad might actually be alive. It hadn't been exactly planned or anything, and really, Diarmuid had wanted to not make a big deal out of it. After all, he knew how lucky he was to even have that decent chance and he knew how the rest of us were a little jealous. I mean; it would be impossible to hide. To have the chance of seeing our parents again? That would be amazing, but we also knew it was impossible. Larcei might still cling to the idea of Uncle Lex still being alive, to the point of refusing to ask the Dozel soldiers about Uncle Lex and Aunt Ayra in order to continue clinging, but the rest of us knew the truth. Aside from Lester and Lana, who still had Aideen, all of our parents were very dead.

But that was no reason to not be joyful for Diarmuid. So, all of us found bunches of snacks and drinks and threw an impromptu party. Because that's what friends and family did.

"So, this is Uncle Finn, right?" I asked, holding up a portrait. We all had grabbed all the portraits we had and scattered them across the floor to scour them for pictures of Uncle Finn. Just to remind ourselves. "Matches the description. Blue hair, blue eyes, Diarmuid's smile."

"Let me see!" Lana demanded, reaching over and making 'grabby hands'. She refused to actually come get it, because that would mean getting up from where she was resting against Hestia. She'd been in the infirmary before all this and was exhausted. "Come on!"
"Here." I tossed it over and hunted for more. A difficult task, sadly. There weren't a lot of pictures anyway, and so... "Ugh... why are there so few?"

"He left before everyone actively started making sketches," Ulster calmly pointed out. I threw a pillow at him, though he easily ducked underneath it. "You asked!"

"It was probably rhetorical," Lester noted dryly. He grinned triumphantly and picked out a portrait. "Here! This is him, right? Don't know who the pink haired lady is, though."

"I think that's Ethlyn, Seliph's aunt."

"Oh." Lester studied it for a moment before passing the picture to Seliph. Larcei and Diarmuid were still 'arguing', meaning it wasn't safe to pass them anything. "She's pretty. How did she die again?"

"The Yied Massacre," Seliph whispered. He stared at the picture, eyes sad. That picture was one of two we had of her. "Travant and the Thracian Knights caught them in an ambush. Aunt Ethlyn, Uncle Quan, and Altenna all died there. They're Leif's family."

"Aideen broke down when she heard, if I remember correctly," Ulster murmured, frowning a bit. We all nodded. After all, that was one of our first memories. "Still, if you can forgive me, Seliph..."

"Why the hell did they bring a child to the desert?" Seliph passed the picture to me, and I studied both Uncle Finn and Ethlyn. They were the same age, and both were laughing in the picture. I wondered what about. Some joke? Some story? Whatever it was had been lost, but still, I couldn't help but be curious. "I don't get it. Our parents chose against that. It was dangerous. Why would they risk their daughter like that?"

"Maybe they didn't think it would be dangerous until they reached Phinora." Ulster sighed and shook his head. "Still, given that they were fighting Thracia, I wonder why they thought Thracia wouldn't strike them at the desert? Oifeye's lessons make it clear that fliers rule desert battles. An ambush is obvious."

"We are looking at it in hindsight, though."

"True." He paused. "Okay, obvious thing is obvious, but we won't mention any of this when we actually, you know..."

"When we meet Leif and the others. Regardless of how idiotic we think it is, it still..." We had enough tact for that. Even Larcei. Maybe. "It had to hurt them terribly. We know the pain of losing family before you could remember them."

"Exactly."

"Oh, I found one with Lachesis!" Lana gasped, brandishing it triumphantly. All of us, save the still bickering Larcei and Diarmuid, clustered around her and Hestia to look at it. "Wow, she's so gorgeous. Look at that smile."

"They look so happy," I whispered. Honestly, that was the running theme with all the portraits. They were all so very happy. Of course, no one would draw portraits of them being sad, but to see them all smiling so brightly, when in a year or so they'd all be dead was... it reminded me of what Arvis stole from all of us. It also reminded me of what we would be stealing from our enemies. "He's quite handsome, though."
"He really is. You can see where Diarmuid got his good looks for sure." Lana set it down among all the other portraits. "Was that really it, though? Is that all we have of him?"

"I think so." It wasn't as if our parents had these made expecting them to be the only way we knew what they looked like or anything. They'd expected many, many more years with us. They expected that we'd grow up with Finn and not ever scramble for any bits of information we had on him. "What do we know about him? Diarmuid's dad, eloped with Lachesis, knight of Leonster, has apparently been taking care of Leif for… seventeen years?" If I had my math right, that is. Leonster supposedly fell in 762, a year after the Belhalla Massacre. "Oifeye thinks of him as an older brother and dear friend even now, right?"

"I think so, yeah." At the least, he'd been excited when we told him about meeting Lewyn and about Finn possibly still being alive. Before being distracted by Yuria. He did a bit of a double-take when we introduced her, but was currently giving her a tour of the castle. "Um… what else? Surely there's…" There had to be some stories, right? If we remembered hard enough, then…

"Ugh, you can be more cheerful about this!" Larcei complained. At some point during the bickering, while we'd been far too distracted by the portraits, she'd sat up and now, she and Diarmuid were glowering at each other. "Your dad is alive! That's fantastic!"

"It is, but that doesn't mean I get a happy reunion or anything," Diarmuid grumbled. Any trace of cheer was gone now, drowned out by frustration over something. "He might not want anything to do with me."

"Oh, come on. He's your dad!"

"He's never met me, remember? He left to go to Leonster before I was born. Before he even knew I was going to be born." Diarmuid looked down, but not before we saw the genuine fear in his eyes. "What if he rejects me? 'What if he decides being a father is too much?' 'What if he picks duty over family?' The questions were so easy to hear. "So that's why. Just because it's the worst case scenario doesn't mean it can't happen. Look at the damn Belhalla Massacre. And Yied Massacre. Worst case scenarios happen all the time."

"But…" Larcei frowned, her eyes wavering. "I'm sure…"

"We can't. We can't be sure. Because any stories we have are nineteen years old at best." An awkward silence fell on all of us. After all, we couldn't say he was wrong. "I'm sorry. I know you all would do next to anything to have the same possibility. And I am happy about it. I'm happy to have it. But I just can't latch onto the best scenario and run with it. I can't… I don't want to get my hopes up. Not when we don't have a clue…"

"…Well, if he is a jackass, we can think of a great big prank instead," I pointed out after a moment. I snuck around our little circle to him and hugged him from behind, leaning heavily on his back and resting my chin on his shoulder. "He's a knight, right? With a horse and all? Maybe have Hestia scare the horse?"

"Okay, leave the horse out of it," Lester instantly protested, scowling. The group shifted a bit to focus more on Larcei and Diarmuid, instead of the portraits. "But yes, we can pull a huge prank on him in that worst case scenario. Classics? Elaborate?"

"Why not both? Nothing says we can't do multiple pranks."

"That's true."
"Oh, I can give him the vilest medicines too!" Lana added cheerfully. She clapped her hands and got up from Hestia to gather the mugs of warm-lukewarm milk with honey and redistribute them. Hestia grumbled a bit before getting up, stretching with a yawn, and trotting over to lay down next to Diarmuid. Diarmuid immediately hugged her and I shifted off his back to instead warm up the mugs for everyone. "The super bitter ones that work, but you hate taking them."

"We can also conveniently arrange for him to have the worst chores," Ulster added, grinning. The mood of the room slowly grew cheerful again, and Diarmuid relaxed. "I mean; I'm sure one of us will be in charge of the chores list."

"We should tailor it, though. I mean; he's a knight. I'm sure he's done all the drudge work as a matter of course." Lana giggled and sat down again next to Larcei, leaning against her shoulder. "We can make sure he gets all his least favorites!"

"But back to the pranks," Seliph redirected, sparking laughter out of all of us. He still looked through the portraits for some reason. "We'd want it to be something that targets only him."

"Hide some of Hestia's kills in his stuff!" Larcei immediately suggested. We all laughed and groaned at the suggestion, and Hestia lifted her head curiously. "Then we can be all 'oh, yeah, she does that'."

"Maybe his shoes? In his shoes?"

"Oh, gross, let's plan for that!"

"You all are the worst," Diarmuid finally said, laughing with the rest of us. Still, he smiled warmly. "Thank you, though. I mean…"

"More seriously, based on the stories, assuming he hasn't had a complete personality shift, it's going to be awkward as all hell, but he'll at least try," Lester noted, smiling gently. He got up to redistribute all the snacks and then actually laid down, using Ulster's lap as a pillow. "But I do think we should acknowledge it'll be very awkward. Like Diarmuid said, he's never met Diarmuid. Ever."

"That's a good point, and I should've acknowledged that," Larcei murmured. She smiled apologetically, but Diarmuid shook his head. No apology required. "And look, we have a plan for the worst case scenario. Or is him… uh…"

"I don't know if him dying in the meantime or the rumors being wrong is worse than being rejected, but for now, I will go with the rejected thing being worse," Diarmuid replied dryly. He stretched out to lay against Hestia, legs in my lap. I fought the urge to tickle his feet. "I mean; if he does die, then it's more or less what I grew up expecting. Hurting a little more, but what I expected. I've been braced for that. Being rejected, though…"

"Okay, so, worst case scenario, we have plans." Larcei grinned. "So, maybe we should plan on the most likely scenario. Are we going to have to shove you at him?"

"Maybe wait until we actually see him to determine that?" Diarmuid pointed at Seliph, needing a bit of a distraction. "Besides, I'm not the only one with a potential family reunion."

"Ah! That's right!" Larcei turned her attention on Seliph, who looked up in surprise. "You've a cousin! A living cousin!"

"Yes, I do," Seliph whispered. He smiled softly, nervously. "He's a few months younger than you, if I recall correctly. And I know nothing else, really. We've never met before."
"Guess it'll be hard to guess what his personality would be like as well," Ulster mused. He looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "I can't think of how to continue the conversation, though. If he's nice, then all is good. If he's a brat, then we prank him too."

"Pretty much." Seliph grinned. "Bad redirect there, really."

"Then why don't we shelve talks of reunions and talk about our new friend?" Lana suggested, giggling. She'd nearly tackled Yuria off her feet when she learned Yuria knew staves. To Yuria's confusion. "Yuria is so sweet!"

"She's pretty cute too," Larcei noted with a grin. She winked at me, and I giggled. "Wondering if I should flirt a bit."

"Don't fluster the poor girl. Besides, we all know who you have a crush on."

"I-I don't have a crush on Shanan!" Larcei blushed badly. "I don't!"

"Never said a name." Lana grinned triumphantly and Larcei groaned. The rest of us, of course, laughed. "We're ready to listen whenever you're ready to talk about it. I just had to poke fun." Larcei, wisely, didn't reply. "Still, don't fluster her too much. She's not used to people. And she's very aware of how lovely we all are."

"Better not let her see Diarmuid and Riona smile then," Lester instantly snarked. Diarmuid and I immediately rolled our eyes, guessing the next sentence. "She'd probably pass out."

"She saw me smile a lot already, dummy," I retorted. I noticed Seliph had gone back to the portraits and nudged him curiously. He quietly brought up a hand, telling me to wait a little longer. "Regardless, I do insist on the same. Let her settle in a little more before we purposely fluster her."

"So, a couple of days before we forget."

"Knowing us, probably."

"I'll remind you," Lana noted with her 'you-will-take-this-medicine-and-like-it' smile. I playfully hid behind Seliph. "She's already volunteered to help me with the infirmary. I really don't want you to put more pressure on her."

"We'll do what we can to make sure she's as comfortable as possible," Ulster reassured, reaching over to take Lana's hand. Lester scowled, though Lana blushed a little. Ulster, of course, didn't notice, even when Larcei rolled her eyes. "It's just been a while since we had a new person, so I know we'll make mistakes."

"Mmm… point."

Seliph poked my arm then and passed me a portrait, perfectly silent. Confused and curious, I studied it, recognizing it after a moment. It was the one picture we had of Deirdre, drawn long after she'd disappeared. It was more stylized than the other portraits, with her lounging in some chair and smiling gently at the viewer, instead of being a 'day in the life of' like the rest. I didn't know much about her besides the whole 'changed her name, married another man, stood to the side while Arvis murdered all the people she once claimed were friends' thing. She had apparently been Mom's best friend though, to the point that one of the arguments Mom had against marrying was that she had promised Deirdre that she could be her Maid of Honor, and I knew Mom named me 'Caitriona' because Deirdre had picked it. Maybe Mom had known more, or learned more, about why she'd done the things she did. After all, Mom had gotten letters from Arvis when they all lived in Silesse. Maybe the answer was in one of those letters, a detail Mom hadn't known was important
until it was far too late. But, if she had, it was lost forever. She was dead. Unless she happened to have a diary or something, most of what she'd known was gone.

But Seliph had given me the portrait for a reason, so I focused on it, trying to figure out what he was silently getting at. And I didn't get it at first. In fact, I only did when I made the observation that her smile was a lot like Seliph's. And Yuria's. *That* was when I realized why 'silver hair and amethyst eyes' had been such a familiar description. Deirdre had silver hair and amethyst eyes. In fact, if not for the fact that Deirdre had wavy hair and Yuria had straight hair, you could almost argue they were the same person.

"We were thinking there was something familiar," Seliph whispered. He'd known when I'd figured it out. "'Yuria' is ridiculously similar to 'Julia' as well."

"It is," I murmured. I continued studying the portrait, finding slight differences, like how Yuria's face was rounder, but it was certainly… "She told me that she's best with light magic." And everyone and their dead grandmother knew that light magic was the weapon of choice for those of Naga's blood. "What the hell?"

"My exact thought."

"What in all the actual hells?"

"Yep."

"Hey, is everything okay?" Diarmuid asked, reminding me that Seliph and I weren't alone. At some point, he'd sat up, and everyone was focused on us. "What's wrong?" Silently, I passed the portrait to him. "Is there a stain or something on this? That'll be a shame, because even if you have conflicting feelings, it's still…" Diarmuid trailed off, realizing it far quicker than me just what was 'wrong'. "Oh. Oh shit." He handed the picture to Larcei and slowly, it made its way around the circle, with the reactions being variations of gasps and curses. Or yawns in Hestia's case, but that was because she was sleepy. "Okay, so, how does the missing imperial princess suddenly appear here of all places?"

"There's no way!" Larcei yelped. Seliph quietly set the portrait back into the scattered mess and pinched the bridge of his nose. Things just got so complicated. "It's got to be a coincidence. Has to be!"

"A coincidence that she looks almost *exactly* like Seliph's mother?"

"There were differences!"

"I'm going to note that those differences are features that Riona actually has," Lester pointed out. He found a picture of Uncle Azel in the pile and studied it. "And look, Azel has them as well. So, since we know that Alicia and Azel both had a strong resemblance with Arvis…"

"Lewyn also found her badly injured in Belhalla," Seliph whispered. He rested his head against my shoulder and closed his eyes. "She disappeared during an assassination attempt that killed my mother. It stands to reason that she'd be injured." Assuming, of course, that Lewyn hadn't killed Deirdre himself and then kidnapped Yuria. A bit of a stretch, but you really did have to consider every possible scenario. "The pieces all fit."

"Though, I will acknowledge how crazy of a coincidence it is, because Larcei is right." Lester sighed and sat up, letting Ulster finally move. And promptly lay down in Lester's lap to better stretch out his legs. "However, I will also point out the crazy coincidence of running into Jungby
soldiers while on patrol, and one just-so-happened to carry Father's Brave Bow. Life is a string of crazy coincidences."

"That all said, we can debate this into the ground, or simply take the easy way to confirm it," Ulster sighed. He stretched his legs out onto Larcei's lap and lifted his head just enough to glower at her. "Tickle me, and I will kick you in the face." Larcei's innocent smile screamed how she'd been planning on that. "Anyway, though, Holy Mark. Princess Julia of Belhalla is the Naga Major of our generation, right? That'll be a large Holy Mark."

"And getting her to take off her clothes isn't going to be that hard," I noted absently. Then I paused and facepalmed, even before the others died of laughter. "Not what I meant. So not what I meant." I sighed, knowing I only had myself to blame for that one. "But she needs new clothes. All of her stuff is designed for Silesse, which is colder thanks to elevation, and is made for layering, which isn't suited for Isaach. I told her she could borrow ours until we got her new ones. Assuming she's not horribly modest, we can check while helping her with that."

"Then that's a plan, I suppose." Ulster smiled. "Ah, too much serious talk, though. Let's talk of lighter things."

"Too much serious talk?" I gasped dramatically. "Who are you and what did you do to Ulster?!!"

"Oh, shut up."

That sparked some laughter, and we talked of lighter things. How we thought things were in Tirnanog. How much we missed Aideen. How we hoped Shanan was okay. Fun little things we'd seen while out and about. Some amusing gossip among the army we were slowly building. Just things to help distract us. Things to help ground us.

When we left the room, all of us would be the confident leaders again. It was good to relax like we were just kids in Tirnanog again.

"So, looks like you're about my height, Yuria," I noted, studying her closely. We girls had gathered in my room to help Yuria into some clothing more suited to Isaach's climate, though Hestia wasn't with us. She always got bored when we talked clothes, and more than once had chewed up an article of clothing from said boredom. She was with Diarmuid instead for now, sensing he needed a bit more comforting. "At the least, you're definitely shorter than Larcei and taller than Lana. I think I've some longer stuff you can wear."

"Thank you," Yuria murmured, smiling shyly. She was seated on my bed, and bounced a bit while Lana and I hunted through my closet. I winced a bit when I realized one of the dresses Aideen made for me did fit the description, but I squashed that down. Aideen would scold me for being selfish. "Hee… I've never done something like this before. I think."

"You think?" Larcei repeated, throwing herself onto the bed now that height comparisons were over. Yuria yelped when Larcei nearly bounced her off. "Sorry! These beds are way bouncier than I expect. You okay?"

"Y-yes, I'm fine." Yuria pressed a hand to her chest, trying to calm her no-doubt racing heart. That had to have been a shock, after all. "But yes, I think. I… I have amnesia, you see."

"Really?" Larcei swung around to lay on her stomach and look at Yuria. "That sucks. When did you lose them? Do you know?"

"My first memory is Lewyn finding me in a park in Belhalla about four years ago. I was wearing an
oversized shirt, and my hair was damp, like someone had been washing it." She smiled sadly. I paused at the year, and shared a glance with Lana. Four years ago… that's how long it had been since Deirdre died. And since 'Princess Julia' went missing. "I also had fur on me, like I'd been near an animal. Black fur to be precise."

"Were you alone?" Lana asked, pulling one of the dresses out of my closet. I saw it wasn't one Aideen made me and she winked. She'd noticed, and understood. The clothes were special. "No animal or person near?"

"No, I was completely alone," Yuria confirmed. Her eyes sparkled at the dress, though, completely distracted. "Oh, that's so pretty!"

"Isn't it?" Lana giggled. "Here, clothes off. We'll help you into it."

"Ah… okay." She hesitated a bit before standing. "Well, we are all girls."

"Yep~!" Lana grinned. "Besides, in the infirmary, you'll be seeing a lot of naked people. Bandaging and all."

"That makes sense," Yuria began undressing and then squeaked because her hair got caught. "Ugh… that always happens…"

"Here, I'll help," I offered with a laugh. Though the first trick was untangling things. "Mind if I take the circlet off?"

"Oh, no, go ahead," she replied. She actually took it off herself, and smoothed away the sweaty strands. Nothing that looked like a Holy Mark, but… "Thank you."

"No worries." Once we got things untangled, helping her out of her dress and various layers was easy. Sadly, and strangely, there was no Holy Mark immediately in sight. Then again, I was quickly distracted by the scar she had on her chest, so 'searching for Holy Marks' actually disappeared from my priority list. "Holy…"

I'd seen scars before, of course. Survivors from the camps were often covered with them. Not to mention the resistance fighters. Hell, even we had scars, mostly from childhood antics. But there was something just wrong about this scar, and not just because of how huge it was. And it was huge. It ran from her left shoulder to her right hip, easily the width of my palm for most of the path. The scarring over her heart was probably twice the size of my hand and noticeably more jagged than the rest, like something had tried and barely failed to gouge her heart out. I wondered what caused it, because I knew of no weapon or instrument that could cause such a thing. I'd say some sort of beast, but I didn't know of anything huge enough. It was just… terrifying, really.

"Damn, now that is a scar," Larcei breathed. She'd gotten off the bed at some point to study the scar. Lana grimaced and frowned at it, likely wondering the same things I was. "How did you get that?"

"I don't remember," Yuria whispered. She reached up to touch the scarring over her heart. "It was scabbed when Lewyn found me. He thinks whatever caused it… well, he thinks the incident where I got it was why I lost my memories."

"Do you really remember nothing?"

"Mmm… I remember being scared." Yuria's eyes unfocused slightly and her voice became soft. "Scared, and certain someone was going mad. Running through the halls, looking for safety. Looking for him."
"Him?"

"I don't remember who 'him' is. Just someone safe. Someone who could keep me safe. Someone warm and kind." She trembled slightly; I barely felt it with my hand on her shoulder and wondered if I should stop her. "He had two colored eyes. I don't remember the colors. But I remember that." I had to bite back a gasp. Conall had two colored eyes. Though, no Holy Mark did imply that… and yet… "I made it to him, and he helped me. He pieced the skin back together. A staff, maybe? But then everything is…!" Her voice went high and her hands covered her ears, fingers digging into her scalp. Her eyes went wide, but they were still unfocused and distant. Seeing something that wasn't here. "Running and running and shadows and someone, a different someone, apologizing and then everything is light and shadows and skin ripping apart and… and…!"

"Yuria!" I took her hands and got in front of her. "Yuria, can you hear me?" I asked gently. She was shaking badly now. "Yuria, it's Riona. You're safe. You are perfect safe. Try to take a deep breath. Do you need me to count?" She managed a nod. "Okay. In… two… three… four… Out… two… three… four…" Slowly and carefully, Yuria managed to sync her breathing to my counting and she leaned forward to rest her head on my shoulder. I stroked her hair reassuringly, kissing the top of her head. "You're safe. It's fine. You're fine." I repeated the words as she slowly calmed down. Counting and reassuring. Lana left briefly to get some water for her and Larcei rubbed her back. Everything we could think of to help Yuria through this.

"Th-thank you…" Yuria whispered after a moment. She slowly straightened and Lana handed her the mug of water. Larcei helped her steady it when her hands trembled. "I'm sorry…"

"No, I should be the sorry one," Larcei gently chided. She smiled apologetically. "I shouldn't have asked." And I should've stopped her when I noticed the trembling.

"No, this… this always happens when I try to remember. Yet, I try anyway." Yuria sighed and sipped the water. "Truthfully, though, Yuria probably isn't even my name. It just sounded familiar when I heard it in the market, so Lewyn went with it."

"Of course it's your name! It's what you're going by now, and that's all that matters." Larcei continued rubbing Yuria's back. "I mean; Riona doesn't go by her birth-name."

"Really?"

"My birth name is Caitriona," I explained, laughing a little. It wasn't quite the same thing, of course, but… "I just go by Riona. Less of a mouthful."

"Your name is what you choose to go by, nothing more and nothing less," Lana added, smiling reassuringly. When Yuria finished the water, she took the mug back. "You want some more?" Yuria shook her head. "Okay."

"Basically, Yuria, you don't need to apologize for having traumas. We should apologize for accidentally hurting you." I cupped her face and smiled. "If you choose to try again, that should be your choice. And we'll be with you, ready to comfort you, whenever something like this happens. That's what it means to travel with us. We try and be there for each other."

"We're basically a very weird family, and you're right in the middle of it!" Lana giggled and took her hand. "You and I are the healer girls as well, so seriously, remember we're here for you. You and I will stick together."

"Oh… you all…" Yuria breathed. She smiled sweetly, giggling. There was still some fear to her, but it was fading quickly, thankfully. "Ah, okay. I'll try to remember. It's been just Lewyn and me
since he found me."

"That's what we're here for," Larcei laughed. "Heart to heart talks while standing around in your underwear." And mildly awkward moment when we realized Larcei was right. We got distracted, so poor Yuria hadn't changed into my dress yet. "Also, to completely change the conversation, how the hell are you comfy with that breast-band?" Larcei pointed to it for emphasis. "You're spilling out!"

"Oh… um…." Yuria blushed, coughing a bit. "I… I can still get it on, so I didn't want to waste money…"

"Making sure you're comfy isn't wasting money, silly." Larcei frowned, nodding. "Okay, which one of us is closest to her size?"

"I think me, actually," Lana noted, studying Yuria. Poor Yuria was blushing madly now. "We'll get her properly fitted, but I think mine will be more comfortable for her. Why don't you and I just grab some of ours, Larcei? Riona can get her into one of hers in the meantime or something. That just looks painful."

"Ah, wait…!" Yuria tried to stop them, but Larcei and Lana were out the door before she could. Larcei actually doubled-back to shut it for us. "Oh, I really don't want to be trouble…"

"Oh, please. All of us are trouble," I dismissed with a wink. Then I headed over to the drawers and pulled out one of my own breast-bands. "That all said, our group is very free with physical affection and the like, so if you ever get uncomfortable, let us know, okay?"

"Okay." She smiled sheepishly. "I… might need help getting the band off, though. It's…"

"Seriously, it's that tight on you?" I handed her my band and worked on getting hers off, wincing. "Freaking hell, I can barely get my fingers under it! You needed a new one a while…" A strange 'buzzing' feeling stole my words. I got her breast-band undone, but then looked at where I'd felt that buzz of power. That was when I saw it.

She did have a Holy Mark. A large Holy Mark, starting from the back of her left shoulder and slowly curving to the front of her left hip, in a very pale silver, with the pale-orange-red of a Fjalar Mark among the angry red marks of a too-tight breast-band. But it was all so hard to see, blending almost perfectly with her skin. If not for the 'buzz', I never would've seen it. Why was it so pale? I'd never seen a Holy Mark as anything but 'vibrant'.

"It's a strange mark, isn't it?" Yuria mumbled. I glanced up and saw her smiling sheepishly. "It used to be more colorful, but it faded soon after Lewyn found me. It's only just started to 'come back'. It's weird."

"I see," I murmured. I wondered what to say and decided, for now, to keep quiet on how it was a Holy Mark. That panic attack… ah, I wished Aideen was here. She'd know what to do. "Not the weirdest thing I've seen." I made sure to smile at her. That Holy Mark… she was Julia. Seliph's sister. My cousin. Family. "By the way, I meant it. You're safe here. And if you ever feel scared, you can find me. Or Hestia. Or Lana. Or Larcei. Or, really, any of us. We won't mind. I promise."

"...Thank you…" She smiled back sweetly. "I appreciate it."

Lana and Larcei returned before long, and we determined that Lana's really was closest. We got all her measurements and helped her get dressed in our stuff before dragging her out to get things settled with the local tailor. On the way, I quietly told Lana and Larcei that Yuria did have a Holy
Mark. Our group would have a meeting, later, over what to do about all of this. Well, aside from 'keeping her safe'. That was a given. Obviously.

"So, she is Julia," Oifeye murmured, leaning back against his desk. Our group, sans Lana, was meeting in his study to discuss Yuria. Lana was showing Yuria around the infirmary, taking advantage of how quiet the late hours were to give her a thorough tour. "I thought so. The similarities between her and Deirdre were uncanny."

"What concerns me is that scar and the amnesia," Seliph whispered. He and I were both sitting on the floor, using Hestia as a pillow. "Based on the description... something tells me there's more to my mother's death than what is 'officially' known."

"I agree. While it's possible a spell could've caused the injury, it's still quite abnormal." Oifeye rested a hand on his temple thoughtfully before looking to Larcei. "You mentioned a panic attack when she tried to remember?"

"Yeah, it was pretty bad or I think so, anyway," Larcei confirmed. Like Seliph and me, she was seated on the ground, absentley brushing Diarmuid's hair. He'd been hosting the self-defense classes and thus, his hair was a tangled mess. "What bits I caught was that something attacked her and she ran to Conall, who then healed her."

"From there, it was a mess," I added, remembering. Shadows... that word had come up a lot. That could mean... "You think the Loptyr priests might've been involved? I mean; they took over soon after. It's not that big of a stretch."

"Oh, yeah, that's a good point."

"That all said, and forgive me for this, but does it matter at the moment?" Ulster asked, voice a little dry. He and Lester leaned against the walls, opposite sides. Lester behind Hestia, Ulster behind Larcei. "We can speculate later. I'm more confused by the Holy Mark."

"Hmm? Oh, did we never tell you those stories?" Oifeye asked, looking surprised. At all of us frowns, he sighed. "Nope, clearly not. Then again, I think they're Grannvale... ah, whatever. There's stories of Holy Marks fading and reappearing to protect the ones they've blessed. It's possible Deirdre's had also faded."

"Oh." Ulster paused for a long moment before shrugging. "Then, in that case, what do we do?"

"And why didn't Lewyn mention any of this?" Lester asked. That was a good question. "Was it because it was a public place? He thought it obvious? Even so, a little more warning might've been nice."

"It's possible he got distracted," Diarmuid noted reluctantly. He smiled in thanks when Larcei finished brushing his hair and scooted over to the wall to rest against it. "I mean... I did kind of break down crying at hearing about..."

"Right, right." Lester sighed and shook his head. "Regardless, though... it seems strange to me. He has to know, right? He met Deirdre?"

"They talked the theories of light magic with each other and Deirdre always enjoyed listening to his performances," Oifeye confirmed. He was back to thinking, hand on his temple again. "But yes, what to do? Obviously, we'll be keeping her safe. Something happened at that castle, and I'm going to assume she's safer with us for the time being."
"Do we tell her what we know-suspect?" Larcei asked. She crawled over and joined Seliph and me on Hestia, snuggling close to me. I rested my head on her shoulder. "That panic attack…"

"No, not yet, at least." Oifeye closed his eyes. I wished Aideen was here. She'd be great for something like this. Would it be safe to write to her about this? "I do think it'll be important to tell her, eventually, but we should move slowly. Her health and well-being are most important. So for now, helping her settle into things will take priority."

"And if she asks?"

"If she brings it up, answer to the best of your abilities. But be wary and cautious. Check who is around, and be prepared for a panic attack. And if she says to stop answering, do so at once." Oifeye smiled kindly. "Other than that, I'd say simply do as I know you all will do. Get to know her, help her feel safe and welcome. She is family, after all, and in our care."

"That's true." Larcei grinned at Seliph and me. "Look at that! We can meet members of that side of the family without having to fight!"

"It is nice to know that, though it makes me wonder if I can meet Julius as well," Seliph whispered. He smiled sweetly and I grinned. It was nice. "Okay, though, we have a plan. Let's try to stick with it. I suppose we can discuss more about the 'what happened' and 'why did Lewyn not tell us' things when Lewyn actually returns."

"Hopefully with good news about Leif and Finn!" I added with a laugh. It soon turned into a yelp when Hestia stood up abruptly, knocking Seliph, Larcei, and me off. "Hey! What's that for?" Hestia whimpered and nosed my cheek. "Oh, outside time for you." I hopped to my feet and she immediately raced out of the room, opening the door fairly easily. "I'll talk to you all later!" And then I was off, chasing after Hestia. It was a bit of an abrupt end to the meeting for me, but Hestia did what she wanted.

Once we were outside, she decided that the castle grounds were too 'tame' for her or something and continued all the way out of the city entirely. I followed, because she really was too fast for me, and times like this, you simply let her wear herself out. Besides, there was something enchanting about Isaach at night, when the moonlight gave everything a more 'silver' or 'blue' sheen. The crisp wind blew, tugging at my hair, and I decided to go ahead and pick some flowers. When Hestia returned to my side, we visited the graveyard so that I could leave the flowers on the graves. Both the new ones that still smelled of fresh soil and the older ones that looked a little neglected. It just felt right to do so, especially since I was already outside.

When I ran out of flowers, Hestia and I returned to the castle, greeting the guards with smiles. Then she decided to go down a certain hallway, and I groaned and muttered curses before following. Because clearly, Hestia was bored and bored Hestia was never a good thing. However, just before we rounded a corner, I saw Yuria and Seliph talking. And promptly hid, holding onto Hestia's fur to make sure she didn't interrupt. At least, that's what I told myself. That I didn't want to interrupt brother-sister bonding. Honestly, though, I hid on instinct, feeling terribly awkward.

"Ah, Lord Seliph, there was something I noticed," Yuria murmured, smiling gently. She looked infinitely more comfortable now that she was wearing clothes better suited to Isaach. "Your hair is tangled. Do you need help brushing it?" A strange ill feeling washed through me and turned my stomach into knots. Brushing Seliph's hair… that was 'my' job. I was the one who did that. I was the only one who… ah, but that wasn't fair. It wasn't like I owned Seliph or his hair. If others wanted to, and he agreed, then I had no right to be mad. But it did make me feel uncomfortable. "I can…"
"That's kind, Yuria, but I'll be okay," Seliph refused with a smile. A feeling of relief settled on me, but that just made me feel more uncomfortable. I mean; that could've been a good way for them to bond. I shouldn't be relieved. "Thank you, though."

"If you're sure." She seemed a little sad about that. "Let me know if there's anything I can help with."

"You don't need to 'earn' your place, you know." Seliph laughed when Yuria squeaked. He'd guessed it in a second. "Besides, you're going to be helping Lana in the infirmary. That's a lot of work."

"Well, yes..." Yuria looked down. "Though, I can't help with the medicines at all. I have to learn them."

"See? Lots of work." Seliph smiled sympathetically when Yuria whimpered. "Diarmuid memorized it all the quickest among us. I'm sure he'd be glad to help you."

"You think so?" She became thoughtful before nodding. "Okay, I'll ask him."

"I think he's free after breakfast tomorrow. Providing no one changed the schedule on me." Seliph hesitated before ruffling her hair. "You're going to be fine. If you're unsure, simply ask."

"I will!" Yuria beamed at him, but sighed when he left. "I was hoping to help him personally, though. Drat."

"Were you?" And suddenly there was Larcei, who must've stepped out of a nearby room. Yuria yelped and Seliph turned back in concern, but Larcei waved him away. I kept a firm grip on Hestia while continuing to eavesdrop and spy. And be awkward. "Middle of the hallway isn't exactly the best place for heart to hearts," Larcei teased, poking Yuria's cheek. "Anyway, mind if I ask why?"

"Well, he, Riona, and Hestia helped me before, so I hoped to return the favor for them," Yuria explained. She sighed again, frowning. "Though, I can't find Riona to ask her."

"She went outside with Hestia. Probably still there." Larcei shrugged. "Anyway, if you want suggestions, feel free to ask. But Seliph only lets Riona brush his hair."

"Really?"

"Yep. We've asked if he wanted us to in the past, even Aideen. But he refuses each time, only agreeing when Riona tries. It's one of their 'things'." Larcei giggled and linked arms with Yuria. "Here, why don't you walk with me? You're being dropped in some strange group dynamics, so I'll give you some summaries to help you feel less like an outsider. And you tell us if you feel lonely, okay? We're not used to new people, but we definitely want to make sure you feel welcome and at home."

"Ah, yes!" Yuria laughed and leaned into Larcei. "Thank you!"

"No problem."

The two of them walked away, and I leaned against the wall. Feeling even more awkward and uncomfortable. I wasn't sure what to do with that little bit of information. I wasn't really sure why it made me squirm. I didn't like it. It was weird, and I wondered if it was just lingering unease of having a new person shaking up all the group dynamics. Change was often uncomfortable. But that didn't feel quite 'right'. That answer didn't feel right. It was likely something different? But what?
"Ack! Hestia!" Of course, in my mental wandering, I forgot to keep a good grip on Hestia. "Yes, good to see you too!" And she apparently ran straight for Seliph, based on the yelps. "No, don't eat the papers! I need those!"

"Hestia, behave!" I snapped, rounding the corner and rushing over. Poor Seliph was trying to fend off an extra-playful Hestia, who apparently thought he was withholding a toy from her. "No, you're not allowed to chew up papers!" I caught her as she tried to jump on Seliph again, only for her to twist and pin me. And start licking my face. "Hestia!"

"Never a dull day when you have a wolf in the family." Seliph wrestled Hestia off of me and Hestia barked happily, wagging her tail. "Yes, hello. Missed you too. Did you have fun outside?" She barked again and play-bowed. "No, I can't play right now." She sat down again, whining. "I know. Your humans have to work. It sucks."

"If brushing her isn't on the chores for us, we need to make sure it is." I tried to brush off the fur on me, but it just clung. I swore I'd brushed her just yesterday, damn it. "Maybe have Lana or Yuria get priority? They can get Hestia antics to wind down from infirmary stuff?"

"I'll bring it up to Lana." Seliph peered at me worriedly. "You okay?"

"Just a little tired." I frowned. "Why?"

"You just… you seem a bit off, is all?" He rested the back of his hand on my forehead. "Mmm… no fever…"

"Like I said, I'm just tired." But now I was back to feeling awkward. "Hey… uh… mind if I brush your hair?"

"Since when do you ask?" Seliph laughed, though, and smiled warmly. "Of course I don't mind. I do need to read these, though." He held up the papers. "And I need to read them tonight."

"We can sit in your room, then." I beamed at him, giddy. This was a tad ridiculous. More than a tad, even. "What are you reading, anyway?"

"Summaries of all the reports. Oifeye says that reading through the summaries will be my primary job as leader, because it'll be the summaries for everything."

"We're going to have to figure out how we're dividing all the labor, aren't we?"

"Yeah, we do." Seliph sighed and scratched Hestia behind the ears. "I have a few thoughts on that, though. Mind listening?"

"Of course I don't mind."

We spent our evening just like that, talking about how we could structure the army so that we could distribute the burden as evenly as we could and also talking about how nervous we were about Yuria and wondering just what the hell happened for her to end up here, of all places. All the while, I brushed his hair carefully, and Hestia slept next to us, waking up occasionally for extra pets. It was a sort of evening we'd had before, though the topics were different. That bit of familiarity was a comfort… though, I really did need to sit down and figure out what was going on with all the awkwardness. Better sooner than later, especially when you were a leader. Leaders couldn't let their personal issues get in the way of things. Leaders didn't have that right. So, I had to figure this out quick.

Something told me that I was going to facepalm and groan when I figured it out, though. Just a
feeling.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: So, 'Yuria' is an early fantranslation of 'Julia' (as in, this name is still what's under the 'script' section for FE4 on SerenesForest). In game, no one pieces together who Yuria/Julia is until much later (Final Chapter, I want to say?), but players will probably find out in .2 seconds because a) her hair color and b) her stat screen. Her hair color (and her looks in general as seen in official art, especially the more recent ones) is the same as Deirdre's. And her weapon rank for Light Magic is (*), and her holy blood page shows that she's got Major Naga and Minor Fjalar blood. And while the characters don't have access to the stat screen (obviously), they would notice her looks. Especially Oifeye (and Shanan and Finn) who knew Deirdre personally. So, I decided to have them figure it out ahead of time, but keep it quiet initially because panic attacks.

As for the Holy Mark… I brought it up briefly in the epilogue of Memoirs of Belhalla, but having the Holy Mark 'disappear' and 'reappear' is sort of my explanation for how certain Holy Blood people were able to hide their heritage (in Julia/Yuria's case, being raised with Lewyn in seclusion no doubt helped). (The epilogue of Memoirs of Belhalla also brings up the events that traumatized Julia/Yuria, though from Conall's POV.) Julia knowing wind magic comes from Heroes, where the 'lead up' for the Naga tome is 'wind', 'elwind' and 'excalibur' (and just makes sense, because Lewyn had been taking care of her and wind tomes are probably more readily available than light tomes, especially in Silesse). She doesn't have access to wind magic until after promotion in game, though.

Yuria/Julia being introduced in this fashion is a bit of a callback to how Deirdre was introduced, and is based on how she's introduced in the Fuyuki manga (though Seliph learning her name and the like still only shows up when he meets Lewyn). In-game, there's no really emphasis on Leif or Finn being alive, but I felt it was a good thing to bring in here (the conversation Lewyn and Seliph have is from the game, though it is admittedly streamlined and Yuria speaks a little more). Ftr, after she's recruited, Lana can talk to Yuria/Julia and the latter gets a free mend staff out of it.

Also in-game, you can't get the Fire Sword until next Game-Chapter, but it felt smoother to add it here. (Think of it as a love-point-boost convo?) As a High Priest, Aideen gains the ability to use C ranked elemental tomes, and unlike Alicia, learned how to use said tomes (mentioned briefly a few times in previous chapters). Riona, however, chose against learning herself. However, thanks to Aideen, Lester actually has a decent magic growth. With Midir as his father, it's 20%. Though I don't think he can use that magic stat for anything.

The Assassin's Bride is toooootally made up. I mean; I wouldn't be surprised if it was the title of some story, but I picked random words at random to make up the title.

Next Chapter - Brothers
Chapter 34) Brothers

Adapting to Yuria's presence is both easier and harder than expected. It's not too hard to spend time with her, but we frequently laugh and tease each other over things she had no idea about and were difficult to explain. Plus there was trying to learn what she was comfortable with, especially since she was a bit hesitant to stand up for herself. Partly due to a shy demeanor and partly because we all had such large personalities and she had no idea how to deal with people who are actually willing to talk about things. Still, we slowly work things out and do our best to integrate her into the group. Slowly.

Just as we slowly make preparations to march out again. Our soldiers were doing well in their lessons. Supplies were acquired. We couldn't stay in Ganeishire forever. We had to push forward to liberate Isaach. And head to Leonster, providing Lewyn brought back good news. And free all of Jugdral. Because that's what people expected of us. The children of the fallen heroes, rising from the ash to save everything...

Comparisons to the Crusaders become more frequent. I wonder if they felt as nauseous as we did.

Our days started much earlier here than they had in Tirnanog. We had to get up early to do our own training, and then there were our chores. And there were some that would remain, no matter how large of an army we got. I mean; Hestia would only let us brush and bathe her, for instance. And Lana preferred it if we were the ones who made the medicines. She knew we knew what we were doing, after all. She hadn't had time to really teach anyone yet.

"I don't think Yuria was expecting so much fur!" Lana laughed, changing the sheets on the beds. There were no more overnighters in the infirmary, for once, so not only could she do so in relative peace, but she got to be as loud as she wanted. A freedom she rarely had, and enjoyed. "I tried to warn her, but she didn't believe me!"

"I think she understands now why 'brushing Hestia' is actually on the list of chores!" I snickered, making medicines at the table. Hestia's ears briefly twitched, but she remained 'asleep' on the floor by my chair. "Aside from not knowing what to do with the fur, she did pretty well. A few more times and I think we can leave her unsupervised."

"I'm glad Diarmuid didn't mind watching out for her." She tossed a dirty sheet into the corner, giggling. "What was his morning chore, though?"

"Reviewing inventory lists. You know how he's just got a good head for numbers." Seliph and I thought that leaving the inventory and budgets to Diarmuid was our best bet in keeping things straight. Lester was our backup. "And how he's good at memorizing."

"He really is." She dragged a spare chair over to a shelf and climbed up on it to pull more clean sheets off. I wasn't sure what I was more confused by: the fact that someone had put them out of reach of our tiny healer, the fact that she hadn't asked me for help despite me likely being tall enough, or that despite half-balancing on the top of the chair, it didn't fall. "He's helping Yuria with
learning herbs. It's super sweet of him."

"And how is she doing?"

"She's learning pretty quickly. I think she was learning when everything happened to her." Lana's cheer faltered, and I winced. Just last night, Yuria had tried to remember again and ended up suffering another panic attack. We reassured her that she didn't have to remember, but she whispered that she wanted to. Because even with the bad memories, she was certain there were good ones she had forgotten and she 'remembered' enough to know she wanted them back. I couldn't decide if I thought it brave to face the bad with the good or if I was frustrated she'd put herself through such things. "That said, I think she does get overwhelmed by having the personal attention of our resident prince charming~!"

"Diarmuid will kill you if he heard you say that." I rolled my eyes. That was an old nickname. 'Prince Charming' and 'Princess Charming' for Diarmuid and I respectively. We hated them with a passion. Not the least because neither of us were royalty. Well, mostly. I supposed we both were sort of royalty, via Agustria's main royal line dying out and Arvis killing all his competition for the throne. Which actually made the nicknames worse. "Anyway, she's probably just more overwhelmed by having a person's attention in general."

"I suppose." Lana disappeared into the back to grab a giant pile of blankets. "Hey, Riona, you okay?"

"Yes?" I looked up from my measuring and mixing and frowned at her. Because random, much? "Why? Do I look ill or something?"

"No, I've just noticed there's been something a little off these past couple of days." She smiled kindly as she got clean blankets on each of the beds. "It's not too bad, but if it's something I can help with, I'd rather we go ahead and address it."

"Before it becomes a problem, right." I sighed. I'd rather hoped no one noticed. But, based on the looks Seliph and Larcei had been giving me, I knew I hadn't been doing that good of a job. This just confirmed it. "I don't think it's serious, though. I think it's just me having some difficulties adjusting to Yuria." Yuria was severely touch-starved and a very lonely person in general. It was rare that she wasn't with at least one of us, though she was very hesitant, aware that she was intruding. So, it was just… very odd. We never really had to deal with a shy person before. Even Muirne had been more confident. "That's all."

"It is weird adjusting to a new person, and she's just so desperate to be helpful and to not cause trouble. It's like those…" Lana paused. "I was just about to compare her to Hestia. I don't like that implication."

"I get your meaning." Hestia had actually been very shy and skittish when I first found her. It had taken her a few weeks to be comfortable with us. Now here she was, snoozing at my feet without a care in the world. "We have to be gentle with her until she's comfortable."

"Yep!" Lana giggled, relieved. However, she still had a serious look to her. "But that just makes me more confused. You say you're having difficulties, but honestly, you've been one of the best for that."

"I think you've been doing a way better job than me."

"You sure? When she was frightened by the self-defense crowd last night, she ran to you."
"I think that's just because…" I paused to double-check a measurement. You had to be extra-careful with medicines. Too much of a certain herb and suddenly, you had a poison, not a medicine. "Anyway, I think that's just because she unconsciously associates me with Conall." I still remembered what she'd said about her past. She'd run to someone with two-colored eyes who she knew would keep her safe. Heterochromia wasn't so common that… "So, she views me as 'safe'. Plus, I had Hestia and who doesn't feel safe with large apex predator ready to kill to protect you?"

"Still, though." She finished changing the blankets and went to work on the pillows. "Well, how did it start?"

"Sometimes, you're like Hestia with a good bone." I sighed and she stuck her tongue out. Whenever she got a 'must fix problem' attitude, she kept at it. Part of why she was such a good healer, but it did make it difficult for her to objectively assess people's injuries. "Okay, okay. The uncomfortableness started because of something I accidentally overheard."

"Ah, eavesdropping." She shook her head and teasingly made a 'tsktsk' noise. "Bad."

"Very bad. All Hestia's fault, of course." I checked on Hestia, but she was definitely fast asleep. "Anyway, I overheard Yuria asking Seliph if she could brush his hair. That's… well…"

"That made you uncomfortable."

"I know it's weird!" It was ridiculous, and a bit pathetic truthfully. If any of our soldiers knew it, they'd sincerely question why they put their hope in me. "Anyway, afterwards, I heard Larcei say that I'm the only one Seliph…" I glanced at her. "Am I really the only one who brushes Seliph's hair?"

"Yep." Lana smiled slightly, a knowing look in her eyes. That never spelled good things. "He wouldn't even let Mother do it. Just you."

"Oh." And there was that strange feeling again. A bit of relief and butterflies and… I didn't even know. "A-anyway, that's kind of what started it."

"I see." Lana sat down at the table, elbows on the table and chin in her hands. This wasn't good at all. "Say, Riona, subject change."

"Okay?" Yep. Not good. This was her 'I am about to have so much fun' look, and that meant teasing. "What is it?"

"How did you feel about Seliph and me dating?"

"That… huh?" The hell? That was random. "Uh… happy? I guess? More things to tease you about, and you both seemed pretty happy?"

"It was certainly fun." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "What about Muirne?"

"Yay, more ways to tease him? Yay, Muirne is smiling more?" I frowned and so did she. "Uh… Lana?"

"Okay, different tactic." She brought one hand down, propping up her face with the other one still. "Did you ever feel threatened? That someone could take your place?"

"My place?" This wasn't making any sort of sense. "No, of course not. I'm me." I finished up the potion I was making and pushed the medicine-making stuff to the side. "Are you suggesting that I feel awkward because 'my place' had been threatened for the first time or something?" I supposed
that made some sense? Illogical, but emotions weren't exactly logical. Lana's little sigh, however, told me I was still missing something. "Either you tell me what you're getting at, Lana, or try a different tactic."

"Think about it a little more. I know you can get it."

"Ugh..." I sighed and leaned back in my chair, doing my best to think about it. I couldn't really find an answer to her question, so I decided to try and figure out what she'd been really asking me. After a moment, I wondered if she'd been asking if I'd ever been jealous of her or Muirne. Which was ridiculous. I'd never been jealous. After all, I...

I froze, realizing something that made me ill. No, I had never gotten jealous. But not because I... it was because I had assumed the relationships were temporary. Even as I teased, because teasing was fun. Even as I thought they looked nice together, because I loved seeing them happy. Even as I wondered why they broke up, because I worried about broken friendships. Even with all of that, I had always, always assumed they were temporary. Because mine had been. Mine had been temporary.

Diarmuid and I dated, yes, but it was just the fun first-crush sort of thing. Neither of us had expected it to last. It was more exploration of ourselves and just fun. Larcei and I had impulsed-dated, more out of desire than any sort of 'love', and both of us had known it wouldn't last either. All the crushes I had were temporary, things I didn't act on both because of the Mythical Someday and because... because I loved Seliph.

I had always loved Seliph. I had always been close to him. Always right there with him. Always content in the knowledge that I could be at his side, and no one could replace me there. Until we got a new person. Until Yuria arrived and shook up our dynamic. Until she asked...

"I'm an idiot..." I groaned, dropping my head to the table with a dull 'thunk'. Lana climbed onto the table itself to pat my head, based on the creaking. "I am an absolutely arrogant idiot."

"Not sure I'd call you arrogant, or an idiot," Lana reassured gently. She continued patting my head. "So, now that you've gotten your answer, what are you going to do?"

"For now, finish these medicines." I sighed and lifted my head. She really was on the table, which amused me. "Then I'm going to have a talk with Larcei."

"And Seliph?"

"I'll figure out what I'll do after that. Probably going to take a couple of days to really process this." I smiled bitterly. "Must've annoyed the hell out of you all."

"Not really." Lana climbed off the table and swung over to hug me, resting her chin on my shoulder. "Just a bit of frustration. No big deal."

"I see." I couldn't even tease her. This was just... "I'm sorry."

"For what?" She kissed my cheek. "I love you, Riona. You're my big sister, and I want you to be happy."

"And you are my adorable little sister and I love you too." I leaned into her. "But the apology is for anything I did or implied when you and Seliph were dating."

"Nothing I noticed. Neither of us expected it to be a permanent thing anyway." She let go of me and sat down at the table again. "But medicines."
"Right." Those definitely needed to be done. "Thank you for dealing with my obliviousness."

"I'm used to it~" She giggled and I rolled my eyes. "I've been trying to figure out a way to get you to figure it out for a while. I guess it was hard because it was always there."

"Yeah." I could tell my crushes easily. It was a change in how I felt. But my feelings for Seliph had never really changed. Or the change had just been so gradual that it was near impossible to notice. "Thank you."

"Always."

"And when you're ready to confess to Ulster, let me know because I will definitely help."

"Th-that…!" She blushed and I had to snicker. I hadn't actually meant to tease. It had been instinctive. But gods, I'd needed it. "Well, I have been trying to figure out how to let him know. But, you know, subtle. I don't know what he feels and I'm not at a point that I want to just ask."

"Then let's discuss strategies."

She and I debated numerous things, from the absolutely absurd to the workable, while we made medicines. It was a good way to wind down from that little revelation, and making Lana blush was fun. Win-win?

I finished up with making medicines and caught Larcei while she was also on break. Sensing the seriousness of the conversation, she suggested we climb to the roof to not be disturbed, which I agreed to, after dropping Hestia off with Lester because he was handling the morning hunting. Of course, any chance of the conversation remaining serious went away more or less at my first sentence. She was far too busy laughing at how I'd finally figured out I was in love with Seliph.

"You know; I meant for this to be serious," I grumbled, hiding my face in my knees. Meanwhile, Larcei was curled into a ball next to me, struggling to breathe through her laughter. "What's that animal with a vocalization that sounds similar to laughter? Hyenas?"

"You'd know more than me, miss animal lover," Larcei wheezed. She was actually crying from laughing so hard. "Ah, freaking hell…"

"Like I said. This was supposed to be serious."

"I promise this laughter isn't entirely mocking." She rolled onto her back, taking deep breaths and wiping at her eyes. I just pulled my legs closer to my chest, refusing the lay down. "Part of it is happy. I'm glad you figured it out. Finally."

"How long have you known?"

"Not sure." She finally calmed down and smiled up at me. "A while, though. For the record, it's why Ulster, Diarmuid, and I were laughing. On the balcony before we killed that bastard."

"Oh." Looking back, I'd felt odd then too. Being the leader, he'd felt so 'distant'. Taking into account what I knew now, I must've felt shaken by that apparent distance. There was no longer that 'guarantee' that I could still be by his side. So, that was why I'd felt such relief when he'd looked up at me and smiled. "You know; a little warning on how arrogant I was being would've been nice."

"I'm not sure I'd call it arrogant, though. You two have always been close. Especially after Conall was captured." She giggled. "You were so despondent. It took a few days to really comprehend
"Well, it honestly felt like half of my heart had been ripped away." I wondered if Conall had hurt too. "And I couldn't accept that one of us just disappeared." It was something that happened to 'other people'. Not 'us'. "You and Seliph worked hard to make sure I smiled again."

"We did. But Seliph was easily the more determined of us two. I remember him actually staying up late to brainstorm. Because you were the person closest to him and you were sad, so he wanted to help." She stretched out like a cat and then let her arms rest above her head, crossed just because. "And that's just how you two always were, always are. When we had to pair up, you two would automatically gravitate towards each other. When we napped as children, you two were always next to each other. When we did the whole 'group cuddle' thing, he was always next to you. When we group up, it's rare you two aren't side by side. It's been that way forever. So, I don't think it's arrogant to simply assume that's how it would always be. Gods know that we're a bunch of sheltered brats. Talked about going out and fighting, but none of us ever really thought about what would change. What would have to change, in order for us to do what we need to do."

"I'll agree with those last three sentences." Leaving Tirnanog certainly showed how much we still had to learn. About so many things. It was honestly a bit unsettling, but we had to keep moving. Too many people entrusted us with their hope to do anything else. "But analyzing that arrogance or taking for granted… whatever… isn't why I wanted to talk to you."

"Right, right. But you're going to tell me later how you figured it out."

"Oh, now that one is simple. Yuria's shaken up our dynamics, I felt weird, Lana prodded me, and none of you have ever asked if I ever got jealous. Figured it out from there because I had to think of why I wasn't jealous."

"We didn't?" Larcei became thoughtful. "Oh. Huh. Yeah, you're right. Of course, we never really asked any of the group if they were jealous. Though, to be fair, I think Lester and Creidne's relationship was the only one we thought had a chance of being permanent."

"True." I frowned, thinking. "Who else did you date again? Me, I know. Deimne. Did you date Muirne?"

"I asked Muirne out, but got refused. She didn't swing that way, sadly." She laughed. "You know; she was starting to crush on Dalvin when we left."

"No, really?" Oh, that was adorable! "When did she tell you?"

"She and I had paired up to look for the children, remember?" It took a bit to actually remember that. She'd done that to 'force' Ulster and Lana to pair up. "She told me then. Sadly, things were far too busy afterwards for her to tell anyone else in our group. You should ask her about it in a letter."

"We do need to send more letters back to Tirnanog." We sent some off as soon as Ganeishire was captured, but… "Wait, wait, wait… we're way off topic. Again."

"Whoops~!" She laughed again, unbothered, but quieted when I sighed. "Okay, sorry. Clearly this is something you really want to say. What is it?"

"It's an apology, Larcei." I hid my face in my knees again. "I mean; our whole argument started because I accused you of using me as a substitute for Shanan, and yet I…"

"I knew you weren't using me as a substitute. I'm no one's substitute." She rolled onto her side and smiled at me. "We both knew it wasn't going to last. It was fun. That's all it was for both of us. And
we knew it."

"You can't tell me it wasn't annoying."

"Oh, no, it was. It really was. So much so that I almost threw it right back at you." She rolled back onto her back. "But, like I said. I knew I was no substitute. And you just… didn't think about it. It was just part of you. Your hair is blonde. Your eyes are red. You love Seliph."

"Yeah, but now it just sounds like I was using you."

"Well, if you were, then I was too. A 'game' just for us, sort of thing." She laughed. "Gods, you and I really shouldn't have dated. It was fun, but looking back on it…"

"Total mess." But fun, like she said. "We both learned a lot with it, though. And that's kind of how our group took relationships. Ways to learn more about ourselves, and about each other. Probably not the best, but no one really stopped us."

"I think it's because we used them to grow. I mean; you and I got way better at communicating after the explosive argument."

"That's true." It also really helped highlight how 'minor issues' should be worked out sooner for relationships to work. And how a couple's problems didn't necessarily effect just them. "But still, I wanted to apologize for that hypocrisy. Even if you didn't think it was that entirely, I do."

"Apology accepted." She smiled again, warm and sincere. Even if she didn't think I needed to apologize, she acknowledged that I thought I needed to. "You know; I can't even remember how that argument started. It was something so damn small."

"But I got irritated, and then you snapped, and then I snapped, and it just became a huge mess where we were yelling and scaring the living hell out of everyone." Yelling-arguments had never really been a thing with our group. At least, not like what we had done. And hopefully, none of us would have anything like that again. "Can't even remember how we got onto the Shanan thing."

"Neither can I." Larcei's smile faltered, and she rolled onto her side again. This time, though, she faced away from me. "...Is it really so obvious? That I…"

"That you're crushing on Shanan?" I reached over and ran my hand through her hair reassuringly. "A bit. It's only become really obvious these past couple of years."

"Well, I've actually only had the crush for a couple of years. I've certainly always admired him, but…" She sighed. "Can I borrow your lap?"

"Of course." I straightened out my legs and she shifted to lay down in my lap, looking away from me. I continued running my hand through her hair to reassure her. "Like Lana said. We're here to listen if you need it."

"I don't even know how to explain it." She absently traced shapes onto the roof. "It's probably silly. He's always been so distant. Well, no, not always. When we were little-little, he was our babysitter, but…"

"We remember him leaving more than anything by this point."

"His back as he left on another mission to save people. To protect his country. The perfect king, even when young. Even when uncrowned."
"Wasn't there a time we went a year without seeing him."

"There was." She paused, gathering her thoughts. "I don't have many memories of him laughing, you know. Not a full and bright laugh. And there's a similar thing with his smiles." She curled into herself a little. "And he always seems so lonely. So, it honestly all started with wanting him to not be so lonely. Wanting him to smile, really smile. To relax. To somehow convince him that he's fine, just as he is. He's strong enough. He's good enough. No matter what he thinks."

"He feels his failures keenly." Or his perceived failures. He blamed himself for Deirdre's kidnapping. He blamed himself for Conall's. He went into dangerous territory, on his own, to get a weapon to 'make him stronger' so that he 'never failed again'. "Yeah, I can see all of that. It makes sense." I thought about it a bit more and smiled. "He laughs the most around you."

"I try. And then he does smile and he does laugh and it's just…" She sighed. "Well, that's when we get into romance novel protagonist thoughts." She rolled over on her back to look at me. "But that's… that's about all I can say coherently."

"So, nothing about him being very handsome."

"Riona!" She scowled and I snickered. "Ugh, I mean, if we want to go into that sort of stuff, then sure. He's super handsome, kind if a bit awkward with his words sometimes…"

"I know. I just had to get you yelling. Being hesitant doesn't suit you."

"Oh, shut up." She continued to scowl, but softened. "We're both weirdos when it comes to romance, huh?"

"We are. And neither of us really know where to go with them."

"Yep." After a moment, we both started laughing. "Well, I'm sure we'll figure it out. You let me know if I can help, okay?"

"So long as you do the same."

"You know it." She sat up and rolled her head to stretch out her neck. "Man, I can see why Seliph always steals your lap. You're comfy!"

"I must, unfortunately, take your word for it. That said, we should probably head down and see what time it is exactly. We were both just 'on break' after all."

"True." She crawled over to the edge and frowned. "Whoa, there's some sort of commotion."

"Really?" I peered down as well and saw she was right. People were rushing about this way and that. "Damn, what happened?"

"No clue."

"I thought you two might be up there!" Yuria's voice drifted up and we quickly found her in the crowd, thanks to her distinctive hair. She smiled up at us from below, next to some very startled servants for some reason. "The scouts returned with some news, so there's a meeting," she explained, cupping her hands around her mouth to help the words carry. "You're needed!"

"We'll be down as soon as we find a safe path," I called back. Larcei was already looking for one. "How long has it been?"
"Not long, but you two proved elusive."

"That so?" I supposed most wouldn't know to look up for us. "Did Diarmuid tell you that we hang out on the roof sometimes?"

"No, I just had a feeling." A feeling? That was weird. I'd ask more about that later. "Should I let them know you're on your way?"

"Please and thank you!" I looked over to Larcei and she waved me over before starting to head down. "Be right there!"

Scouts, huh? Then this was a war meeting. The first one… oh gods, now we really were official. I was going to be sick.

The 'War Room' was of a reasonable size with windows set up closer to the ceiling to let sunlight in, but not provide any sort of 'weak point' into the room. There were no chairs or rugs inside. Simply a large, square table with a map carefully pinned in the center and what looks like hundreds of pieces of paper scattered about on the edges. An exaggeration more than likely, but it was definitely intimidating. Standing along the edges of that table, looking over the map with everyone… everything became far too real. This was war. This was an operations room. And, on a personal note, this was the first time all day I'd seen Seliph. Meaning I felt a little awkward because I was still processing that little revelation. I smiled to hide it, of course. But honestly, quite a bit of the awkwardness was feeling like I should be more awkward!

"Everyone relax," Oifeye chided, smiling at all of us. He had an interesting expression, some sort of cross between 'amused', 'proud', and 'sad'. "You have to be relaxed, as otherwise, you'll focus too much on impulses, not thoughts. It's little different than what we did before taking Ganeishire."

"Except now it's official," Diarmuid pointed out. He'd noticed something off with me immediately, and made sure to stand next to me to hold my hand reassuringly. I appreciated it greatly. Just as I appreciated Hestia leaning into my leg to let me pet her more easily. "Big difference."

"I suppose." Oifeye chuckled, and then looked across the table at Seliph. "Well then. Since this is official, Lord Seliph…"

"Ugh… how did Father ever deal with this?" Seliph groaned. Ulster, on his right, rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Since Hestia was between Seliph and me, I simply caught his eye and smiled to encourage him. "Okay. Everyone knows what sparked this, right? Scouts returned."

"That's about the extent of what I know, anyway," Larcei noted. She was across from me, between Ulster and Lana, and held Lana's hand much like Diarmuid held mine. "I'm assuming soldiers, though."

"Yes. Lester?" Seliph focused on him, on the end of the table with Oifeye. I wondered how this set up would change if we got more people. Would we add more? "You actually met the scouts, if I recall correctly."

"Yes, my hunting group ran into them, and I borrowed a horse to venture a bit ahead," Lester confirmed. He fidgeted with his sleeves, nervous. Reporting enemy movement. This was all so… I didn't even know. "We've a group of mounted soldiers within sight, barely. They're probably be here in one or two days, depending on whether or not they want to camp another night."

"Basically, deciding if they go ahead and attack to lessen our chances of being prepared or if they want to be fully rested?" Lana asked. She frowned a bit, resting her free hand on her cheek.
"Mmm… infirmary is ready. I'll definitely want some more on bandages and other preparations, and to have at least one of you switch over to medicines for the duties and chores. But, providing nothing too unexpected occurs…"

"Hey, you sound like Mother." Lester grinned and Lana rolled her eyes. "Regardless, though, it seems the leader is Iuchar, based on the colors. Or so I was told."

"And that is…?"

"The middle child of Danann."

"Oh, so Ulster and Larcei's cousin." Lana looked up at Larcei curiously, but she shrugged. She didn't really care. Ulster didn't react either, showing the same. "So, what should we do?"

"Personally, I'm curious if we can get him to surrender," Seliph murmured. He leaned against the table, looking over at the map. "But first… where were they again?" There was an odd moment of silence, awkward and hesitant, before Oifeye produced some little figurines and set them up, consulting the reports to set them up as accurately as he could. "Thank you." All of us frowned when we noticed the area. "Some trees and the like, but it's pretty damn open…"

"Oifeye, the figurines have horses, so is that indicative of the troops?" Diarmuid asked. Oifeye nodded without saying a word, continuing to set things up. I had a sneaking suspicion that he was simply going to guide us and intervene only if things got super bad. "In that case, then of course they're in open area. The horses practically need it."

"It also means the battlefield would be nothing but chaos, with little chances of tweaking things to our advantage." Seliph sighed, and fussed with his hair. "You and Riona found out that Iuchar isn't that bad, though, yes?"

"According to the gossip, he doesn't support the Child Hunts, at least, and it seems no one really has a bad thing to say about him, save that he's Danann's son." Diarmuid frowned, thinking. "I believe the exact phrase is something like 'someone made sure he and his brother actually learned morals'?"

"In that case, as I mentioned earlier, I would like to try and get him to surrender somehow. Less battles will be good for our own forces, and the possibility of more allies…” Seliph suddenly grimaced. "Though, maybe that's naive, considering earlier…"

"What happened earlier?"

"Just some quiet staring contests between our new recruits and the Dozel soldiers who sided with us," Ulster explained. He shrugged, still unbothered. Perfectly stoic Ulster being the calm one like usual. "It was bound to happen. They were part of the force that hurt them and their families. I managed to prevent a fight, but if we're going to continue recruiting those on the enemy's side, I do expect something to give."

"If that's the case, then everyone airs out their grievances and we'll swoop in with some passionate and cool speech," I replied, making my voice light to hide how uneasy that made me. We'd have enough troubles without infighting. At the same time, we couldn't just kill everyone in our path. For one thing, that would just lead to more deaths on our side. "Like when that girl threw mud at Seliph."

"I'm sure if we make one or two of us available to discuss our reasonings, then we'll at least get everyone cooperating, even if they're not happy about it." Of course, that led to all of us sighing as
we recognized yet another job. "Okay, I'm with Seliph. How did our parents manage things like this? For more people?"

"Delegation, in most cases," Oifeye answered easily. He watched us closely, smiling. "Lots of delegation. You'll figure out how best to divide things. But that's for later. Don't look so far ahead that you trip over your own feet."

"Right, we have a situation to deal with now, in the present," Larcei agreed. She shrugged and tugged Lana a little closer so that she could lean on her. "So, surrender. How do we make him get one?" Silence. Because we certainly had no idea. "Oifeye!"

"Fine, fine." He chuckled, amused. "Your best bet would be to figure out a way to demoralize them prior to the battle."

"So, what? Feed them your cooking?"

"I… well…" He sighed as the rest of us burst into laughter. "Just for that, you can figure out how on your own."

"You were going to make us flail about on our own for a while longer anyway!"

"Of course. What you lack is experience. I can't teach you experience. I can only guide you through it." He crossed his arms and smiled gently at us. "You have the knowledge you need. You simply need experience to recognize that, and we have the time to let you take it slowly still. Though, I do have a feeling that once you figure out how to proceed, you will push forward. All the way to Rivough. But that's for later. Think on the now."

"And the now is 'how do we disrupt them?',' I murmured, wondering just what Oifeye was trying to lead us to. Hestia licked my hand to reassure me, and I almost facepalmed when the obvious thought occurred to be right then. I only didn't because Diarmuid had one hand and I wasn't going to slap my face with wolf-spit. "Wait, of course. Horses. We have a wolf." I pointed to Hestia for emphasis. Her ears perked up, interest piqued. "Horses spook easily anyway. One good howl and…"

"Gods, they'll be running all over the place, especially if we free them first," Diarmuid laughed. All of us lit up as we finally recognized what Oifeye meant. "Wait, let's run with that. Spooking them and all. That won't require that much infiltration or anything, like replacing their food with Oifeye's cooking."

"I could totally do weird shit with their campfire! And..." I was about to suggest Seliph do things with the light globes, but quickly realized that he likely wouldn't be infiltrating at all. "And uh…"

"It might be open plains, but I think the grass is a bit high in that area, so we can sneak closer and… and maybe capture Iuchar?" Ulster suggested. He tried to hide his excitement, but it was hard. Oifeye was right. We did know…! "Riona, Larcei, and I can leave with some of the quieter members of our army."

"If you're going to do that, then I need to get you all some medicine packs," Lana noted. She frowned at us. "And if you get yourself badly hurt, I will make you regret it."

"The stuff of nightmares, that. Maybe we should have you scold Iuchar into submission instead."

"No, I don't," Seliph reassured. He smiled sweetly, but I saw the worry in it. "Simply sad that I can't go along to help. But I have to stay here, huh?"
"You can fret with us not-as-sneaky ones," Lester teased, grinning. "Not like we'll be getting much sleep anyway. Don't we have a list of sneaky people, though?"

"I imagine so. We have lists for nearly everything else." Seliph sighed and nodded. "All right. We'll go with this. The exact plan will be up to you three upon seeing the actual layout. Don't leave without checking in, okay?"

We all dispersed, heading this way and that, except Seliph who lingered at the table, frowning over the map. I hesitated a bit before going to his side, poking his face to let him know I was here. He smiled at me briefly, but soon returned to the map, staring at the pieces. I studied him for a moment before looking at the pieces too, curious as to what held his attention so. The silence stretched out, and eventually, I just had to break it.

"I wonder how many people each of those little pieces represents," I murmured, picking one up. They were finely made, but I could see tiny little scratches and worn edges that quietly showed their age. I wondered if these were pieces Oifeye had used for tactics while serving with Sigurd. "Ten? Twenty? More?"

"I hope not more. You're going to be a small group," Seliph whispered. He sighed and smiled sadly. "Ah, I'm just worrying. It didn't occur to me until now that I won't be able to just go out on missions and the like. It makes perfect sense, yet…"

"Yep. You have to stay and be the big leader person." I set the piece back down and leaned into his side to hug him. "Relax, though. We'll be fine. I mean; we've got Ulster, the most cautious of us. Biggest worry is Hestia getting excited."

"That's a big worry." He laughed softly and rested his head against mine. "I suppose it's also going to be odd because you'll be away for… at least a day. Our group isn't used to separations."

"No, we're not." Diarmuid and Lester going on patrol was the first time, really. Unless one counted Conall being captured. "We'll be back before long." But I supposed the realization that things like this would become common was a little… "Seriously, don't fret so much."

"You might have an easier time convincing the sun to rise from the west." He smiled, though, and it was warm. "Ah, but I'm keeping you. I'm sure you have a lot to pack."

"Not a lot." I did have to get going, however, so I pulled away and winked. "I'll see you later, okay?"

I left then, skipping down the hall. But then I paused and sighed, frowning. Shouldn't I feel a little more awkward? I just figured out I was in love with him. Wasn't I supposed to be all blushy and stammering? Everything was as normal. Did the simple acknowledgement not actually mean all that much to my brain? Had it been so obvious that my mind simply didn't think anything of it anymore? But how obvious was it? And what should I do from here? The normal situation would be to confess, of course, but…

But that's where things got 'typical' apparently. Because the thought filled me with a panic. A gnawing panic that made my stomach turn and vision blur at the edges. A fear of 'change', but in this case, a fear that I was 'wrong'. That I couldn't actually… that my feelings weren't requited and that confessing would change things for the worse. That he and I could never be as close again. I didn't want that. More than anything I…

"Okay, what happened?" And suddenly, I had a Diarmuid in my face. "Easy there," he murmured, catching me when I yelped, jumped back, and nearly fell. "You didn't follow, so I double-backed.
You were a bit off before the meeting started too. Is everything okay?"

"I… well…” I began. After a moment, I sighed and smiled wanly. "I'm fine. Just being a bit weird. Ask Lana, because she knows… most of it. I'm honestly not sure I've the time to explain it all. Or that I should be having a heart-to-heart when I should be focusing."

"Something like that, huh?" He nodded, understanding. "Okay." He ruffled my hair and kissed my forehead. "Then I'll ask her, and we can talk about it in a couple of days if you're up for it."

"Yeah, that sounds good." I kissed his cheek and skipped past him. "Thanks for the save, though. Didn't expect my thoughts to take that sort of turn."

"Figured as much." He smiled. "I'll see you later, then."

"Sounds good!" I ran down the hall, rounding a corner quickly to try and get some energy and bounce into me. It had the side effect of almost running into Yuria, though. "Sorry!"

"N-no, it's fine!" Yuria yelped. She pressed her hands on her chest, though, to calm her pounding heart. "Um… but I was looking for someone, so this is perfect. I was wondering what was going on exactly? Everyone is running about suddenly and Lana raced into the infirmary, grumbling about medicinal packs..."

"Oh, right, you were watching the infirmary while Lana was at the meeting," I murmured. I smiled at her and poked her cheek. Just to make her squeak. It was fun. "Basically, we've enemies and Ulster, Larcei, Hestia, and I are going to head out with some people to see about capturing the leader and demoralizing the enemy."

"You are?" She gasped. "B-but that sounds dangerous!"

"It is, but we'll be fine. We'll just be gone for a bit." And we had to move quickly. The sooner we left, the better. "That's all."

"Well, yes, but…." She winced, and genuinely looked afraid. But she soon sighed and nodded, smiling faintly. "Then again, it is you. You all are amazing." She took my hands, though, and squeezed them. "Be back soon? I'll be waiting, with everyone else."

"Of course." I grinned, making sure I appeared as confident as possible for her. It seemed to soothe her. "We'll be back before you know it. Promise."

"I'll hold you to that."

By some strange sort of luck, we actually left within the hour with full preparations done. It made us feel oddly professional and accomplished, though we did have to explain to our people that this wasn't an assassination. Not unless Iuchar gave us a reason besides 'he is related to a cesspool of a human'. Because there were a lot of people on the continent that were 'guilty' of the same sort of 'crime'. After we finished convincing them to go with our plan of not-assassination, I pulled Ulster off to the side and told him about what I'd figured out about my feelings on Seliph, just because it felt fair. Lana and Larcei knew, and Diarmuid would before long. I'd make sure Lester knew when I got back. So, fair.

"Ah, finally," he murmured, smiling warmly and thankfully not laughing. He slung an arm around my shoulder and kissed my hair. "I was curious if you'd ever name them."

"Apparently, throwing a new person in the group is enough to rattle me," I grumbled. Actually, the
more I thought about it, the more annoyed I got that it had taken so long. And the more annoyed I got at my own arrogance at simply assuming things. "Anyway, if you're wondering why Larcei's been grinning like the cat that caught the sparrow, that's why."

"I had been curious." He studied my expression and kissed my hair again. "What's wrong, though? And something is. You're good at hiding, but we've known each other too long."

"Just being annoyed at myself, really. And wondering…" The usual thoughts. Should I confess? Should I not? I didn't have this issue with Diarmuid and Larcei. I'd just gone for it. But I also hadn't been so afraid of being rejected by them. "Then I get annoyed for still thinking about it when we're… you know…"

"Having to be the leaders?" Ulster glanced around, but thankfully, the two of us were still a bit away from the group. Larcei and Hestia were leading them well enough. "You need to rant? I think I can come up with an excuse to get further away."

"No, not yet. I'm still processing." I smiled wanly. "Just, like I said, very annoyed at myself on multiple things." And the whole obsessing over it like I was just some random teenaged girl, not… ugh… "I need a distraction clearly. It's like my mind has a morbid fascination with making me cringe and hate myself."

"That's not good. You sure you don't need to rant?"

"Later." I sighed. This was a mess. If not for the fact that I knew it was better to get all this dealt with, I could almost be mad at Lana. It was like the itchy feeling of a scab while a wound healed. "Later."

"All right." Ulster thought a moment before nodding. "Well, if you don't mind continuing 'relationship' discussions…"

"So long as I'm not one of the parties involved, I am all for gossip."

"Not sure it's gossip, and 'relationship' is probably the wrong word, but it's the only one I can think of." He removed his arm from my shoulders and started absently gesturing, as he did when he was particularly nervous or confused. "It's Lana. I think she's been acting oddly around me."

"And you're asking me about it and not, say, Larcei?"

"Well, partly you need a distraction and partly because Larcei will say it's because of something ridiculous, like Lana has a crush on me." It took everything I had not to facepalm. He was almost criminally oblivious sometimes. Someone could throw themselves naked at him, declaring their undying love, and he'd still miss the point. "Regardless, it's not any one instance. Just a general feeling of her being frustrated or confused. It's Lana. I think she's been acting oddly around me."

"And you want to try to address it before it becomes a problem-problem and we have another explosive argument in the group. Honestly, disastrous as the relationship had been, Larcei was right. All of us definitely got a lot better about communicating afterwards, and not just simply rely on our 'we know each other extremely well' thing. "Well, with that said, is there a reason it feels like a problem? Lana's not one to hold back when annoyed."

"Well, on a personal level, yes? I like her, after all."

"Oh, I seeeeeee… hold up, what?" My jaw dropped and Larcei glanced over worriedly, probably because of how squeaky my voice went. I waved her worries off and, instead, poked Ulster in the side repeatedly, knowing he was ticklish there. "Okay, just so that we're not jumping to full
conclusions or anything. We mean like-like, right? Like what I just told you about how I felt about Seliph?"

"Yes?" Ulster frowned. "Have I really not told you all this?"

"No! And I know you haven't told Larcei either because there's no way she wouldn't have told me that."

"...Larcei is going to kill me later, then." He shrugged, unbothered, like always. I, however, was having a small mental crisis because I never noticed. "Well, to be fair, it's sort of the same situation as with you. I've always liked her."

"How did you figure it out then?"

"Unlike you, I got jealous. And then talked it over with Aideen. Because we have an adult who clearly had romantic relationships in the past, so we might as well get her wisdom."

"Er… right…" I looked away sheepishly. Never did talk to Aideen about relationship stuff. Though, in my defense, it had been because I was worried about making her cry. Midir's death still hurt her keenly. All of the deaths hurt her, really. It wasn't uncommon to overhear her sobbing because of how much she missed everyone. The worst were the apologies to Sigurd, though. I'd never asked, but it wouldn't surprise me if she felt everything that happened to Sigurd was her fault. "Pretty sure that's healthier? Maybe? Getting jealous, I mean."

"Depends on how you act on the jealousy. You hear some horror stories sometimes." He had a point there. "Regardless, though…"

"Right, right, sorry, you just dropped that Elfire on me." I sighed, trying to think of what to say. He wouldn't believe me if I mentioned anything about Lana having a crush on him, but I also couldn't tell him it was nothing. I was sure it was part of Lana's subtle attempts to try and figure out what he felt. And failing, clearly. Then again, all of us had failed to notice that Ulster liked Lana. Ulster's stoicism helping and hindering him. "I can talk to Lana for you, if you'd like, but perhaps she's simply trying to imitate your calm?" That had to be the most bullshit thing I had ever said.

"Ah, that's a possibility." So, of course, Ulster believed it. "I know she's been a bit annoyed at not being able to hold onto a 'healer calm'. Which is apparently a requirement?"

"Most healers are apparently taught that it is, and most keep themselves isolated in order to stay that way." From what I knew, Mom had been a total workaholic to avoid interacting with people. It was a testament to the army's patience that she opened up at all. Of course, then she lost everything, just like everyone else. Because life. "Oifeye mentioned that Aideen had some difficulties too, depending on the situation. And Lana is younger than any of the healers in Sigurd's army."

"All true, but she's still frustrated." Ulster became thoughtful. "I should offer to teach her a few of my tricks."

"What? It's not natural?" I gasped dramatically and he rolled his eyes. "Color me surprised!"

"Oh, please. It's nothing different than your ability to fake a bright smile and cheery disposition with barely any sort of signal." He sighed, and I shrugged. I mean; he wasn't wrong after all. Someone had to do it, and I'd always been good at it. So, might as well be me. "Regardless, thank you. It's been bothering me, but I wasn't sure I needed to confront her or not."

"Of course." Though now I did wish I'd told him to ask her. Lana might've just blurted out a
confession. Then again, Lana would've been mortified and we'd have all sorts of problems surrounding that. Problems we honestly couldn't afford. No one needed to see their 'leaders' rushing about like lovesick teenagers. "You going to tell the others, though? About your feelings for Lana?"

"When we're back. Last thing we need is Larcei trying to kill me while we're in the middle of an important mission." He chuckled, shaking his head. "I didn't mean for it to be a secret, though."

"I suppose we could've just asked if you were crushing on someone." But we hadn't. Relying on our 'we have known each other forever' thing, and getting reminded that it didn't mean we knew everything. Communication was important! "Shall we rejoin the others? I'm definitely feeling better."

"I'm glad." He pulled me into a one-armed hug and kissed my temple. I kissed his cheek in return. "We should send people ahead to scout."

"I'll handle that, then."

It was a very good thing Ulster suggested that, and I got a quick little group together to move ahead. Iuchar apparently had patrols set up beyond the typical 'safe distance', meaning we almost walked straight into one. Thankfully, though, we ambushed them instead and got them bound and gagged. Learned a few new interesting knots and ways to tie people up through it. However, there was a slight problem. During the aftermath, where we tried to figure out what to actually do with them, Hestia's ears twitched and she went loping off, no doubt hearing some snake and deciding she wanted a snack. So I had to leave Ulster and Larcei to deal with all of that while I chased after Hestia. Because I wasn't going to leave my wolf alone when we knew soldiers were about.

"Hestia, couldn't you have waited?" I grumbled, following her closely. She evaded my attempts to grab and drag her back to the group, so now I just waited for her to catch the damn snake or whatever it was. "Ugh, where even are we?" Based on the terrain, we were nearing the mountains, with lots of hills and some patches of trees and brush. And we were decidedly out of sight of everyone else. "Hestia, if you lead me into an enemy ambush because of your stomach, I swear you will get no treats for a month." Of course, Hestia didn't pay me any mind, save to make sure I hadn't fallen and hurt myself. "I mean it."

We went around a hill and Hestia suddenly jumped into a high patch of grass and came out with a hare in her mouth. I rolled my eyes and facepalmed before looking around while Hestia quickly devoured her snack. Then I stiffled, noticing an odd bit of movement close by. Hestia's ears flicked over to it and she headed for it after she finished eating, hinting that the hare had been a 'lucky meal' for her. Her true prey was whatever had caused the movement. Slowly, I followed, one hand hovering over the hilts of my blades. Oifeye had suggested I simply wear both swords and it had taken a bit of practice to get used to the new weight and ensure I had a fast and smooth draw from both. Honestly, I wasn't quite that certain on it, but I could manage if things came to a fight. I hoped not, though. That things would come to a fight, not that I could manage if things did. Hestia and I were alone, after all.

But there was no fight. Instead, the source of the movement had been wings. The pure white, almost fluffy looking wings of a pegasus. Because there was a random pegasus in the middle of Isaach, despite the fact that pegasi were native to Silesse. And there were a bunch of mountains between here and the closest Silessean city: Lubeck. There shouldn't be one here. Certainly not a wild pegasus. Which logically meant...

"Hands in the air!" Which meant the pegasus had a rider, and she had stepped out from behind the pegasus, a slim lance in hand. "Who are you?" she demanded sharply, glaring as she leveled the
point at me. I studied her, noting the stereotypical green hair and eyes. The hair was short, though, unlike what I'd heard from most Silesseans, and held back with a white headband. "I asked a question." She wore gold earrings, and a green tunic over white shorts. And armor. All of it seemed a bit on the richer side of things, but I didn't know Silesse well. What was 'expensive' here might be 'cheap' there. "Hey!"

"Give me a moment to appreciate the beauty who just appeared," I instantly retorted. It was no lie; she was pretty. The statement also made her yelp and I noticed her stance was very 'textbook'. It was someone who had practiced a lot, but didn't necessarily fight a lot. "Anyway, though, I'm sorry for startling you. Can we put the weapon down, though?"

"Why? You just appeared out of nowhere and…" She squeaked and stumbled back when Hestia growled, hackles up. No snarling, yet, but her muzzle was bloody. Added to the intimidation. "Um…"

"That's why." I was much calmer about all this than I really had a right to be. "Hestia, stay by me please." Then again, I was more than a little startled by all of this. Probably helped make me calm because I just couldn't process all of this. "We did surprise her and all. How the hell did you hear her and her pegasus from where we were, though?" Despite the reassurances, Hestia refused to let up, and I almost scolded her, but then I noticed she wasn't actually growling at the girl. She growled at a patch of high grasses just beyond the girl, telling me exactly she wasn't settling down. "Okay, whoever is trying to hide, you're apparently doing a bad job and Hestia is offended."

"Aw, and here I thought I was doing a good job." And a boy with long silver hair stepped out from the grass, a green tome in hand. He had two more, one red and one yellow, in a holster on his hip. A mage, then. "I wonder if the dog heard your poor attempts at hunting earlier," the boy continued with a slight, almost carefree smile. There was enough of an edge to it, though, to make it unfriendly. "I told you that you were making too much noise."

"You didn't exactly give me tips to fix it!" the girl grumbled. She glowered, but then softened. "I am sorry, though. Now we're dealing with this."

"That we are. So, how do we proceed?"

"Well?"

"Going to note that I'm literally the only reason you both don't have torn open throats," I deadpanned. Now I was a bit annoyed and Hestia began snarling, sensing my irritation. "Oh, whatever. This is not what I planned on doing tonight. I just followed my wolf and really do need to get back to my group."

"Wolf? How does someone get a pet wolf?" the boy asked. Again, there was that false bit of friendliness and his fingers twitched on the tome. Hestia lunged and purposely just missed his hand, jaws shutting with an audible 'clack'. "Whoa!"

"Hestia, not helping." I sighed. This was a mess. This was such a mess. And all because Hestia wanted to investigate a weird sound or smell she'd noticed. "To answer your question, it's more that she has pet humans. But can we just restart this whole conversation or something? Without weapons? Because I guarantee you that if Hestia continues thinking you're a threat, she's going to kill you. And then probably the pegasus there for the extra meal."

"No! Leave Annand alone!" the girl yelped. She clung to the pegasus's neck and I had to fight the urge to groan. I didn't need to say that last bit. Why did I say that? "Annand is my friend and…!"
"Okay, can we reset the conversation? Seriously?" I groaned. I was clearly emulating Larcei on tact at the moment. "Hestia, by me. Now." Hestia reluctantly retreated to my side, and the boy watched her warily. "She's not actually going to go after your pegasus. She just ate a hare."

"She ate a bunny?!"

"She's a wolf! She eats meat!" This was so bizarre. The boy looked ready to laugh, probably from the sheer absurdity of everything. "She eats whatever she catches! And besides, hares and rabbits aren't the same thing!" And now was when the pegasus's name finally got through. "Wait, Annand?" Mostly because I actually knew that name. A skilled pegasus knight, the older sister of Erinys, who lost her life during the Silessean Civil War while protecting civilians. "You named your pegasus after a knight who died?"

"I named her after my aunt." The girl scowled again, and the boy did start snickering then, pinching the bridge of his nose even. I, however, felt like I just got hit in the head. "What? Is that so weird or something? It's a tradition in Silesse to name pegasi after fallen knights. Admittedly, mine is more recent, but whatever."

"Uh… Annand is your aunt?" There was no way. There was no way, at all. "You're Erinys's kid?"

"You know my mother?" The girl looked at me curiously. "Well I guess that's not a surprise, given that she's the queen of Silesse and all, but not many would know of Aunt Annand way out here. At least, I wouldn't think so." She frowned. "Who are you? You never answered that, you know."

"It's… It's Riona. Caitriona, really, but I go by Riona. I'm the daughter of Alicia and Chulainn." This was weird. This was so freaking weird. "Your mom was…"

"Oh my gods! You're Caitriona?!" Her eyes sparkled and she tackled me with a hug. And knocked me clean off my feet. "Hi! Oh, this is amazing! Mom told me so many stories!"

"Nice to meet you… er…?"

"Fee. My name is Fee. I was born after all the chaos and the like." She giggled. "Oh, yay! What a stroke of luck!"

"From threatening to giggling, you sure do change moods quickly," the boy laughed. He bowed then and put his tome away with the other two. Hestia then relaxed, sitting next to me, but cautiously watching. "Well, my name is Arthur. Fee offered to give me a ride when we happened to meet on the outskirts."

"Though, for some reason, he thinks he can walk to Alster," Fee teased, laughing. She also still hung onto me. "But we're sticking together for now."

"As thanks for giving me a ride." He crossed his arms and looked at Fee curiously. "I forgot to ask why you were so far away from Thove, though. That's where the royal family hid after the Empire took over, right?"

"It is, but after Mother died, I couldn't stand being there, especially since I was alone, so I left to clear my head about two years ago now, living in some of the hidden cabins and retreats that they used to use while training pegasus knights."

"Erinys is dead?" I asked, wincing. That was… it was expected, but still. "And your…" Wait, but is she was Erinys's daughter, then she was also Lewyn's. And Lewyn had just… "You've a brother, right?" I vaguely remembered Aideen mentioning that there had been two other children in the army. One stayed in Silesse, and the other likely died with everyone else during the Belhalla
Massacre. Both names escaped me. "Is he…?"

"Oh, Ced is fine," she replied, perfectly chipper. She finally got off of me, sitting back on her heels. "He just left to try and find our father when the healers told us that Mother wasn't going to recover from her illness. I haven't seen him in three or four years."

"That's… a while."

"He probably got caught up helping people. It's how he is." She shrugged, but her eyes wavered. She missed him terribly, and it had to hurt to be alone. I couldn't imagine watching a parent die. The idea of watching Aideen or Oifeye die was… nauseating, really. "Still less time since Arthur has seen his sister."

"You don't need to tell everyone your life story, or mine," Arthur pointed out, a touch grudgingly. Fee winced and looked down apologetically. "Still, that is true. It's been about thirteen years for me."

"That's how long it's been since I've seen my twin brother," I murmured. It felt right to say, and I knew it was not my imagination when I saw him soften slightly. "But, while we're on awkward topics, I… uh… saw Lewyn? Not all that long ago?"

"Wait, really?!" Fee gasped, leaning forward and barely avoiding clonking her head against mine. "Where has he been? He just up and left five years ago!"

"He didn't say." That was a complete lie, but damn if I was going to reveal that. But still, this was a little… "Okay, so, when I next see him, I think I'll give him a good hit in the head for being a poor husband and father." It didn't match up with the stories about Lewyn I'd grown up with. Not at all. "Anyway, that's enough awkwardness. I really need to get back…"

"Right, you said you were with a group," Arthur noted. Fee sat back on her heels again, hurt and anger warring in her eyes and expression. I… uh… probably could've timed that little bit of information better. "I'm guessing some liberation army? Rumors have hit Silesse. It's why Fee raced off, actually."

"They're already spreading?" That… well, it was good and bad. But we really did need to defeat Danann before reinforcements arrived. "Ah, but yes, it's… some of us. We're actually on a bit of a mission?"

"Might we assist?" Arthur smiled warmly. "Fee is a pegasus knight, in training, and I'm a mage, as I'm sure you've guessed."

"You can definitely join the army proper, and you can come with me and learn what we're doing. Then you can decide from there whether you'll stick with us, or head north to Ganeishire." What in Jugdral did I get myself into? We left to mess with the enemy and potentially capture their leader. How did I get more recruits out of this? "Welcome to the army?"

Both Ulster and Larcei were also weirded out by the unexpected recruitments. Particularly when they learned Fee was Eriny's daughter. Because what were the chances? Well, said chances were a little higher when we learned Fee left specifically because she had adored the stories Eriny and Lewyn had told her about the army and she felt like things 'made sense again' when she heard about our army. Honestly, she was latching onto the first thing that made her feel useful, because she was still horribly traumatized and mourning Eriny's death and Lewyn's abandonment. And her brother's well-intentioned abandonment. It was amazing how she was able to smile. I wondered if
"Say, Riona, I've a question for you," Arthur began randomly in the middle of Fee's report. Thanks to her being a pegasus knight, she had gone ahead and given us an incredible aerial view of the camp layout. Complete with map. Apparently, it was part of their training to draw accurate maps. "You wear two swords."

"I do, yes," I replied absentlty, a bit more focused on brushing Hestia. She had needed it badly, as the pile of fur next to me suggested. Yuria apparently hadn't done as good of a job as I'd thought she had. Or Hestia was really shedding and we needed to double up her weekly brushings. "Oh, I'm worried about you when we go further south."

"You're… oh, wait, that was to the wolf."

"Hestia."

"Hestia, that's what it was. Sorry, I hadn't paid that much attention." He eyed her warily, and she gave him the most innocent expression before yawning and resting her head back in my lap. "I was convinced she was going to eat me."

"Hestia doesn't really like the taste of human." Though, I was worried about her acquiring said taste. But for right now, Hestia playfully made the wolf-equivalent of a 'gross face' and pointedly ate some grass. "I know, sweetie. We're super gross, aren't we?"

"Right…" Arthur gave me a weird look and then looked to Hestia again. "So, this wasn't what I intended to ask, but does she remember threatening me or…?"

"She does, but that's just because she thought you were threatening a member of her pack. Me." I leaned down to kiss her nose. She licked my chin. "So long as you're not a threat, she doesn't care about you at all."

"So, basically, I'm not in any actual danger by sitting next to you."

"No more danger than me." Hestia knew she'd get in big trouble if she hurt an ally. "Anyway, we got distracted. You were asking about my swords?"

"I was actually leading to ask about one sword." He pointed to my Fire Sword, which was half-hidden by all the Hestia fur. My silver blade was similarly covered. "That one. It's magic, isn't it?"

"Yes? Why?"

"It's unusual to see magic swords." He shrugged. "And Isaach isn't exactly known for it's magic."

"That is true." I glanced over at where Ulster, Larcei, and Fee were talking before focusing on Arthur. It was still just reports and double-checking the local terrain. Most of our soldiers were similarly not paying attention, focused on their own preparations. "Magic runs strong through my mom's side of the family, though, and I inherited that."

"Why not just learn magic then?"

"Ha… bit of a child's logic, truthfully." I smiled wanly, uncomfortable by the thought. "You know of the Belhalla Massacre? With the meteors and all?"

"Yeah, I heard about that." He frowned. "So, magic killed your parents and then…"
"Well, it definitely killed my dad. Not quite sure how Mom died." She died five years after everything. "But it's not necessarily that. It's that it was my uncle who did it. He took advantage of their trust and betrayed them." He slaughtered Mom's friends. He destroyed her happiness, her dreams. And not just hers, but also the happiness and dreams of almost everyone she had ever cared about. "I don't want to be like him. And as a child, I was afraid that if I learned magic, I'd be like him. That if I heard the pixies, communicated with them as he did, I'd somehow turn into him. None of which is helped, of course, by the horror stories in Isaach about the terrifying mages of Velthomer and Friege."

"Why just the mages?"

"Key advantage. Isaachians specialize in swordsmanship, specifically styles that involve a lot of dodging, and a great many of the battles happened in and near the Yied Desert." Meaning the Isaachian warriors were slowed by the sands, something that didn't effect over half of the mage troops. Add in how most people really don't have that great of a resistance to magic and you just had a lot of electrocuted ash that used to be people. "And then…"

"Wait, there's more?"

"Yep. It was Velthomer mages who kidnapped my twin brother." Magic had never been anything but a force of destruction in my life. "And again, Isaach. Not known for magic. I grew up around only one person who knew how to use tomes and even then, she was a healer first and foremost."

"Ah, so limited experience and all of that experience is negative." Arthur became thoughtful, glancing up at the sky. The very colorful sky, since the sun was setting. "Basically like when you eat something, and then you get sick, so you can't stomach that something anymore."

"Or when you were really sick and you could only eat a certain food, so you avoid it. Psychological association, Oifeye called it." Diarmuid couldn't stand eggs for that reason. Even the smell of them cooking made him nauseous and irritable. "But yes, it's the same concept."

"I can understand that. Took me a while to pick up thunder magic for that reason. I'd try to focus on the magic and the sprites, and then I'd remember seeing those very same sprites help people kidnap my mother and little sister. And kill my father." His eyes went dark briefly, and I had a bad feeling he'd watched his father die. "Oh, but in that case, why have the magic sword?"

"Well, I associate swords with Isaach. So, I'm kind of hoping that if I can connect magic through that…" I shrugged and smiled sheepishly. Hestia nosed my hand, because at some point during all the discussion, I'd stopped brushing her. "We're at war. I really need to use all my resources. Our soldiers deserve nothing less than my best. Leaders couldn't let personal stuff get in the way of things. "Well, mostly. See, it's also a gift."

"Ah, so you also feel obligated to use it!" He snickered and I rolled my eyes. "Definitely understand that. I picked up wind magic because some traveling merchant gave me a tome and I felt obligated to learn. He taught me a bit."

"Sometimes, you do need that outside push." I sighed as I thought of how applicable that was. But this wasn't the place for mulling over how annoyed I was at myself for that. "Ah, that got a little heavier than I think either of us expected. Why ask?"

"Because I'm a nosy person. Obviously." He grinned for a split-second and I had to muffle my giggles. "I do like learning, though. You're right in that it got heavier than I intended, but I do like learning."
"Riona, Arthur, might need to pick your brains over here," Ulster called then. I nudged Hestia off my lap and moved over to his side. And dumped some of Hestia's fur on him. Just because. "So, I was actually thinking we'd weaponize the fur."

"You were not," I teased, laughing. Hestia gave me a dirty look before getting up to lay down behind me for a convenient pillow. Arthur remained where he was, frowning slightly. "Over here. We don't know your magic better than you." Slowly, he joined our little group, sitting next to Fee. "That said, what exactly do you need?"

"Truthfully, I was thinking you and Arthur pair up below while Fee uses her Thunder Sword from above."

"Thunder sword?" I looked at Fee, startled. "You have a Thunder Sword?"

"I inherited it from Mother, truthfully," Fee explained, smiling. Arthur frowned at her. "What? We weren't fighting, and I do prefer my spear. But she had it as a backup, so I decided to do the same. I'm not too bad with magic. Not the greatest either, though. Forseti blood makes me fast, not powerful." She paused. "Well, for me, anyway. You should see my brother. Freaking obliterates everyone with Forseti. Does almost as much damage with a Lightning tome."

"Careful, she'll go on and on about her brother," Arthur noted dryly. She scowled at him, but he pretended to not notice. "Didn't you mention wanting to try and find him?"

"Knowing Ced and how he inherited Mother's inability to not help people, I'm certain he'll join up before too long. Just a matter of getting near where he is."

"I don't think you can talk about 'inability to not help people'." Arthur blithely continued ignoring Fee's irritation. "Regardless, what is it you're doing exactly? I didn't pick up on that."

"Spook the troops so that we can infiltrate and more easily subdue and capture the enemy leader."

"...You basically are going to pull pranks on your enemies to avoid an outright battle?" Arthur stared at us for a long moment before grinning and laughing. "Okay, I was wary at first, but if you all do ridiculous things like this, I think I could get to like you lot!"

"Glad to have your approval." Only those who knew Ulster could tell he was being sarcastic, not stoically sincere. I was rather impressed that Larcei hadn't deadpanned something, but when I glanced over, I noticed her frowning thoughtfully. "So, can we count on you?"

"Sure, sure. The elemental spirits love pranks." He covered his mouth to quiet his laughter and then he noticed Fee staring at him. "What is it?"

"Didn't know you could laugh like that," Fee replied frankly. Arthur immediately rolled his eyes. "Look, you barely did anything but smirk and snicker the whole way here!"

"Larcei, is everything okay?" I whispered as Fee and Arthur bickered, leaning around Ulster to poke her. Ulster helpfully leaned back against Hestia to make it easier on me. "Surprised you didn't snap."

"Not even paying attention and clearly that's a good thing," Larcei explained. She studied Arthur and then focused on me. "Smile."

"What?"

"Smile. Mind smiling for a second?"
"Uh… sure?" I smiled, wondering what the hell was going on. "So…?"

"Think of Seliph and smile. Or teasing one of us."

"Okay… then…?" Clearly Larcei wanted a smile-smile, so I thought about some fun things these past few days and did my best to smile-smile. Ulster watched curiously, having no idea what Larcei was going on about. "Better?"

"Yeah." She glanced at Arthur again, and then back at me. "They're the same."

"Pardon?"

"Your smiles. They're the same. You've both got similar features too, but you can only tell when he grins." Larcei frowned. "You've got any cousins besides…?"

"That I know of? No." But no one knew what happened to Uncle Azel. No one knew what happened to Aunt Tailtiu. If they really had gotten together, then maybe… "Let's shelve the topic, though."

"You sure?"

"From what I can gather, Arthur is with us because he feels like he owes Fee, not because he actually believes in us," Ulster whispered. He glanced up at Arthur and Fee, who were still bickering. "He's not comfortable with us. So let's not badger him for information he's not willing to give."

"Besides, he told me that his mother and sister were captured, he's looking for his little sister but not his mother, and he is very sure his father is dead," I mumbled, petting Hestia. She lifted her head to nuzzle me, sensing the darker mood. "And how he said the latter implies he saw it."

"Okay, yeah, leave all that stuff to him and him alone. We don't want to accidentally trigger a panic attack." Ulster looked at Larcei and she nodded, agreeing. "Regardless, Riona, you think you'll be okay with the two of them?"

"Oh, you know me. I get along with everyone." I grinned and he chuckled. I was good at faking it, and that's all that mattered. "They're not so bad anyway."

"Providing that they don't ask Seliph if they can brush his hair?"

I was totally justified in pushing Ulster face-first into the pile of Hestia fur. Totally. Besides, Larcei helped.

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Plans set and the moon high in the sky, everyone split up into their different groups, ready for each of their roles. Though Fee would actually be 'alone' for most of the operation, she stuck with Arthur and me while we waited for the signal. Meaning I, of course, took full advantage of being able to study and admire a pegasus for the first time. Because I loved animals, and pegasi were amazing.

"How is it that she can fly?" I asked, crouched under one of Annand's wings to study the wing joint. It was one of the few physical differences that I could see between her and a horse, and it was rather fascinating. "Are her bones hollow like a bird's?"

"They are, actually, so pegasi are at a higher risk for broken bones and plays a part in why they're known for speed and not strength," Fee answered. She petted Annand's nose to keep her calm while the weirdo girl (me) studied her. Arthur, meanwhile, sat on the ground amidst the high grass and
flipped through his tomes, ignoring us. "They also have... less bones? Or more fused bones? I can't remember. The musculature is also different because... well..."

"Oh, wait, I think I can see that." The muscles around the wing joint were noticeably more developed. Made sense, of course. "Is the respiratory system different?"

"Yep. Flying requires a lot of energy, so they have a completely different respiratory from horses to account for that. I mean; even if their wings are used mostly for gliding and all." She giggled. I wondered how that worked. Did they kick the air or something? "You know; most give me weird looks when I use that term."

"I grew up with a healer. I know more medical jargon than I'd like." I moved back and stood up, leaning down to stretch out my legs. "Though I'm curious. Did you have to deal with dissections and the like?"

"Yep. It's super gross and sad, but it's part of basic training just in case we're not near a healer and have to rely on medicines to help our pegasi." Fee hugged Annand's neck, giggling. "Though, they do have a slight advantage over humans. Pegasi actually have innate magic to them. It helps protect them, and their riders, from magic to a minor degree, but more importantly, it aids them in flying and helps them with healing. So injuries that mean death for a horse are often just inconveniences for them."

"I suppose that's why their wingspan isn't ridiculously huge." After all, even accounting for the lesser weight from the skeleton, a pegasus was still the size of a horse, and fully capable of carrying at least two humans and their packs. "Oh, I have a question that has always bothered me."

"Yes?"

"Why do they only let females ride them?" That just made no sense to me. "Do they just really not like balls or something?"

"Maybe!" Fee giggled. Arthur looked up very briefly, with a look that distinctly conveyed 'I think I started listening at the wrong time', and promptly went right back to his reading. "No one is really sure, though. There's a popular story in Silesse about how the pegasus was actually born from a maiden's blood to protect her, and so, pegasi continue to uphold that 'oath of birth' or... however it was worded."

"They... wait, really?" Okay, that sounded amazing. "Tell me later?"

"Oh, sure! It's really lovely." She grew sad suddenly. "There's actually a song. Well a few, but there's one Father used to sing for me, because I loved it so much." Still was more than half-convinced I was going to punch Lewyn for just leaving his family. It really did make me worry, though. While it made sense for there to be differences between the stories and how they were like now, to actually see such a drastic shift, particularly in someone the stories noted was excited to be a father and fretted over being a good husband while also being a good king... It made me worry Uncle Finn might've changed 'too much' and we really were going to be pranking him in retaliation for him hurting Diarmuid. "Ah, sorry, that's not something I should think about right before a mission, huh?"

"It's just us three, and there's no signal yet." I smiled to reassure her and then decided to bother Arthur. Because Fee looked like she needed a bit of time to compose herself. "Say, Arthur?" So, I walked over and poked his head to get his attention. "Question for you."

"I'm reading," he grumbled, giving me a bit of a dirty look. I continued smiling, though, so he
"sighed. "Oh, whatever. What is it?"

"What magic are you going with for all of this?" I asked, smiling innocently. His blank expression hinted he'd expected nonsense. "You haven't said."

"Wind." He held up his green tome for emphasis. "From what I understand, you and Fee have fire and thunder covered. Though I don't know how a Fire Sword can be used to prank."

"I've a few tricks." And, with an eerie bit of timing, Hestia howled right then. Signal. Because few things were as spooky as a lone wolf's howl. "Welp, here we go."

Arthur and I crept closer, using the grass as cover, while Fee went up in the air. The majority of the initial spooking was going to rely on us three and our magic, so we had to be perfectly hidden while still getting a good view. Though, as we got closer, it seemed like we had accidentally started the spooking sooner. The captured patrols hadn't returned, obviously, so from their perspective, they sent soldiers out and they'd vanished into the night. Of course, some were smart and wondered if we'd done something, but it still meant the air of the camp was unnerved. Perfect.

"We're waiting for Fee to start, yes?" Arthur asked quietly. Both of us were on our hands and knees in the grass, just barely able to see things. The grass was really itchy, and I swore a couple of bugs crawled over me. "I think an ant just bit me."

"Funny how stories never mention things like this," I half-joked. I had to crawl a little forward to get a view of their campfire. I needed a line of sight. "But yes. She'll have both the easiest and hardest time hiding, and we want them to be looking up."

"Got it." He moved to stay next to me and set his tome on the ground, resting one hand on it. A very dull green glow surrounded his fingers and he smiled. "The sylphs are super excited. The pixies are too."

"Taking your word on that."

"They like you. The pixies, I mean."

"Also taking your word on that." Supposedly, those with magic who 'shift' their senses to see the pixies, sprites, and sylphs that assisted humans in using elemental magic, but I didn't know how. But it would make some sense if they just liked me anyway. I was of Fjalar's blood, after all. "Lana is going to be so mad at how muddy my clothes are getting."

"Who's Lana?"

"Youngest of our little group, adorable as a kitten, and our healer, meaning you really don't want to make her mad. I laid down on the ground so that I could more easily prop myself up while still having a hand free. And winced because I definitely saw the insect bites. "Should've put on insect balm prior to all of this."

"I'm regretting wearing shorts." He grimaced. "Really regretting it."

"Yeah, I'm wishing I had tights or something for my legs." The slits up the dress were normally very convenient, but right now… "While I don't want her to be in danger…"

"I really hope Fee hurries the hell up."

"Same." I sighed. "Same."
Sadly, sort of, we had to wait a little while longer before Fee apparently decided she was in a good position. But when she sent down an Elthunder to strike an empty spot in the camp, that was the second signal. As the Dozel soldiers yelped and ran about, I reached out and seized the flames of the campfire, making it climb into the air and burn hotter. But still in the same place. After all, I didn't want to burn them all to death. I just wanted to scare them.

"You should make shapes!" Arthur suggested with a grin. Now that we were actually doing something, he was excited and it was surprisingly infectious. "Can you do that?"

"Sure I can," I replied. I thought for a moment and then shaped the flames into a giant wolf 'howling' into the night sky. Perhaps because she saw the wolf from wherever she was, or maybe it was sheer coincidence, but Hestia happened to actually howl almost in perfect sync with the fire-wolf. "Gods, I love my wolf."

"Do a human and make it gesture, will you?"

"Sure." I had the flames slowly turn into a humanoid figure, one unnaturally thin to convey a sense of otherness, and had it make a grand 'sweeping' gesture. Right on cue, Arthur released a small bit of wind magic, actually knocking a couple of the tents over. Fee, watching this all from above, made a few more thunderbolts strike the empty spaces of the camp. By this point, all the soldiers were freaking out, screaming about spirits and curses. "I almost feel bad."

"I don't." Arthur glanced at me. "Though, question. Given the atrocities I've heard…"

"We're taking a leap of faith that Iuchar's soldiers aren't like that due to his reputation. Otherwise, we'll judge them as appropriate." Or something. It was a worry, really. "However, if we judge them all as guilty prior to everything, then more will die in battle."

"So, potentially 'sacrifice' a few to protect the many, huh?" He nodded, understanding, but I winced. I didn't like it. It made me nauseous. "The merchant who taught me mentioned that grand ideals required grand sacrifices."

"You can't save everyone. That's just a fact of life."

"Yep. Life's not fair."

"No, but we can make it fairer. But you have to take leaps of faith for that." I frowned as I noticed something. "They're running for the horses."

"What horses?" Arthur snickered and pointed to where the horses were stampeding off. Except… er… "Wait, that one's…"

"Move!" I had to actually do an awkward backflip-roll to get out of the way of the horses that nearly trampled us. "Arthur?"

"I'm okay..." He groaned and pushed his hair out of his face, smearing some mud on his cheek. He'd rolled and gotten himself muddy. "So, unintentional flaw of the plan."

"Yep." It was stupid to not take into account that the horses would run in random directions. I hoped no one had gotten hurt. "Let's see..." And Hestia howled again. I winced when I saw a couple of the Dozel soldiers crying because of how scared they were. I… I felt bad now. "So, if everything is still okay, then..."

Then our soldiers would jump into the chaos and subdue the Dozel soldiers. Which they did, easily. I stood up and got on my tiptoes to look for Ulster and Larcei, knowing they would head...
straight for Iuchar, and I quickly found them in the middle of battle with someone with short brown hair held back by a blue headband. The finer clothes and axe hinted that he was, indeed, Iuchar. A bit worried by how well he was fighting, I checked that Arthur was okay before heading in, ducking around the various bits of... well, honestly, it was brawling. Iuchar was probably the only one of the Dozel soldiers who actually picked up a weapon.

That all said, I really shouldn't have been worried. By the time I made it over, Larcei had flipped Iuchar onto his back with the tip of her sword under his chin and her foot on his arm. Both she and Ulster were completely apathetic to the whole thing, though Ulster smiled when he saw me, no doubt guessing why I had come over. He dropped his smile when Iuchar sighed and brought his free hand up in surrender.

"Well, it seems I've fallen," Iuchar noted quietly. He seemed surprisingly indifferent about being pinned as he was. "Such a shame."

"Yeah, you have," Larcei noted dryly. She tilted his up slightly with her sword. "So, surrender and-"

"Fallen in love, of course." Using our utter shock, he managed to flip around so that he was kneeling instead of being flat on his back. But he didn't try to walk away or anything. Instead, he took Larcei's hand in his, totally ignoring her admittedly-loose grip on her sword. "And goodness, how lovely you are! Your voice is as sweet as a bird's song, and your eyes sparkle with a brilliance matched only by the stars."

"The hell?!" Larcei's voice was very squeaky and I knew I should intervene. I was a little too busy being stunned. "Are you mad or something?!"

"Ah, yes, love is such a maddening beast sometimes." He sighed gustily. I genuinely wondered if he hit his head. "Yes, yes, I surrender! You may do as you wish, oh beauty of war!"

Larcei continued shrieking in surprise, but Ulster and I just exchanged a 'you have got to be kidding look'. Because we literally couldn't do anything else. This... this... nothing about any of this that was 'according to expectations'. Nothing at all.

Giving the report was probably one of the weirder experiences I'd ever had to deal with. No one in our group could keep a straight face about it. No one. Lester actually fell out of his chair because he laughed so hard. The worst-best part was that Iuchar rather happily agreed with all of our conditions, such as people watching him and his soldiers, not having any weapons... Iuchar actually offered to strip down to reassure ourselves that he really didn't have any hidden weapons. It was... we expected someone much grumpier and that was probably the simplest way of saying that.

"His soldiers are surprisingly kind," Yuria murmured, balancing a tea tray carefully. She had insisted on making us some tea for our war meeting this time, and I offered to help her carry everything. "I expected them to be colder, but they are wonderfully polite."

"Are they?" I asked, laughing a little while carrying my own tray and making sure I didn't trip over Hestia. It had only been a couple of days since they 'joined' us, so I hadn't had the chance to actually talk to them or anything. "Seems we were right to gamble on them being decent people."

"Yes, I think so too!" She giggled, but her cheer faded slightly for a far away look. "I'm scared you all will have to fight and kill good people like that."
"...We already have, I'm sure." It would be nice if war only took the evil people. But war wasn't like the stories of 'hell' you heard in the church. Hell was fair. War wasn't. "I'd rather things didn't come to a war, truthfully. But Danann isn't the type of person who will simply surrender. Neither are those who participate in the Child Hunts." So, we 'sacrificed' a few, the soldiers who fought against us, in the hopes that we would save the many civilians. Once you started thinking of ideals and changing the world, there really wasn't any way to avoid 'sacrificing' something. Or a way to save everyone. We just had to do what we could to minimize it all, no matter how ill it made us. "But I do hope that we will have more surrenders." It wasn't likely, of course, especially as we fought more and more of the Empire. But one could hope anyway.

"I hope so too." She smiled sweetly at me and then we stopped outside a door. "Oh...uh..."

"Hestia?" Hestia barked and got the door open in a couple of tries. "I really shouldn't encourage that, but damn if it's not useful." I stepped inside and noticed the bouquets of roses, of various colors, sitting awkwardly in vases by the map of Isaach. I didn't even need to look at Larcei's exasperated expression to know they were from Iuchar, for her. Someone was going to need to tell him that Larcei was already crushing on someone. For his sake. "Yuria made tea for everyone, so praise her, okay?"

"N-no, it's really nothing!" Yuria blushed prettily even before anyone could say anything. It was hilarious. "Um... but I might need help...?"

"Here, let me," Diarmuid offered, moving to her side to unload the tray. After all, Yuria had insisted on not just a few different teapots, but treats to go with the tea. My tray held only the teacups, easily passed out. "This is wonderful. Thank you for being so thoughtful."

"N-no, really..." Yuria mumbled. As soon as her tray was empty, she held it up to half-hide her face. It did nothing to hide her blush, though. "Um... h-have a good meeting!" And then she was off, nearly tripping over Hestia on her way out. After a moment, Hestia followed Yuria, no doubt deciding that making sure Yuria was fine was more important than taking a nap while we all talked.

"Did I offend her?" Diarmuid looked so confused, while most of our group snickered. I just sighed and made sure Fee and Arthur had their own teacups. Seliph had asked them to be a part of this, because we didn't know much about fliers or magic. "Anyway, let's get set up. We were just waiting on you, Riona, before Iuchar shared some important information."

It took a bit to settle in, both because of the tea and trying to arrange everyone and everything to be comfortable. Eventually, I decided to just take a bunch of the roses and put them in people's hair because they were honestly taking up too much room. Actually braided quite a few into Seliph's and let him braid a bunch in mine. After a moment, Arthur allowed Fee to do the same with his hair, since he was the only other person in the room with hair past their shoulders. The result was an interesting thing where all the 'leaders' in the army were having a very important, very serious meeting with roses all in their hair and stuffing ourselves full of sweets. Let no one say we were a conventional army by any means.

"Goodness, this is far more delightful than the farces my father likes to pretend are meetings," Iuchar noted, sipping his tea from his spot at the end of the table, by Oifeye and Lester. He had a red rose tucked into his headband, his choice. "And such delicious food as well."

"Well, we do try," Seliph replied, smiling gently. Something helped by all the red and white roses in his hair. I didn't purposely put the red ones in his hair, of course. Those had just been the ones Lester handed to me while I was braiding. The smirk told me the exact reason why; Lana must've made sure to tell Lester too. "Regardless, you mentioned you were in charge of Isaach Castle?"
"Were' being the most crucial word. My father's men took over when I was ordered to 'reclaim' Ganeishire. As a result, it's probably the most defensible, especially since it's on the main road."

"Of course." Seliph traced out the path on the map for emphasis. "So, we'll have to prepare for a siege…"

"Or take another way."

"Is there one?" Larcei asked, frowning at the map. She had an orange rose tucked behind her ear, picked by Diarmuid. "I mean; we do have a flier, but…"

"Flying everyone from here to Rivough would take a long time," Fee finished, fiddling with the white rose behind her ear. She and Arthur were side by side, standing between Lana and Oifeye. "Obviously, of course, but for emphasis, Annand can carry only two people and their stuff at a time. And one of those people has to be me. Pegasi only tolerate other riders if their knight is incapacitated."

"Hey, morbid and off-topic, but what happens to a pegasus when their knight dies?"

"Assuming they didn't die too? Either retire and are pampered for the rest of their days or choose a new one. Often a relative of their original knight. Misha rides her mother's pegasus, for instance."

"That's pretty interesting, actually."

"And off-topic," Ulster reminded, sighing. Even with a pink rose in his hair, put in by Larcei, he was perfectly stoic. I was actually beginning to worry he was hiding too much. "We need a way to sneak behind Isaach Castle. He pointed to the lone castle off the road. "What's that? Can we go there?"

"That would be Sophara," Iuchar answered. I tried to not react to the name. Sophara… Dad's childhood home… I'd always wanted to visit. But this was a serious meeting, so I tried to not react. Diarmuid nudged my side, though, telling me that was a lost cause. I rolled my eyes and fixed the lilac rose behind his ear, picked so that he could press it later. "My younger brother is in charge of it, and since it's out of the way, it's got far less of our 'elites'." He set his teacup down and smiled slightly. "And there's two half-hidden paths leading from it. One that heads straight to Isaach Castle, and one that heads straight for Rivough."

"Meaning we could actually bypass Isaach Castle entirely?" Oifeye whispered. Even he had a rose in his hair, a white one. He'd tried to refuse, but Seliph put it there anyway. Because there was no way we were going to leave Oifeye out. "That would be far less strain on our resources, and hopefully cut off potential reinforcements. Unless there are some already there…?"

"Not that I've heard, but I'll be the first to admit that my father never tells me anything besides what he wants me to do and how disappointed he is in me." Iuchar said the words lightly, but most of us winced. Only Arthur didn't, but that might've been because he was more distracted by whatever was on the ceiling, seemingly not paying attention. He didn't even react when Fee fixed the yellow and red roses braided into his hair. "He's not boasted of it, which is a good sign, but that could've changed."

"I see."

"Well, regardless, should we send Fee out to scout and check that the paths exist and are still viable?" Lester suggested, quickly shifting the subject to more comfortable topics. He took the orange rose out of his hair briefly, chosen because it reminded him of Lana and Aideen, and then
tucked it behind his other ear. "If you don't mind being volunteered, that is, Fee. I apologize for that."

"Nah, I don't mind," Fee reassured. She poked Arthur's shoulder. "Can he come with me for back-up, though?"

"Of course." Lester glanced at Seliph to make sure and Seliph nodded, officially giving his permission. "We can decide our path once that's confirmed, then. Otherwise, we'll talk ourselves in circles."

"However, I have a question for Iuchar," Lana whispered, briefly touching the pink rose she had in her hair. We made Ulster pick it, just for fun. Even more fun for me, since I wasn't sure the others knew that Ulster like-liked Lana. Things had been busy. "And it's how are you doing? I mean… we're asking quite a thing, for you to fight against your family."

"Your kindness is only surpassed by your beauty, Lady Lana," Iuchar immediately replied, sighing gustily. Lana frowned, no doubt feeling like she was being mocked. "But regardless, I am perfectly fine. While it is beautiful and wondrous to see the close bonds you and yours have, I must admit that the very idea of family getting along and liking each other is incredibly baffling to me." He smiled bitterly, surprisingly so. "My father is a lazy, entitled ass with an inferiority complex. My older brother is entirely too focused on 'family honor', and not on 'personal morals'. And my little brother is a stick in the mud at the best of times, far too cynical, with no love for the grander ideals in the slightest. I hate all of them. And they hate me just as much."

"That's…" An uncomfortable silence fell, because it was just… incomprehensible to us. Even Arthur frowned at that. "Um…"

"So, yes, I am well and you don't need to hold back on Iucharba or my father on my account." His smiled warmed. "I do appreciate the concern, however."

"Is there no chance that we can talk Iucharba down?" Seliph asked, wisely redirecting the conversation again. I wished Hestia had stayed so that I could cuddle with her and get some reassurance. As it was, I went around refilling or rewarming the forgotten mugs of tea, just to have something to do. "I've heard he dislikes…"

"He hates the Empire, the Child Hunts, and our father," Iuchar confirmed. He smiled kindly at me when I heated up his tea before focusing on Seliph again. I went around the table and then returned to my spot, next to Seliph and across from Ulster. "Probably the only three things I've agreed with him with in our entire lives. That said, Prince Seliph, Iucharba is a protective, but cynical sort. Not inclined to take chances or gambles. And you're quite the gamble, Prince Seliph. Others have risen and fallen. Others still try." "But you side with us."

"I'm more inclined to take gambles, and I'm a little less stubborn. He's inclined to find a path and charge down it, regardless of the damage to himself. I am more inclined to take a leap of faith, providing that it suits the ideals I adore." Iuchar grinned suddenly. "Besides, with such skillful goddesses of war on your side, you might have a chance."

"Uh…" Seliph's expression blanked and Larcei facepalmed. Fee and I exchanged an exasperated look when we realized he'd used a plural. Poor Lana just looked confused. "I think that was a compliment, so I'll just say 'thank you'?"

"You're welcome!" And now came the slightly awkward silence. "So, forgive me, but if there
"I had a personal question," Ulster immediately whispered. His expression was carefully stoic, even more so than usual, and immediately, I knew what he was about to ask. "You see; Larcei and I are actually your cousins. We're the children of Lex and Ayra, so I was wondering-"

"Ulster!" Larcei snapped, bristling. We Tirnanog people tensed, not quite sure what to do. Iuchar seemed startled and frowned, closely studying both Ulster and Larcei. Poor Fee and Arthur looked so confused and I couldn't blame them at all. But there was also no time to explain. "You…!"

"You can leave if you want, Larcei." Ulster didn't even look at her. He looked right at Iuchar, unwavering. "But I want to know what happened. I'm tired of not knowing." Larcei glared at him, but reached out to hold his hand. Choosing to stay, even though… "So, Iuchar? If you don't know, that's fine, but…"

"At the moment, I'm kicking myself for not realizing sooner you're Uncle Lex's children," Iuchar replied. He smiled sadly, and I winced. I wasn't the only one. "You two… look exactly like them. Or, at least, my memory of them." Seliph took my hand and I stepped a little closer to him. "But yes, I know. I know what happened." Lana brought her hands up in prayer. Diarmuid walked over and rested his hand on Ulster's shoulder. Lester closed his eyes, bracing himself for… "They're both buried in the crypt at Isaach Castle, next to King Mariccle's memorial. I burn incense for them, when I can."

It was news we expected. Especially when we discovered General Richard had Uncle Lex's Brave Axe. But it still felt like a punch to the gut. Larcei's knees buckled, but Diarmuid caught her. Ulster went absolutely rigid, not even breathing for a split-second. During that same split-second, Seliph and I simultaneously panicked because no one had been watching Oifeye and we both rushed to his side, ready to help him if needed. Of course, Oifeye had been expecting this even longer than we had, and so, he simply covered his face, too tired to cry. Lester found a chair from nowhere, from my perspective, and pulled it over for him. Oifeye sat down hard and didn't say or do anything, simply letting the three of us fuss over him.

It took a couple of seconds to even think about checking on Arthur and Fee, and I winced, prepared to offer apologies. But Fee's eyes were wide and shining with held back tears, and she'd covered her mouth as if to stifle a gasp. Arthur was a little more stoic, but still, he looked sympathetic. Probably because both had lost parents. Fee's was recent; Arthur was still traumatized.

"So, he buried them?" Arthur asked quietly, voice surprisingly gentle. His expression was also soft, and he looked carefully at all of us, gauging our reactions. "Based on what I have heard of the man, and what you just said about lack of familial ties, I wouldn't have expected such respect."

"Oh, no, you're right. Father had wanted to throw their bodies to the animals to hide the evidence, but some of the older soldiers balked at the thought and they got the bodies to some Isaachians who handled the proper burials," Iuchar explained. He still smiled sadly, wincing a bit as he looked at Larcei and Ulster. Ulster was still rigid, with Lana and Lester hovering by him worriedly. Diarmuid continued holding Larcei up, kissing her hair reassuringly. Larcei and Ulster still held hands. "At least, that's what I was told. I didn't see that part or anything. I just heard about it after I was 'assigned' Isaach Castle, and I accidentally found the graves in the crypt while exploring."

"And what's the significance of incense burning?"

"Ah, in Grannvale, one burns incense for the dead, to soothe their spirits and help them not miss the realm of the living so much and trap themselves on this side as ghosts."
"Oh, so like how in Silesse, we leave candles and lanterns for the dead, because it's bad luck to leave them in darkness." Arthur nodded, smiling from the new bit of information, and shrugged off Fee's dirty look. "Look, either someone talks or we're in silence while everyone tries to process that Tornado spell. I hate silence. Always means bad things." He shrugged and Seliph made sure to catch his eye and smile reassuringly. "Going to take that smile as permission to keep asking questions. So, what do you mean by 'hide the evidence', Iuchar?"

"Well, the 'official story' is that Uncle Lex and Aunt Ayra died to bandits. Their injuries might've suggested otherwise, and my father does have a decent sense of self-preservation." Iuchar sighed. "If Emperor Arvis or, worse, Empress Diadora, had learned, without a doubt, that Father had killed Uncle Lex, then Father would be dead. Ash or a nice little blood patch, depending on which one got him first."

"Why the 'without a doubt'?"

"No proof meant that Emperor Arvis couldn't just save everyone a headache and kill Father without seeming like a tyrant. Which he seems to have stopped caring about nowadays, but at the time, his position was more vulnerable, and Father had plenty of time to hide everything by the time they even heard about the deaths in Belhalla. Yied Desert slows gossip significantly. When it doesn't outright stop it." Meaning that there was only rumors and suspicions, and nothing that could 'legally' be done. Typical.

"And the ash and blood patch part?"

"Ash if it was Emperor Arvis, because Valflame. Blood patch if it was Empress Diadora, because Book of Naga." Iuchar paused. "Unless you were asking about why they'd do that. The answer is because Uncle Lex was the best friend of Duke Azel, Emperor Arvis's younger brother." Arthur's eyes narrowed slightly at the name. "Meaning Uncle Lex was 'like family' and… well..."

"Sadly, it seems like Arvis has as loose of a definition of family as Danann, save when it's convenient," I deadpanned, unable to bite my tongue in time. But I did find it hard to believe that Arvis would kill Dannan simply because Uncle Lex was 'like family'. After all, this was the same man who massacred his younger siblings' friends and family, simply for his ambition. And I doubted Diadora for similar reasons. She'd remarried and let her second husband incinerate her first husband. And abandoned her firstborn. That all said… "Sorry, that was unnecessary."

"However, the questions and that comment bought me the time to process things," Oifeye whispered. He brought his hands down, and he still didn't cry. There was no sign of tears. Just deep, tired sorrow. An ache that would never go away. "Ulster, Larcei, I want to know when and how. If you two need to leave..." Larcei shook her head, even as she still leaned on Diarmuid. Ulster didn't react, save to look at Iuchar. "Very well. Please..."

"The when... I think it's been about thirteen years now," Iuchar whispered. He frowned in thought, but all of us (save Arthur and Fee, of course) stiffened. Thirteen years ago... we had been near Isaach Castle specifically because Aideen had heard Aunt Ayra and Uncle Lex were near. That was why Conall had been captured. We'd thought it was false for years. But it had been true? It had been true, and we had just missed each other? That was just... "Yes, thirteen years ago. It was shortly before the death of Duchess Alicia and we still lived in Isaach Castle then." That was just too cruel..."

"I see." Oifeye made himself sit up straight. Seliph squeezed his shoulder, and I took Oifeye's hand. The others had Ulster and Larcei. Someone needed to be there for Oifeye. "How? Do you know?"
"Most of it, yeah. I actually saw part of it, while some servants were getting Brian, Iucharba, and me to a 'safer' location." Iuchar closed his eyes, to better remember. "From what I understand, they were trying to sneak past and got caught and, so, tried to fight their way out. I saw Uncle Lex and Father dueling, with Uncle Lex dominating the battle. And I saw Aunt Ayra, or at least a woman I assume was my aunt, just kicking ass all over the place. It was glorious, watching them fight. Poetry in motion."

"They were always two of Sigurd's strongest fighters." That was why the 'bandit' story had never made sense. "Was it numbers?"

"No, hostages. Children hostages." Silence fell in response, all of us staring in horror. "Father took some of the servants' children hostage. He told Uncle Lex and Aunt Ayra to drop their weapons or the children would die. And badly injured one when Aunt Ayra declared that he was bluffing. So, they dropped their weapons." Iuchar's smile was pained. "That's about the end of what I saw. I saw them back to back, holding hands and keeping perfectly poised while the soldiers prepared to kill them. And Father laughed at his 'victory'. It echoed down the hall as the servants pulled me away."

"That… that does sound like them." Oifeye closed his eyes and slowly pushed himself up. "I do think I need to lay down, though. And write Aideen."

"Yes, let's end the meeting here," Seliph encouraged with a kind and understanding smile. He helped Oifeye over to the door. "Fee, can you remain here a moment longer? I want to discuss the logistics of your scouting."

Slowly but surely, everyone dispersed. Seliph, Fee, and Arthur remained, just as Seliph had requested. Oifeye left to be alone, specifically requesting it. Lana and Lester took charge of Larcei, who let herself be led about like a doll. Diarmuid tugged Ulster after him, immediately launching into some logistical things that Diarmuid likely knew the answer to, but would help Ulster keep busy while he processed everything. I wondered what to do personally before deciding to do the obvious. Times like this required warm milk with honey. So, I headed towards the kitchen, and ran into Hestia. Or, rather, Hestia ran into me, licking my hand and arm, and nearly knocking me over. I hadn't even noticed her running up.

"Ah, is everything okay?" Yuria, of course, followed. "Hestia got very… well, energetic, but with a franticness?" Yuria explained softly, frowning worriedly. I wondered if Hestia sensed something was wrong with her 'pack', even so far away. "Oh! The flowers are so pretty!"

"The… oh, right," I whispered. I'd completely forgotten about the flowers Seliph had braided into my hair. Red and lilac. "And it'll be fine. Simply a confirmation of something sad and painful. We'd known about it for a while, but we hadn't known-known until today."

"So, Larcei and Ulster's parents? I've heard Iuchar is their cousin, so it makes sense that he would know..." She clasped her hands and looked down. "I know Larcei thought they were still alive, but the rest of you…"

"Larcei clung to the belief, but I think she knew they were dead." It just hurt, because she had so desperately hoped to be wrong. "Regardless, what everyone needs is time, distraction, and warm milk with honey." Something I needed as well. "Do you know how to make it? I'll teach you."

"That sounds wonderful!" Yuria smiled sweetly. "Yes, please!"

I sent Hestia off to find Ulster, not wanting her underfoot while we were in the kitchen, and taught Yuria the 'super secret art' of making warm milk with honey. She watched and listened with rapt fascination, taking the lesson completely seriously, so it actually wasn't long before I managed to
cheer up. A good thing, since I took over Larcei and Ulster's jobs for the rest of the day. They needed the break, but their jobs couldn't just be ignored. So I handled their share of the work and their shares of the smiles. Someone had to. Might as well be me.

Fee and Arthur went scouting after that meeting, and returned a few days later to confirm that the path from Sophara to Rivough was definitely viable, and more or less totally unwatched. Seliph promptly sent a messenger to Iucharba in Sophara, asking if he'd be willing to negotiate, but the messenger returned with the message undelivered. Iucharba refused to even receive them. So, we all prepared to march, determined to take and hold Sophara. I spent my time trying to not be excited at visiting Dad's childhood home and making sure Larcei, Ulster, and Oifeye were doing okay. We all rearranged the chores/duties list to give them lighter loads, and did our best to help them when they faltered.

Because of all of that, I didn't realize until the day we planned to confront Iucharba that I could ask Iuchar about Conall. Iuchar made no secret about being willing to answer any of our questions to the best of his abilities, after all, and honestly did his best to be as helpful as possible to prove his loyalty to our cause. He'd obviously know about how Conall was. The trick was getting enough time to ask him!

"You're curious about Prince Conall?" Iuchar asked once I finally got a free moment. It wasn't even really 'free', so much as I managed to ask him for some assistance. We needed to move some supplies further back to lessen the chances of them getting in the way during the potential battle. Iuchar was stronger than me. Simple. "What would you like to know? Are you worried that he'll show up as reinforcements?"

"Is that a danger?" I asked, choosing to not really answer his questions. While Iuchar knew Seliph's lineage, and Larcei and Ulster's, he was still learning everyone else's. I didn't feel like getting into it, at the moment. "And how much of one?"

"Well, I certainly don't want to face him in combat. He's known as the Reaper's Wolf for how skilled he is, and he is a powerful magic user with some trick that allows him to bypass one's resistance to magic. Add in that he's considered a master of light and fire magic…" Iuchar grimaced and I... I wasn't sure how to react, honestly. The Conall I remembered wouldn't have been good at combat, much less be associated with a 'reaper'. Then again, Shanan told me once that Dad had an epithet when he was a gladiator and mercenary, the 'Death's Hound.' It wasn't something that came up in the army a lot, but Shanan remembered it nonetheless. So, I supposed it was 'fitting' in that fashion. But it did remind me that a lot had changed since I last saw him. So much was different... "That all said, he hates my father with a passion and makes no secret of it. So, I doubt he'll appear."

"I see." We reached the area with all the other boxes, and I looked for some free space to put this last one. "Where might he be, then?"

"Likely in Belhalla. Crown Prince Julius is incredibly fond of him, and despite how public opinion of the royal family has been dropping, Prince Conall remains very popular, so his presence keeps the people calm." Iuchar set the box he'd been carrying down where I indicated. I wondered why Conall's 'popularity' remained constant, and wondered if it was because of our parents, and their connection to Sigurd. "If he's not there, then perhaps he's in Alster or Conote. He and Lady Ishtar are best friends, and she is often in both locations. Though, it's possible he's could be in Thracia. He normally spends the autumn, and harvests, there."

"Really?"
"Yes, he's a good friend of Prince Arione." He smiled. "Regardless, though, I doubt we'll fight him, especially here with my brother."

"I see." There were a thousand more questions I had, but honestly, I got my biggest question answered. Conall was alive, and he seemed to be doing fine. Considering we were likely going to battle soon, I really didn't have a right to ask more. Truthfully, I shouldn't have asked anything at all, but... "Thank you. Both for the information and for the help."

"Of course, dear lady." He smiled warmly. "Is there anything else I can do to assist in securing our glorious victory today?"

"Don't suppose you have tips for possibly getting Iucharba to surrender and not lead a bunch of people to their deaths?" On both sides. Really, I'd rather not kill anyone today.

"Yeah, don't mention me. Don't bring me up. If anything, make him think I'm not here." He shrugged, but that nonchalance just made my heart hurt even more. "You might stand more of a chance. Maybe."

"I understand." I smiled for him. "Thank you." "You're quite welcome."

Iuchar went to assist with whatever else he could and I spent the next hour or so before marching continuing to keep things together. When we did march for the open fields just outside Sophara, though, I was certain I was going to be sick. This was my first time standing on an open to-be-battlefield, staring down the enemy army. In Tirnanog, we jumped into a battle already in progress. On the road, it was ambushes. In Ganeishire, I'd infiltrated ahead of things. But here? Here, I stood next to Seliph, looking out over the fields that would soon be filled with blood and corpses, with Hestia at my side. Our mounted units were on the flanks or whatever the term was, led by Diarmuid, Lester, luchar, and Oifieye. Larcei and Ulster were with their own groups, out of immediate sight. Lana and Yuria were in the infirmary. Fee was resting on a nearby cliff, with Arthur by her side.

And before us? Before us was Dozel's Sophara-Army, all infantry, lightly armored axe users with some archers mixed in. Due to Sophara being off the main path, it wasn't that large of an army. Certainly, it was smaller than the army we expected in Rivough and Isaach Castle. But it was still an enemy army, simply waiting. Waiting for a signal, just like all of our soldiers. The wind blowing through as the stalemate stretched on and on... waiting... waiting... waiting...

"Thanks for being here with me," Seliph whispered. Even with the silence, it was hard to hear him. "I'm certain I would've buckled by now."

"You're stronger than you think you are, Seliph," I replied. I caught his eye and smiled reassuringly. "Still, of course I'm with you." I hesitated, thinking of my feelings. Given everything, I hadn't actually thought too much about them or about my fear of confessing. And now certainly wasn't the time to figure anything out. "As I always am." Still, that felt right to say, especially right now.

"...Thank you..." He smiled back, and it was a smile with many things. Warmth, kindness, relief, bravery. "Okay. Let's do this."

"You're giving him one more chance, yes?"

"Yes." Seliph closed his eyes and gathered his courage. "I'll offer my hand one more time. If he
refuses, then we will force the path to Sophara open."

"Are we aiming to capture or kill?"

"If we can somehow capture him, that would be lovely, but I'm not going to order it. Things are chaotic enough during a battle, and our soldiers aren't so well trained that..." That they could survive while holding back. Though we wanted to minimize casualties on both sides, we had to prioritize our own people's safety. They trusted us with their lives; we had to match that trust. "Okay. Stay near me?"

"Always." I knew he was asking not just for moral support. It was a risk, to step out and address Iucharba. Oifeye had actually warned against it, because it gave archers time to aim. So, officially, I was here as Seliph's guard, along with Hestia. "I'll have my flames ready."

"Then I have little to fear." He smiled at me again, took a deep breath, and stepped forward, bringing up his hand to remind our soldiers to wait. They shifted behind us, a few accidentally bumping into each other as they moved into formation. "Lord Iucharba, I wish to speak with you." There was a bit of movement among the enemy soldiers, and I watched them carefully as I kept near Seliph. Hestia's ears were up and forward and twitched this way and that, catching sounds. And scents, but obviously not with her ears. "Might you indulge me?"

"Ugh... you really are an idiot." Still, a lone man pushed forward, his expression set in a scowl. Like Iuchar, he wore a headband in his hair, a green one. "Fine, we can," Iucharba replied, looking distinctly unimpressed by all of us. "Though, I'd think refusing your messengers should've been answer enough."

"I am afraid I am quite the stubborn person, and I truly do wish to minimize the amount of blood shed this day," Seliph replied easily. He even smiled, perfectly gentle. I could see the nervousness in it, though. "Your soldiers have families who await their return just as mine do. I'd rather they had that chance."

"You really are naive." Iucharba rolled his eyes. "Do you honestly think you're the first to rise up against the Empire? Don't be ridiculous. You're just the latest in a long line and there's nothing about you that makes you any better than them. Holy Blood means nothing; you're just better at killing and surviving. And you might be the true heir, but no one cares about the ass that sits in the throne. They're too busy trying to survive."

"And will they survive with the Empire as it is? Sheltered as I have been, even I am aware of the Empire's attempts to strangle the life out of its people." Seliph held out his hand. Not fully extended, of course, but it was still enough to show what he meant. "So, surely you know that. From what I heard, it must anger you."

"Yeah, and people flock to you because they're desperate. But you've got no chance in hell defeating the Empire. All you're doing is killing people, with hope instead of despair." Iucharba brought his axe up and pointed it at Seliph, a very clear answer to the open hand. "Gathering an army, 'liberating' instead of conquering... it's just the same thing your father did. And we all know how that ended up. You'll face the same end as everyone else."

"So, you will fight."

"I will. Because I think you're full of it."

"...Very well." Seliph closed his eyes and brought his hand down. "Then I am sorry for this. If we had met in different circumstances, I am certain we could have been friends. But if you intend on
blocking my path, I have no choice but to remove you from it. Perhaps it is naive to believe the world can change and that my meager strength is enough to protect anything, but I believe that when everything is dark, the greatest weapon you have is your own light and hope. So, I continue to hope my strength will be enough."

"Then let's see what you've got, 'Prince of Light'." Iucharba raised his axe over his head, and his soldiers cheered, ready for battle. Seliph glanced at me and I nodded before kneeling down to whisper in Hestia's ear. "Dozel soldiers! Show these rebels exactly-!"

Hestia howled. A long, haunting howl that echoed off the mountain sides. And at that howl, the forces we had snuck behind their lines jumped out from their hiding places, led by Larcei and Ulster. Arthur, from his perch, unleashed a torrent of wind magic to knock down large chunks of the army. Fee, high above everything, struck key targets with her thunder sword. After all, while we had hoped for a peaceful solution, we had known it might not happen. So, we had prepared. Big showy front, sneaky team behind. A basic strategy that was effective at disrupting enemy formations, and Iucharba clearly hadn't expected, based on Seliph's reputation as a kind and gentle lord. Not that, of course, they went down without a fight. There were still a lot of them, after all.

"Easy, easy," I murmured, helping one of ours up. He'd rushed forward to kill an enemy soldier, and tripped over a corpse. "Enthusiasm is good and all, but you have to watch things." Another enemy soldier appeared and tried to attack me, but Hestia tore their throat out. "Or have a wolf watch for you!"

"I think I'll watch myself, my lady!" the soldier laughed. I didn't know his name, but he was young. Younger than me, and probably younger than our minimum age. "I've seen the chaos your wolf causes."

"She's a troublemaker for sure. So, pay attention to your surroundings and your own injuries." I nudged him towards the backlines. "Go get checked. Battle-fever will dull your pain and you might not notice a bad injury until it's too late."

"Yes, my lady!" They ducked back and I killed an archer that tried to shoot at their back. Hestia crushed another archer's arm between her jaws. "Thank you!"

That sort of thing was my normal during the battle. While Seliph shouted orders and actually led, I worked on encouraging our soldiers as they flagged. Within seconds of outright battle, everyone was absolutely exhausted and some of our fighters hadn't expected that. So, I focused on guarding them, being the confident leader who 'knew' we were going to succeed. Hestia, of course, remained at my side during the battle, rarely venturing far. That gave me the freedom to actually look for soldiers who needed personal talks.

"My lady!" It also meant I was easier to find on a battlefield than most. "My lady, Lady Lana has requested you," one soldier informed me. After a moment, I recognized the scars and knew her to be Niamh, from the sword lessons. "It seems the soldiers broke through and fell on the infirmary."

"I see," I murmured. I wanted to scream, but I checked the urge. I had to be calm and confident. "Well, we'll make them pay for that in a moment. Can you make sure Seliph knows this happened?" I pointed to where he was. I could just barely see him from here. "Just in case he wants to change the strategy."

"Of course." Niamh bowed, and I studied her, noting that while she was wounded, she seemed mostly fine. That made me happy, since I taught her. "Lady Lana moved the infirmary back closer to the supplies."
"Probably intends on using the boxes as a barricade." I reached into my medicine pouch and tended to a noticeably bad wound on her arm. "Remember to have your wounds evaluated by someone other than you. Battle-fever…"

"Can make you push forward when you shouldn't. I know." She pointed to the scars on her face and neck, and I nodded, acknowledging the gentle rebuke. "Thank you though, my lady."

"Of course." I snapped my fingers, both to burn an enemy's clothes to distract and to call Hestia to my side. She appeared after a moment, dropping someone's arm on my feet on accident. I was tired enough to just not care, but not so tired that I didn't feel nauseous over the apathy. "I shall fall back then."

Of course 'falling back' was easier said than done. I had to reassure my own that things were fine, and I was simply looking into something. Our enemies thought I was 'running away' and was thus an 'easy target', which I had to deal with violently. Poor Hestia ended up pulling a leg while protecting me. Not that she had to deal with it long. Lana's first reaction upon us finally arriving at where she was re-setting up the infirmary was to heal her up. Only then she turned and tended to me.

"I am feeling significantly less bad about killing him," Lana grumbled, healing me with a staff. I almost protested, but bit my tongue. If she was this mad, she'd turn her temper on me on accident. "Thanks for coming, though. I was a bit worried…"

"Of course I'm here," I chided, smiling. Noticing how frazzled she also was, I leaned down and kissed her head. "It's going to be fine, Lana. I'm sorry we let you get exposed to such danger."

"If this is his way of being like 'oh, see, you are naive for thinking enemies won't target the healers'..." She sighed, and shook her head. "No, now isn't the time for me to growl. I got separated from Yuria."

"You… what?" I looked around worriedly, and saw she was right. Yuria was nowhere in sight, which was… bad. On multiple levels. "Well, she does have a tome, but…" Yuria had never been in a battle before.

"I'm also missing some patients. Some of which are pretty badly hurt." She smiled at me, an attempt at a healer's smile. While it might fool most, I saw the strain in it. "Much as I'd love a hug right now, you and Hestia are our best trackers."

"More like Hestia is." I glanced down worriedly, but Hestia simply barked and started sniffing about, already trying to get the scent. "We'll do what we can. There's a lot of spells."

"Smells." She giggled and I facepalmed when I realized what I'd done. "There's actually not a lot of spells. Just Arthur, unless you've been using your fire sword?"

"...I need to." I rested my hand on it, thinking. I'd defaulted to Dad's silver blade, but while I loved the idea of him watching out for me, I couldn't rely on his protection forever. And I did want to push past my discomfort, if only for our soldiers' sake. I owed them my best. So, I sheathed the silver blade and unsheathed the fire sword. "I'll be back, with Yuria and hopefully, some of your missing patients."

"I'm counting on you~!" She kissed my cheek and went back to work. And after making sure the area was clear of enemies, Hestia and I left to try and track down Yuria.

It was difficult. We didn't exactly have a convenient 'here is an item of theirs, so catch the scent'
thing, and there was a lot of blood and guts, so what scent Hestia might find was drowned out. And just trying to listen for her was rough because the air was filled with the screams of the pained and the dying, the war bellows of the fighting, and the constant clang and thumps of weapons hitting against each other or against armor. So, I had to rely on my sight, searching for a flash of silver amidst the carnage, while Hestia did her very best to hunt for Yuria and protect me. She was definitely getting bunches of treats as soon as I could manage it. Maybe a whole pig. Or a deer. Just for her.

Eventually, Hestia barked, snarled, and lunged forward, tearing the throat out of an enemy and crushing their spine. As both fell, I saw Yuria staring blankly at it, trying to process what happened. She was splattered with blood, drenched in sweat, and was pale enough that I feared she was about to faint. But, surprisingly, she didn't seem to be injured. Well, I was surprised until I saw she had help: Diarmuid.

"Hestia, you are getting so many treats once the battle is over," Diarmuid breathed, kneeling by the bloody mess of the corpse to rub Hestia's back vigorously. She licked his face and nuzzled him. "Riona, what brings you to this part of the field? You were more center."

"Lana sent for me, since she got separated from Yuria," I explained. I glanced around and saw that there were a clustered of badly hurt people just behind where Yuria was. She and Diarmuid had been fighting to protect them. "What about you? And where is your horse?"

"Fee told me that Yuria was under assault, but she couldn't get near because of archers." It took me a moment to remember that as a flier, Fee had a better overview of the battle. Damn, fliers were amazing. "I was closest, so she cleared out who she could with the thunder sword, told me, and then went to get Arthur to better assist with clearing." Diarmuid kissed Hestia's head and stood up, wincing. He'd pulled something definitely, and a cut on his cheek bled sluggishly. "I let someone borrow my horse to make sure Oifeye and Seliph knew what was going on, and to lessen the chances of me accidentally trampling people I kind of like."

"Yeah, that would be bad." I sheathed the Fire Sword, unused thanks to Hestia, and cupped Yuria's face, focusing entirely on her. "Hey, Yuria? Can you see me? Can you hear me?"

"A-ah, yes!" Yuria squeaked. She coughed, struggling to catch a breath, and glanced down. Shock. "Sorry, I wasn't… you surprised me."

"I imagine so." I smiled warmly at her and kissed her forehead. "It's okay. I'm going to help you get them back to the infirmary."

"Oh, good…" She smiled back and some color finally returned to her face. "It's been a struggle protecting them. Thank everything for Diarmuid. If not for him, I… I'm sure I would've…"

"You were doing a damn good job before I got over here," Diarmuid pointed out. He glanced to the side and nodded. "Seems Hestia's messy kill got us a breather. Let's get them checked and moving."

"Yes!" Yuria agreed. She tucked her wind tome under her arm and retrieved her staff from the ground. She must've dropped it. "Okay, let's see…"

We worked together to get everyone organized. Sadly, some had bled out during the chaos and all we could do was move their bodies to the side to be retrieved and identified later. The worst were the ones that bled out as Yuria attempted to get to 'moving condition'. She did her best, but they'd lost a lot of crucial time with the attack and inability to move from this point. There just wasn't anything we could do. Or so I thought. Arthur appeared out of nowhere to prove that sometimes, there were actually some things one could still do when a person's heart stopped. Apparently,
loosing a small bit of thunder magic at two points on the chest could jolt the heart back into beating (or resuming regular rhythm) just long enough for healing magic to take.

"Oh, good, that worked," Arthur noted, stepping back. He waved to Diarmuid and me and tried to not yelp when Hestia licked his hand in greeting. "For the record, don't actually do what I did? Full-powered tome just kills them faster."

"I think I figured that part out," I replied dryly, just because. He grinned, showing no hard feelings. But now I had to really wonder if he was Aunt Tailtiu's kid. That looked like something I'd do with fire. "I take it Fee dropped you off?"

"She did, but sooner than she wanted. An archer nearly shot us out of the sky." Right, archers were the bane of all fliers, particularly pegasi. Oifeye had taught us that. "I needed the break anyway. No offense, but..."

"You're exhausted. Of course you are. Why wouldn't you be?" I grinned, mostly to avoid frowning. Now that he pointed it out, I could see his complexion was grey with exhaustion and his clothes and hair stuck awkwardly to his skin thanks to sweat. "Only reason I haven't dropped is because of stubborn spite."

"Always perfect." He became serious again. "Regardless, though, I'm here to help with moving, if need be."

"In that case, I should get back to the fighting to make sure they don't break through again." I looked to Diarmuid and he nodded. He'd remain here for a while longer to continue assisting, and then jump back. He'd also suggest that Arthur remain as an infirmary guard to rest. "See you later~!" Thus, with a cheer I didn't feel, I leapt back into the fray with Hestia to rally the soldiers still.

Thankfully, by this point, the battle was starting to wind down. The Dozel soldiers had lost too many soldiers to continue with an all-out offensive. Honestly, I couldn't help but wonder that at this point, they were just... just not 'going quietly'. Making us work for the 'honor' of killing them. Or maybe they were making a statement. 'I do not believe in you, and I would rather die than believe in what I think is a false hope.' It was sobering to say the least. Growing up with so many believing in us... so many being willing to die for us... it was almost uneasy, to see people so willing to die because we were the alternative.

"There you are, Iucharba." Iuchar's voice startled me, and I turned to see him talking to Iucharba. "And you're still continuing this farce of a fight," Iuchar sighed, shaking his head. He was still mounted. "It pains me to have a little brother as foolish as you."

"You're the foolish one, believing in these brats," Iucharba retorted, rolling his eyes. Both were just... so nonchalant. The thought of having to fight Conall made me ill, and I hadn't seen him in thirteen years. Yet these two brothers, who grew up with each other... "Well, that's irrelevant. Kind of expected something like this, so let's get it over with."

"Yes, I suppose so." Iuchar brandished his axe. "For love, justice, and peace, I shall strike you down!"

"Gods, can you keep the flowery vomit out of this?" Iucharba charged. Iuchar blocked. And so, the two brothers dueled, amidst the blood and bodies of their soldiers.

If this had been a story, everything would've stopped to observe. But, of course, it wasn't. People still fought. People still died. So, I continued to fight, to rally, to kill. Hestia continued protecting
me. Because the battle might've been dying down, but it still raged on. And, at some point, Hestia howled in warning, and I whirled to see a bunch of Dozel soldiers, in a final bit of desperation, break through our back lines again. With none of ours really 'in reach' to stop them from going after the infirmary, again.

It was amazing, what you could do when you decided 'there is no other choice'. As soon as I processed 'no one is close', I dropped the silver blade and drew the fire blade. I sparked its magic into life as I unsheathed it and loosed an Elfire with the initial swing. I cast the spell again with another swing, and in those two castings, the very first proper-spell-casting I had ever done in my life, I burned all of the enemies who had broken through. And I froze as I watched them burn. I heard them scream. I smelled the smoke and char. I watched them writhe in pain before they stopped moving. Dead? In too much pain? I didn't know.

Our soldiers cheered, celebrating the successful 'fix' to the defenses. Celebrating their deaths. A few smiled and bowed to me, celebrating that I, child of Fjalar's blood, had used the power our enemies shared to destroy my foes. Or something. I wasn't sure. I… I… I was honestly going to be sick. But I couldn't be. No, I had to smile. I had to pretend that I was perfectly okay. Because in front of the people who showed me their trust, who put their lives in my hands, I had no right to be ill. I had no right to be afraid. I had no right to scream. I had no right to cry or break down. But I wanted to. Gods, I wanted to. I ambushed them with fire magic. While their backs were turned, while their guard was down, I dropped fireballs on them. Just as… just as Arvis had done during the Belhalla Massacre. And even though I knew, logically, that it was a viable tactic and that it wasn't quite the same… the similarities were enough to make me nauseous. Because it was like him, and honestly, even now, my biggest fear was being like Arvis.

However, I made sure to smile. When they looked at me, I shoved all that panic, nausea, and tears to the side. And I smiled. I smirked. I pretended that I wasn't shaken. I pretended everything was perfectly fine. Because I was their leader and that meant they got my best. Even when I didn't feel my best.

Besides, there were other things to cheer about before long. A few seconds after I cast Elfire, twice, Iuchar slammed his axe into Iucharba's chest and ripped it out in a spray of blood. A killing blow. And with their leader's fall, the Dozel soldiers dropped their weapons and surrendered, too exhausted to do anything more. And the battle ended. Just like that. Though soldiers still died. Wounds still bled. And some… some had time for last words.

"Bah, so this is how I die? Looking at your ugly face?" Iucharba groaned, coughing up blood. More trickled out of the corner of his mouth. "Better than listening to you, I suppose."

"As always, you're such a mouthy brat," Iuchar replied, dismounting. He knelt down next to his dying brother, facing away from me. "Can't you be adorable for once?"

"Screw you." Iuchar coughed up more blood. Blood poured down his chest, seeping into his shirt. "Ugh, and you were always so… nauseating. Talking about ideals and bullshit. Like it would work with life as it is."

"Ideals are what help people stay alive, and brings color to their lives. Be the cynic all you want, but such pessimism only takes you so far. And for you, that path took you here."

"Damn, so I do have to look at you and listen to the flowery junk. What a way to die." Iucharba reached up with a shaking hand and gripped Iuchar's sleeve. "Don't lose. Don't die. You die, and I'll kick your ass right back to the living."
"Say 'hello' to Mother for me."

"Maybe." Iucharba's eyes closed. "If I… think about it…" And his hand fell to the ground.

Iuchar remained where he was, unmoving, so I automatically headed over to check on him, and to check that Iucharba was truly dead. Probably a bit pointless. The gaping hole in his chest proved that. Still, I couldn't help but check. That's just… what you did, I supposed.

"Well, he certainly made his choice," I whispered, standing. Iuchar still didn't look at me, probably because of how stupid the words were. "Iuchar?" I rested a hand on his back. Hestia trotted over to nudge Iucharba's head, like she'd have more luck. But of course, she didn't. The dead were dead. Only the Valkyrie Staff had a chance of bringing them back. "You okay?"

"I… it's so strange…" he murmured, voice wobbling. When he looked up, I saw that he was crying. Full on cry, not just one or two tears. "We've never gotten along. Never liked each other. My first memory of him is trying to put a handful of worms down his shirt because he ruined my favorite toy, just because. I'm sure his first one of me was similar. After all, we've always hated each other. Too opposite and yet, too similar. The only things we had in common were things that made it impossible to cooperate. Father didn't help matters. And yet…" He laughed bitterly and more tears fell down his face. "And yet, here I am, crying. The tears won't stop. It hurts. It hurts so much. I didn't expect that. I truly thought that… that I wouldn't care." He smiled, but it was just painful to look at. "I suppose some part of my heart loved my idiotic little brother after all. Who would've thought?"

"Do you need to be alone?"

"Yes, please." He looked down at Iucharba's body. "But give me a moment to let the rain fall, and I shall spring up like the flowers, vibrant and defiant. I promise. I just… I just need a moment."

"Take all the time you need." I ruffled his hair and, after a moment, leaned down to kiss the top of his head. Then I turned away, calling Hestia to me before doing my best to distract the nearby soldiers. He deserved to mourn and cry in peace, especially right now. I'd make sure he had that time.

So, I had everyone focus on how we just achieved our second great victory, and our first one as an official army-army. I helped them celebrate and comforted the crying. I laughed with them, teased them. I smiled brightly and pretended I wasn't shaken by the battle, by the spells, and by the exchange between Iuchar and Iucharba. That last one haunted me, though, no matter how hard I tried to shove it to the side like all my other anxieties. Would Conall and I have to fight, just as they did? When I reunited with my twin brother, would we be forced to cross blades? Would we have to kill each other? Could I kill him? Could he kill me?

I didn't know. I hoped I never had to find out.

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_Lana_

Class: Cleric; Skills: Pursuit, Charge, Bargain

The 17-year-old daughter of Aideen of Jungby and Sir Midir of the Jungby Knights, younger sister of Lester. The youngest of the Tirmanog group and the only one born after the Belhalla Massacre, she sometimes feels a bit out of place in her own group due to that. Not helped, of course, by the fact that she has a living parent. That said, she knows the others love her dearly and never doubts that love for a second.
Has a Holy Mark for Ulir on her upper left arm, between the shoulder and elbow. Its blessing gives her boosts to stamina and the ability to take damage. According to legend, Ulir's Blood substantially increases one's luck to the point that one can actually make strategies around it. How much is always up for debate, since it's impossible to quantify 'luck', but there are many stories of 'Ulir Luck' saving the lives of the house.

The only one who showed any interest in healing among the group, she takes the duty very seriously. She studies extensively and inherited most of her mother's staves, including the powerful Warp Staff. She does wish to learn more combat, but for now, focuses solely on making sure she is the best healer she can be.

Due to her inexperience, she sometimes lets her healer-calm slip, resulting in her being very sharp-tongued to particularly aggravating patients. While she's horribly embarrassed by it, many of the soldiers actually find it endearing and hilarious. Especially since she can be very creative with some of the insults.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: So, here's Iuchar and Iucharba, the Arran-Samson Archetype chars of the game. In-game, the two already know Larcei and are in love with her. Thus, Larcei can recruit one of them by talking to them, but the other one will refuse to join out of jealousy. Most people I know pick Iuchar because, while Iucharba does have slightly better stats, Iuchar is mounted and that's very key in FE4. Both aren't exactly the greatest of units though. No matter which one you recruit, their soldiers turn into NPCs.

Now, the two don't know her ahead of time in this story, so I debated what other reasons would work. I went with this, where Iuchar joins due to being damn impressed with Larcei and because he is a bit more idealistic (or, rather, enjoys ideals more) and willing to gamble on said ideals. And Iucharba refuses because he doesn't see the point on gambling when so many others have failed, preferring instead to simply protect the people around him. Essentially a 'do you take a chance on something better or stick to the devil you know how to defend against?' sort of choice. And yes, I know, both mangas have it where both are recruited. I chose against that. Iuchar's dialogue on his recruitment is based on his recruitment dialogue in-game. The dialogue Iuchar and Iucharba have prior to their fight is based on their in-game boss dialogue. Iucharba's lone skill is 'Charge', hence Iuchar's comment about him charging.

Now for Lex and Ayra. Already established they were dead, but now you get to hear the how at long last! Both of their fates are left ambiguous in-game after the Belhalla Massacre (and the Fuyuki manga doesn't address any of the parents), but the Oosawa manga has it where Danann betrayed and killed them both, with no hostages. I went with the above for... future reasons.

Neither Aideen nor Midir actually have 'Bargain' as their skills (Aideen has no skills in-game, while Midir has Pursuit and Charge, a skill that adds rounds of combat in a single battle depending on HP and attack speed). However, there is an item in-game known as the 'Bargain Ring', which confers the Bargain skill to whoever has it in their inventory. What I typically do with it is have Sylvia get it first to buy the Knight and
Leg Rings (grant remove and +3 movement, a necessity for a dancer on these huge maps) and then have Aideen buy it to save money on her staves. So, by consequence, Lana often inherits it. In-story, though, this was already explained by Dew actually 'teaching' Aideen, and so, she had the skill herself. (Because no skills on healers in BS, game! They need them too!)

The turn after conquering Ganeishire, Fee and Arthur appear near Sophara and auto-join (a good thing, since bandits are threatening the villages there). Fee is your pegasus knight of the generation, taking after her mother and inheriting all of her items. Most give her the brave lance so that a) her offense keeps up and b) so that you get it early (if Finn is a father in FE4, none of his lances get inherited; thanks to narrative stuff, though, Finn kept his brave lance). Her having the thunder sword is actually from the Fuyuki manga, and yes, in-game, she named her pegasus for her deceased aunt. As for Arthur, he's your first mage-mage char (as opposed to Lana and Yuria/Julia, who act as your healers since Julia doesn't actually have a tome yet in-game) and comes with his father's items as well as a wind tome. We'll talk more about his heritage when it's a bit more relevant in the story. And yes, I know, that 'holster' is typically used for firearms (which obviously don't exist in Fire Emblem), but I couldn't think of another word for it. If you're curious about what it looks like, look to Alt!Olwen's art. The thing about the 'traveling merchant' teaching Arthur wind magic comes from some supplementary material.

Other than that, have some heart to hearts and Riona figuring out her feelings. And Ulster revealing his. Because that's fun. Oh, some (very brief) rose meanings, for the hell of it. Red roses, obviously, mean 'romantic love'. Yellow once meant 'jealousy', but now conveys 'happiness' or 'friendship'. White is 'purity', 'innocence', 'reverence', and often shows a message of 'loyalty'. Orange is for 'energy' and 'enthusiasm', and sometimes given to show admiration or pride in someone. Pink is 'elegance' and 'sweetness', with additional meanings depending on the shade (dark pink often shows gratitude while lighter pink conveys happiness). Lilac/lavender are associated with 'mystery' and 'enchantment', and thus often show a 'love at first sight' meaning. There's also joint meanings (red and white together represent 'unity', for instance, while red and yellow symbolize 'happiness').

Next Chapter - Interlude, Sophara
With Iucharba and most of his soldiers dead, we move into Sophara and are greeted with a loud, jubilant chorus of cheers. Sophara had hated the Empire bitterly, though they had tolerated Iucharba because he had been kind. But Sophara had dealt with a tyrant before, the man who killed Dad's family and took over, and had not enjoyed suffering under a second. So, they welcomed us with open arms, a sharp contrast to Iucharba and his soldiers.

Unfortunately, it's not actually all that comforting. Iucharba's words bit deep, and looking at all of the happy civilians, I was even more keenly aware of just how many would suffer if we did fail. That didn't help with the nauseous feeling I had. Not one bit. But I smiled for them. I would never stop smiling for them.

It was strange, being in Sophara. This was Dad's childhood home. It had fallen when he was a child, and he never was able to return, but it had once been his home. His family was buried in the crypts, with the graves of my grandparents decorated with ribbons and flowers (all flowers showing admiration and loyalty, highlighting how well they must've ruled) and the graves of my aunt and uncle having small children's toys (because they had been so young, three and two respectively). There were adults here, still alive, who remembered him as a child, and shared their memories of him with sad smiles and bittersweet laughs. But, perhaps most importantly, there were pictures. There were portraits of him as a child, some of which were actually on the walls, set up after Iucharba's death. And, as his daughter, his eldest, his 'heir', I was allowed to take whatever I wished. Meaning that all the smaller pictures, the ones easily carried, were scattered across my bed, along with the portraits I had of him as an adult. Because I, of course, devoted an afternoon just looking at them.

"Dad's smile was much smaller and sadder as an adult," I whispered, studying a couple, one from when he was a child and one from when he was an adult. His smile as a child had been bright and carefree, like the sun. "Oh, but it's more similar to this one..." I picked up a different portrait, one where he seemed to be teasing Mom. The smile there was more 'boyish', and freer. "Aideen did tell me once that Dad's best smiles were reserved for Mom." She also said that Dad had always had a sad air to him, but it had been smallest when he was near Mom. Like the happiness she'd given him was enough to make the sadness cower. He'd been happiest, though, when he'd was with Mom, Conall, and me. "Oh, wait, is this one with Aunt Ayra?!!" I picked up a different picture of Dad's childhood, one where he was playing with a girl with long black hair and grey eyes. "It is! Oh, I have to show this to Larcei and Ulster!" I set it on the nightstand by my bed and continued looking. Or, at least, I did until someone knocked on my door. "Come in!"

"Strangely, I thought you would be too enthralled with the pictures and that Hestia would be the one answering," Oifeye teased as he opened the door, carrying a mug. He looked around curiously, frowning. "Where is she?"

"Hunting, of course. You know that she always joins the hunters to help them out." She only hadn't helped once, and the resulting 'prize' had been far smaller than we would've liked. So now, we made sure she helped. Armies required a lot of food, after all.
"That's right." He set the mug on the nightstand and picked up the picture of Dad and Aunt Ayra as children. "You know; I had always thought so, but Conall and Larcei really did take after them."

"You think so?"

"Yes." He laughed softly at something. I, however, picked up a picture of Dad when he was older, studying it. Was this what Conall looked like? I hoped his smile was warmer, brighter, but… "Funny how Ayra's smile was the same."

"I suppose she smiled a lot, with the army."

"Eventually, yes. It took a while for her to be comfortable with us, considering what Grannvale did to her family and home." He grinned. "She'd always be so annoyed that Lex could spark smiles from her. She felt like she was losing, which irritated her."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised." That fit the stories I'd heard. "Dad's smile is different."

"Well, considering everything that happened…" Oifeye smiled sadly. "The army did eventually learn a bit about his past. How his family had been betrayed and slaughtered and all. I think only Alicia ever learned just how he survived, but considering he had been a child gladiator who bought his freedom and became a mercenary…" Not to mention his epithet of 'Death's Hound'. "No one asked. No one even tried."

"Bit of a shame that it's lost, though. It was an important, if tragic, part of Dad's life." Still, maybe that was a good thing as well. Maybe not having it known let him rest a little more peacefully. "Still, I can't believe there are knights willing to…"

"Swear loyalty to one of the last scions of the line?" He set down the picture and passed me the mug. Warm milk with honey. "I made you this."

"Uh… Oifeye, I'm pretty excited about being here and all." I put on my best smile. "I don't need the comfort."

"Yes, you're excited about being here. However, knights swearing loyalty to you is quite unnerving, isn't it? Particularly when you don't know if it's a sign of how well your grandparents ruled, or a sign of how much they desperately hope for something better, yes?" He smiled smugly and I… I took a sip from the mug in defeat. "You've also been uncomfortable about a few things lately. While some seem to predate the battle…"

"That's just typical teen stuff."

"So, a crush? That's really the only 'typical teen' thing you all dealt with." He frowned and sat on the bed next to me. "Still, it's odd for you to be hesitant in confessing."

"It's a bit different this time." I looked at him curiously. "You know; I've seen a lot of people confess to you over the years. Why have you never dated? You just not into that sort of thing?"

"I'm not aromantic, no. I've had quite a few crushes over the years." He brought his hand up to count them off. "Ethlyn, Alicia, Aideen, Erinys, Sylvia…"

"Not Aunt Ayra?"

"No, but I could admit that she was very beautiful. She just terrified me." He laughed. "But no, I've had crushes. I just… the Belhalla Massacre hurt me deeply, Riona. I am not joking when I say that I would not be here if not for the promises I made."
"Oifeye…" I knew he had been hurting. I never knew he'd considered suicide. "I think Mom would've hurt you."

"All of them would've. But I had once thought it would be worth it, if I could see them again." He brushed the hair out of my face and smiled gently. "But when I considered it, one of you would just… do something that had required my attention. And I'd remember the promises I made. I promised that I would keep you safe, and I couldn't do that if I was gone."

"I'm glad you're still here."

"As am I. Because I got to see all of you grow up into very fine adults, even if I wish I could keep you safe a while longer." His smile became a bit mischievous. "Still, I am here for you, when you need to talk about things that have been bothering you."

"Well, I'll keep quiet on typical teen things, just a little bit longer. Still thinking on them."

"Then perhaps something else? Perhaps the fact that you cast spells for the first time?"

"How…?" I groaned and took a big gulp of the milk, quietly surrendering again. "Why do I bother?"

"Because you prefer giving me heart attacks by climbing far too high."

"You make funny noises." Still, I sighed. "I don't think it was… necessarily, the spell casting." I struggled to find the words. "It was what I did. Fireballs in ambush."

"Enough similarities to the Belhalla Massacre to make you nauseous."

"And that it was something Arvis did." I tightened my grip on the mug. "I… I don't want to be like him. I'm scared of being like him. So…" And logically, I knew the circumstances were completely different. Logically, I knew it had been a viable, even needed, tactic. But…

"I see." Oifeye closed his eyes, considering his words carefully. "I can understand being afraid, Riona. But, at the same time, I'm not sure it would necessarily be a bad thing if you are."

"What?" I nearly dropped my mug, and honestly only didn't because the portraits were still on my bed. "But he…!"

"Oh, yes, he hurt me deeply. And I hate him, will always hate him. He killed my family. He killed the person who took me in when I lost my parents. He destroyed most of my world, and with it, many dreams and hopes I'd had. That all of us had. I will never forgive him for the Belhalla Massacre." He helped me steady my hands and gathered up the portraits to put them safely to the side. Just in case. "But just because I don't agree with someone doesn't mean they're a bad person. I've disagreed with quite a few tactics you all have decided, but I know you're very good people."

"That's different!"

"Is it? At its core, is it?" He waited a bit, but I couldn't answer. Because, I supposed, it was the same? Maybe? At the least, I could see what he got at, and even why. Oifeye wasn't as comfortable with pragmatic tactics as the rest of us; he also didn't like us purposely playing bait. "Alicia adored Arvis. She trusted him completely and always smiled when talking about him. Azel loved him dearly, was always grateful towards him. Lex outright stated that Arvis had been a better 'father' than his own. Sigurd had admired him. I could go on and on, but the fact of the matter is that you can't fool that many people for so long. Particularly Azel, who shared the same living space. So, I do very much believe he was the person they thought he was." He chuckled. "Besides, Azel would
often tell me of how similar Arvis and Alicia were. And I know Alicia was a good person."

"How were they similar?"

"Workaholics. Lonely. Terrible at describing people, probably because they were so used to being alone that they stopped paying attention to those 'basics' because no one stayed for long." He rattled the traits off easily. "Kind. Wanted the best for those around them. Believed in 'fairness'. Strong believers in sacrificing the few to save the many, even when it cut them to the core."

"I get it; I get it." I honestly hadn't expected anything besides vague things, and it sounded like he could go on for a while. "But then Arvis killed them all."

"He did. But we did the same to others." He closed his eyes, remembering. "There are families in Agustria that no doubt sneer at Sigurd's name, because he killed their loved ones in the name of 'saving Agustria'. There are those in Silesse who lost their loved ones to our arrows, and then had to listen to us be lauded as heroes." He smiled sadly and opened his eyes again. "It's no different, really. The only difference is that we were on the opposite side. But that doesn't automatically mean that Arvis is the 'villain'. No more than it makes Sigurd or the 'villain'. Much as I wish the world was simple, it's just… not."

"That's…" I winced. That was something we all were troubled by, truthfully. That was why we tried diplomacy, even when it might be a little stupid to do so.

"In a way, you all are already 'like' him. You're trying to do your best by the people of Jugdral. And, based on his early reign and based on how highly everyone thought about him, I'd like to believe the same for him." Again, he brushed the hair out of my face. "And his early years were strict, but peaceful. Prosperous. Measures were taken to let those not born to nobility to still prosper. Proper punishments were given to nobles who abused their privileges. Those in the conquered regions didn't have the best of lives, certainly, but as we can see, things could have been much worse. Arvis allowed people their discontent, until recently."

"So, why do you think he's doing all this?"

"I don't think he's doing anything at all, Riona. And I think that's the problem." He began gesturing, like there was a giant book in front of him that he was reading from. "I think he's stopped ruling, and the Loptyr Priests took over. After all, look at the timing of the Child Hunts and their sudden openness."

"...Okay, that makes too much sense." I'd assumed it was Arvis, willing to believe the worst because if anyone deserved it… but Oifeye was right. Everything went wrong when the Loptyrian Priests stepped out of the shadows and began the Child Hunts openly. "Why would he let them, though?"

"His wife died and his daughter went missing, presumed dead for quite some time. In fact, from his perspective, she's still presumed dead." Oifeye smiled sadly. "And I know that would break me. I only didn't break when Conall was taken because I was 'certain' he would be fine, and I had all of you to think of. But because I know that, it is very easy for me to imagine he broke and stopped caring."

"Oh." I hadn't thought about him like that. I always thought of him as someone who deserved what he got, even if… "I hate him."

"I do too. But you can hate someone and acknowledge their good points. Just as you can be afraid and still keep going. After all, only a fool feels no fear, and you are no fool. Even if you do foolish
things sometimes." He stroked my hair, smiling gently. "Besides, you have something Arvis never had."

"An inability to betray the people I love?"

"People who love you, who trust you, and are willing to stand in your way if they think you're taking too dark of a path." He rested his hand on my shoulder. "From what I understand, Arvis never had that. His father died when he was seven and his mother left soon afterwards. He ruled Velthomer, alone, and raised Azel with the help of a single maid, Azel's mother. Alicia, his little sister and one of his only confidants, lived on the other side of the country. He had only one friend, Aida, and she was clearly someone who agreed with him too much. They were too similar, and while that made them good friends, it also meant that when things went too far, no one stopped him. Assuming he thought there was a reason to stop. Being forced alone and to do everything yourself twists your thoughts into thinking you know best."

"...All I can think of is that Larcei would dropkick me if she thought I was going too far." And how often I fretted of being wrong and that I wasn't doing the right thing at all.

"And that is exactly what makes you all succeed. If you all think you're getting too dark, you will pull each other back into the light. If you think you're favoring too many sacrifices, you will pull each other away from such thinking." His smile became proud. "You are a group, and a close one. You stand by each other and scold each other when you think someone is going too far. You talk to each other constantly, sharing your worries. And if you think there is a problem, you speak up, because you know the others will listen."

"I see..." I did have to smile. Because he was right. All of us were together, so...

"That all said, I do think that fear is a good thing, Riona. While it wouldn't be as bad as you are thinking, that fear means that you will consider your options more, and listen to others. What you must not do is let that fear prevent you from doing what you know needs to be done."

"Like not using magic when enemies break through."

"Exactly. You made the right choice there. You spared Lana more worry, and spared the patients the stress of having enemies near while they are helpless."

"...Thank you..." I began tearing up suddenly, and I rubbed roughly at my eyes. "Ah, why?"

"Crying when overwhelmed is normal." He took the mug from me and pulled me into a hug, letting me cry on his shoulder. "You've been overworking as well, to let Ulster, Larcei, and me process what happened to Lex and Ayra. So you rest a bit and cry. Crying is healthy."

I ended up crying longer than I would've wanted, long enough for the milk to cool. After I warmed it up again, Oifeye began sharing stories about what was going on in the various pictures I had of Dad. All fun stories, because each of the portraits had him smiling. Though some of them were absolutely ridiculous. Apparently, a bored army was a very dangerous thing, almost as dangerous as a bored Hestia. We'd have to be careful about that.

"Ah, so that was the issue," Diarmuid murmured as we walked through the woods with Hestia. Officially, we were herb-hunting for Lana. Unofficially, we were giving Hestia a chance to run about before she got bored and ate important things and to get alone for a private conversation. "When Lana told me you had figured out your feelings for Seliph... congrats, by the way."

"Please tell me that they at least weren't obvious when you and I were dating," I sighed. I felt bad.
about all of that, really. Even if we went into the relationship with the expectation of it being temporary... "Please."

"They weren't until towards the end, when I became aware enough to notice. I'll admit it played a part in why I wanted to break-up. Though it was mostly that the feelings had faded and there was no point in dragging out the relationship."

"I see." I tried to not grimace and hid how uneasy I felt by crouching down to pick a few more herbs. Hestia was somewhere up ahead, probably chasing a squirrel or something to eat. "I'm sorry."

"For what? Neither of us thought it was going to be forever. We just thought it would be fun. Which it was." He grinned. "You're a very good kisser."

"You're not so bad yourself." I had to grin back and laugh. It really had been fun, dating him. I just felt bad because there was something wrong about dating someone when you loved someone else. Even if you weren't aware-aware of the feelings. "You didn't really date afterwards, though."

"I had crushes, but I was like you. I didn't want to date outside of our group because we'd leave one day." He made a face. "Though I did almost ask Dalvin out. Same with Deimne."

"Oh?" I thought briefly about them and remembered a habit both of them had. "Oh, gods, it was probably after a practice session. In the summer."

"They always practiced shirtless!" Diarmuid groaned and I actually sat down on the ground to laugh, barely making sure to set my basket off to the side so that I didn't knock it over. "Gods above! And they were built!"

"Dalvin was always so confused as to why he'd get an audience!" I fell back, still laughing. It was a funny memory. "Then there was freaking Deimne! And his back...!"

"And worse, he knew how sexy he was!" Diarmuid sighed gustily and pulled me up. I picked up my basket and we started walking again. "What were we talking about? We didn't come out here to have a private conversation about too handsome friends. We could have that with everyone else."

"Seriously. I think most of the group could commiserate!" Not hearing Hestia, I whistled and she popped her head out from the brush for a split-second before returned to whatever had caught her attention. "I hope she doesn't get a snake wrapped around her head again."

"Again?" Diarmuid frowned. "When did it happen the first time?"

"Uh... later. Totally will tell you later."

"You will not."

"Nope." That whole thing was still horribly embarrassing. "Regardless, what were we talking about again?"

"Fine, change the subject." He playfully scowled and I stuck my tongue out childishly before kissing his cheek. "We were talking about your feelings for Seliph. With a focus on the panic you felt at the thought of confessing. Who knows that part?"

"Just for now." I grimaced. "Between trying to process that, and everything that has been going on..."
"Makes sense, and I now remember my thought before we got very, very distracted." He smiled kindly and stopped under a tree. "And, speaking of distractions, the fruit up there…"

"What about it?" I frowned, studying it for a moment before recognizing it. "Oh, whoa, that's supposed to be super good for medicinal teas, right?"

"It's good for you in general, but yes, it's good for medicinal stuff. I didn't know they grew around here." He held out his hand. "You mind…?"

"Here." I passed him my basket and quickly climbed the tree, going to the highest branches for the ripest ones. "I'll do a few trips!"

"I know I'm good at climbing, but there is something very cat-like about how you climb up."

"Better than Seliph's comparison." I picked as many as I could safely carry and climbed a partway down. "Called me a spider once."

"He knows he can get away with it." Diarmuid climbed up the tree and sat on the lower branches to more easily hold up the baskets and so that I wasn't having to work as hard bringing them down. "Regardless, to continue that thought I originally had, when Lana told me about it, I thought that didn't fit the panic you showed. But if you're afraid of confessing…"

"'Afraid' sounds too tame." I swung up to grab a few more of the fruit. Their name was escaping me at the moment, but I definitely recognized them. "I felt like I was about to fall into a panic attack until you jolted me out of it."

"And that's because you're afraid of being wrong and there being a big change in our dynamic. Perfectly reasonable." He shifted the baskets, so that it was less tiring on his arms to hold them. "After all, if you two got together, what would change? You two have always been close. All of us have always been close. The idea that things might not be like that again is…" He struggled for a word before shrugging. "Uncomfortable. To say the least."

"Which is why Larcei and me not talking to each other was so damn awkward for everyone."

"Exactly. By the way, is everything about that argument settled-settled?"

"It is, or I think so." I wouldn't bring up that Larcei had talked to me about her feelings for Shanan. That was her thing to tell, when she was ready. "If it seems like it's not, bring it up, but for now…"

"Good." He sighed. "But yeah, the idea that we might get a situation where things are like that between any of the group again is unnerving. And since this wouldn't be caused by anger…" He shuddered. "Yeah, no, that is definitely a reasonable fear."

"Thank you." I actually felt a lot better just being validated like that. "More coming down."

"Got them!" Diarmuid helped me get the fruit into the baskets. "To continue, that's just our personal stuff. I'm not sure what the army will think or feel if they saw their normally very close leaders being very awkward. Probably assume a relationship spat."

"Uh… while that would technically be true, something tells me there's more to the story." I decided to do one more trip, just because I wanted to surprise Lana. "Something hopefully hilarious?"

"Hmm? Oh, have you not heard the rumors?" He grinned. "There's some soldiers who are convinced that our entire group is together. As in polyamorous relationship."
"Oh, wow, that's…" I had to laugh, unable to help it. It might work for others, there were a few families in Tirnanog like that, but I didn't think that was for me. Or really anyone in our group. Besides… "Not everyone in the group is bisexual or pansexual."

"You, me, and Larcei are the only three, right?"

"Yep!" Though Ulster might be demisexual. He'd never found the need to label himself, not like me, who had found comfort in the label when trying to figure things out about myself. But I didn't want to bring that up. I still wasn't sure if Ulster had told anyone yet. Larcei hadn't yelled my ear off about it yet, though, so maybe he'd forgotten again. "Though I suppose a polyamorous relationship doesn't require everyone being bisexual or pansexual in the group." For one thing, you could have three women in such a grouping. "We are so off-topic."

"We are!" Diarmuid laughed. "Regardless, though, I imagine it would be unsettling to the soldiers. Which just adds another layer to the worry."

"One I didn't even think of." I sighed and brought back the last of the fruit before settling on a branch above him. "Though now I have to wonder if being in a relationship will…"

"Going to point out that our parents did it, and that had absolutely no bearing on what happened to them, in the end." He paused and looked down. "Gods, I still can't believe my father is alive. I was so sure…" He winced. "Worse, I was so sure and was proven wrong. And Larcei…"

"Hey, no, don't feel guilty about it." I nudged his shoulder with my foot, careful to not accidentally kick him in the head. "That's not your fault."

"I know it's not. But I can't help but wish that Ayra or Lex were alive instead, as harsh and messed up as it is to think. Just because…" Because Larcei had clung to that belief for so long, latched onto that hope with everything she had. And it was answered with nothing. "I know it sounds ungrateful. Not to mention…"

"You're afraid he won't want to be your father."

"Exactly. He's never met me. He's been through gods knows what for all this time, apparently raising and protecting Leif." He sighed. "So, what if he just… doesn't care? The stories imply that he wouldn't think that. But Lewyn…"

"Yeah…" By now, Fee's story about how Lewyn just flat-out abandoned his family five years ago had spread. Oifeye had been completely and utterly confused by it; he'd assumed that if Yuria hadn't been raised with Ced, then she had been in a place nearby, with Lewyn watching over her and his family. Or something. "Still, we do have a plan in that worst case scenario. And something tells me Oifeye would give him the tenth degree."

"Something tells me Oifeye is going to give Lewyn the tenth degree when Lewyn returns." He sighed. "Off-topic. Again."

"We haven't talked much about how you felt since we first learned about it, though."

"Processing everything. The shock, the hope, the guilt…"

"Maybe talk to Lester or Lana about it?" Both of them had always felt a small amount of guilt over having a living-parent.

"Probably a good idea." He shook his head. "But, regardless, back to the original topic, because it's why we found an excuse to be out here in the first place."
"Right, right…" I nudged his shoulder again. "But you know that you can vent at me whenever you need it, yes?"

"Of course. That's how we've always been. Part of why our group works so well together." He waved his hand through the air, trying to get back to the original point. "Ah, got it. I'm not sure we should not be in relationships because of what the army thinks. We can talk to Oifeye if it's really bothering, but I think we're allowed our friendships and romances still, even as we lead. We just can't let them take up our entire lives and keep up with our duties."

"That does make sense." I missed the simple days of Tirnanog. But those days were bought with the blood, sweat, and tears of everyone else, so it was only fair that we repaid them for everything. "Was there a continuation to all of that, though? We keep getting distracted."

"There was, actually. It's that it's totally understandable, but I still highly encourage you to confess." Diarmuid grinned up at me. I tried to not accidentally fall from surprise. "Well, maybe wait until we've dealt with Danann. We should have some time afterwards before pushing into Leonster. For one thing, we have to make sure we're adequately prepared for the Yied Desert."

"You think I should…" My voice definitely went squeaky at the thought. "I mean… what if…?"

"I just mentioned how uncomfortable it would be. You really think I'd encourage you if I thought the worst was going to happen?" ...Okay, I had to admit that point. "Besides, I think he might be doing something subtle too. After all, the roses he picked for you were-"

"Does Seliph even know the flower meanings? That's more of Larcei and Lester's thing, with us picking some up because they'd discuss it."

"Who knows? But it is true that he purposely picked red for yours. And everyone and their dead great-great-grandfather knows what a red roses means." He continued grinning. I became tempted to 'accidentally' kick him. "I wonder how many roses there were, though. There's supposed to be meaning to the number, right?"

"I have no idea, but reminder that we were trying to use as many of the roses as possible to clear the damn table." Looking back, I sincerely wondered how Luchar got so many roses in the first place! "I do wish we had saved a few for Yuria, though." They would've looked so pretty in her hair and since it was long, we could've put a bunch in. "I should take her out to some meadows or something to make up for it."

"She really likes flower crowns. She can't remember why, but she finds it fun." Diarmuid shifted so that he was resting against the trunk of the tree. "I'm a bit worried she tries too hard to be 'helpful' and 'useful'."

"I've been worried about the same." It was like she felt she had to repay us for the shelter, and she didn't have to do that at all. "Still, she does seem to be settling in well."

"She is, and she does well in her lessons. I'm just worried she's going to push herself too much and collapse." Diarmuid glanced up at me. "She's also had a few soldiers flirt with her and she gets terribly confused."

"Well, she is cute." I still felt myself go cold. "So, by flirting…"

"Simple flirting, nothing that seems pushy. She seems confused, but not uncomfortable. That said, with her tendency to be shy…"

"Might need to keep a better eye then." If there was one thing that would not be tolerated, it was...
harrassment. Period. "Though, I suppose I should also give her some tips for dating and the like. Or should we discourage that because of the whole amnesia thing?"

"I have no idea on that one." Diarmuid held his hands out like they were a set of scales, with the baskets being the 'scales'. "On the one hand, there has to be ten thousand complications that come from dating an amnesiac because of all the things that could happen because of the missing past. On the other hand, it's wrong to deny someone happiness for something out of their control like that. Might as well deny someone happiness for having melancholia or soldier's heart or... uh..."

"I get what you mean." Of course, we had the additional complication of knowing who she was, but not being able to talk much about it because she was traumatized. "Hey, why is it called soldier's heart when you can get it from non-combat things?" Creidne had it, because of...

"I think it's just because it was identified first in soldiers and no one has bothered changing the medical definition. I mean; why do we call anything... anything?"

"Okay, point." I might as well ask why a flower was called a 'flower'. "And..." And now was when I realized that in the conversation, neither of us had been paying attention to Hestia. At all. "Shit."

"What?"

"Hestia."

"...Damn it."

Both of us climbed down quickly and hunted through the trees, well aware that Hestia could be just about anywhere, especially if she hadn't noticed we'd stopped. Thankfully, though, we heard her barking and growling at something, allowing us to find her easily. We assumed that she was just being angry at a squirrel that managed to escape up a tree. Instead, we found her growling at a hissing bobcat. Because of course she was.

"I... uh... didn't know bobcats lived around these parts," Diarmuid whispered, unnerved. Rightfully so. Wild animal and all. However... "Hestia? Hey, girl, come back over here and-"

"Oh my gods, you are so cute!" I gushed, smiling brightly. Diarmuid tried to stop me, but I ducked around him and rushed over to the pretty bobcat, nudging Hestia back before holding out my hand to it. "Hello there..." Slowly and carefully, the bobcat sniffed my hand, learning my scent. Living so close to the castle, it was probably more used to people. "Did my Hestia chase off your dinner? I'm sorry if she did."

"Why is your reaction to potentially dangerous animals always 'KITTY!'?" Aside from pitching that last word high for false excitement, Diarmuid's tone was decidedly exasperated. "That's a full-grown bobcat!"

"And?" I scooted a little closer, and the bobcat let me. "Besides, you just have to be respectful."

"I am. Waaaaaaay back here."

"Well, you can hold Hestia or something and make sure she stays out of the baskets." I moved even closer, fighting off a grin. I didn't want to bare my teeth; that was often a threat display. "Goodness, you are a beauty. That you're out and about means we're probably about three hours out from sunset, though."

"How the hell can you tell that?"
"Bobcats are crepuscular, active during twilight hours." By now, I was close enough to check underneath and get a gender for the bobcat. "She'll be hunting until around midnight, and then will be running about from about dawn to three hours after sunrise."

"Oifeye is going to have a fit."

"He doesn't need to know." I carefully rested my hand on the bobcat's head and she let me scratch her behind the ears. "Oh, I bet that feels good. You can't clean here very well."

"You are petting a wild bobcat."

"Obviously." I continued petting her, making sure to really rub her on the head and behind the ears. "Can we bring her back-"

"No."

"Aw, come on! She's cute!"

"You can't bring every cute animal home!" Diarmuid sounded so done with me. I didn't care, though, because the bobcat was soft and let me pet her. "She's got a pack or something."

"Like most felines, bobcats are mostly solitary animals." I caught a sound, though, and looked up to see two tiny little bobcats looked at me through the branches of a tree. "Oh my gods, you have kittens!"

"Gods help me and my dumb friend who is going to get eaten by a bear one of these days because she thinks it's cute." Diarmuid sighed. I ignored him to coo at the kittens. "No, you can't take them home either!"

"Kittens!"

"No!"

While I didn't get to bring the bobcat and her kittens back to the castle, we did help her with catching some extra meat for them and I hummed the whole way back. While Diarmuid grumbled and groaned about how I was seriously going to get eaten one of these days. Hestia kept giving him weird looks while she stuck close to me, panting happily as we returned. Sadly, though, the good mood didn't last. Shortly after dropping off the baskets at the infirmary and going our separate ways, I ended up in the middle of a fight.

"The hell are you doing?" I snapped, pushing people as I fought my way through the crowd. It was one of the recreation rooms of the castle, set up for soldiers to play cards together and the like, and unfortunately, that meant I had a lot of people to get through before I reached the troublemakers. "Hestia!" However, a growling wolf made even the angriest of people stumble back and I made it to the fight before too many punches were thrown. I hoped. "Hey!" Unfortunately, though, I ended up getting punched in the face for it, but hell if I cared right then. Mostly because I had to calm down Hestia and hold her back. "Knock it off!"

"M-my lady…" the puncher whispered shakily, looking down. I glowered at the people around and slowly tried to figure out what the hell was going on. It was only then that I realized the puncher's intended victim was Iuchar, who looked startled to see me. "I…"

"If you're only going to feel bad because you hit me, then don't apologize. I'm more annoyed at the punch, not getting hit." I sighed and brushed my hair out of my face, wishing I had it tied back.
no, I wore it down, like I always did when I wasn't going into battle. At least Hestia was calm, if
growling. "What happened? I'm assuming that you got offended by Dozel and decided to take it out
on allies who happen to have once been associated with them?"

"I…"

"Hush. I don't want to hear from you at the moment." I looked to Iuchar, who smiled wryly. I
noticed he actually had a couple bruises on his face. That there were none on the puncher proved
Iuchar hadn't fought back. "You're of Neir's blood. You could've at least blocked."

"Well, I wasn't expecting to get punched," Iuchar replied, shrugging. A few of his soldiers glared at
the puncher. Others glared back. "I did, however, let them yell at me. I thought that if the yelling
helped, I could deal. It's better than what Father used to say. Or Iucharba."

"You don't need to do that. You're not responsible for your father's crimes." Though, consider he'd
winced at Iucharba's name, I had to wonder if he went through it as 'penance' for killing his little
brother. "But, basically, you and yours were here enjoying a card game?"

"More like enjoying a drink. We tried to keep in the corner."

"Oh, this is ridiculous." I gave the puncher a droll look. "I'd think you'd want to make it
harder for Danann to kill us all, not easier. Divisions among us is only going to help him."

"Why should we listen to you?" someone demanded. I couldn't see who they were; they were
hidden in the crowd. "Some bastard child born to a bastard child, claiming Isaachian heritage…"
All my thoughts clunked to a stop. "Pretty convenient that you preach 'peace' to the side that
supports your uncle." Mostly because I never had someone accuse me of this before. "Makes me
wonder how else you try to undermine our-

And then there was the sound of a punch. And some yelling. It took someone screaming, "how
dare you insult Lady Riona!" to make me realize that someone had attacked my insulter. Multiple
someones. Meaning I had to push my way through a crowd and fight again.

"Enough, enough, enough!" I yelled, wading through. Iuchar helped me, as did Hestia. "Stop this at
once!" Iuchar actually had to throw a few people back so that I could reach the center of things,
and actually see the my accuser, a rather young person whose face was swollen from the assault. In
fact, one eye was swollen shut. Their nose and mouth were bloody. Bruises mottled their neck.
"How dare you do this to one of your own?!" It was actually scary. It was scary, to see how
wounded they were, just because of an insult to me. I didn't like it. That sort of zealousness… I
didn't like it at all. "Unbelievable! Gods above, ignoring everything else, you're giving Lana and
Yuria more work!"

"B-But my lady…" someone tried to justify. They slinked back into the crowd when Hestia
growled in warning. "They…"

"No. No, there is no justification for this. This is something Danann would tolerate. Not us. Never
us." I knelt in front of my accuser, peering at them worriedly. Their not-swollen-shut eye was
blackened. A bruise near the ear made me worry that there would be some sort of hearing damage,
though I didn't see any bleeding there. "We should get you to a-" And they spit blood in my face.
So I had to grab Hestia before she tore his face off. "Gods above… hey, Iuchar, can you get Hestia
for-"

"Holy shit, she tries to keep people from dying in fights, and tries to keep very needed soldiers
from beating each other up, and people really think she's the bad guy? Really?" Arthur appeared
out of nowhere, absently shuffling some cards. He must've been playing with the soldiers. "Gods, what sort of drug do you take for that to make any sense?" he demanded, rolling his eyes. I just focused on getting Hestia away, and Iuchar grabbed her by the fur to drag her out. Soldiers, mostly those from Tirnanog helped block her, recognizing the danger; they'd seen what she can do to a person. "Not to mention 'attacking' her when she's got a giant wolf that can crush your spine. If you want to die so badly, go jump off a roof or something. Don't mess around and make more work for the rest of us."

"What does a sheltered bitch like her know about our pain?!" the accuser snapped. Blood dripped from their mouth, seeped through their teeth. I hoped it was just a cut and not loosened teeth. But this whole thing was just..."Sheltered and family to our enemies!"

"You mean the family she's never met and is directly responsible for the death of her parents? Because I've been here for only a few days and already know all of that." Arthur's voice was dry enough to spark flame. "And because of that family tie, caused by a happenstance at birth, you think she'll automatically be loyal? Really? Seriously, what sort of drug are you on?"

"I-!"

"Were you in the last battle?" Arthur waited until they nodded. "Oh, good, so I probably saved your life. With my magic." They nodded again. "Then look at this." Arthur pulled off his right glove, revealing a Holy Mark spiraling around the wrist, going partially down the top of his hand, but not his palm. The colors were Thrud-purple and Fjalar-red. "Holy Mark. Thunder. Fire. Pretty obvious what my heritage is, yes? Blood ties to the enemy on both sides of the family, and I saved your sorry ass during the last battle. And I'll continue to do so for each of the battles I fight with this army. Because even though I think you're an idiot and a problem, I am still a soldier in this army and I do my duty."

"That's a pretty good lead-in to what I wanted to say," I murmured, smiling warmly at him. And not just because his interference had helped me get Hestia out of here and made the soldiers stop being so combative. But I couldn't focus on the other reason right now. "And it's this. You don't have to like me. You may even hate me. If throwing barbed comments like that make you feel better, then have at it." I knelt in front of my accuser again and grasped their chin to make them look at me. "But you will respect me. You will respect all of us. You will respect your fellow soldiers. You will follow our rules. If you cannot do these things, then you will leave. We might need every blade we can get, but that doesn't mean we need to tolerate such poison among our ranks. Our jobs are hard enough without someone actively trying to undermine us." I removed my hand from their face and looked up at the surrounding soldiers. "Someone get him to the infirmary. Now." I stood up and faced the others. "Now, which of you punched them? Which of you punched Iuchar? Front and center. I wish to have a discussion with you."

People tried to disperse and give the instigators privacy, but I ordered them to stay and listen to the dressing down, both to make sure everyone heard it and to serve as the punishment for starting all this chaos. The ones who had punched the accuser were also ordered to report to me in the morning, after breakfast, for a reassignment to their duties for the next week. Only then did I let people leave, and when the last person meandered out, I sighed and covered my face with my hands, leaning against a table. I had no idea at all how I managed to get through all of that. I was exhausted. I was nauseous. I was kicking myself for not noticing how big of a problem this was getting. Some leader I was...

"A flower to cheer you, dear lady?" A yellow lily appeared in front of me and it took a couple of blinks to realize Iuchar had dramatically kneeled to hold it out. "I do believe it would suit you," he continued, voice pitched melodramatically. I had to smile at that. "See?"
"Thank you," I murmured, taking the flower. I tucked it behind my ear and sighed. "How are you? I can still see the bruises."

"Nothing bad. I'll be certain to check in with our fair goddesses of the staves once things settle down a little more." He stood up and bowed, smiling apologetically. "I am sorry, though. I truly thought that if they yelled at me, it would bleed off some of the tension."

"This is clearly something that we should've kept a closer eye on." I crossed my arms and winced when I noticed the blood droplets on the floor where the accuser had been. I really didn't like that reaction. I really didn't. I could excuse it in Hestia. She was a wild animal who thought of us as pack. But in people? In **soldiers**? It made me worry for the days to come. "I'm assuming Hestia didn't bite you since I see no blood."

"Nope, though she did fight me. But thankfully, Lester was passing by and took her from me to get her far away from the room. She was **much** less inclined to fight him."

"Makes sense." And I owed Lester big time for that. "Have things like this been common?"

"Oh, no, **nothing** like this. There's been some yelling and glaring contests, but truly, Lady Riona-"

"You don't have to call me by title, you know."

"Riona, there has been nothing like the scene we saw. Most seemed content with us keeping apart and under guard, as we had been."

"I see." Well, that was a bit of a relief. We were definitely going to have discussions about this, though. We needed to ask Oifeye about how the Verdanites were integrated into the army during the Verdane Campaign. Surely there had to be grudges and the like with that, right? "Well, hopefully, that little scolding will make it so that they're less inclined to turn to violence. If not yelling."

"I'm not sure the yelling is bad, so long as we can all work together when it comes to it." Iuchar smiled. "After all, anger is healthy, to a degree."

"Yeah, but if the yelling makes them more inclined to turn to violence…” I sighed. "Oh, whatever. Right now, we just have to wait and hope that they'll at least respect us enough to listen." But now that I was calmed down… "I need to go talk to Arthur, though."

"Because of what he just revealed?"

"Eh… sort of." It was, but it wasn't a bad thing by any means. "You make sure to go to Lana, okay?"

"I will." He bowed again. "I truly am sorry."

"You were doing what you thought would help. It's not your fault that it backfired." I did hope that he would be a little less inclined to let himself be a scapegoat in the future. "I'll see you at dinner! Thanks for the flower!" And I ran out of the room, expecting to have to ask and hunt down Arthur. To my surprise, though, Arthur actually wasn't that far away, just down the hall and leaning against the wall, clearly waiting for someone. And since his eyes immediately settled on me, it seemed that 'someone' had been me.

"So, I wanted to apologize for not mentioning anything sooner about the Holy Mark," he began. His glove was already back on. "I just got really annoyed."
"No, don't worry about it," I reassured, trying to not bounce from excitement. Because now that everything was a little more settled, I… "But I did have a question."

"Yes?"

"Your dad's name is Azel, yes?"

"Uh… yeah, it was?" Arthur frowned, but I had to keep from jumping for joy. "Who is apparently-"

"And your mom's name is Tailtiu?"

"Yes?" Arthur frowned more and I couldn't help but bounce on my toes. Which no doubt confused him further. "Why…?"

"We're cousins!" I grinned at him and his expression blanked. "My Holy Mark in on my chest, so I'd have to strip down to actually show you. But, we're cousins! Your dad is my mom's little brother!"

"Oh." He stared blankly for a moment before looking down quickly. I thought I saw his expression crumple, though. "That's why, then…"

"Hmm?"

"Your smile… it's like Father's. It confused me so much, but made me more willing to talk as well."

"I take after my mom, and I'm told she, Uncle Azel, and Arvis all looked alike." I hugged him, giggling. He stiffened, probably unused to the affection, so I quickly pulled away. "Ah, sorry, I should've asked first." He waved away the apology, not saying anything. "Ah, anyway, do you want to see pictures of them? Your parents? I've got some! Though, maybe you'd rather talk to Oifeye? He's got bunches of stories and I'm sure he'd be excited to tell you!"

"You do? He does? He would?" Arthur's voice became squeakier with each word and I had a feeling that I… well, that I was pushing a little too much. "Uh…"

"Oh, you don't have to! Just, you know, suggestions? Uncle Azel and Aunt Tailtiu were in Sigurd's army, so we've got those sort of things, but if you'd rather not, then please, don't force yourself!" I tried to think of a good excuse to delay and figured out one instantly. "Ah, damn it! I'm late!" I was supposed to supervise some of the classes with Oifeye. "Let me know if you'd like to see any portraits after dinner, okay?"

"I… sure?" His voice was still squeaky. I'd really startled him. "Um… thanks."

"Of course!" I grinned and winked before running down the hall, hoping Oifeye wasn't too annoyed.

I, however, was in the best of moods. Cousin! Family! Family I wouldn't have to kill! This was just the best!

After dinner, Arthur did actually want to look at the portraits. So, after checking to make sure I was done for the day, I brought him over to my room and scattered all the pictures I had of Uncle Azel and Aunt Tailtiu on my bed and showed him. Hestia laid down against the door to gnaw on a bone, effectively blocking the door as well. Hestia weighed a lot, after all.
"Oh, so Mother did have silver hair," Arthur whispered, studying the pictures closely. He smiled nostalgically and sadly at them. "I thought I didn't remember it correctly."

"The hair color is supposed to be very common to Friege," I explained. I pointed to his hair for emphasis. "Like the silver-purple of a thundercloud."

"Is it? Then I wonder if Tine has the hair color. I don't remember if she did or not."

"Maybe. Though she could have the Fjalar-red." I pointed to Uncle Azel for emphasis. "I got Dad's blonde hair, but it's not uncommon for those of the house to have this hair color."

"I wonder why they run so strongly in the families?" Arthur fiddled with a pendant he wore, a simple but beautiful one of silvers and reds. It matched the pendant Uncle Azel and Aunt Tailitu wore in the pictures, but I didn't ask if they were the same. That was his business. "Holy Blood?"

"Could be." I held up one portrait of Mom and Uncle Azel. "Ah, but this is my mom. See what I mean by the family resemblance?"

"Oh, yeah, you can easily tell they're siblings." Arthur laughed softly. "I feel bad for not recognizing the name. Then again, I barely remember my family's names. I knew my parents had siblings, but…" He glanced at me. "Question, how long have you all suspected my lineage?"

"Basically as long as you've been with us?" I smiled sheepishly. "Larcei noticed our smiles are similar, and it went from there."

"That means…" Arthur looked at the picture again. "My smile is like Father's?"

"Yep!" I giggled and he smiled, pleased by the information. "But yes, we suspected from then. Magic runs strong through both Thrud and Fjalar's lines, particularly Fjalar, and the whole 'restart the heart with thunder magic' thing really helped with the suspicion."

"It did?"

"Yes." I made sure nothing flammable was near and snapped my fingers to spark a bit of flame. "Being able to manipulate the elements without a tome is one of the things that separate those with Holy Blood and typical mages. So, that thing you did with the thunder magic is probably something that only those of Thrud's blood can do. Well, safely, at least."

"Oh. I really just learned because it's good for giving massages." He glanced up at the ceiling in thought, and I tried to think of how and why that would be good for massages. "Is that how you were able to manipulate the campfire?"

"It was." I dismissed the fire and smiled at him. "You can do things like that too."

"I'll have to try it sometime." He looked to me again. "But if you suspected something, why didn't you say anything?"

"People's stories are their business. None of us want to force anything." Particularly when there was trauma involved. "We'd love it if people be comfortable in the army, and in that comfort, open up and heal on their own." Of course, if they were being self-destructive, someone would intervene. Or, I hoped at least. With the army becoming larger, it would be more difficult to gauge that. "That's all."

"What if it's life or death?" His eyes were sharp. "Something in that story..."
"Who determines that? You're the only one who knows, and would know. Assuming you even remember in the moment." I smiled warmly at him. "After all, how many times have we realized something was important \textit{afterwards}?" Just look at Mom for instance. She had never asked Arvis what Diadora looked like, thinking it unimportant, and it turned out far more important than anyone ever could guess. "You just take your time. Move at your pace with things like that. You're already forced to move at our pace for a lot of things."

"...Ah." Arthur looked down, almost like he was embarrassed, before he picked up another picture. "Who's the other person in this one?"

"Hmm? Oh, that's Uncle Lex. He, Uncle Azel, and Aunt Tailtiu were all childhood friends." I showed him a different picture, one with all three of them. They were all smiling brightly, laughing at something. And all of them were dead now. "Uncle Lex is actually Ulster and Larcei's dad."

"Oh, that explains why he and Ulster look alike then." He picked up another one. "And here?"

"That's Lewyn, Fee's dad." In the picture, he and Aunt Tailtiu were bent over tomes, discussing something with rapt fascination. "I understand that he, Uncle Azel, and Aunt Tailtiu often talked magic together. They handled a lot of the magical stuff for Sigurd. They also taught Aunt Lachesis magic."

"Lachesis?"

"Diarmuid's mom." I found a picture of her teasing Aunt Tailtiu, based on how flustered Aunt Tailtiu looked. "Here. She was a Master Knight."

"The hell is a Master Knight?"

"It's someone who tries \textit{way} too hard." I grinned. "Masters of swords, axes, lances, bows, fire, wind, thunder, \textit{and} light. And staves. While mounted, by the way."

"How poor of a social life did she have?"

"Well, her friends taught her, so..." A knock on the door made me look up. That whoever it was tried to open it without waiting for an answer told me it was one of my group. Hestia, of course, growled and shifted back against the door roughly, telling whoever it was to be polite. But I still felt a little grumpy. "I'm supposed to be done for the day."

"Maybe there was another fight?"

"Gods, please, no." I sighed and got off the bed. "Hestia, move away so that I can see what is going on." Hestia sighed gustily and got up to chew on her bone by my dresser. "However, if it's a fight, make Ulster deal with it."

"Be rather hard, because it's me," Ulster answered, opening the door. He nodded a greeting to Arthur before focusing on me. "And no, no fights from what I understand. I want your help with interrogations."

"Interro...?" I began, frowning. Then I remembered that we did actually have some captives, survivors from Iucharba's army, and we were trying to get more recent information out of them. Or at least different. Iuchar mentioned that Danann would often tell the two of them different things, operating on a 'need to know' basis. "And you want my help... why?"

"Oifeye suggested a 'nice person, mean person' sort of thing. He also suggested getting someone charming." He grinned. "So..."
"It's like the freaking gates again." I sighed and he laughed. "Am I the mean one or nice one?"

"Well..." He pointed to Hestia and I burst into laughter as I caught his meaning. I was going to be 'both' apparently, the sweet one who could 'order' the mean wolf to kill. "So?"

"Yes, yes..." I looked back to Arthur and smiled. "You take your time with the portraits, okay? This might take a while."

"Ah, thank you," Arthur murmured. He paused and held up one picture, one with Uncle Azel and Aunt Tailtiu smiling warmly at each other. "Can I borrow this one?"

"Of course!" I agreed immediately. I nudged Hestia up and pulled on some shoes. "Borrow whichever ones you want, though please let me know so that I know Hestia didn't eat any of them."

"...Thank you..." He returned to the pictures, and while I thought about swinging over to kiss his cheek, like I would with any of our group, I held off. He'd been uncomfortable with the hug, so it stood to reason he'd be uncomfortable with that too. Instead, I left the room, shutting the door behind me when Hestia joined me, and skipped down the hall, giddy.

Ulster followed me easily, laughing softly. "Arthur's heritage has already spread through gossip, so I won't ask why you're in such a chipper mood," he teased. I rolled my eyes and slowed down a bit to make it easier on him to keep up. "Sorry to interrupt bonding time."

"It's fine, since I'm a bit worried I was pushing," I replied, petting Hestia. Arthur did seem more inclined to let people know if he was annoyed or something than Yuria. But still... "We were just looking through the pictures I have of Uncle Azel and Aunt Tailtiu, while I shared what little bits I knew."

"That sounds like fun."

"Well, I enjoyed it." Wasn't sure if Arthur did or not. "Ah, regardless, what about you? Are you and Larcei bonding with Iuchar?"

"A bit, sure?" Ulster shrugged. "Neither of us were very interesting in getting to know that side of the family. Honestly didn't expect to ever meet them in a non-combat situation and never really thought about meeting them peacefully. Not like Seliph."

"I see." That made me a bit sad, though it made a lot of sense. I never thought about meeting Julius under 'peaceful' circumstances either. "Then in that case, how are things? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, mostly. Like I said, it's mainly weird." Ulster snickered. "Then there's his flirting with Larcei."

"Ah, yes, that." I sighed, thinking on what bits I'd overheard. "Has she told him to stop?"

"Not yet. I think she's more confused than anything."

"She's been flirted with before?" And I knew that for a definite fact. "Or is it the flowery language part?"

"The latter. Iuchar can get quite grandiose."

"What was it that he said when we first met him? Eyes of starlight or something?" If someone said anything like that to me, I'd probably send them to Lana to check for a head injury! "Does she need one of us to intervene?"
"I don't think so yet, but I'll remind her that she's got bunches of people willing to jump in to help if need be." Ulster rolled his eyes. "This would be much easier if she admitted to her own crush on Shanan."

"Speaking of which, have you told Larcei about your crush on Lana? Because she hasn't yelled my ear off for it."

"Uh..." Ulster actually stopped walking, trying to remember. "Damn it. Too much happened afterwards." He sighed. "Okay, the two of us just need to have a twin talk soon."

"Let me know if we need to rearrange the chore lists..." I paused and giggled, unable to help it. "Chore lists... why do we still keep calling it that? It should be like... duty roster or something."

"I guess it helps us feel like not everything is different." Ulster moved to Hestia's other side to pet her. "Besides, it's hard to say brushing Hestia is something good for the entire army."

"I don't know. I'd put it up there with brushing and tending to the horses. Same with giving her baths." I shook my head. "Anyway, this interrogation. We're just questioning, yes?"

"Of course, though they all seem to expect us to start torturing after a moment. Danann seems to favor it. Maybe the Empire in general does."

"I don't see how torture works. I mean; how do you know someone doesn't just blurt out a lie or something?"

"I suppose the hope is that they don't have the mental fortitude to come up with a lie while in copious amounts of pain." He shrugged. "That said; some people just freeze and don't say anything. I think they're just sadists who like being in power."

"Right, right." Made me wonder though... after all, if someone was torturing a person, then they had a bias towards what the 'truth' was, right? In that case, would the torture end with the truth? Or would it end when they heard what they wanted to hear? "Ah, this is bad. I'm trying to reason out torture and it's icky. And not working."

"Thankfully, we don't do anything like that. The worst is going to be threatening them with Hestia." Ulster smiled. "So, want to know what exactly has been going on?"

"Please and thank you."

The interrogation went well, from what I could tell, though in the middle of it, Ulster got Diarmuid and had the two of us ask questions. I had a bad feeling this was going to be part of our job now, but Hestia playing 'mean one' certainly was effective in getting people to talk. So was the simple truth of 'we will not torture you, but you will be stuck in this place unless we can get useful information'. Amazing what a little honesty got you.

"Now then, where is Fee?" I murmured, wandering the halls with Hestia. It was late, so she could be asleep, but no one else was really asleep, based on all the noise I heard. It wasn't late-late yet, after all. "I really do want to talk to her." Someone needed to ask her if she'd be willing to be an 'official' leader, but with everything going on, it slipped our minds. I wanted to make sure I didn't forget again. "Hestia, you sure she's this way?" Hestia barked and sniffed around before continuing on. "Okay then, sweetie."

We continued on, and I made sure to smile at people as we passed, just to be polite. A couple stopped me to ask questions about certain duties and lessons, which I answered to the best of my
abilities. A few more wanted to talk about the fights from earlier, since of course, that had traveled through the gossip vines, with all the exaggerations. I did my best to explain what actually happened and emphasized certain key and practical things, like how Danann's army was easily three times our size even with the extra allies. And how detrimental the in-fighting could be, pointing out how we now had to replace the medicines Lana and Yuria used to tend to the injuries, reducing our stock and chances of 'having enough' when another battle came. Thankfully, most seemed to understand. Some didn't, but I could only hope they'd have enough respect to follow the rules. Otherwise, we were going to get more problems far too quickly.

Regardless, though, all the talking certainly slowed the hunt down, but eventually, Hestia and I did find Fee. And I had to hold Hestia back because she and Yuria were talking. And it looked to be a serious discussion, based on how sad and shy Yuria was, so I didn't want to interrupt.

"Uh… you've apologized twice now, but I have no idea what you're apologizing about," Fee noted, frowning thoughtfully. She glanced up at the ceiling, tilting her head and pressing a finger against her cheek. "Nothing is broken, from what I know. My Annand is fine. My food was good. I didn't run into any pranks…" She hummed a bit, an incredibly beautiful sound really, and then shrugged. "Nope. Can't think of anything. So?"

"I… well…" Yuria whispered. She looked down, actually pulling her hair by her face to try and hide more. "I… Lewyn…"

"What's Father… oh!" Fee clapped, emphasizing her gasp. Or maybe she gasped, emphasizing her clap. "Oh, wait, are you apologizing because he's been raising you these past few years?"

"...Yes…" Yuria's voice was very small. "I'm-"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Don't apologize for him!" Fee cupped Yuria's face between her hands and brought her head up. "There's no reason to be mad at you. He's the one who left. If anything, I'm just madder at him over it.

"But…"

"But nothing! I'm super mad that he left, and I'm even more annoyed that he raised you in such isolation! I mean; come on! Ignoring how being alone sucks super much, why didn't he bring you back to Thove? It's not like he and Mother didn't raise other orphans there. There's Misha, Karin. Hermina, Hawk… and I could go on and on, really. The castle was practically an orphanage with how many he and Mother took care of." Fee smiled sweetly, bending down slightly to make sure she was looking Yuria in the eye. Yuria kept looking down. "Mother would've loved you to bits. There is no reason why he couldn't have brought you to Thove. That he chose to do so is just another reason to be mad at him."

"But…"

"Again, his decisions are neither your fault or responsibility." Fee giggled. "If anything, I'd rather you think of me like a sister, if you don't mind. After all, we were raised by the same person, even if he's a jerk who thought raising you alone was a good idea."

"I…" Yuria finally looked up and smiled back. "I would like that."

"Then I have something to finally thank him for. Letting me get another wonderful sister~" Fee laughed, the joyful sound bouncing up and down the hall. "Say, how old are you? Do you know?"

"Mm… no, not really." Yuria smiled sheepishly. "Lewyn guessed that I was around thirteen when
he found me, so we just say that I'm seventeen." Considering what I knew, those ages were accurate, which made sense. There was no way Lewyn didn't put the pieces together about who she really was. "But…"

"Ah, if that's the case, I'll think of you as my big sister! I'm sixteen, after all." Fee continued laughing. "So, no more apologizing. I'd rather spend time with you."

"That does sound nice." Yuria giggled, looking relieved. "Though, I do have my lessons with Diarmuid."

"This late? Wow, everyone works so hard!" Fee stepped back and brought up her fists, looking determined. "I've got to keep up!"

"That's my problem too." Yuria giggled again. "Everyone works so hard. I feel like I'm falling behind or, worse, holding them back."

"I'm sure you're doing better than you think. I mean; healing is hard work! Mother knew some healing staves and medicines." Fee snapped her fingers. "Oh, right! I was looking for one of the group! I wanted to offer to help make medicines. My parents taught Ced and me."

"They'll probably have you do it with supervision, just to make sure, but I'm sure they'd love it." Yuria sighed. "I need to memorize the herbs more quickly so that I can help too. They need more time to rest."

"Well, we'll work hard and keep at it!" Fee grinned. "Anyway, though, I'm keeping you from lessons, aren't I?"

"Ah, right!" Yuria turned and ran down the hall. "Let's have breakfast together in the morning!"

"Sounds good!" Fee waved until Yuria was out of sight and giggled. "Ah, that was fun~!" She then turned and squeaked, finding Hestia and me right there. Totally not hiding at all. "Uh…"

"That was so cute~!" I teased, laughing. She sulked a bit, puffing out her cheeks like a chipmunk, before relaxing. "She's right, though. While we'd love more medicine makers, Lana will want to watch you work a few times, just to be absolutely certain. Medicine making…"

"Is one of the few things in life that requires absolute perfection," Fee finished, swinging her arms behind her and clasping them. "Father said that Alicia and Sylvia practically hit him over the head."

"Oh?" That… actually, that made sense. Oifeye told me that Mom had been the one to teach him medicine making, and that Sylvia had been the best medicine maker in the army. Aideen said that Shanan and Oifeye were the second-best ones. "Then I'm sure it'll be fine. Lana will just want to be certain, though."

"Of course!"

"And I know I mentioned it jokingly before, but if you want someone to slap Lewyn for leaving, I will volunteer. Or we can coordinate some pranks." I reached down to pet Hestia, for a bit of emphasis. Her tailed wagged at the idea of 'prank'. "Our group has a list of things we've got planned for someone else in a worst case scenario, but I'm sure no one would mind using them on him."

"Tempting, but I'll at least wait until I see him before making a decision." Fee glanced around and let her hands fall to her side. "Besides, there's something a bit more to Yuria than what meets the
"That's a keen intuition." I crossed my arms and looked around as well, before gesturing for her to follow Hestia and me. "What makes you say that?"

"It's the wind, mainly." Fee followed me closely, talking quietly. We found a door outside and stepped out, walking through the grounds. Hestia rushed about, determined to get a late night snack. "As someone of Forseti's blood, I'm able to 'hear' the wind to a degree. It's helpful for when you're lost or for predicting the weather. I can also control it to a small degree as well, but I tend to avoid it since unexpected gusts can mess up Annand's flying."

"That makes sense." Forseti was one of the 'magic' Holy Bloods, after all. "Is it the wind or the sylphs?"

"Since I'm not really trained in magic-magic, I just say 'the wind', but it's probably the sylphs. Ced is way better at talking to them than me."

"I see." I looked around again, confirming that we were alone. Which made sense, considering we were outside in the cold at night. If anyone asked, we could blame Hestia, since she was hunting something. "Well, you're right. There is something more to her, but even she doesn't know because of the amnesia and the resulting panic attack when she does try to remember." I hesitated in continuing, but decided to go ahead and do so. After all, we planned on asking her to be a leader in the army. That meant showing her a high degree of trust. "She's actually Julia."

"Julia, huh? That name is familiar…" Fee frowned, thinking, and then she gasped. "Oh, wait…! Ah, that makes so much sense!" She nodded, crossing her arms. "I wonder if that's why then. I mean; based on what I heard, she would've been in so much danger." She frowned again. "Then again, Thove is literally the northmost city in all of Jugdral and between the snows and various forests, it's super hard to get to if you don't have a flier. Not to mention how gossip very rarely filters all the way from there to… well, anywhere. That's why we hid there, or so I was told."

"Told?"

"I was born in Thove. I've never actually been in Silesse Castle. Mother was pregnant with me when it fell. It's part of why Grandmother made sure to stay behind, while Father and Mother got everyone evacuated and safe. She died distracting the Grannvelian soldiers." Fee pulled back her sleeve, showing me a beautiful silver and diamond bracelet. "This was hers. She gave Mother some of her jewelry, to sell if need be. Thankfully, we didn't need to, so Ced and I got to wear them."

"Oh, that's a bit like my earring!" I tapped the ruby-gold one dangling from my ear. "Dad bought it for Conall and me when we were little. It matches a ring he bought Mom."

"Conall? Oh, right! Your twin! Mother told me about him." She peered at my earring. "Does he have the other one?"

"I hope so." We had each grabbed one along with our stuffed dogs that day. Then we had hidden in a building to get away from the soldiers and the roof… "I hope so."

"I'm sure he does. And I'm sure he's fine, just like Ced." She giggled and I smiled back, touched that she'd try to cheer me up. "You know; it's kind of funny. When I heard about you all, I somehow assumed you'd all be more like… say… Arthur. Crabby, bit caustic, like a skittish cat that had been abused and is slowly learning that the world isn't so bad."
"That… sounds a little too accurate." Though, Arthur saved the worst of his bite for people who genuinely annoyed him. "Gods, can you imagine him with cat ears?"

"So easily! I should figure out a way to make him some or something."

"A headband maybe?"

"Oh, that'll be fun!" Fee laughed, and I joined in. "See? Like that. But you all lived pretty happily, didn't you? Like me. Sure, things were tough in Thove, but I was surrounded with wonderful people. Of course, you also get the obligations. You lived such a nice life…"

"But you know others paid the price for that." I thought of the injuries Dalvin and Deimne got. I thought of Creidne. I thought of Muirne working herself to the bone to help with the healing. I thought of Shanain always leaving to save more people, never done. "The people who also look to you as…"

"As their hope." Fee nodded, completely understanding. "Ced got it worse than me. He's the Forseti Major, the heir, and he's just powerful. Like wow…" Her eyes sparkled, hinting she had a tiny bit of hero worship. Or, at the least, looked up to him highly. "One time, there was an avalanche and he used the wind to divert it completely from a village."

"Forseti isn't known for magical strength, right?"

"Nope. Forseti is speed. But magic itself has always run strongly in the line, even before the Holy Blood." She shrugged. "However, our way is a peaceful path, so many forget that even before receiving the Blessings of the Wind God, our Crusader-King created sandstorms with his magic to buy the army time to rest. The Miracle occurred during those sandstorms."

"That's amazing!"

"Isn't it?" She giggled, bouncing a bit. "But Ced's not just powerful. He's super nice, humble, patient, and he's the best musician. Plays a flute like our father. He's the best period, actually."

"I see." I, however, worried a bit. Even if you were naturally gifted, you had to work hard in order to excel at something. And if you spent so much being the 'perfect prince', then what else did you have? I felt like I was being crushed by expectations as it was. I worried that he felt the same. "Ah, goodness, I got completely distracted. I was actually looking for you to talk about something."

"You were?" And just like that, Fee was serious again. "What is it?"

"It's a question that we keep forgetting to ask." I smiled warmly at her. "Do you mind if we have you as an 'official' leader? You're our only flier, and that gives you a perspective none of us have."

"Oh!" Her eyes lit up and she smiled back, touched and proud. "I would be honored! Does it really change anything, though?"

"You probably have to actually do paperwork, but otherwise, I think your duties are more or less the same." I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd been worried she'd refuse. "It essentially is giving you more 'official' authority. You might need to order people, for instance, to help support you in a fight because of unexpected archers or whatnot."

"I see." She playfully saluted and winked, though I did see the seriousness in her expression. Even if she was excited, she was well aware of how heavy this duty was. She was a princess, after all. "We'll discuss details over the next few days to figure out specifics."
"Yep. This is a great big learning experience for all of us." I knew the proper thing to say would be something like 'I look forward to working with you' or something equally formal, but that was when I noticed Hestia had found some interesting prey. An owl with an injured wing. A fledgling owl, to be specific. "Ah! Hestia! Leave that one alone! Poor thing!"

"Oh no! Its wing!" Fee gasped. Hestia looked up at us with a 'why are you always stealing my snacks?' look. Gods, she didn't even like birds typically! "Quickly, quickly!"

Lana nearly laughed herself to tears when Fee and I rushed into the infirmary with the injured bird carefully tucked against my chest, a sulking Hestia following us. She tended to the owl with ease and all three of us headed outside to help the poor thing back up into the trees. Leaving Hestia with Yuria in the infirmary, of course. We also did a hunt to make sure there were no other injured birds on the ground. Because how could you save the continent if you didn't take the time to care for an animal? Or something.

"Oh, so Fee agreed, then?" Seliph asked, frowning over a report. Though it was horribly late, he was still working, reading through all the reports and the like, so I'd gone ahead and told him that I'd asked Fee. And that I'd told her about Yuria. Thankfully, he agreed that we should tell her, as a sign of trust. And because, knowing our group, it would come up in an 'official' setting. We'd have to consider letting Arthur and Iuchar know for a similar reason. If Iuchar hadn't already guessed. "Good, I'm glad. I'm thinking that she and Ulster can work together as our scout and spy leaders. She really does have a unique way of looking at a battlefield."

"Both literal and how she visualizes," I agreed, petting Hestia while I read through a couple of the reports. Seliph wasn't sure if he'd read them correctly, and I couldn't blame him. "I think we need some sort of standard for reports. This one rambles a bit too much." It was a scouting report and mentioned cute bunny rabbits. Which I totally understood, but it wasn't something Seliph needed to read and made it harder to pick out the important bits. "But yeah, she will visualize the battlefield from a top-down perspective, allowing her to note things we'd miss from our 'ground-up' way of viewing things."

"Also helps her with identifying places on a map." He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose before holding up the paper he'd been trying to read. "You mind...?"

"Now, is this another rambling one or a sign that you should get some sleep?" I took the paper from him and frowned. "Uh... huh." It was neither. It was just really messy writing. "Must be one of our newly taught."

"We're going to have to have it where someone proofreads or something. I mean no disrespect to the scout, but I honestly cannot make heads or tails of their report and that just means their work is wasted."

"It's fine." I snagged a pen from his desk and returned to the one I had been reading, underlining the important bits. "Here. This might help with this one."

"Thank you." He smiled warmly and sighed in relief. "Oh gods, that really does help. I can see why Otfeye said I'd just read summaries once we get the scout stuff finalized."

"Aha! So that's why you focused on that!" I winked, smiling teasingly. "I see through you!"

"I didn't think I was being subtle." Seliph leaned back in his chair and Hestia abandoned my side to head to his, nosing his hand. "Aw, thank you, Hestia. I do think some wolf hair would help with some of these." She licked his hand and rested her paws on the arm of the chair to reach his face.
"Okay, okay, okay!"

"She's fretting because you've been in this study all freaking day." I frowned over the unreadable report. "Think we might need a bit more light if I'm to have a chance of getting through this one."

"Done." He snapped his fingers and four bright globes of light spun out from his fingertips to join the two hovering in the air over his desk. Seliph's Naga Blood certainly helped us save a little money on candles. Particularly if he was going to pull long nights like this on a regular basis. "I'll be glad once we get things properly organized. We really should've planned this better."

"In retrospect, yes." But what else could we have done, really? "Can you have one of the globes move a little closer to me?" Seliph gestured and one of the globes gently 'bumped' my cheek before hovering over my shoulder. "Cute."

"I thought so." He grinned and I rolled my eyes. "Say, do you think Arthur might be willing to be a leader?"

"I'm not so certain on him quite yet." With the additional light, making it through the report was a little easier. That said, I had to steal some pen and paper to make notes. "He's more here for Fee's sake, and at the moment, his ultimate goal is to get to Alster."

"Meaning that when we reach there…" Seliph frowned. "Where is Alster again?"

"Uh… way south?" I stopped what I was doing and found a map in the room. Because of course there was one. "Why is there a map?"

"Ask Oifeye. He's the one who put it there." Seliph stood up and cleared a space for me to set up the map. "Ah, so it's actually south of Leonster."

"It is." I found Conote fairly quickly from there. Both Alster and Conote were places Iuchar thought Conall might be, if he wasn't in Belhalla. So, when we went to Leonster, would I finally get to see him? "If he decides to stay with us after we've made it there, then I think we should ask. But until then…"

"Best to assume that he'll leave to stay with his sister." Seliph laughed softly. "Bit of a shame. I mean; he's your cousin."

"He is, but we can bond while he's here, and that relation won't change even if he does leave." I rolled up the map again, set it to the side, and went back to reading the report. "I think we should have him in the war meetings still, though. He's our only magey-mage. Sure, Yuria uses magic, but…"

"Yuria primarily helps Lana in the infirmary, and I think will want to continue doing so." Seliph sat down again to read. Hestia put her head on his knee, silently demanding pets. Which, of course, she got. "She might change her mind if we get more healers, but honestly, I'm not sure you can have 'too much' help there."

"Maybe if there's a shortage of space." That reminded me of something. "Oh, hey, did Lana tell you that she was wondering if we needed a larger space for the field infirmary?"

"She did. I'll talk to her in the morning about it." He smiled. "I love the reports from the infirmary. Lana's so precise."

"Well, she's not only been trained in this, but she's had her 'role' from the start. Same as you, really." Lana, for very obvious reasons, was our Chief Healer. Seliph led everything. "Diarmuid is
officially in charge of our inventory and budget, right?"

"Yep. He got annoyed by my attempts at it. You know how grouchy he can get when you use a less efficient way to do math."

"Grouchy and hovering." He did try not to, bless him, but it just grated his nerves so damn much. "Iuchar?"

"Helping Lester manage our cavalry units, due to the majority being actually his soldiers. But…" Seliph sighed and leaned back in his chair. "I think that fight you had to deal with shows how… ill-advised it would be to make Iuchar a 'leader' outright."

"I'm not really sure if I 'dealt' with it. But I agree." It was clearly too much to ask of our Isaachian soldiers to have them listen and be under the command of Iuchar. No matter how kind Iuchar actually was. "What's Oifeye's official job?"

"Advisor, teacher to the new soldiers, making us seem far more competent than we actually are…" He smiled when I laughed. "I swear he works too hard. And I am saying that even though I know I'm probably working too hard."

"Not even probably." I made it through the report and passed my notes to him. "Bit of a shame their writing is still poor. Their report is actually very detailed, but to the point. Whoever it is…"

"Is a damn good scout apparently." His eyes narrowed and he jotted down a note. "Only report I've gotten so far that mentions the possibility of Dozel soldiers being on the road."

"That's troubling." While we did have a defense force in Ganeishire, the majority of our army was here in Sophara. Still, it wasn't entirely unexpected either. "Have Fee check it in the morning."

"Just what I was thinking." He smiled at me and glanced through my notes again before handing it back to me. "There should be a name on the top right corner of the original report. Can you copy it down? I think we'll see about getting them extra classes for the writing."

"Sure." Whoever wrote the name had been a different person, so it was easy to copy that down. "Ha… pretty funny that Larcei and I are the only ones without any set roles."

"That's because you're both too good at too many things." Seliph grinned and I rolled my eyes. "Still, you were able to deal with that argument well. Better than I would've, at least."

"Again, I don't think I really 'dealt' with it." I brushed my hair behind my ear, and Hestia returned to my side for pets. "I really don't like how they bloodied that person for insulting me, though."

"Neither do I." He closed his eyes briefly before shaking his head and going back to his reading. "Still, you're better at faking a smile than the rest of us, so the soldiers find you infinitely more approachable. Or so I've overheard."

"Really now?"

"Yep. You and Diarmuid." Seliph brought up his hand to count off people. "Lana is the healer and no one wants to bother her with not-health-related questions. Yuria's in the same situation, with the addition of her being very shy. Larcei's untactful, to put it mildly. Ulster's stoicism intimidates people. Oifeye is gives an air of 'weary veteran' and so, no one wants to bother him during his few bits of free time. People assume that I'm too busy. Lester is also always running around."

"That's just because Lester is a bit of a scatterbrain, always forgets things, and rushes to get them
"Yes we know that, but they think it's because he's super busy too." Seliph rolled his eyes and I had to laugh. "And Diarmuid is often dealing with the supplies and the like and can't fake a smile as well as you. Meanwhile, according to the soldier gossip-

"Which you've heard because…?"

"Because I hide during my breaks and people just walk on by. You eavesdrop quite a bit."

"Where do you hide? You're not a good enough climber to get to the roof, and the trees don't have enough leaves to hide you."

"Alcoves, mainly." He shrugged. "Anyway, you always make sure to smile for them, so not only do they not feel intimidated, but they actually feel encouraged to ask you."

"That explains why I got so many people asking for clarification about why the fight was such a disturbance." I sighed, but smiled for him. "Well, if it helps keep the peace, I certainly don't mind. Do we have a person specifically in charge of our infantry? If not, we can throw that to Larcei."

"Ulster was, but he's honestly better as a scout-spy master." He laughed. "Larcei's going to kill me in the morning."

"Drop it on her and run to my room."

"Don't think I won't." He smiled at me, but then took my hand. "But have you been okay? You've been a bit shaken, and it does seem like it's more than just 'how do you even run a freaking army?' and 'why are people swearing loyalty?'."}

"You know me well." Of course, I couldn't tell him about what part of that was. Not yet. There was too much going on. "The fight between Iuchar and Iucharba did make me worry far more about Conall."

"...Well, he's not the only one who has changed a lot." Seliph stood again and cupped my cheek, smiling gently. "All of us grew up quite a bit. Little-Riona would've punched out the person who insulted her, for instance, not use it as a base to better explain our vision and hope for the future."

"Ha… that is true." I had, in fact, done so a few times. I was much more violent as a child, though
Aideen had been quick to nip that before it became too much of a problem. "Still, there are so many things that are the same...

"Of course. But there's nothing that says he's not still the same in so many ways." Seliph grinned. "Besides, isn't it fun to imagine his bluntness in Belhalla?"

"I... well..." I did have to giggle. Conall might have been quiet, cautious, and still, but he had also been the one person in the group with less tact than Larcei. "That's a good point." I could hope, at least. I just worried. "What about you? Have you been okay?" I studied him closely, frowning. "I know you haven't slept well."

"Ah, no, I haven't." He sighed and actually leaned down to rest his head on my shoulder. I ran one hand through his hair while resting the other one on his back. Hestia laid down on our feet, ready to be a comfort pillow if need be. "Iucharba's words haunt me. I keep hearing them as I try to sleep. The parts of killing people with hope..."

"And then seeing so many people choosing to die instead of believing in us." It was unnerving and didn't exactly make me hopeful. But the fact did remain that no one was surviving with things as they were. Perhaps our sheltered life let us still believe things could be saved, but it was still... "If it gets too much, you'll need to see Lana for sleeping medicines."

"I know. I don't think I'm that bad off yet." He sighed and straightened. I let one hand fall to my side, but kept the other on his back. "It just... it reminds me of how I will never be as strong as I ought to be. And how I can only pray that I can still be strong enough."

"Don't think that you alone have to be strong enough to bear all of their weight." I cupped his face between my hands and rested my forehead against his. "Of course you wouldn't be 'strong enough' for that. Our group has always worked together. That is how we push through things. By pooling our strength, we become more than strong enough." I smiled teasingly, and he smiled back faintly, accepting the rebuke. "Even Sigurd had an army of friends to help him through everything."

"I worry that I'm leading everyone to the same end. That I am simply being played, and leading everyone into a trap."

"We keep our eyes and ears open, and we remember that all things are possible. Our parents made mistakes, but we can learn from them."

"That... is true." He laughed softly. "Ah, I'm fretting too much, aren't I?"

"Not necessarily a bad thing. It means that you're aware of the possibilities, and if we acknowledge the worst stuff, then we can hopefully plan for them." I made to pull away, but he reached up to hold my hand against his face. "Hmm?"

"Nothing. Just..." He half-shrugged and closed his eyes, still holding my hand against his cheek. "I'd like to stay like this just a little longer."

"Of course." I smiled warmly at him, even if he couldn't see. "But be careful. Hestia's going to get jealous~!"

"I'll get her a treat in the morning." Hestia's ears twitched at the magic word of 'treat'. "Hey, Riona?"

"Yes?"

"I..." He sighed and shook his head, letting go of my hand and opening his eyes. "No, never mind."
"Are you sure?" I leaned forward to study him a bit better. "I'm always here to listen."

"I know. I'm just not sure what I want to say, or how." He smiled sheepishly, and I smiled reassuringly in return. "That's..." A knock on the door chased the half-conversation away and both of us became serious in an instance. "Come in."

"I... think I need help opening the door, actually?" Yuria's sheepish voice filtered through, and I went over to open the door, seeing that she also smiled sheepishly. And carried a tray with tea and food and what looked to be raw meat on a plate for Hestia. "I noticed the light and realized you were both still working," she murmured, walking in carefully. Seliph quickly cleared a spot on the desk for her. "So, I thought I would make you something."

"And you got something for Hestia too!" I laughed, taking the plate and setting it down for Hestia. Hestia, of course, rapidly chomped it down. She always ate fast. "That's so sweet!"

"Oh, no, it's nothing!" She set out the plate of food and the two teacups. "The tea is an herbal thing that's supposed to help with exhaustion, but not to the point of keeping you up. Mostly to make sure that your vision doesn't blur." She looked up at the light globes in fascination, poking one. "Pretty..."

"A useful little trick thank to my Holy Blood," Seliph explained, portioning out the food. I noticed that they were fluffy cheese buns, perfect for a late night snack, and that he was dividing it in 'three'. "Means I don't have to hunt for candles."

"They're beautiful..." Yuria breathed. She even giggled. "They're like stars!"

"I suppose so, huh?" Seliph frowned a bit, only just now noticing there were only two teacups. And being terribly confused. "I like them too. I used to be very afraid of the dark."

"You were?" She laughed. "That's adorable!"

"He used to get so scared that he had to sleep beside Oifeye to feel safe," I teased, grinning. Seliph scowled. "What? You did! It was cute!"

"Just wait until there's a thunderstorm," Seliph grumbled. His eyes danced, though, telling me he wasn't really mad. "She's afraid of the thunder."

"Lightning! It's the lightning!"] I did look away in embarrassment, though. While I didn't mind the rain, I hated thunderstorms. Severely. I always had to hide with Aideen or Oifeye when I was little and even nowadays, I tended to try and hide during a bad storm. "B-besides, you know why!" It actually stemmed from two things. One was the fact that a particularly bad thunderstorm hit very soon after Conall had been captured, which only highlighted the fear and pain of losing my twin. The other reason was more conventional; I'd seen someone die from being struck by lightning. First time I'd seen someone die to something other than a weapon or magic. Kind of stood out.

"Yes, I know. But if you're going to share things like that..." He shrugged before snapping his fingers. And accidentally created another light globe, though he pretended he meant to do that, sending it floating around Yuria to her utter delight. "That reminds me. Have you been okay with Fee's thunder sword?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes. I've been fine. It's the storm, not... you know," I gestured vaguely. "Thunder magic goes 'magic-thunder-kill' in my head. Lightning goes 'storm-thunder-kill'. The association is different in my head. I hadn't even thought about it."

"Oh, good. I've been worried." He smiled warmly, and I vaguely noticed that Yuria looked between
us, looking surprisingly happy about something. She even bounced a bit on her toes, for some reason. "Anyway, though, Yuria, why didn't you bring three teacups? Were you not planning on staying?"

"Ah, Yuria, you need a break too!" I got behind her and nudged her to the desk. "And I'm sure Hestia actually needs to head out-" I didn't even say the full word before Hestia was out the door, leaving a licked-clean-plate. "See? So, I'll go take care of that. You two take a proper break!" And Seliph got to spend time with his little sister! It was perfect!

Yuria's little frustrated frown, though, told me I had missed something, and it wasn't until much later that I realized Larcei might've told her about Seliph and me along with all the 'dynamic summary' stuff. Which… might have meant that Yuria had been trying to get the two of us to take a break together, especially given how giddy she had looked at Seliph and me bantering. Which I'd accidentally messed up because my mind went 'oh! Perfect excuse for Seliph and Yuria to bond!' and Hestia really did need to be let out.

I'd… uh… have to apologize for that obliviousness. And sincerely ask the others if this was something that happened a lot. I was morbidly curious by this point.

By the time Hestia was done frolicking outside, I decided to try and get some sleep. Unfortunately though, I'd been a little too awake to just pass out, so I decided to curl up on my bed to read a couple more chapters of *The Assassin's Bride*, since I hadn't really had time to read more than a couple of pages since we started officially forming the army. Big mistake. Not the army, but choosing to read. When I'd started, I was about a third of the way through and I only stopped because I… uh… finished the book. And it was a long book.

"That was so good!" I gushed, flailing about with the book clutched to my chest. Hestia, who sprawled out on the bed with me at some point during my reading even though she knew she wasn't supposed to, yawned and attempted to go back to sleep. "I was so worried that they wouldn't make it out, but they did, Hestia! They did!" I sighed happily and flipped back to the ending to reread the last few lines. "And though we might have met in the darkest of circumstances, you have always been my light…" I hid my face in the book, giggling. "So good~! No wonder Lana loved it!" I gasped as a thought occurred to me. "Oh, I need to reread it and find all the foreshadowing!" I rolled onto my stomach and opened the book to the first page. Hestia tried to bite the book. "No! Mine!" I poked her nose to keep her away. "Who needs sleep anyway, right?"

The answer to who needed sleep was, of course, me. It was very, very, very late. I had morning duties. I had morning training. I couldn't really sleep in, and I was sure that 'stayed up late reading a really good book' was not on the list for acceptable excuses for why a leader overslept. But the story was just too good! So, I began reading again, starting from the very beginning, squealing in delight when I instantly noticed some bits of foreshadowing in the first few pages. Tiny hints about the big bad villain, when he was still masquerading as the helpful and faithful knight of the realm who 'only wished to protect the people'. And there was even a hint about how he died! Broken, alone, and at the hands on those he wronged. A fitting, if pitiable, death.

However, I only made it about ten or so pages before I was yawning, my jaw actually popping from it. I rubbed my eyes to try and get the sleep from them so that I could continue, but it didn't really work. Instead, I swore I saw blue sparkles swirling about me and sighed, accepting defeat. It had been a long day, after all. I doubted I'd actually pick up much of anything anyway. So I petted Hestia and tried to nudge her off the bed because she really shouldn't have been on the bed with me. However, my limbs were so heavy. I felt like I had bunches of weights tied to every bit of my skin. This wasn't really normal. I never got *this* sleepy, especially so quickly. Then again, maybe
I'd been overdoing it. No, I had been. Oifeye had told me that. So maybe this was my body saying 'see? This is what happens when you abuse me.' or something.

Then Hestia started whimpering, nosing and licking my face, and I knew there was something just plain wrong. The frantic knocking on the door confirmed that.

"R-Riona?" Yuria's shaking voice barely filtered through. "Riona, are you awake?" she asked, voice a little high from worry. More than a little. "Riona? Oh gods..."

"Barley," I called, making myself get up and stumble over to the bathroom. I bumped into the nightstand and the wall, but I managed it. Though I dropped the book somewhere. "Er… barely. I'm barely awake. Door's open."

"Oh, thank goodness..." Yuria rushed inside and I got some cold water to splash on my face. Normally, it woke me right on up. This time… not so much. "Riona?"

"Trying to get coherent. You hug Hestia or something." It took a few more splashes and a couple of light slaps to the face before I felt awake again. Or at least coherent. "Is everything okay?"

"Everyone's asleep!" Yuria looked so frantic when I stepped out of the bathroom that I chose against pointing out that the late hour meant that was normal. "I was in the infirmary with Lana and she just dropped!" That, however, wasn't normal. And further confirmed that something was very, very wrong. Even as I wondered why the two of them were up at this hour in the first place. "I thought she had fainted, but I couldn't find anyone who was awake! Even the people in the halls!"

"That's… uh…" It took a moment for my groggy mind to come up with some sort of answer. Sleep Staff. According to Oifeye's stories, Mom had used the staff a few times to put large groups of people asleep. The staff wasn't meant to be used that way, mind, but with enough power, it could. "Not good…" Sleep staves meant enemies, though. And to put everyone to sleep would mean…! "Seliph!" No one would be awake for an assault. Or an assassination. And it only took one assassin to kill a leader. "Hestia! Go!" Hestia barked and was out of the room in an instance. "Sword… sword… damn it, where did I put…? Yuria, you armed?"

"N-no…" She flinched. "I was in the infirmary, and I panicked, and-"

"It's fine. Just narrows down which sword I'm looking for." My fire sword also happened to be the first one I found, by sheer coincidence. I wasn't too comfortable with the idea of using magic still, but if I needed long-range… "Okay. He should be in his room at this hour. And if he's not, I'm going to scold him as soon as we confirm his safety."

"You're awake, though?"

"I made poor decisions." I shook my head as sleep took me and I did something else that was stupid. I hit myself on the thigh really freaking hard, hard enough that I swore I'd have a bruise in the morning. The pain helped my thoughts focus, though, and that took priority. "Why were you and Lana awake?"

"One of the night patrol people slipped and cracked their head on the corner of a wall, so we were tending to it. And we'd just finished when…" Yuria winced and clung to my sleeve. "Oh, I hope no one is injured…"

"Right now, we need to make sure we don't have people sneaking in. We can tend to injuries once we know that much." The grogginess was slowly receding. Thank everything. "Okay, stay close to me."
Yuria and I headed down the hall, moving slower than I liked, but between my less-but-still-freaking-there gogginess and Yuria's lack of athletic ability, it was really just safer for both of us. On the way, we checked in on the others. Larcei was fast asleep on her bed, half-dressed like she'd passed out while changing. Ulster was half on his bed and half off, completely out. Diarmuid had various papers scattered around his sleeping form, like he'd been working still. Lester was probably the only one 'properly' asleep of the Tirnanog group, but he also had the earliest mornings due to organizing the hunters. Seliph, however, wasn't in his room. But that was because Seliph had either noticed something wrong, or Hestia had woken him up, because he was actually heading our way, silver sword in hand, with Hestia following him closely.

"Riona! Yuria!" Seliph called, running the last bit to hug us both. Hestia nuzzled my hand and let me pet her before pressing into Yuria's leg, providing comfort. "Oifeye is out. How is…?"

"All of our group is fast asleep, including Lana in the infirmary," I explained, yawning halfway through. Seliph, like Yuria, was perfectly awake. "Damn you and your high resistance to magic, by the way."

"So you think it's a Sleep Staff too." Seliph sighed and ruffled Yuria's hair to help calm her. She smiled gratefully in return. "Hestia woke me. Sort of."

"Were you dozing?"

"Yeah, and then I felt like something was trying to press against my skull. I thought it was just the beginnings of a headache and went to Oifeye's room for a remedy, but..." He glanced down the hall. "We should see if anyone else is awake. I'm not entirely hopeful, but..."

"If this is an assault, I'm not hopeful of two wide awake people, one half-awake at best, and a wolf protecting everything, so we should definitely check." If it was 'just' assassins, then maybe we had a chance. If it was an army, we were dead. "Hestia? You smell or hear anything?" Hestia sniffed the air and walked a bit ahead before barking, having caught something odd, at least. "Looks like that's a 'yes'."

"Seems so." Seliph nodded and looked at Yuria. "If you need to hold onto someone, do you mind holding onto Hestia? Unfortunately, Riona and I might need our arms." Yuria nodded, smiling to reassure us. "Then let's see what she's caught."

All of us kept very close together, twitching at every tiny noise. Most of the time, it was a sleeping soldier, who we dragged off to the side to clear the hallway. Much as I would've loved carrying them to safer places, we didn't have the time or energy to do so. Particularly when every second just made us more and more paranoid. By now I expected something. Enemy soldiers. Assassins. Blood. Something. But there was nothing. Just a silence that pressed down on us, watching like a predator deciding if we were weak enough to take. It was almost a relief when Hestia growled at two figures coming down a different hallway. It became a 'true' relief when we saw the figures were Arthur and Fee.

"Told you the wind said friendlies," Fee yawned, rubbing at her eyes. She carried her slim lance and leaned against the wall. "You should've just believe me."

"Like I know the wind," Arthur grumbled. His sleepy-eyes took all heat out of the words, as did the fact that he nearly dropped his fire tome. That said, he certainly seemed more awake than Fee and me. He walked straight, at least. "Ugh... I'm too tired for all of this."

"Told you should have been asleep."
"If I'd been asleep, you wouldn't have known there was anything wrong."

"I'm pleased to see you're well," Seliph diplomatically interrupted, smiling gently. I silently noted that the one thing we all have in common is that we all had magic Holy Blood, though only Seliph and Yuria had Holy Blood associated with any resistance to magic. I wondered if the elemental spirits blunted it for Arthur, Fee, and me. Would explain why Arthur was better off of our trio; he had two magic Holy Bloods. "Have you checked on Iuchar?"

"He sleep talks," Arthur informed us dryly. Fee began giggling and went over to Yuria to lean on her instead of the wall. "All that poetic dri… stuff? He apparently composes it in his sleep."

"So, he's fine."

"Yep." Arthur sighed. "If this is an assault, they're doing a damn poor job. Providing the wind isn't messing with Fee, and she's hearing correctly when she's too tired to walk straight, then there was an army, but now there isn't."

"...There was one, but not now?" Seliph frowned and looked at the rest of us. "Really?"

"See, Fee? It makes no sense."

"But that's what the wind says!" Fee complained, a little whiny and a little defensive. She leaned and cuddled with Yuria, to Yuria's confusion. I found it adorable. "It's not worried at all now anyway, so even if there are some left, they're no threat. I mean; we should probably look into it anyway, but..." She hummed, giggling. "You're so warm, Yuria..."

"I'm glad?" Yuria replied squeakily. Arthur facepalmed, while Seliph laughed softly. Much as I thought it cute too, though, I noticed something. "Um..."

"Hestia?" I called, because Hestia was far ahead. Her ears twitched and she looked back, but she continued on. "...She smells others."

"Th-then we should follow." Yuria hesitantly looked to Arthur. "Do you have a wind tome I can borrow? I..." She smiled when Arthur pulled out his wind tome from his holster. He actually had the thunder tome already there, highlighting further how he was far more awake than Fee and me. "Thank you!" She looked worriedly at Fee. "Um..."

I had to go catch Hestia while the others convinced Fee to let go of Yuria, and we then decided to divert to Fee's room so that she and I could splash our faces again to try and wake up more, just in case. After all, you had to prepare for the worst case scenario you could think of. That way you were at least mildly ready when things became even worse.

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We wandered the halls slowly, mostly following Hestia, but also going out of our way to check on whether someone had fallen asleep in a bad spot. Like the stairs. Or when they'd been leaning out over something. Thankfully, though, the late hour proved helpful for preventing things like that, or at the least, we didn't find anyone bruised and bloody. We still did our best to get the sleepers to more comfortable places, but for the most part, we followed Hestia. It took a moment to realize we were heading to the main entrance room-area and we barely caught Hestia as we heard voices drift out of that room, providing there were, indeed, others here. And not people in our army.

"I thought sharing my magic meant that you wouldn't get injured." A woman's voice, kind and soft. And worried. "Was I wrong?"

"You sharing your magic with me meant that I didn't pass out from using the staff as I did. It's
really not designed to be used to put so many asleep." A man's voice, laughing and gentle. And strangely familiar. "That doesn't mean the feedback isn't there. The staff is broken and needs to be repaired, and my hand hates me."

"Here, use my handkerchief to bind that up."

"Thank you." There was the sound of movement and then something falling. "Oh, gods damn it."

"I can hold one of the staves, you know." There was a bit of a pause. Our group looked at each other and ducked into a nearby alcove, with Yuria and Arthur being the furthest back. We were a little squished, but we also wouldn't be seen immediately. It would hopefully be enough, if things came to a fight. "Still, I'm surprised you went with this sort of tactics. Not like you to play a long game."

"Long games are too complicated and rarely go as you expect. Even if you plan for everything, the gods will find a way to make you pay for it." The man's voice was dry and scoffing. It sounded like the woman giggled in response, though it was hard to tell. "Besides, this wasn't that long of a 'game' and you've been itching to see him dead ever since he proudly showed us that labor camp."

"I'm not complaining, though I'm sure the locals are going to freak out at seeing a bunch of electrocuted Dozel soldiers on their doorstep. And a finely cooked general."

"I'll turn them to ash on the way out. We specifically went with them here because we overheard them bragging of the number of people they'd assaulted recently. I don't care about leaving no body for them."

"Harsh, but fair. I suppose they'll just be written off as more deceased by the rebels hands." That definitely proved these two, whoever they were, were with the Empire. And I wasn't sure I liked us being used as a scapegoat, though it did sound like these would be people we'd killed anyway… "Why did you bring the fortify staff again?"

"Because I have no idea if someone's bleeding because they dropped at an inconvenient point or if any healers had been in the middle of tending to someone and I'd like to minimize things if I can. I'm hoping the late hour is also helping with that, but you never know," Yuria smiled a bit at that, though she quickly frowned in confusion, like she was trying to figure something out. "So… hmm? Hekate?" A quiet little growl echoed down the hall and Hestia's hackles rose. All of us bit back groans or facepalmed as we realized what Hestia had been following: the scent of a fellow animal. An interloping animal, in 'her' territory. "Do you smell someone, sweetie?"

"Surely no one is awake!"

"Magical resistance does let one resist, Ishtar. It's part of the name."

"Hestia, no…!" I hissed, trying to grab her. However, thanks to how we were all squished together, I couldn't get a good a good grip on her fur and so she darted down the hall. After the animal. "Hestia…" I sighed and, once again, decided to do something stupid. "Yuria, make sure they don't do what I'm about to do." And I pushed past everyone and chased after Hestia to try and catch her before she made it to the room.

Sadly, I failed, and ended up stumbling into the room myself. With the two strangers, and the very large black wolf with them who was in a staring contest with Hestia. The woman, carrying a badly cracked Sleep Staff, looked at me and Hestia curiously. The man, carrying a Fortify,, focused entirely on Hestia, though, and only looked up when the woman nudged him. I, however, froze because… because…!
"Ah, so someone was… awake…" the man trailed off, staring at me. Staring at me with eyes of two different colors: red left eye, blue right eye. "You…" He wore his Fjalar-red hair long, tied back in a simple ponytail with a few strands framing his face. He wore a long, black coat with gold embroidery halfway up the lower arm. He wore a simple white shirt and black pants tucked into black leather boots. "You can't be…" A sword hung from his belt, finely made. A ruby stud glinted in his left ear. A gold-ruby earring dangled from his right. An earring that matched… that matched the one I wore in my left… "Riona?"

"C-Conall…?" I whispered, choking on the name, on my hope. Tears filled my eyes at his slight, unbelieving smile. It was… it was really…! "Conall!" And I dropped my sword and lunged forward to hug my twin brother for the first time in thirteen years. "You're okay! You're… you're…!"

"You're alive!" Conall dropped the staff to cling to me tightly. His breath caught and I felt tears hit my shoulder. "You're alive! You're okay!"

"Yep, I'm just fine!" I thought about pulling back to study him, but I couldn't make myself do it. He was here. He was really here. I couldn't believe it. "You look good."

"Being back in Isaach has been good for me, it seems." He pulled away first, and cupped my face. "Bit thinner than my memory. But it's you. It's really you."

"It is!" I grinned at him. I was crying. He was crying. "Ha… you look like Dad!"

"Do I? I've seen pictures, but…"

"Yep! You looked like him as a little kid too. Got pictures to prove that!" Though what he said confused me. "But Arvis has pictures of Dad?"

"Mom did. They were with her things. So, I saw the ones she kept. They kept everything of hers. That Sleep staff..." His eyes widened and he dropped his right hand to his side. It had a handkerchief tied around it. "Ah, did I get blood on you?"

"You think I haven't gotten blood on me over these last few years? Please. You're fine." I rolled my eyes, but I kept on smiling. I couldn't stop. Conall was here. He was really here. "Though, why put everyone to sleep?"

"So that Ishtar and I could kill some rapists who got away with their crimes for too long without bothering people." He paused and then looked at the woman standing by us, who was smiling in amusement. "Er… so, Ishtar, this is Riona. Caitriona."

"I go by Riona. I couldn't stand not hearing it after you were captured, so I made everyone call me it, so that I could… oh, whatever." Still, this was now a bit awkward. "But… uh… hi?"

"Hello!" Ishtar greeted, surprisingly cheerful. She had a lovely smile as well, warm and bright and fun. "Nice to not-meet you. Because we totally didn't see you. Right, Conall?"

"Yes, thank you," Conall replied, smiling warmly at her. I frowned in confusion. "I imagine you don't want Imperial Troops to know your exact location and send priests to kidnap you, Riona. I promise; it's very not fun."

"That said, I have to ask…" Ishtar pointed to Hestia, who sniffed the black wolf curiously now. The black wolf did the same, nosing her. "You have a wolf too? Because Hekate is Conall's."

"Well, yes?" I replied, frowning a bit. "Hestia is mine, as much as any wolf can be?" Then it
clicked. "Oh, wait, what?" I rounded on him, laughing. "How did you get her?"

"I found her injured in the woods while walking with Ishtar and healed her up!" Conall laughed. This was… this was too amusing. "You?"

"Found her malnourished in the woods." I looked at Hekate again and reached out to pet her. She immediately began licking my hand and wagging her tail, maybe smelling (somehow) that I was Conall's twin. "She looks like your stuffed-dog. Do you still…?"

"I do. Managed to hold onto it and the earring. Barely." He tapped it for emphasis and I grinned, glad. "I'm guessing you still have yours? Especially since Hestia looks like yours."

"Of course I do." I pointed to my earring as well, and he laughed. "Aw, she's so cute, though~! I bet she uses that to get out of trouble."

"I'd say you don't know the half of it, but I'm guessing your Hestia is simi-ACK!" And Hestia jumped up to brace her paws on Conall's shoulders and lick his face. "Well, aren't you affectionate?"

"She's very used to people." I giggled, cheerful still, but that cheer to fade when I thought about something. Our meeting was a coincidence. He hadn't known I was here. "Conall?"

"A moment! I'm being licked to death!" Still, he laughed and managed to get Hestia to get back down on all fours. She immediately went to lick Ishtar's hand. "She's super social."

"She knows that if she's cute, she gets extra treats and pets from people." I watched Ishtar coo over Hestia for a bit and petted Hekate before smiling wryly at him. "You're not staying here, are you?"

"Hmm? Ah…" Conall winced and Ishtar looked away. She even brought her hands halfway up, like she wanted to cover her ears, though both Hestia and Hekate nudged her until she started petting them again. "No, I promised…"

"...Well, promises are important..." I made sure to smile for him. I couldn't deny it hurt. I wanted him to stay. I wanted him to be here with me. I wanted to catch up on so many things. I wanted… but what I wanted didn't fully matter here. It was also what he wanted. And I had known he would've had a life in Belhalla. That we hadn't immediately started fighting… that was enough. That was enough for my worries. "Nothing says that I won't see you again, and no matter what, you are my adorable little brother~!"

"Twin. Twin." He sulked. "I'm not that much younger."

"You're still younger!" I giggled. "And I'm your twin sister. That's not changing. Neither will the fact that I love you and want you to be happy."

"Riona..." He smiled warmly for me. "Yes, that's right. No matter what, I love you and I'm praying for your happiness too. Yours and all of our family's. Things are just… complicated. More complicated than I can explain right now, I think."

"I'm also groggy, believe it or not, so I'm not sure I'd process most of it!" I did notice Ishtar looked relieved and that she smiled so softly. She. must've been afraid that he'd stay here with me, instead of leaving with her. "But hey. Question." I moved to whisper in his ear. "Are you two dating or something?"

"What? No!" Conall kept his voice quiet too. "N-no, we're not. We're close, certainly, but..." Normally, I'd start smiling and teasing, but I saw very real panic in his eyes, so I bit my tongue.
"She's dating Julius."

"Oh, okay." That panic… why had it been there? I hadn't seen him in thirteen years, but I knew that look. I'd seen it so many times when we were children. The 'fear for your life' panic. Why would he feel that, based on such a simple question? "Sorry."

"No, no, it's fine." Slowly, that panic faded and he smiled awkwardly. "Just uh…"

"What are you two talking about?" Ishtar asked, looking a little grumpy, even as she pet both Hekate and Hestia. Her eyes were narrowed and everything. "It's about me, isn't it? That's why you're so quiet."

"I'm telling Conall how hot you are," I instantly retorted, going for the first thing I could think of. It was worth her yelp. "She makes funny noises when she's startled. It must be fun teasing her." Conall nodded in agreement. "Hmm… I wonder how else…?"

"Yeah, you two are definitely twins." Ishtar sighed. "You're as blunt as Conall too."

"Depends on the person and the situation."

"Okay, so not as bad as Conall."

"I'm not that bad," Conall replied lightly. His grin showed he was lying through his teeth and knew it. "Really, I'm not."

"You told King Travant, to his face, that he's known as a villain for the Yied Massacre, and that your first memory is of someone named Aideen who broke down sobbing at the news," Ishtar retorted. My expression blanked, wondering why Conall had thought that had been a good idea. "And you called Mother a bitch to her face when you first met her."

"Hey, I didn't curse. I just implied one. I don't hide how much I hate Hilda, Ishtar." Conall shrugged and Ishtar sighed. "Look, sorry, but some of her comments around…"

"I know; I know. I can't say she's my favorite person either. But she is my mother."

"Yeah, and Diadora and Mom were more of actual mothers to you, but that's an argument where we agree to disagree. Probably because I didn't get to spend time with Mom." Conall grinned, and Ishtar facepalmed. Something told me comments like that were very common, and that made me a little happy. It made me happy that he kept his bluntness and didn't let them forget what had happened, even as he grew to like them. "Besides, I'm surprised you didn't mention that my first words to Arvis were something along the lines of 'is this where you drop meteors on me?'".

"I forgot hearing about that." She sighed heavily again. I choked on a laugh, wishing I'd seen that. "Oh, whatever. Hey, you take your time. I'll wait outside, make sure we got them all, and handle the burning. I do have a fire tome for a backup, after all."

"Thanks, Ishtar." He pulled her into a hug and she grinned at him. "I doubt I'll be long."

"Like I said, take your time." She smiled warmly at me. "I'm glad you're alive. Conall's been dreadfully worried. Like walking into windows worried."

"I didn't walk into a window!" Conall blushed though, so I guessed it was an 'almost'. "Oh, go on with your stories."

"Yes, yes!" She continued down the hall, her laughter trailing after her almost like a scarf. She
really did seem like a happy sort of person.

"Being away from Belhalla has been good for her." Conall's voice was soft, and he smiled fondly. "Most I've heard her laugh in a while." He shook his head and returned his attention to me. "It is good to see you, though. Did you all run here after I was captured?"

"No, we were actually way further north," I explained, now curious. Her smiles had seemed so natural and fun. It seemed strange to me that she hadn't been like that 'in a while'. "So…" Hekate began growling at the hallway, though Hestia wagged her tail, and I sighed. "Oh, damn it. I'd hoped her guilting would keep people back."

"I'm much faster and I was the furthest away, so I could more easily ignore." Seliph stepped into the room and smiled innocently when I facepalmed. "She's keeping Arthur and Fee back still, of course," he continued, walking to my side. To my amusement, Conall looked completely exasperated, even as he pet Hekate to soothe her. Hestia nosed her as if to say 'no, no, Seliph is my pack, so it is okay'. "So, you're alive. I can't wait to let everyone know we were right."

"I'm glad you had the sense to wait a bit before stepping out, even though you clearly don't have the sense to continue hiding when there's literally bounties on your head," Conall deadpanned. Seliph just continued to smile. "You… grew out your hair?"

"Like Shanan."

"...Same reason as me." Conall sighed and smiled and Seliph reached out to hug him. Conall returned it easily. "Gods, I missed you. How are the others?"

"Asleep and they're going to be so mad!" Seliph grinned. "Well, Oifeye might be sad."

"Well, that's a horrible thing to inflict on me. But, to be fair, I had no idea you all were here. I thought you all would still be in Ganeishire or something." His smile turned sad, and a little bitter. "Though, I've certainly heard the rumors. You've raised the rebellion flag or however they're worded it."

"We got tired of running, Conall." Seliph winced. "Are you okay?"

"Mm… I won't deny I'm conflicted. I'd rather you all be safe. And not fighting." He sighed. "But I can't blame you for wanting to kill Danann. I've been back in Isaach for two days and I've almost burned him alive twenty times. And have had to call off Hekate fifty times. Ishtar has been a little better, only at ten, but her temper has been fraying."

"Why not attack him?"

"I think the Isaachians deserve it more than me. I hate him for what he's done. They hate him for what they've suffered. And, like I said, I've only been here two days, so not enough time to determine if you all need that bit of help." Conall smiled softly. "Isaach is still beautiful, though. I've missed it."

"Have you been out besides here and Rivough?"

"I've visited the villages to heal a bit. I'm no healer like Mom, but I know staves and medicines." His eyes narrowed. "By the way, there's a labor camp near Isaach Castle that you might want to secure before Danann decides to 'hide the evidence'."

"I'll keep that in mind." Seliph bit his lip, already thinking of the logistics. "Conall, are there reinforcements coming? From Belhalla?"
"No, but Danann thinks Ishtar and me are them." Conall rolled his eyes, but I wondered just how skilled both of them were, to be considered reinforcements on their own. I knew what Iuchar had said, of course, but... "In reality, we're just here to retrieve Helswath, gather information, and return so that we can destroy the Warp Circle connecting Rivough to Belhalla. Danann is being cut off."

"So, we just have to deal with him and the soldiers he currently has?"

"Yep. Ishtar and I certainly aren't helping him. And the only 'help' Hekate will give him is a helpful nudge off an edge."

"I see." Seliph breathed a sigh of relief. "That's good to hear. The people simply can't take him anymore, but..."

"You've got the time to plan carefully." Conall grinned. "And I might do some misdirection for you. Just little things."

"Will that put you in danger?"

"Danann is no danger to me." But Conall's eyes went dark, implying that doing so wasn't entirely 'safe' either. "I've still got my rank, and family ties. I can take advantage of them to get out of things." But I heard the 'for now', and I wondered just what in hell was going on. First there was Yuria and now...

A thought occurred to me then, and I hesitated, worrying. But it was Conall, and...

"Seliph..." I whispered, nudging his leg. We shared a glance and he nodded. He thought it safe too. And maybe this was foolish, but... "Hey, Conall, this needs to stay secret-secret."

"Like meeting you all?" Conall asked, smiling wryly. Hekate nosed his hand, like she sensed something more behind the words. Hestia returned to my side and licked my arm. "Well, I'm good at keeping secrets. What is it?"

"It's..." I hesitated and stepped a bit closer. "We have Julia."

"You... what?" His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. "She's here? She's safe?"

"Well, she's with us." So I had no idea how 'safe' that actually was. "But she lost her memories."

"I can imagine, especially given how Diadora..." Conall winced and looked nauseous for a split second. "N-never mind that. She's alive. She's with you and alive and doing well."

"Yeah." I gestured across my torso. "She's got a scar right here..."

"I healed that. Not surprised it scarred, since it was just me healing it."

"I know." I smiled. "She remembers very vague things. Including a boy with two colored eyes who meant 'safety'."

"Be it assassins or icky bugs, I tended to be the one keeping her safe. Same with Julius." He winced again. I wondered why. He'd said 'complicated', but... "But yeah, keep her away from the Empire. It's... Belhalla is not safe for any of you, but it's really not safe for her." He snapped his fingers, sparking a tiny bit of flame on accident, and reached behind his belt, under his coat. It took a moment to see that he had three tomes in a holster behind the sword, two gold and one red. "She should have..." His hand hovered over one of the gold tomes, but he hesitated and then pulled out the other. "No, this one will be more useful for her, and it'll be less showy than Aura." He handed it
to me. "This is a Nosferatu tome. Light magic and powerful. It'll leech the life from its targets to heal the caster, so it's perfect for those fighting more defensively."

"We'll make sure it gets to her." I tucked it against my chest and smiled. "She's sweet, even without her memories."

"She's always been sweet. I'm glad to hear she's still alive." He smiled sadly, like he was holding back tears, but it was very genuine and warm. "Is it all right if I tell Ishtar I heard a rumor? I won't tell her exactly where Julia is, but…"

"I don't see a problem with that, if you trust her." I glanced at Seliph to be sure and he nodded. He trusted Conall's judgement too. "I mean; you can tell her outright if you want?"

"Loptyr priests are in Belhalla and they would throw everything they had at you if they knew you had Julia. And while Ishtar would never tell them, I'd like to minimize the amount of lying she'd have to do. Things have been… exhausting recently. It's much harder to lie when you're tired." Again, there was that wince. I shoved the tome at Seliph to hug him. "...Your hugs are the same."

He rested his head on my shoulder. "Both of your hugs are the same. I'm glad. I'm glad so much stayed the same." He hugged me back and then pulled away, gesturing to Hekate. "That said, I should probably get going…"

"Um… one more question…" Seliph whispered. He looked down and I took his hand, wondering if he was… "My mother. Why did she…?" 'Why did she betray everyone?' "I don't know if you know, Conall, but-

"Amnesia," Conall answered, bluntly and honestly. He smiled bitterly. "She lost her memory prior to being found in Velthomer. Could be trauma. Could be dark magic. Hell if I actually know. But that's what it was. That's why her name was different. That's why she stood to the side. She didn't remember Sigurd. She never remembered him as anything but one of the conspirators to her father's murder."

"So she…" Seliph struggled to find the words. "It wasn't intentional. She didn't intentionally…"

"The only thing she purposely did was trust the people around her. And misinterpret a few things, based on what she heard and because she was naturally trusting." Conall hesitated and looked down to pet Hekate. Like he wasn't sure what to say, really. "But no, she didn't remember anything. Right up to the end."

"I see." Seliph managed a smile, but it shook. "Thank you. I've…"

"Yeah, that never did spread, even after she died and the story of her past gained momentum in the gossips." Conall looked up again and smiled gently. "But that's the truth of it all. I'm not sure if it's better or worse, though."

"...But I have an answer and, better, I have an answer to give Oifeye and Aideen. And Shanan when we seen him again. He's… somewhere in the desert."

"He's what." Conall facepalmed. "Why the hell is he in the Yied? There's dark mages all over the damn place there."

"He wanted Balmung, because he still feels guilty over what happened to my mother, and you."

"He…" Conall's eyes widened and he looked down. "Idiot. It was my fault. I ran the wrong way." He gave me a look when I protested. "No, not your fault. I was the dummy who ran the completely wrong way because I panicked." He focused on Seliph again. "You may inform Shanan of all of
that, by the way. Especially the idiot part."

"We'll be sure to do so." Seliph's smile warmed. "Regardless, I think I'll reassure the other three that things are fine while Riona sees you off. Though, I thought I heard something about a Fortify staff?"

"...Oh, damn, right. I'd wanted…" Conall sighed and looked to where the fortify staff was on the ground, actually not far away from my fire sword. "Okay, can we do a couple of stops on the way for me to use the staff, Riona? I really do want to lessen the chances of someone dying."

What ended up happening was me giving Conall a little bit of a tour, nothing extensive, but enough for both of us to become giddy again, with Hekate and Hestia playing as we all walked. This was Dad's childhood home, and this was where we had met again. Dad had to have intervened somehow in that. It was simply too perfect. And, truthfully, I wanted to ask again if he really did have to leave, but that wouldn't have been fair. He had his life and his choices, and he wasn't badgering me into coming with him.

So, I walked him outside and, with Hestia sitting beside me, I waved goodbye and he and Hekate left with Ishtar. He smiled and waved back, waving until he was out of sight. A proper… a proper 'see you later'. I refused to believe this would be the only time I saw him. I refused to believe I would never see him again. I did fear that when I next saw him, we would be on opposite sides of the battle, but I knew that even though so much had changed, so much had also stayed the same. He wouldn't fight us. So long as that held true, then the day would come where the two of us could sit down and catch up.

I'd waited thirteen years for that day. Now that I'd seen him, I didn't mind waiting a little longer. It hurt, certainly. And was annoying. But at the same time, I didn't mind. Because he was alive, and he was okay. I was content, knowing that.

"I can't believe Conall was here and I was freaking asleep!" Larcei shrieked-complained, growling as she paced around my room. Everyone else in our little group just made sure we weren't in her way, so that she didn't trip and fall flat on her face. Again. "He looked good? He was okay?"

"He was very handsome, yes," Seliph replied, shifting so that he was a little more comfortable on Hestia, next to me. Larcei rolled her eyes. "I know; I just had to tease. He seemed tired, but I imagine dealing with Danann would make anyone tired."

"Argh! Why didn't he stay? At least until we woke up!"

"Because he promised someone?"

"Ugh!" She sighed, but then began giggling and hugged me. "But we knew it! He's just fine! Told you that he was!"

I didn't bother replying, simply smiling. All those affected by the Sleep Staff had slept until well past dawn, and while there had been an initial panic, Seliph managed to calm it by lying and stating there had been an assassin, but dealt with before there was too much trouble. Our group (plus Iuchar) was told the truth, of course, and we'd checked outside to find a large pile of ash slowly being blown away, all that remained of the soldiers Conall and Ishtar had killed.

Afterwards, we made sure to tell our Tirnanog about how Deirdre had lost all her memories, which was why she had done the things she had. A bit of a bitter feeling, and Oifeye actually took the day off to write Aideen and to process it. Not that there was a lot getting done today anyway. The oversleeping knocked everyone off their schedules, so it was decided that today would be an 'easy'
day. Which, for our group, meant clustering in my room, with Seliph and me resting against Hestia because we were exhausted unlike the others, chatting happily over the news that Conall was, in fact, okay. Because Seliph didn't want to talk about Deirdre just yet.

"I wish I had told Yuria that I had a Restore staff in the infirmary," Lana sighed, sipping her warm milk with honey. She'd insisted on making some for all of us, but she'd fussed over us so much that she was the only one not done with hers. "Then maybe we could've seen him too. It's only got so many charges, of course, but…"

"He's fine, and hopefully, we can all see him again and not fight," Lester pointed out, resting his head on her shoulder. He had his legs stretched out over Diarmuid's, not that Diarmuid minded. He was using Seliph's leg as a pillow, after all. "That things didn't immediately dissolve into a fight now, and he said that he missed us, makes it really probable."

"That's true!" Lana giggled. "Plus there's the information he gave us."

"Providing that nothing changes, then we can take our time to secure things and to train a bit more," Ulster murmured, smiling in relief. Larcei let go of me to lay down in his lap, since he was right next to me, and he ran his hand through her hair. And petted Hestia because Hestia's head was close to him. "That labor camp worries me, though. We should try to get that as soon as we can."

"But we can prioritize that, and figuring out how to get people safely here, while keeping an eye on things in case things do change," Diarmuid pointed out. He smiled brightly, and I had a feeling it was because he was now not the only one with good news about missing family. He was still the only one with good news about his father, but now… "And we can figure out how to best set up the infirmary for them."

"That's very true." Ulster frowned. "Wait, damn, do we have enough medicine for…?"

"Oh, for crying out loud, we're supposed to be celebrating and relaxing!" Larcei groaned, poking Ulster's chin. He batted her hand away, but she switched to poking his stomach. "I mean; I know we're all becoming workaholics, but still. Relaxing. Having fun. That's why we're all here in the first place!"

"She is right," I pointed out, moving to sit up. Hestia twisted to rest her head on my shoulder, stopping me for the moment. "We've been running around trying to get things settled. I'm surprised Oifeye hasn't imposed a rest day on us sooner."

"Exactly!" Larcei drapped her legs over my lap and giggled. "Hey, we haven't done a group reading thing in a while. Should we do that today? I know there's that book Riona's been reading."

"I just finished that one, actually."

"You did?" Lana gleefully asked, eyes sparkling. She set her empty mug down and immediately crawled over to me, with Lester almost falling in the process. "What did you think about the ending? Where he carried her across the fields?"

"It was so cute!" I gushed, giggling. The others either rolled their eyes or smiled fondly at us. "I loved the last lines, though. They just…"

"Summed up everything perfectly…" Lana sighed happily. "The whole thing was just amazing. I'm so glad Muirne recommended it to me."

"So, should we do a group-read of it?" Lester asked, a touch sulkily. He'd been abandoned for book talk, after all. "So that the rest of us get to see what it is?"
"It's a smut novel, so we can, but that'll have to be kept in mind," Seliph cheerfully pointed out. He kindly moved off of Hestia, so that Lana could lay on her next to me instead. "Of course, it wouldn't have been the first time we've done that, but..."

"Mmm... might be more fun to go with something a little less 'must whisper-read this in the dark so that Mother does not overhear us'," Lester began thinking. "Oh, wait, there's this book that I've heard about. Older, but I think there's a copy in the library. A dramatization of the Crusaders?"

"That could be interesting."

"Might hit a little too close for the moment, though," Diarmuid pointed out. Since Seliph had moved, Diarmuid went to using Lana's leg as a pillow instead. Seliph took Lana's old spot and let Lester rest against him. "Considering all the child hunts and stuff."

"That's true, but that does remind me..." Ulster began, with a slight, teasing smirk. This was going to be good. "I actually found a story you might be interested in."

"Really?" Diarmuid frowned, knowing that Ulster only dragged things out to tease. "What is it?"

"It was in a book of folk-stories from various parts of Jugdral. A tale of a Leonster Hero named 'Diarmuid'." Ulster paused and all of us burst into laughter, and laughed even harder when Diarmuid began blushing. "That sounds like it would be fun to read, yes? Aideen did tell us you were named for-"

"M-maybe something-"

"No way, let's read that one!" I insisted, pushing myself up. I wobbled a bit, but managed to keep standing. I was still exhausted by everything, but I also wanted to move. "I mean; we can read all the stories, but let's start with that one! I'll go get it!" And I was out the door before anyone could stop me. Not that I thought any of them really would. Well, maybe if they were worried I should rest more... ah, whatever.

Point was, I escaped and ran towards the library, hunting through the shelves to find the book Ulster mentioned. The library wasn't exactly organized the best, but it did have a lot of books. It surprised me, but I half-wondered if it had been something Iucharba did. I wondered if he'd read these books, or had gotten them for his soldiers to read. Sadly, I'd probably never learn the answer to that. Save for the handful we had captured, all of Iucharba's soldiers had died alongside Iucharba. And Iuchar probably didn't know Iucharba enough.

"Oh, Riona!" However, while I was looking, I passed by Yuria, who sat at one of the tables, reading through a botany guide or something, based on the cover. "I thought you all were in your room?" she asked, looking around curiously. "What brings you here?"

"Looking for a book of folktales," I explained. However, I paused my search to crouch by her and study her face. "You look rested."

"I... um... slept in." She blushed and marked her page in her book. "But what book was it?"

"I forgot to get the title, but Ulster saw it."

"Um... Oh, maybe this one, then." She stood up and went to the shelves, pulling out one that had been shelved haphazardly. "I study here a lot, so I saw him with this one."

"Oh?" I flipped through it, and found the story Ulster had talked about almost immediately. It was bookmarked, proving he'd set up that bit of teasing for a while. "Yep, this is the one. Thanks."
"O-of course!" She smiled brightly, proud of herself, though she quickly became hesitant again, frowning. "Um… Riona?"

"Yes?"

"…No, never mind." She shook her head. "I think I want to think on it a while longer."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure." She smiled again, and there didn't seem to be anything hidden in it. "I want to get my thoughts organized, so that I'm not rambling."

"If you've ever heard any of our serious talks, they jump all over the place." Still, I wouldn't press. She would tell me when she wanted. "Hey, if you're just studying, why don't you come to the room with me?"

"Huh?" She stared for a second before blushing and shaking her head. "Oh, no, I don't want to intrude!"

"Is it intruding if I invite you? Besides, it's probably rather lonely when we just group up as we do, yes?" I smiled apologetically, and she looked away sheepishly. "We're bad at reaching out, but we really do want you to be comfortable with us, Yuria. Our goal for this army is that everyone can be comfortable and work together. So, please, don't stay away because you feel like an outsider. Tell us so that we can make the necessary changes." I offered her my hand and she took it shyly. "Come on. You can bring your book. We can even help you study."

"O-okay…" She smiled sweetly, but then became hesitant again. "Um… Iuchar is out on patrol, but I think Arthur and Fee are outside…"

"Then let's go invite them!" I tugged her out of the library, pausing only long enough for Yuria to grab the botany book. "Where did you see them?"

Yuria had actually seen them flying, so we had to walk outside and hunt around for them. Eventually, we found them in one of the gardens, with Fee tended to Annand while Arthur sat on a nearby bench and flipped through one of his tomes. He was actually the first one to notice us, and greeted us with a nod. Fee took a little longer, but that was because she was focused on cleaning Annand's hooves. Apparently, despite flying, pegasi still needed their hooves cleaned.

"Enjoying the sunshine too?" Fee asked with a laugh when she was done. She set the pick in a small basket, and pulled out a body-brush to continue tending to Annand. "Or is there business?"

"Barring a complete emergency, everyone has the day off," I reassured, laughing. I passed my book over to Yuria and tiptoed closer, careful to keep my distance from Annand's hooves. Apparently, despite flying, pegasi still needed their hooves cleaned.

"That's incredibly fascinating." The mention of 'special oil' worried me, though. We were in Isaach,
after all, and getting things from Silesse would be... difficult. "Do you have enough?"

"Of the oil? Yeah, I've got enough for a year, easy. It spreads super easily, so a little goes a long way." She grinned at me before going back to brushing. "Truthfully, I brought more than a year's worth, just in case I lost some. I'll warn when I'm about halfway through, so that we have plenty of time to get more."

"Good, good." I wondered if we could time it with Hestia's weekly brushing. I wasn't sure how Annand would like Hestia being near, but it might be fun to pair it up so that Fee could have help if need be. Assuming she wanted it, of course. I'd bring it up later. "Ah, I almost forgot. Yuria and I were actually looking for you two."

"Really?" Fee hopped to her feet again, and looked over at Yuria, who smiled shyly. Arthur continued reading, ignoring us. "What's up?"

"Basically, we Tirnanog kids did our normal thing of 'grouping up and forgetting to actually remind people that they're more than welcome', so I'm rectifying that." I smiled sheepishly, a little annoyed at myself for not making sure to do this sooner. "We're all in my room, just relaxing, and we're going to be reading aloud from a book and likely help Yuria with her studying. Would you like to join?"

"That sounds like fun!" Fee grinned, but looked over at Arthur. "What about you, grumpy?"

"...You know; I think I'll join as well," Arthur replied after a moment. Fee's expression blanked, showing she hadn't expected that. "Though, is there food? I'm starving."

"We can pick some up on the way, since I'm sure one of us is going to complain about food before long," I reassured, grinning. And trying to not bounce, because I was really excited now. "I'm sure I can whip up something quickly."

"You cook?"

"Yep. Pretty good at it too, if you don't mind the boast."

"Let me just finish brushing Annand and get her to the stables," Fee said, laughing. Though her eyes shone with excitement, she did take her time, not risking making a mistake. "I can meet you at the kitchens?"

"Would you like some help, Fee?" Yuria offered with a hesitant smile. She set the books on the bench by Arthur. "I don't know much, but..."

"You can hand me stuff!" Fee grinned. "I'd love the help!"

"In that case, I think we'll head to the kitchens and gather stuff," Arthur noted, shutting his tome and standing. "Wherever it is, at least."

"Follow me!" I laughed, already heading inside. This was going to be fun. "Any requests for food?"

"Nah, I'm not picky. Couldn't be, really." Arthur glanced back at Fee and Yuria, both laughing, and smiled slightly, but warmly. "You know; I wasn't so sure about the army. There's too many people. I'm not used to it. But I think it's actually a pretty good decision, for both of us. She's been lonely, and I suppose I do need to learn how to interact with people again, if I'm not to hurt my little sister's feelings."

"I hope that feeling continues." I paused as I thought about what that sentence even meant, because
it just felt weird in my mouth. "With thinking it was a good idea, I mean."

"I figured." Arthur smirked and I rolled my eyes. "Oh, but that remind me. First, Fee, Yuria, and I overheard a lot of the conversation last night."

"Er... right." I coughed, embarrassed now. "Well, here's hoping it's good fortune for your own reunion."

"I'll admit. It did make me a itsy-bitsy more hopeful." His eyes became serious, though. "But I know the name 'Ishtar'. The Goddess of Thunder, and the Thrud Major of our generation."

"Oh?" I paused and facepalmed. "Oh, damn it! I could've asked about your sister." I could've asked even if it had just been Conall.

"Did I even tell you her name?"

"Tine, yes? You mentioned it once." I sighed gustily. "I'm so sorry. I should've thought about that."

"Yeah, you totally should've thought about anything besides the twin you haven't seen or heard anything about in thirteen years." Arthur's voice was very, very dry. "Though, if you see him again before we find her, I wouldn't mind if you ask."

"Of course." I made a mental note to be certain of that. "Ah, though that means I had a very lovely talk with your cousin. Or are you like Ulster and Larcei and not quite caring over such things?"

"Honestly? I'm learning to care. About practically everything." He smiled bitterly. "It's a slow process. But that's another reason why I think joining here was good. It's making me care about things again, and..."

"That is important. Apathy might seem like a good defensive mechanism, but if you're apathetic, you can't feel the good things either."

"Yeah. I'm learning that." Now his smile became a little hesitant. "Regardless, she did seem nice. Maybe I'll care more in a few months."

"You take your time." I almost took his hand, but checked the urge. It was probably best to wait for him to reach out first. "Regardless, let's get some food. Or make some. Probably make."

"I'm not all that great at cooking."

"Then I'll teach you." Arthur hadn't been joking when he said he wasn't good at cooking, but he proved to be a most excellent helper, and he had been absolutely fascinated by how I utilized fire magic with the cooking. Fee and Yuria appeared at the kitchen just in time to be taste-testers, and then all of us carried everything back to my room, where the others greeted us with delight and cheers. It took a bit to settle in with everyone, both for room and to make sure everyone was comfortable, and then we all had to shift again when Luchiar swung by with bunches of flowers for all of us. Just because he thought they were pretty and that 'such wonders of strength should have some color to match their spirits' or something.

It was a total mess. But it was fun, and we loved every moment of it. Certainly a good way to spend what was probably going to be our last 'day off' for a very, very long time.
Author's notes: And Conall makes his gen2 debut, alongside a super early cameo for Ishgar (she's not even mentioned in game until Game-Chapter 7, in a village conversation). The 'magic' Holy Bloods don't confer any sort of resistance to offensive staves in game (unless one counts Naga, Bragi, and Loptyr, which all boost Res), but I thought it would be fun to play with, highlighting how the Blood changes those it has blessed. Fee has a 15% resistance growth if Lewyn is her father, but I am also treating her typically-decent res (she averages about 8 res on recruitment) as being partly her pegasus's, so her 'natural' res is lower.

And yes, in-game, you get a free light tome. Which one you get depends on whether you conquer Isaach or Sophara first. If you conquer Isaach first, you get Nosferatu. If you conquer Sophara, you get Aura. Most go with Nosferatu because Julia will actually double with the tome and because of the health-leech effect. And, for those who kept messaging me (and apparently assume I've never played the game based on how patronizing some of them were), the choice between Iuchar and Iucharba has nothing to do with the tome choice. While it is true that one castle will become allied based on who you recruit (Sophara if Iucharba, and Isaach if Iuchar), there is no significant difference in difficulty for obtaining Nosferatu because the axe knights Danann sends after the recruitment will prioritize retaking Isaach (if Iuchar is the one recruited). Meaning that by the time you actually make it to Isaach castle, it has been reclaimed by the enemy, letting you conquer it as normal. (I suppose you might be able to get to it prior if you blitz through and Seliph inherited a leg ring or something, but honestly, I've done both multiple times and never found any real difference.)

Regardless, in-game, you get a free light tome for Yuria. Enter Conall as an explanation for the light tome, since in-game, it was apparently just sitting there. While both tomes are the same rank (A) in FE4, Nosferatu actually appears in FE5 as a B ranked tome (and Aura makes no FE5 appearance at all). So, while Aura isn't necessarily treated as a 'special' weapon in the game, I'm treating it as a rarer magic, one most wouldn't have access to (because only Deirdre and Julia are capable of using it in FE4 due to how weapon ranks work). Granted, in Fe5, Nosferatu is technically meant for Linoan, who is not only a noble but randomly has Minor Naga Blood, but it can still be used by anyone who gets a B rank in light magic.

In FE4, the fortify staff has a fixed range of 1-10 spaces, but given how damned huge the maps are, that actually encompasses a VERY long range (something that is also hinted at in FE5, where all ranged staves have unlimited range). Now, in game, you only get one copy (either the one Claude came with or via a drop in Game-Chapter 9 if the staff wasn't inherited), but I've already established there are multiples of said staff, and considering Conall is a) high ranked and b) connected to the Empire, I figured he could get his hands on one fairly easily (particularly when he planned on doing something like this). The Sleep Staff has the same range, hence Conall's very wide 'net' when using it (and breaking it).

The scene where the soldiers are fighting is based a bit off of something from the Oosawa Manga and it's there because we're getting people in the army who only know the group by of their reputations. And it gives a good lead-in to Arthur revealing his heritage in-story. Yes, he's Tailtiu's son, Minor Thrud and Minor Fjalar in this story due to also being Azel's son. According to the game, Friege troops kidnapped Tailtiu
and Tine when Arthur was small. There is no mention of what happened to his father, but I chose it where he was killed while trying to escape with Arthur.

Misha and Karin are two playable chars from FE5 (with Karin noted to be close enough to Fee that Fee felt comfortable crying around her despite putting up a strong front for the public). Hermina and Hawk are actually the sub chars for Fee and Ced. I'm not sure the game ever quite goes into how Queen Rahna died, though Lewyn's words imply that she died when Grannvale conquered Silesse in Gran 762. I decided to expand a little bit on the how.

Other than that, more heart-to-hearts. Riona's actually social and talks about her problems, so these actually might be a norm in her chapters. Whoops? Also, standard warning to not do what Riona does if you encounter a wild animal in the woods and don't have any sort of wild-animal handling experience. You are liable to get hurt. Or killed. Hence Diarmuid's exasperation. 'Melancholia' is an older term for clinical depression; soldier's heart is a historic war-diagnosis that has become synonymous with PTSD.

Next Chapter - Ghosts
Chapter 35) Ghosts

I saw Conall. I saw Conall! He's okay! Oh, thank goodness, he really is okay!

Though I do wish he had stayed, I know I can't be so selfish. Twins we may be, but we do have our own lives. Lives that were forced to walk separate paths long ago. But I still love him. He still loves me. We still love him. He still loves us. I can only hope that those bonds we forged when we were little are strong enough to keep us from fighting. I'm not sure I could bear it otherwise.

However, even if I'd like to skip around giddily because I got to see him or sulk with a mug of warm milk with honey because he had to leave, I can't. There's too much to do. Scouts are sent out; soldiers are trained. Our fledgling army practically vibrates with anticipation. We are taking the fight to Danann. We are liberating Isaach, the first freedom Isaach has had since Grannvale pulled their trick so many years ago.

I miiiiight be a lot nauseous from the anxiety. Maybe. Just a little. A lot. More than a lot. Fine thing for a leader, huh?

The air was still very nippy, but I rather welcomed the cool air. Mostly because once you started exercising, you warmed up quickly anyway. And I was determined to be very appreciative, especially since if things went as we half-expected, we would be in the Yied Desert within a few months. Deserts were well known for their heat. Practicing was going to be an absolute nightmare when we got there.

But that was for the future. At the moment, I was practicing, going through drills while Hestia gnawed on the bones of whatever she'd killed for her early morning breakfast. Probably a deer, since there were so many rushing about, but I wasn't sure. I didn't look or anything. I simply focused on being in the moment. Focused on maintaining perfect balance and having the utmost control. Focused on clearing my mind. Focused on the dirt beneath my feet, the wind playing with my braid. How, exactly, my body moved for each swing. During a battle, all of this had to be instinctual, so it was all the more important to take it slow in practice. To make sure the body would 'remember' when the battle-fever flooded the senses.

This sort of practice was something every single one of us did, when we had time. Though, each of us also had our own unique things. Ulster and Larcei would practice calling upon Astra, for instance, while I would fall into the calm state needed for Luna. The blue sparkles were always a welcome sight, a sign of a job well done, but I needed to be better at it. All of us needed to be stronger, faster, better than we were, if we were going to make it through this, but I especially needed to be better at calling upon Luna. The ability to bypass an opponent's defenses, or resistance, was simply too useful.

But again, that was for the future. For now, it was just me and the blade. Calm. Control. Stillness and movement. No movement wasted. Each step blending right into the next. Then, at the end of the drills came the 'practice dance', a way to cool down. The movements were lighter, less controlled, allowing the muscles to relax. Every Isaachian began and ended their practice with such
a 'dance'. I didn't know if other countries did. Then again, Isaachians had literal dances with bladed weapons that I was fairly certain none of the other countries had. At the least, I vaguely remembered Aideen and Oifeye being shocked when we first attended a festival in Tirnanog. And they forbade us from learning, for whatever reason. Of course, Creidne and Dalvin taught us anyway, but still. Sign of the culture difference.

When I finished the 'dance' and tilted my head back to breathe and enjoy the breeze, someone began clapping. Curious, mostly since Hestia normally let me know when people were near, I turned and saw Arthur was the one clapping. And Hestia was happily eating fresh meat that I knew hadn't been there when I started. I'd waited until she was finished eating.

"Yes, I bribed her to not interrupt," Arthur admitted without a trace of shame. Hestia barked in agreement, tail wagging as she continued eating. "Is that something we need to worry about?"

"Meh, she knows I trust you, and if you were planning something, then meat or no meat, you'd be down an arm," I replied, not really bothered. I did wish she had let me know, but it's not like I would've acknowledged him if she had. I'd been very focused. "So, what brings you over here? I didn't think you were up this early."

"Normally, I'd be in my room, but strangely, spending so much time with someone who has more energy than a sprite has warped my common sense into thinking going outside is a good thing." Arthur sighed mournfully and I laughed. "Even when Fee's not here, I had the urge. So, I went walking, and happened to go this way."

"I'm sure she'll be thrilled to hear that when she returns." Fee was out on a mission, scouting the area around the labor camp, and Isaach Castle. She was due back soon, though. "Still, I wouldn't have thought my practicing was anything worth watching. Or anything to bribe Hestia over."

"What? It was pretty." He shrugged. "You're just used to it. Like how I'm used to magic." He paused, and looked a little hesitant suddenly. But the hesitancy disappeared quickly, so I wondered if I imagined it. "Though, I am curious. You want to learn magic-magic? With tomes?"

"Mmm… eventually, I think so. I owe it to everyone to give nothing less than my best." I smiled bitterly. "Getting past that mental block is, sadly, going to delay me." I sighed and reached back to undo my braid. And then remembered something. "Oh, right, has anyone actually talked to you about Arvis?"

"You mean how I'm related to the freaking emperor?" Arthur's tone went very dry, and I had to laugh. Hestia looked between us curiously before finishing up with her meat and returning to her bone, perfectly content. If a little bloodier than normal. Cleaning her muzzle was going to be so much fun. "I figured out the nobility thing because Holy Marks. Everyone wanted to make sure the power remained with the nobility."

"That's one way to put it." And interesting if odd way, by my eyes. From my understanding, the people had begged the Crusaders to rule, and so, they and their descendents did for the next hundred years. But, then again, recent events did show how difficult it was to oust those with Holy Blood from power. Having entire armies at your beck and call, as well as the blessings, did give one an edge. Nothing invincible, but sometimes, the edge was enough. "But no one mentioned that Arvis was the Fjalar major?"

"In Silesse, no one said anything about Arvis that wasn't something like 'traitor' or 'kinslayer'. Sigurd's army was very well liked in Silesse for a number of reasons. Most were pissed off about the killings and most of the ones that weren't? They were pissed off Arvis killed people Queen Rahna adored so much." Arthur shrugged. "I wonder what sort of coldhearted bastard he is. To
sacrifice his siblings who loved him so."

"Someone who apparently decided ambitions were more important than the family you supposedly loved." I sighed, and ran a hand through my sweaty hair. I needed a bath. "That's probably the part I don't understand. It's not like with Iuchar and his family, where they all hate each other. Supposedly, Arvis, Uncle Azel, and Mom all adored each other very much."

"And then he utilized that love and trust to destroy their lives." Arthur's voice was back to being perfectly dry. "I don't think he's going to win any awards for 'best brother ever'. I mean; I doubt big brothers are supposed to set up events that directly lead to their siblings dying. Horribly, in Father's case."

"No, I don't think so either." I did have to look down, though, thinking of what Oifeye said. About how similar all of us probably already were to Arvis. Even if he said that it wasn't necessarily as bad as I feared... "I'm scared I'll understand him."

"You can understand someone and still admit they're the absolute definition of idiocy." Arthur hesitantly petted Hestia, and she licked his hand before pressing her head into his palm for extra pets. It occurred to me that this was probably the first friendly interaction I'd seen between the two. "Understanding means that you're not as inclined to make the same mistakes, right?" He began gesturing with his free hand. "Like, with magic, you have to learn the theories and understand it, so that you don't blow up your own hand when trying to cast a thunder spell. Understanding him would, ideally, make you less inclined to follow his path, right? Though, I somehow doubt you'd follow it anyway."

"Oh?"

"I may not have been here long, but I'm about ninety percent certain that if any of you tried, Larcei would dropkick you off the roof." He said the words so blandly that I had to laugh. And quietly admit that he was right. "Assuming Lana doesn't hit you in the head with her staff first."

"You're learning us well!" The wind blew then, and I glanced up at the sky, noticing that dawn still hadn't come quite yet. "You must think me silly, though."

"I think you're like the rest of the group. Overthinking and overworking because you keenly feel the weight of everyone's expectations, and no one seems to remember that those with Holy Blood are still human." He stood up and stretched. "I could try to do a little rumor countering, if you guys want. I play cards with the soldiers frequently."

"I think I'm more curious what gossip you've heard for now." I smiled warmly at him. "We'll see how troublesome the rumors get. If it stays about this, I think we'll be fine, but..."

"You're worried about another fight breaking out." He smirked when I winced. "I'm very good at observing. Had to be."

"And I clearly need to work on... oh, what's the expression?" I frowned, trying to remember it. And came up blank. "Poky face?"

"Poker face." He snickered and I scowled. "Keep to the smile. It fools people way more." He shrugged. "As for the gossip, most of it isn't important."

"No, I think it is." I closed my eyes, thinking. "By knowing what they talk about, especially when we're not around, I think we can learn about them. And by learning about them, we can hopefully make things more comfortable." I opened my eyes again and smiled. "People's stories are their
business, of course, but it's good for gauging the mood as well."

"Then sure, I'll regale you with all their supposed tips for sex." Arthur grinned and I laughed. Somehow, I wasn't surprised. "Darn, I thought that would get a blush or something."

"Takes more than that to get me blushing. I read smutty novels, after all."

"Darn." Arthur sighed, playfully despondent, and I laughed again. "Hey, can I swing the sword about?"

"Hmm? Ah, sure?" I tossed him the practice sword and winced when he fumbled a bit before catching. I'd just done that automatically. "Er… sorry."

"It's fine." He swung it a couple of times and I crouched down by Hestia to pet her. She nuzzled my cheek, bloody muzzle and all, before returning to her bones. She was almost done with them, but the last part was the best. "Say, Riona?"

"Hmm?"

"Would you mind teaching me how to wield one?" He didn't quite look at me when I frowned up at him. "Just in case, say, we encounter someone with really high resistance or… something?"

"Well…” I almost asked why, but then a thought came to me. I had no idea if it was right or not, of course. It was more of a 'hope' than an 'idea'. But I did wonder if this was an awkward way to try and bond. I certainly wouldn't mind, if that was the case. "Of course!" And I would agree if only for that reason. "But I won't go easy on you!"

"Oh, wait, I've seen you teach the others." He sighed, but smiled. "So, how do I…?"

"First, you're going to do some stretches." I hopped back to my feet, feeling giddy and bubbly. This was going to be great. When she got back, I should drag Fee into it too, so that Arthur was a little more comfortable. "It's important to warm yourself up. Otherwise, you're just going to end up in the infirmary with Lana scolding you."

"Might be in over my head. But I was always too stubborn." He set the practice sword down. "So?"

We didn't get very far, mostly because of the lack of time and because some of that time was spent catching Hestia because she decided the practice sword was a toy. But we went through some basic stretches and some basic stances and no matter how much Arthur 'complained', he followed my instructions closely. And, by the end of it, he seemed like he was having fun. I couldn't ask for more.

"Hmm… what am I going to wear today?" I mused, looking through the clothes in my closet. It never failed. I'd take my morning bath and then spend twenty-minutes just trying to figure out what I was going to wear. Because it was a hard choice! When we weren't planning on battling, I didn't wear my 'battle stuff'. Well, none of us did. Seliph didn't want to bother with the cape on a daily basis, for one thing. But while I did have quite a few battle-dresses, including the one Creidne and Muirne got for me, I had way more 'casual' dresses. Courtesy of Aideen somehow made lot of clothes for us without us knowing. "Ugh… okay. Let's narrow it down. Shirt and skirt or dress today?" I looked to wear Hestia normally would be asleep, but she wasn't there. She was out hunting with Lester. "Damn, can't even pretend she's the one picking." This would help if I wasn't so damn indecisive of how I wanted to look.

"Riona?" A knock and Yuria's voice distracted me briefly from my dilemma. "Riona, do you mind
"If we talk?" she asked, voice a bit muffled thanks to the door. "I can come back later, if needed."

"Nah, come on in." I barely paid any attention, focused entirely on the clothes. At least, I was until I heard a squeak, and I turned to see Yuria staring, blushing horribly, in the doorway. And it took me a full second to realize why. I was standing about in my underwear. And while I'd get prickly if it was a stranger, growing up in close quarters with a bunch of people meant that I no longer cared when people I knew saw me like that. But that didn't mean Yuria did. "In retrospect, I should've warned you."

"I'm still getting used to how incredibly gorgeous everyone is, you know!" she yelped, covering her very red face and shutting the door behind her. I did my best to not laugh, because as fun as it was making her blush, she did seem a bit mortified. "Oh goodness... I might need to talk to someone about that..."

"Well, I'm all ears for that sort of talk, as is anyone else in the group. And if you want to write Aideen, I'm sure she'd do what she could." Absently, I kissed her blushing cheek and ducked into the bathroom. "Let me get a towel and then you can actually help me figure out what to wear."

"Huh? Oh, ah, sure?" Yuria's blush slowly cooled as I stepped out again, safely wrapped in a towel. Well, 'safely'. It was better than my underwear, I supposed. In retrospect, I could've tried to find my nightclothes, but I had no idea where I'd thrown them this morning. Knowing me, they were up on a door frame or something. "Um... I didn't mishear you, right?"

"Nope, you didn't. When it comes to emergencies and people I know, I'm not really modest. Pretty sure in our group everyone has seen everyone else in their underwear at least once or twice." More like too many to count. We really didn't care when it came to our group. And while we would appreciate the eye candy when we could, the constant helping in the infirmary did make it where seeing people in various states of undress wasn't the end of the world. Just prickly when we didn't give permission and it happened anyway. "Ah, I'm really sorry for spooking you."

"I'm slowly getting used to how none of you have any sense of personal space."

"Was that sarcasm?" I grinned and she looked away shyly. "Look at you~! We're corrupting you! Success!"

"R-regardless, why do you need my help figuring out what to wear?" Yuria frowned. "You look good in just about everything."

"Aw, so sweet~! I'm going to blush."

"Do any of you blush?"

"Quite a bit, actually." I giggled and she frowned more. "More seriously, I'm just indecisive when it comes to clothes."

"I see." Yuria went to my closet, looking at them. "Oh, I overheard some of the female soldiers wondering what you did to make your skin look so nice, by the way."

"You did?" That hadn't been something I'd expected to come up. "It's something Muirne would insist that we do, and even now, I swear I can hear her scolding if we skip. The boys have something similar. Also at her insistence."

"Lana gave me something to use. Something about a healer has to look nice."

"I vaguely remember Aideen mentioning that. Basically, if a healer doesn't look like they've taken
care of themselves, how can you expect them to take care of you or... something." I tried to remember it better, but that was the extent of it. While I loved making medicines and didn't mind helping in the infirmary, I had never had an interest in healing. "So, anyway, you see my dilemma?"

"All of you have a lot of clothes." Yuria pulled out a shirt and skirt ensemble from the back. Sleeveless black shirt with a long, light blue skirt with slits up the side. "I don't think I've seen you wear these before."

"Then that's what I'll wear~!" I took them from her and almost dropped the towel. "If you don't want to see my underwear again..." I laughed when Yuria immediately turned around, red again. "Goodness! Is my underwear so ghastly?"

"N-no, it looks nice!" She sighed and whimpered a little. "Ugh... I promise I'm not like this in the infirmary!"

"I know you're not. Lana would've brought it up if you were." I quickly changed into the clothes and hugged her from behind, resting my chin on her shoulder. "It's the unexpectedness, though. And the lack of 'must do job' mentality." I kissed her cheek and led her over to the bed to sit down. I didn't have chairs or anything in my room, after all. "Anyway, you had something you wanted to talk to me about."

"Right! I did!" She clapped her hands, like that would help her remember. "Well, firstly, I wanted to thank you for the tome. I really do feel more secure with a light tome. Though, Arthur insisted I keep the wind tome as a backup."

"Always a good idea." I shrugged, smiling. "But there's nothing to really thank me about that. I'd gotten it from Conall."

"And who is he? I never got an explanation about that, though..." She frowned a bit. "I swear that there was something familiar about him. When I heard him, I no longer felt scared or anything. Confused, but not scared."

"He's my twin brother." I decided it was better to just focus on the question, just in case. "We were separated when we were little. The Empire captured him, you see."

"Oh, that had to be..." She winced and brought her heads up to her chest, clutching at her heart. "Hurts..."

"Yuria?" I panicked when she leaned forward a little and didn't say anything. "Yuria!"

"I'm fine. Just... it hurt. That word just makes my heart ache so much." She looked ready to cry. "I wonder... did I have a twin? Did they die? Is that why? Is that...?" Her breaths started to become shallow. Her eyes took a pained, yet almost wild look. "Is that why...?"

"Yuria." I pulled her into a hug, stroking her hair. "Yuria, try to focus on me."

"I... yes, you're right." She took a few deep, shuddering breaths and leaned into me. "Ah, I almost had one again, didn't I? I'm sorry."

"Never be sorry about panic attacks, Yuria. It's not like you chose to have them." I kissed her head and continued holding her. "Better?"

"Mmm... yes." She pulled away and smiled sweetly. She was a bit pale, but otherwise, she did seem fine. "Ha... I managed to head it off. Maybe... well, now's not the time to see if I can
remember anything."

"Give your body some time to recuperate, at the very least."

"Yes." Yuria fell silent, clearly thinking about something, and then she sighed. "I was trying to think of a way to lead in what I really wanted to ask about, but…"

"Just be blunt. I won't mind."

"Okay." She still hesitated, before nodding to herself. "The tattoo I have… it's a Holy Mark, isn't it?"

"I…” I had no idea how to reply. I hadn't expected that one.

"See, I've been trying to figure out what that group had in common. The group that resisted the Sleep staff." She spoke very quickly, like she was afraid she'd stop if she even took a breath. "At first, I thought it was simply a resistance to magic, but Fee told me hers wasn't all that great when she was off her pegasus. Diarmuid mentioned that yours wasn't good either. So, I was stumped and decided to remove myself from the group to see if it became more obvious and, while I thought of quite a few things you all had in common, what stood out was 'Holy Blood'. Specifically, it was Holy Blood connected to magic." Her hands began shaking, even when she clasped them in her lap to try and hide it. "It's… probably arrogant to think that I'm so special that I have-"

"Everyone is special, Yuria." I took her hands and spoke firmly and gently. "Everyone is, Holy Blood or otherwise. Honestly, some days, I think the Holy Blood just makes us big weirdos. I mean; I accidentally conjure up flames when I snap my fingers. Larcei can block a blade with her bare arm. And gods, the stories you hear of Ulir luck."

"I've heard a few. It's so hard to see how the logic and physics connect all the dots together most of the time." She took another shuddering breath and then looked at me. "But am I right? Is it one?"

"...Yes. It is." I couldn't lie to her. Not about this. Besides, Oifeye had said that if she brought it up, we should answer to the best of our abilities. "Would you like to see mine? It's on my chest, so I'd have to take off my shirt."

"Please?"

"Sure." Pretty easy to take off my shirt again, and I gestured to the Mark to help her see it. After a moment, she poked the part on my collarbone, closer to my shoulder, and promptly squeaked. "Buzz?" She nodded. "That's how you know it's a Holy Mark. It burns with power. Scars won't form on it either. You can see it with Oifeye's and Shanan's. Especially Shanan's." Though, she hadn't met Shanan yet. I could only hope one of us saw him before he saw Yuria. Someone had to warn him. "As I said. Weirdos."

"I see." Yuria studied mine closely, one hand wrapping around her waist to touch part of her Mark. "It's smaller than mine."

"Typically, Minors have small and Majors have large. Seliph is a Major Baldur and his takes up half of his back."

"...Mine is large…” She frowned, and I braced myself for a panic attack, but she shook her head and focused again on my Mark. "The color of that one…” She pointed to the orange-red Fjalar part of it. "It's like the one on mine. One of them, at least. Mine is on my back, so I only see it in the mirror."
"Yep, it's for Fjalar. The black is Od's. You can tell because each type of Mark has a different color. None overlap or anything."

"That we share means…" She smiled shyly. "We're related?"

"We are." I smiled back. "Probably should've brought that up sooner, but your panic attacks…"

"I understand. You're not really hiding it. You're waiting for me to heal enough to hear it." She began thinking a bit. "How are we related, though? You have only your twin for a sibling. Arthur is your cousin, and his sister is in Alster."

"His sister would be Minor Thrud, which has a more purple color."

"Whereas mine is silver." She hummed a bit. "Oh, but they do say you're the niece of…" Yuria trailed off, eyes going wide. "Oh. Oh."

"You okay?" I rested a hand on her shoulder. She didn't answer. "Yuria."

"Um… y-yes, I'm…" She whimpered. "Oh, goodness. If you follow the logic, then I'm…"

"You're you, no matter what." I smiled reassuringly at her. "No matter who your parents are. You know this, yes?"

"Yes. But it's still a weird feeling, to piece together that you're royalty. It's like a storybook thing, not…" She sighed. "And that means my father…"

"Well, Oifeye's got a couple of theories." I kissed her cheek and rested my forehead against hers. "And don't be worried about any of us suddenly hating you."

"For one thing, you all knew because of the Mark."

"Well, yes. And you're also super sweet." I tried to think of something to cheer her up and came on one thing. "And, you know what else it all means?"

"What?"

"You're Seliph's sister. Half-sister, technically, but…"

"I… oh, that's right. Everyone says he's a prince, so…" Yuria slowly smiled again, giggling at the thought. "Ah, so I have a brother and two cousins here! Plus a sister, with Fee!"

"Yep. The family just keeps on getting bigger." I leaned back and pulled my shirt back on. "So, relax. Heal at your own pace. Take things at your own pace. Would you like to still be called 'Yuria'?"

"Yes. Until I remember my past. It feels best." Yuria kept on giggling and hopped to her feet, bouncing a bit. "Oh, I should tell Seliph, huh?"

"You should!" Seliph was going to be thrilled. "Go on, go on! I'll see you at lunch."

"I'll see you then." And she was out the door, careful to shut it behind her, still giggling.

I remained where I was a while longer, smiling warmly, before getting up to find socks and boots that would match my outfit. It was nice that she'd figured it out. She still didn't remember anything, but knowing that much seemed to give her a better footing. I worried for the days ahead, of course, but for now, I was fairly certain it was a good thing. I'd need to give the others a heads up, though.
It could mean she'd be more likely to have a panic attack, after all. We'd need to be prepared.

The day after Yuria pieced together her identity, Fee returned from her scouting and so, we assembled the War Meeting. Of course, after Fee gave her report, we all remained silent, trying to process things. Since no Dozel soldier thought to look up, she'd been able to get quite the detailed look at the camp, complete with map and notes on conditions of the buildings and people. The latter… kind of… um…

"I always knew the conditions were bad, based on the survivors, but damn, that's somehow even worse than I ever would've thought," I whispered, recovering first. 'Recovering.' I was still reeling. I could just speak first. "What's the worst curse you can bestow on someone again? I am blanking."

"Well, the joking version is 'may you live in interesting times'," Ulster replied, half-automatically. Even he couldn't maintain his stoicism in light of this, so his eyes were wide and his hands shook by his side. "If we're being serious, there was that one Deimne would use when particularly mad."

"'May the gods use your spine as a ladder to hell'. I remember now." I looked down at the map, and Fee's reports. "Feels too tame."

"His mother would add something like 'legs as splinters', I think."

"Bit better."

"I'm trying to decide if you two are attempting banter to try and get your minds working again, attempting banter because you default to it, or if you're not bantering at all and I'm just pretending because then, things feel slightly more normal with this group," Arthur rattled off. He held himself stiffly on the other side of the table, but that was because, after reporting, Fee had finally broken down crying and decided to cry into his shoulder. So, he was awkwardly letting her while Larcei, face stony, rubbed her back. "Also, Danann is dying, right? You guys aren't going to do your 'please, surrender' thing on him?"

"Surrender doesn't necessarily mean you live," Diarmuid instantly pointed out, jumping to Seliph's defense. Noticing Seliph was still out of it, I stepped closer to him and took his hand. I wished I'd brought Hestia in here with me, but I'd left her with Yuria in the infirmary, thinking this wouldn't be too bad. Oh how wrong I was. "Means you might be able to keep some modicum of dignity when you die. We do have limits."

"Okay, good. Just… checking…"

"It's fine. It's also… well, forgetting his soldiers, our soldiers die when we fight. Surrendering lessens those deaths."

"Right, right, I remember Riona… sorry, I'm just…" Arthur's hand came up and gestured vaguely. "Well…"

"I know." Diarmuid glared at the map. "I know."

"I'm currently trying to figure out why no one has already killed my father," Iuchar growled. Now that the shock faded, somewhat, he bristled with quiet anger, fists shaking at his side. Oifeye rested a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "Gods, I knew they were bad, but nothing like…"

"You ruled Isaach Castle, right?" Lester asked, voice harsh. He then winced and shook his head. "That came out far more accusatory than I meant."
"It's fine. We're all shaken." Iuchar sighed and visibly made himself relax. Oifeye still held onto him, though. "That said, that was the castle. I was actually forbidden to go near the labor camps. They were run by my father and his generals. And I wasn't exactly eager to see if they had orders to execute me if I got too close or not."

"...I know you mentioned that you didn't get along with your family, but I continue being shocked every time it comes up."

"That is because you are blessed with a good family."

"Adding that to my list of 'things I am thankful for' for my evening prayers."

"Much as I love you both, I do think we need to be serious," Lana scolded, crossing her arms and scowling. The worry and fear in her eyes cut off any sort of teasing. "I… I don't know if we're prepared enough, infirmary wise, to tend to them. And, I mean…" Lana sighed and looked down. "They've basically been packed together. Minimal bathing, minimal cleaning… they're going to be disease ridden. They're going to be malnourished. They're going to be…"

"We've treated people like them before," Larcei reassured. She left Fee alone to hug Lana, kissing her hair. "So, we know what to do."

"Do we? Mother always told us, yes, but this time, we're on our own. But even that isn't the biggest issue."

"Oh?"

"Oifeye, how did Shanan and the resistance groups safely get the survivors out?" Seliph asked quietly. Because, once you got past the shock, that became the obvious question. They were in bad condition. People like that couldn't… "And we're definitely going to need some sort of distraction to get any sort of time." No wonder Shanan's missions were always so damn long. Gods above...

"We'll also need to set up people on the roads to ambush messengers," I added, leaning over the map to study it. After a moment, I found a couple of potential spots and used some metal markers to… well… mark them. "One of these?"

"I'd think I'd want multiple. Just in case. And…" Seliph looked to Fee, who had finally recovered and no longer leaned on Arthur. To Arthur's visible relief. Still, he rested a hand on her back, and that was enough for her. "I am so sorry to send you into such a distressing scenario."

."No, no, I have to get used to things like this," Fee mumbled. She looked down in embarrassment; meanwhile, Ulster, Larcei, Lester, and I marked more potential spots. Diarmuid talked quietly to Iuchar about something and Iuchar left, just as quietly. "Thank you for allowing me to be unprofessional, though."

"You gave us the information we needed, and as soon as you did, I would say your job was done," Seliph reassured. Fee glanced up and smiled shyly. "That said, would you mind both serving as a scout for the ambushers and assisting in the evacuations."

"Gladly. For both."

"I asked Iuchar to double-check how many people our horses could carry, and if some of his would be willing to… infiltrate in plain sight, so to speak, so that can help," Diarmuid explained. He smiled apologetically at Lester. "I know I should've probably gone through you for that, but…" Lester waved the apology away, more focused on the task we four were doing. Ambushes were important, and Lester's archery gave him a different perspective than Ulster, Larcei, and me.
"Oifeye, we never actually waited for your answer."

"That's fine, as I don't actually know," Oifeye admitted easily. He bowed to us, and… well, we did our best to not glower. It wasn't his fault, after all. "Lord Seliph, if you would like, I can leave to investigate, however. We do have resistance members here, some of which were with Shanan."

Seliph hesitated before nodding. "Very good. Lana, I'll tell Yuria to do inventory for the infirmary." And Oifeye was gone in an instant, with a mildly put-out, mildly uneasy silence left in his wake.

For one thing, from this point forward, this would be the first 'War Meeting' held in his absence. For another…

"I know I don't know him well, but I swear that he set that up," Arthur drawled, saying what we all were thinking. "Not the labor camp part. The whole 'leaving you all alone to figure things out part'." He sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. "Not sure how much help I'm going to be with the labor camp or anything, but I could possibly do some spooking? Like what Riona, Fee, and I did for Iuchar's camp. I've been practicing the fire-control-without-a-tome stuff, and then there's just my magic in general."

"And I can listen to the wind and get... well, a little warning," Fee added. Slowly, but surely, the cheer I associated with her returned. It was still subdued, and her eyes were red from the crying, but it was there. "It won't be too much ahead. It's better for weather and things, since I'm a Minor, but..."

"Better than nothing, but I've got a couple more worries. And chief among them? These Child Hunts I've heard about." Arthur frowned a bit. "Well, more like the priests. They apparently really don't like Silesse's cold or something because I haven't heard anything about them."

"Of course, they couldn't just be waiting for us to starve." Fee sighed. "Silesse isn't the most fertile of places, better than Thracia but that's not saying much. We've been facing a hunger crisis for... four years, I want to say? Quite a few pegasus knights, like Misha, went to find mercenary work to send back."

"Regardless, shouldn't we focus on them? Or am I missing something? Because it seems to me that these camps would be a damn good spot to gather them up, and gods knows where else in Isaach they can be. Just because Iuchar and Iucharba protected people doesn't mean it still didn't happen."

"Mmm... no, that is a good point," Seliph murmured. He glanced at me and I winced. Killing those priests... even if I knew they were horrible, I still had nightmares about that fight. Along with everything else. "We do know that they infiltrated Tirnanog. Conall told us that there are no reinforcements, but the priests are likely moving independently. Danann might not even be aware they're here."

"Or he is, but they're not considered reinforcements," I whispered. I felt a bit nauseous, but Diarmuid kissed my temple to reassure me. "But they did focus on us, so they might abandon any Child Hunts they're attempting once they learn where... 'Once.' As if it weren't obvious where we would head. Sure, we'd muddle the path, but the destination? That was damn obvious. We couldn't liberate Isaach without killing the tyrant, after all. 'Damn it. I should've asked Conall about that.'"

"There's a lot we should've asked Conall. Like the Sleep Staff thing."

"Yeah..." I could almost kick myself for it. As a leader, I really should've thought about it. On the other hand, no matter how much he loved us still, Conall was under no obligation to give us information. And he could only give us information he'd know. Now, Sleep thing? He'd know. Loptyr Priests running about? Not necessarily. "Worse is that he's probably already left with Ishtar." Their words did imply they didn't plan on staying long. How hard could it be to find an axe
and leave? "Ah, neither here nor there. Arthur, that's a good point, but we have no information, so..." Arthur nodded, understanding. "We'll try to be wary, but for now, we need a distraction. We need to keep Danann occupied. With something."

"Something that can't be soldiers. The second there's military, we have slaughter and hostages, no doubt." Seliph sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "Priests are important, but they can be discussed once we figured out the distraction."

"Maybe send Diarmuid and Riona in again to charm people?" Ulster half-joked. Diarmuid and I immediately scowled. "You two got us a lot of information last time. And got a date or ten."

"There's absolutely no way that would work, and I doubt it would be an effective distraction anyway," Diarmuid immediately countered, tone very grouchy. I almost chimed in with my own annoyance, but a thought occurred to me. And Iuchar wasn't here to confirm, so I'd have to double-check, but... "I highly doubt that Danann is going to be 'charmed' by anyone."

"You never know. Could just need a friend. Isn't that how some of the people talked about stopping bullying? Just go be friends?"

"That is such bullshit. Why should a child be responsible for 'correcting' another child's behavior anyway?"

"Well..."

"Actually, Ulster might be on to something," I murmured. I waved away everyone's incredulous looks. "Not the whole 'let us charm the guards' thing which I still have no idea how it worked. But me going in." I gestured a bit, trying to find the words I wanted. "We'd have to find Iuchar to confirm, but seriously, what do you think Danann's reaction will be to the Emperor's niece showing up on his doorstep?" I hesitated and looked at Arthur. "And maybe his nephew as well?"

"I appreciate the thought, but while I have the Holy Mark to prove things, I am not a good actor at all," Arthur refused, shaking his head. He then smiled wryly. "And given what we just learned, I'd probably just burn the whole place down, which is a tad more violent than you might want for a 'distraction'. Keep things to the ones good at acting. Also known as the ones who can go on missions and are very good at biting their tongue."

"And being friendly and charming, which narrows it right on down to you and Diarmuid, Riona," Larcei noted. She glanced at Ulster and crossed her arms. "I mean; Ulster can at least be stoic, but I somehow doubt Danann will look favorably on him or me."

"Based on what I've heard? I'd be surprised if you weren't killed on sight."

"Exactly."

"...Well, it's a plan, but we should wait for Iuchar's input," Seliph began, voice carefully neutral. I glanced at the others worriedly, and they frowned, noticing the same thing. Seliph wasn't happy about this plan at all. "While he's getting information, we should let the soldiers know what is going on, and the like."

We all looked at each other and decided to take that as a dismissal. However, true to form, I stayed behind while they left. Fee and Arthur lingered a bit, but Ulster snagged Fee's hand and led her out, discussing something about the scouts, while Diarmuid took Arthur's arm and talked quietly with him about something. I closed my eyes and sighed a bit. I was tempted to be pouty, but there was no point to it. They all left because they thought I would be the one Seliph would open up to.
And… to be fair… that was probably true. I always had been. Part of it had just been me being stubborn as a child, though. Once I'd recovered from Conall's capture, some, I'd been annoyed by how much I'd 'taken' and insisted that Seliph ramble at me too. And it just… continued as we got older.

"I'd complain about being so easy to read, except it did seem like it was just our group who noticed, huh?" Seliph noted, smiling wanly. He sighed and reached back to adjust his ponytail. I actually went and removed the hair tie to tie it back a little more neatly. "I know you brought it up, but are you sure about this?"

"It's basically the same thing as what we did with Ganeishire, isn't it?" I teased, smiling warmly at him. He simply winced, looking both pained and worried. "So little faith in my acting?"

"That's not it at all." He cupped my cheek, fingers twisting a bit into the hair by my face, thumb brushing under my eye. "Ganeishire was a simple infiltration and you… well, you did stay longer than anticipated, but it was still essentially 'in and out'. Even then, you and Diarmuid were uncomfortable."

"We didn't think it would work." Still didn't know how it did. "Difference."

"Not quite my point." Still, he looked pained and worried. I wished I knew what I could do or say to make him feel better. "This time, you're going to infiltrate into the heart of our enemy's territory, attempt to hold his attention for who even knows how long, and you're going to do it by taking advantage of a relation you hate."

"Well, yes…" I couldn't deny that. And it was uncomfortable. "But if it gives us a better chance of saving and protecting the civilians, then shouldn't we?" I couldn't give them any less than my best. We had a duty to protect them, to save them. I couldn't falter just because of discomfort. "And I will have Diarmuid and Hestia with me, and once inside, we can secure paths and the like for more infiltration."

"I'm not exactly in a hurry to see you set yourself on fire to keep the rest of us warm, Riona."

Despite my attempt at reassuring, he only looked more pained. I hadn't done this bad of a job in reassuring him in… a long while. "Worse is that I can't come with you, though. We have a plan that puts you and Diarmuid in so much danger, and I can do nothing but wait…!" He looked down, each word becoming tighter and harsher. "It's like Tirnanog again. Waiting while others take the danger. Keeping me in a protective bubble while…"

"Silly, I'm not protecting you. I'm helping you protect our soldiers and civilians." I reached up to hold his hand on my face. "That's what we all do. We help each other. While Diarmuid and I infiltrate, you will be coordinating every single part of the plan. We all have our roles, but you are the one who oversees all of it, to make sure each one of the pieces works. Like the printing press." I smiled warmly at him, kissing his forehead. "If something is wrong with the press, the books are all jumbled up and messy. You might be able to read it, but it would be much more difficult. So, you keep things running smoothly."

"You would use a book analogy." Seliph looked up and scowled. "And I'm not sure of how good of one it is."

"Oh, just admit I'm right." I grinned and he rolled his eyes. "Yes, this job is dangerous. But while we do that, you are the one keeping things running smoothly. And since Diarmuid and I are away…"

"...I'm the one who has to do your jobs, or at least, look over them. All of us are." He sighed and
shook his head. "I don't like it."

"Doing our jobs?"

"Sending people off into danger while I stay back. But I have to get used to it, huh? It's not like we have a better plan anyway." He rested his forehead against mine. "Please be careful. I always feel uneasy when you're not near."

"Then liberate the camp quickly and efficiently so that you can meet us in Rivough." I smiled at him and, finally, he smiled back. "I'll be waiting."

"I'll try to not keep you waiting long, then." He stepped away and turned back to the map. "I'll wait here for Oifeye and Iuchar, just in case they come back here."

"In retrospect, we shouldn't have sent them off. Or, at least, not Iuchar." Ah, hindsight. The bane of everything. "See you at dinner." I smiled at him and, finally, he smiled back. "I'll be waiting."

"Damn, was hoping for a kiss or something," Lester sighed gustily, barely talking quietly enough so that Seliph wouldn't overhear. The rest of the Tirnanog nodded in agreement. Fee looked both confused yet happy. Arthur facepalmed, no doubt having been forced to stay by the others. "Surely that would've been a good moment, yes? A 'last kiss before the mission' thing? Shows up in stories so much?"

"You know; I had planned on taking Hestia, but if you all have this much time, all of you can take care of her without me," I deadpanned, scowling. The worst part about this was that it was perfectly common in our group and I had done the same damn thing in the past. All of us had crowded together and eavesdropped when Lester and Creidne had confessed, for instance. "Oh, whatever. Break over, work time now."

The next few days were going to be… interesting. To say the least.
"I can already tell you he'll refuse."

"But wouldn't asking give you an excuse to head inside for a moment?" I asked teasingly. The guard's face softened enough for a smile. "If he does refuse, then we won't make trouble and insist otherwise, but we really would like to speak with him."

"Well... I suppose I can deliver the message, at least," the guard replied slowly. After a moment, they nodded. "Your names?"

"I am Caitriona, the daughter of Alicia, and this is Diarmuid of House Nordion." I smiled warmly at him. "Make sure you deliver it exactly that way? I imagine it'll give you the least amount of trouble."

"We'll see, miss." The guard disappeared and Diarmuid and I looked at each other, wondering if this would actually work. And, for a while, we didn't think it would. After all, we had been kept waiting long enough that we had to hold onto Hestia to keep her from running off from boredom. But, eventually, the gates did open and that was when we met Danann for the very first time.

"Princess Caitriona! What a surprise!" Danann boomed, laughing. I was startled by how warm the laughter was, and how much the smile... the smile was like Ulster's. And Uncle Lex's, by default. I... I didn't like that. "And this is Lord Diarmuid?"

"I am, my lord," Diarmuid replied, bowing respectively. I simply smiled, swallowing all my initial hatred. Acting... acting... this was going to be the greatest test of our ability to bullshit. "We would like entry, if you do not mind, and-"

"Of course, of course! Come inside!" Danann gestured grandly to the castle in the distance and we followed him into the city. I caught the eye of the guard who had delivered our message and winked, smiling in gratitude. "I hope your travels were not too hard?"

"No, we're old hands at traveling," I replied, keeping my tone as light and cheerful as possible. And tried not to notice how damn quiet Rivough was. It was the middle of the day, prime time for market, and yet, there was only a couple of lackluster streetcleaners wandering about, pushing dust without cleaning it. There were no children playing. There were no parents gossiping in the market. It was like the city was devoid of anyone. "Thank you so much for the shelter, though. Things have been so harrowing lately. So much fighting..."

"It is baffling why these rebels believe they have any sort of chance," Danann sighed, shaking his head. The mocking smile he wore really tested my patience, so I focused on keeping a good grip on Hestia. "Clearly, I have been too lenient." Neither Diarmuid and I knew what to say to that. In fact, we both instantly looked at each other, to make sure we didn't. "Besides, what do they think they're going to do? They can't burn me out or anything. The gates are fireproof." Well, that thing about the gates was good to know. "But truly, Princess Caitriona, your timing is perfect." We stepped inside the castle proper, and I nearly gagged as I was instantly bombarded with far too many smells. Hestia sneezed a few times, my poor sweetie, and Diarmuid did cough a bit, before catching my eye and pointing to an absolutely gaudy painting on the wall. I couldn't even tell what it was supposed to be; the colors burned my eyes. "I understand that you've not seen Prince Conall in a long while?"

"He and I were separated thirteen years ago." The words were automatic and only afterwards did I look to Diarmuid in shock. He simply stared back, confirming what I had heard. I had sincerely thought he'd be gone, not... "Wait, is he here?"

"He is, indeed! Has been for a few days. I took the liberty to send someone for him as soon as your
message arrived." We stepped into a throne room and Hestia began wagging her tail, recognizing a smell even among all the… whatever the hell the other smells were. "Looks like the servants were prompt, for once."

"Amazing how a little kindness goes a long way," Conall immediately deadpanned from where he was leaning on the wall by some door. Hekate sat by him, her tail wagging too. "Well, what is it? Hekate is surprisingly eager, so did your soldiers actually manage a good hunt for once or…?"

Conall's eyes flicked over to me and his jaw dropped. "What…?"

"Conall!" I called, rushing over and tackling him with a giant hug. He caught me automatically, stumbling a bit. "I've missed you so much!"

"I…" Conall hugged me tightly. Hestia and Hekate immediately began barking and playing, delighted to see each other again. "I've missed you too." He dropped his voice to a whisper, to make sure we weren't overheard. "But what the hell are you doing?"

"Play along." I also kept my voice a whisper. "Please?"

"No duh. But I'm really not that great of an actor." Still, he smiled at me when he pulled away, and then he looked up and saw Diarmuid. Who was staring in shock. All of us really had thought Conall would've been gone by now. Showed what we knew. "Diarmuid?"

"Damn, wasn't expecting this," Diarmuid whispered, laughing a bit. Danann, meanwhile, left with a decidedly smug smile on his face. "Think my brain broke a bit."

"Your brain broke?" Conall repeated, taking my hand. He looked Diarmuid up and down, smiling softly. "Looks like you've some muscle on you. Bit of a surprise, given how frail you used to be. How is your health?"

"Perfectly fine, though I do get regular checkups just in case my heart decides to buck the trend and start giving me problems again. Especially with the stress and all." Diarmuid rested a hand briefly on his chest, right over the scar he had. He actually had to have heart surgery when he was very little, from what I understood. "Hezul's blood is associated with strength. Could be that it helped. Could be Holy Blood in general."


"We've missed you too. Wish the circumstances were different, but it's good to know you're well instead of believing."

"I know that feeling all too well." Conall stepped back and pointed to the door. So, after catching Hestia and Hekate by the fur, we left the room into a hallway with equally burning… ugh… "So, scale of one to ten, how gaudy do you find this place?"

"A million." Diarmuid's response was quicker than mine, so I simply laughed. "The paintings are atrocious, there is far too many bulky decorations on the walls, the tapestries are utter wrecks, and whoever designed the interior needs lessons in colors. Also, what is with the damn smell?"

"Part of Grannvale's wealth is shown through scented candles, except Danann has some of the worst I've ever dealt with." Conall made a face. "Surprisingly, you do get used to it, but I still can't stand most of them. There are some lighter ones that don't smell so bad, though. There's actually one that reminds me of the perfume Aideen wears. Wore."

"Wore. She eventually ran out, and now wears perfumes gifted to her from patients." It was sad,
because that perfume had been a gift from Midir. But few things lasted forever, and none of them were perfume. "Hey, write a letter or something for her, will you? Oifeye wrote about seeing you, but she'd be delighted to actually hear from you."

"So, she's not actually with you?"

"Nope, she's… whoa!" And Hekate and Hestia were running down the hall, yipping and jumping all over the place. "Oh, right, there's two now."

"All sorts of fun, yes?" Conall whistled and Hekate immediately returned to his side, Hestia following curiously. "Didn't expect that to work on the first try." He petted her head and scratched Hestia behind the ear. "Probably got excited." Once we were done the hall a bit, he opened a door without knocking, probably his. "Hey, Ishtar, have I mentioned recently that you are my very best friend and I love you very much?"

"Oh gods, Conall, what the hell did you do?" Ishtar's response was immediate and deadpan, hinting trouble wasn't uncommon with Conall. She still nearly fell at the sight of Diarmuid and me, and she'd been sitting at a table, reading a book. "Well… uh…" she began, opening and closing her mouth a few times. She stared for a moment longer before half-glaring at Conall like he was responsible for this. "This has become quite the little thing."

"I didn't expect them to freaking infiltrate!" Conall snapped defensively. He got all four of us inside and closed the door behind us. "Welcome to my room, you two. How did you even get the guards to listen long enough to get inside? They like pretending to be statues whenever I try to strike up a conversation."

"We were just friendly," I explained, looking around the room curiously. The colors here were much softer, and it was sparsely decorated, especially compared to the clutter of the halls. The half-open closet, with random things peeking out, hinted Conall had cleared the place out to be more comfortable. I also saw that there was a pile of blankets and pillows on the floor, instead of on the bed, for some reason. "The guard was very nice, though I do think someone needs to get them some balm. That sunburn had looked so painful." I thought of what he'd just said and smiled. "A little kindness goes a long way, yes?"

"Don't mock me within a minute of showing up unexpectedly!"

"I wonder if it's just the same thing that makes you popular despite your complete utter lack of tact, Conall," Ishtar mused thoughtfully. She leaned back in her chair, book half-dangling from her fingertips. I tried to see what the cover was, but couldn't. "That charm thing."

"No idea what you're talking about," Conall noted, hunting through the room for something. He disappeared briefly and returned with two more chairs. "At all."

"You've gained quite a few admirers in the short time we've been here. As per usual, actually."

"Still have no idea what you're talking about." Conall left briefly again and returned with a large pillow, which he tossed into the corner, next to another one with bunches of black fur. Hekate immediately ran over to the covered-one and laid down, and Hestia followed suit on the other. "Okay, tea. We're going to be proper and have some tea, as soon as I find…"

"Top shelf in the right corner."

"Thank you." Conall headed over and Diarmuid and I decided to simply sit down, both amused. "Riona, do you still like citrus?"
"I do!" I replied, giggling. It was silly, but I was so glad he remembered that. "Oranges are the best."

"Oh, those are my favorite too," Ishtar laughed. Slowly, she relaxed, smiling warmly. "Yay, an excuse to have my favorite tea. It's got a touch of spices, and it's so good."

"Really? That sounds amazing!"

"Lovely, you two can bond over oranges," Conall deadpanned. He left briefly, yet again, to get some water and used fire magic to get the water heated quickly. "Diarmuid, there's a second pot if you want something different."

"Well, what about your favorite?" Diarmuid suggested, smiling. He was far too amused by all of this. "I could do with some apples."

"How the hell do you remember I like apples?"

"Well, part of it is that there is that incident where you snuck into an apple orchard and hid in the trees for an entire day, scaring the living hell out of Oifeye and Aideen because you wanted a continuous apple supply," Diarmuid grinned, and I laughed, remembering that. Conall made a face, while Ishtar giggled. "Pretty easy to remember after that."

"Point made, point made." Conall got the other teapot set up and before long, all four of us had our tea ready and Conall sat down to join us at the table. Hekate and Hestia napped on their cushions in the corner. "Okay, so, what the hell are you doing here? Assassination?"

"Nah, neither of us are suited for that," I answered, shrugging. And giggled a bit before the tea really was good. "Bit too noticeable with a giant wolf."

"We're playing distraction, so that Danann doesn't notice that he's suddenly not getting reports or whatever from that labor camp you told us about," Diarmuid added. He sipped his own tea, and smiled softly. "I mean; we don't know much from there. But we figured Riona would be far too tempting of a carrot for Danann to not jump at the bait. And I'm the extra bit to make sure of it."

"Also, we're both the ones most likely to hold onto our tempers." I scowled when Conall immediately choked on his tea, coughing and trying to hold back a laugh. "I got better at it, damn it!"

"You punched a soldier for making Aideen uncomfortable when we were four," Conall laughed, still coughing and choking. Diarmuid patted him on the back before giving him a hug. Ishtar looked at us weirdly. "A soldier!"

"W-we were leaving anyway!" I squeaked, face burning with mortification. I'd actually forgotten about that. "And I just beat Oifeye to it!"

"Yes, but Oifeye was like twenty-something. You were four."

"So, causing trouble is definitely just a thing with these twins," Ishtar sighed. Still, she smiled sweetly. "Conall punched an assassin, once."

"When did I… oh, wait, the first one, right," Conall murmured. He waved away Diarmuid's worried look; I was a little too shocked to even be worried. "Look, no matter what, there were people angry with Arvis and Diadora. Rightfully so. And then they went overboard and targeted children. The angry people, not Arvis and Diadora."
"Though, given what we now know…"

"Yeah, wouldn't be surprised if Manfroy was the one who hired them. Would explain how they infiltrated both times." Conall shrugged. Diarmuid and I glanced at each other, wondering what the hell, and who the hell, they were talking about. "But neither here nor there. Point is that you two are here in order to strike at Danann, eventually." Conall grinned. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Are you serious, Conall?" Ishtar scowled. Diarmuid and I, wisely, focused on our tea. He and I traded briefly and I had to say that Conall had very good taste in teas. These were both very, very good. "I know they're your family, but…"

"It's Danann. You can't tell me you don't want to see him dead." Conall smiled innocently. "All we'll be doing, or I'll be doing if you're really uncomfortable, is assisting in the execution of a criminal. And by doing so, we can figure out where Danann hell he stores Helswath. Because it's in none of the normal or even abnormal possibilities."

"Well, that is true…"

"Besides, you hate him. You like things to be simple when you hate people. And, for once, this is actually simple."

"It isn't, but I do appreciate you making it that way for me." Ishtar sighed, but smiled. "Well, no different than what we did with the soldiers, yes?"

"Exactly." Conall looked to us. "So?"

"For now, as we said, we're just playing distraction, so if you can help us make sure Danann doesn't notice the lack of reports, we'd be grateful." Diarmuid replied. I nodded in agreement, smiling. I couldn't deny how happy I was that Conall and I would work together to liberate Isaach. Even if later, we might… "We can revisit the discussion when it's time to fight, but I think we've been much too serious, so…" Diarmuid glanced over at Hestia and Hekate, who were curled up together, fast asleep. "Can someone explain to me how both of you got pet wolves? Seriously?"

"Who knows?" I replied, shrugging. Ishtar sighed and Conall grinned. "Oh, but this just really makes me wish I'd brought that bobcat and her kittens to the castle. They were so cute and fluffy!"

"You can't bring every single animal you—"

"You saw a bobcat?" Conall asked excitedly. Ishtar groaned and facepalmed. "Ugh… I knew I should've hiked through the woods. I wonder if they would be as fun to play with as a lion cub?"

"You got to play with a lion cub?!" I sulked and he grinned. Diarmuid, meanwhile, shared a commiserating look with Ishtar. "No fair!"

"You got bobcats!

"Still not fair!"

Conall and I animatedly discussed various animals we had met and played with in the past, laughing and sighing over how cute they'd been. Ishtar and Diarmuid, meanwhile, no doubt talked about how they had no idea how they had no idea how we were still alive. And, eventually, the two just left the table to pet Hekate and Hestia, leaving Conall and me to our discussions.

I couldn't believe he got to see a lion, though. I wanted one!
Dinner was… trying. The amount of food Danann set out for us was an over-full feast, and I was all too aware of how little others had compared to this, because this was at least two or three times as much of a what I normally associated with a 'feast'. Plus, so many the foods were… well, 'heavy' was the only word I could think of. There were so many flavors in them that I swore I was going to be overwhelmed and I just… couldn't taste anything. Plus there was the sheer variety. Different kinds of meats. Different types of salad. Different kinds of soups. And it was all just for the five of us: Danann, Ishtar, Conall, Diarmuid, and myself. Hekate and Hestia hid under the table, and Diarmuid and I snuck food to them to hide how little we were actually eating. Conall and Ishtar didn't seem to mind, but Conall caught my eye and smiled wanly, hinting that maybe they were just good at hiding how uncomfortable they were. He also brewed ginger tea for all four of us afterwards.

Then there was trying to go to sleep. Which I couldn't. Anxiety had already made my stomach all topsy-turvy, but the food just sat there like rocks, making me nauseous even with the ginger tea. And the bed was so soft that I sank into it and genuinely wondered if I'd suffocate sleeping in it. That was solved with a simple move to the floor, curled up with Hestia, but the nausea and the like? Not so much. After a while of trying, I gave up and decided to walk through the halls to try and calm down. Hestia walked with me, of course. She refused to leave me alone in this place.

"That discussion Conall and Ishtar had really did remind me of how likely it is that I'll fight them later," I murmured, petting Hestia's head as we walked. She whimpered and pressed into my leg. "I don't like that." Conall was Conall. And Ishtar seemed like a very sweet person. And, more importantly, she was close to Conall. I didn't want to hurt people he was close to. But the worst thing was… "I probably wouldn't learn until it was too late." And even if I did, there was no guarantee that they'd just… not fight. If it became a choice between my life and theirs, I… "I hate that real war isn't as simple as the stories." Even if they fought for a tyrannical empire, there were still good people. People who either didn't know better, or did but thought the alternatives were worse. Iucharba had thought that. And we… "How did our parents get through these sorts of things?" Did they just not think about it? Would it be like killing? Would I just get so used to it that I…?

Loud laughter startled me from my thoughts and, curious, I hunted down the source. Eventually, I came upon a half-open door and peeked inside, to find Danann drinking and laughing alone in what might've once been a study, but was now a place of scattered wine bottles, shards of glass, and empty, molded plates. And based on the smell, he was well in his cups. Or would be if he wasn't drinking directly from the bottle.

"Ah, such prestige these two will bring!" he boasted. I held onto Hestia and looked about subtly to confirm that he was alone, lounging in a chair. He was boasting to no one. "This'll bring more money over! Perhaps I'd even be relieved of this pigsty of a country!" He laughed again, and I closed my eyes and counted to ten to avoid losing my temper. "STOP SMILING LIKE THAT!" He suddenly threw the wine bottle against the wall, where it shattered into pieces, the wine splashing across the wall like demented blood. I jerked back and hugged Hestia tightly, trying to not yelp. Wondering what the hell that was about. "Stop pitying me, Lex! You always pitied me! Because you were the clever one, the strong one, the favorite! Even after you left, you hogged all the glory!" He laughed again, but this time, it was mad. It was completely mad. "But look who survived! Look who won in the end! All your cleverness and strength were nothing in the end! I won! I beat you!" Another growl and he picked up another wine bottle to throw. This one was full, but it shattered all the same. I could tell by how large the stain on the wall was. "Stop smiling! Stop pitying me! I won! I won!"

I finally unfroze and booked it down the hall, Hestia following me closely. I had no idea where exactly I ran. I just knew I didn't want to be near. I didn't want to be found. So, I ran. I ran and ran,
and only stopped when it became hard to breathe. And once I had stopped, I sat down on the floor and hugged Hestia again, waiting for my breathing to even out and for my shaking to stop while Hestia whimpered, licked, and nuzzled me. I’d known he was insane, but I’d always thought it was more of a… more of a sociopathic or psychopathic way. Though maybe it still was and… I didn’t know. I didn’t know. All I knew was that was not a comfortable experience, and I was even less comfortable with the knowledge that I had to share a roof with him. That Diarmuid and I had to distract him.

Gods, we should’ve called off this plan and actually checked if Conall was still here before even considering it. Instead of just assuming. Things would be so much better that way. Much as I loved seeing Conall again…

I took a couple of deep breaths to center myself and stood up. Regardless of how uncomfortable I was, I had to do this. Our soldiers were depending on us. My friends, family, were depending on us. All of them deserved nothing less than my best. I couldn’t balk just because of something as simple as discomfort and fear. I wasn’t allowed to. Someone who was always sheltered… someone who was always protected… someone who raised the flags of war despite that… someone like me didn’t have a right to…

I sighed and looked up, wondering just where I was in the castle and how the hell I was going to get back to my room. I didn't know this castle anyway, and now I was well and truly lost. I supposed I could just wander until I found some guard or servant, but it was still annoying. But as I was debating what to do or where to go, I happened to actually see someone in the distance. So, I headed towards them, intending on just asking. However, as I got a bit closer, I noticed… I noticed long black hair, with a purple surcoat and an embroidered sash. Grannvallians didn't typically wear surcoats nor did they wear such fancy sashes. That was more of an Isaachian thing. So were the wrappings around the shoes, done to reinforce the shoes for any sort of hard work or running. Plus, I… I knew this back. I’d seen this sight many, many times over the years. The sight of Shanan's back as he went on some mission, determined to save even just one more person. And it was easy to think of a reason for why he'd be here. If he'd found Balmung, then it was obvious he'd try to assassinate Danann. Many would even call it fitting.

But Shanan wouldn't know everything that was going on. Shanan wouldn't know the others were close, that Diarmuid and I were here, that Conall was here. So, I chased after him, determined to catch him and let him know what was going on. Hestia whimpered and followed, looking strangely upset by something. Maybe the fact that Shanan was doing something dangerous? I wasn't sure. Because, after a moment, all my focus was on keeping up with Shanan because I’d completely forgotten how freaking fast he could be when he wanted. So, around and around I went, following, not wanting to risk shouting in case I drew unwanted attention, but getting more and more irritated by the second because I just… couldn’t… catch… up...!

Then, all at once, the hallway ended at a door. A closed door. Confused, I looked around for any other paths, found none, and then I opened the door and walked inside. It was immediately obvious that this was some sort of storage room, dusty and packed with boxes. Hestia whimpered again, pressing into my leg before sneezing at the dust. However, despite the dust, I couldn't see any footprints. I looked back and saw mine and Hestia's. But not…

"Shanan?" I called, walking further in. It was a large place, but all of it was dusty. And none of it was disturbed. Not until I passed by. "Shanan, are you in here?" I swore I'd followed him perfectly, even if he'd been so far ahead, but… "Shanan, this isn't funny. You have to know it's me by now, right? Who else runs around with a wolf?" Still I walked. No Shanan. No footprints. Nothing but dust and a musty smell. "Shanan?"
It wasn't until I made it to the very back of the room that I saw 'Shanan'. But now that I saw his face, I realized it couldn't be Shanan at all. This man's features were sharper, for one thing, and he wore two or three beaded necklaces. Shanan wore only one necklace, a trinket from Agustria that Mom and Aunt Ayra bought for him. And, as I stared, I realized another key reason why this couldn't be Shanan; the man… was slightly transparent…

He smiled. It was a surprisingly soft smile, vaguely reminding me of the pictures of Aunt Ayra's smile. Then I blinked and he was gone. Like he had never been there.

"Was that… was that a ghost?" I clung to Hestia, trying to not shake. I knew about ghosts, of course. Isaach had many rituals designed to appease them and help them past. Most were frightening beings, twisted by their confusion and rage, and accidentally brought harm and discomfort to those around them. But that one had… "That couldn't have been Mariccle, could it?" I knew the stories about him too. Shanan's father, who bowed to the people's will in the hopes that, one day, the truth of what happened would come to light. He had fought valiantly against Grannvale, but had been obliterated by the Book of Naga, with no body left behind. Many had performed rituals afterwards, hoping that Mariccle would not become a ghost, still locked in battle and warfare. The elders in Tirnanog had always talked of how kindhearted and gentle he had been, so many continued with the rituals just to make sure. "He looked so much like Shanan…" Had he still been trapped, but not twisted? Was it something else entirely? I wished I'd paid more attention to the stories, but...

Carefully, I walked to where he had been, Hestia still whimpering and sneezing. There, right behind where the ghost had been, was a box. Just like the others. But it was easy to open, and so, I rummaged through the random bits of cloth. At least, I thought they were random until I recognized one dress; there was a picture of Aunt Ayra where she'd worn it. So, I continued digging, finding little trinkets. Finding portraits from Sigurd's army, different ones. And, at the bottom, I found a sword, a Brave Sword, and I found Aunt Ayra's ring. Next to it was a pendant that Uncle Lex wore often in the pictures, though I had never heard the story about it or anything.

"Bastard must've upended their packs into a box." And kept the Brave Axe out because his forces could more readily use it. "Can I…?" A quick look showed that there was no way I was carrying this by myself. And that was so frustrating because I wanted this box to be safe. I wanted to make sure Danann didn't burn it or anything, just to be petty. I was surprised it had lasted this long.

"What do I…?"

"Hekate, normally when you wake me up in the middle of the night, it's because you have to go outside, not because you want to chase a ghost." With eerie timing, Conall's grouchy, sleepy voice echoed through the room. Hestia barked in response. "Uh… Hestia? Why are you… Riona, what the hell?" Conall looked very exasperated, even when yawning. Hekate was sitting next to him, perfectly nonchalant. "This is an unholy hour anyway," he grumbled sleepily. I couldn't help but be amused, because he got grumpy when his naps were interrupted when we were children too.

"Fairly certain a dust bath isn't part of any beauty routines."

"Implying that I need one? So cruel to your twin!" I grinned, excited now. Between the two of us… "I didn't mean to come here, but hey, help me get this out."

"Why?"

"It's got things that I swear belong to Aunt Ayra and Uncle Lex."

"Why the hell would he…? Oh, damn, right, there was that suspicion Danann killed them. Arvis could never find any evidence, so he effectively exiled Danann in response. Not the greatest of ideas, but Danann did behave, somewhat." Conall sighed, rubbing at his eyes before brushing his
hair back. He wore it down to sleep apparently. And wore a robe, which must be a Grannvalian thing. "Whatever. I'm not the strongest of people, you know."

"It's bulky. I think we'll be find strength wise." I gave him my best pout, remembering how effective it used to be. "Please? I just want to make sure Ulster and Larcei get the stuff."

"...Gods, damn it. I haven't seen you in thirteen years until a few days ago. Why does that pout still work?" Conall sighed, and I grinned. "Fine, fine, we'll try it. If we can't, first thing in the morning. My room isn't far, so we'll hide it there."

"Yay! I love you!"

"Love you too. Hekate, please make sure no one catches us."

"Hestia, help her, will you?"

Thankfully, I was proven right in that the box wasn't that heavy; it was just too big for one person to carry. So, cursing all the while and coughing at the dust, Conall and I managed to get the box to his room and hide it fairly easily. It involved more cursing, of course, and some rearranging, but we did it!

"You know; I'm surprised he kept the things, though maybe he forgot about them," Conall mused, looking through the box himself. I petted both Hekate and Hestia, cooing over them and trying to get the dust off of them. Pretty hard, since Conall and I were also dusty. "We'll have to go back down the path and sweep."

"Yeah, we will," I agreed. Now that the box was safe, I wondered again about the ghost. Had it truly been Mariccle? Had he wanted to bring a bit of closure to his nephew and niece, even from beyond? "You mentioned a ghost with Hekate." I glanced back at him. "You see it?"

"Just a bit of long black hair. Figured it was an Isaachian who was slaughtered in the war, or by Danann's policies." Conall was nonchalant about the whole thing. Did Belhalla have a lot of ghosts? Considering the massacre, I wouldn't have been surprised. "I assumed ghost because of the damn disappearing act, and how it managed to outrun Hekate. I sent her ahead, just in case it was someone unintentionally throwing off your plan."

"Thank you." I grinned at him before kissing both Hestia and Hekate on the nose. I got licks in return. But being in the room did make a thought worm itself into my head, something that might solve my original dilemma. And I wanted to change the subject. "Say, Conall?"

"Hmm?" He glanced at me. "What is it?"

"...No, it's nothing." I kept my attention on the wolves, deciding that I was being silly. There was no way he would...

"Want to stay the night?" Conall grinned when I gave him a dumbfounded look. "Ha! I can still read you!"

"Stop being smug!" I blushed and looked away. "But would you mind?"

"Of course not. I was thinking of asking you in the morning." He straightened and rolled his shoulders. "Okay, sweep and changing into clean nightclothes. Do you want the bed? I hate it, because of how soft it is, so you don't have to worry about kicking me off."

"No way, I swore it would suffocate me!"
After Conall changed, we swung by my room so that I could as well and then went back to sweep and hide the obvious trail. Then, back in his room, we brushed the dust out of each other's hair, chatting about nonsense and the wolves, before we settled among the blankets and pillows, sleeping side by side for the first time in thirteen years. It was so silly, really. But I loved it. I felt like we really were making up for the time stolen from us. It was just the best.

Iuchar proved correct. Aside from meals, Danann seemed to have no interest at all in actually spending time with Diarmuid and me. Oh, sure, he'd sometimes stand on a balcony looking over at us, but it was more like we were trophies he wanted to make sure were still there, not… well… people. It was creepy and gross, but it did make it much easier to handle being in Rivough. At the least, Diarmuid and I weren't as tempting to bash his skull in. So, that was good.

"You know; I really should've offered this last time, but I was startled by seeing you and I… well, I am quite selfish sometimes," Ishtar murmured, drawing me out of my thoughts. She and I were sitting on a bench by the practice yards, where Diarmuid and Conall were sparring. Hestia and Hekate were asleep at our feet, both tucked under the bench. I was resting my head on her shoulder, which she let me with an odd look. "But well…" She pulled off her glove and then pulled off a ring. I immediately recognized it as Mom's. I'd seen it enough times in the pictures. "Here."

"Wow, it's even prettier than the pictures," I whispered, straightening to better study it. Startled and confused as I was by the subject, particularly since we'd been perfectly silent before, I couldn't help but smile at the ring. This was Mom's. Dad had bought it for her. The earrings Conall and I wore matched it. It also matched Aunt Ayra's ring. So many connections in this tiny ring… "You wear it?"

"I do. Conall gave it to me. He wears a bracelet Alicia always wore." She pointed to Conall and the bracelet that caught the light every once in a while. Conall had changed into practice clothes, more Isaachian than his normal clothes, and thus wore no coat. "Supposedly, the gem in it is something important to Thracia? I'm not sure. I just know she got it because she saved Travant's life."

"She did, huh?" I'd never known that. But, given what I knew of Travant, I imagine Mom wouldn't have exactly boasted about it. "I wonder what the gem is."

"Conall knows a bit more." She glanced at me curiously. "You don't seem too surprised by that. Alicia saving Travant, I mean."

"More surprised the army let him get close enough for that." I shrugged. "I was raised by a healer, Ishtar. I have a healer as a little sister. I know the oath of neutrality they take. I know that Mom took that oath seriously." That oath played a part in why she helped Shanan, after all. She left the politics to the politicians, the fighting to the soldiers. Healers healed all who came to them, regardless of their personal beliefs. It was the job of an army to help them avoid morally complicated things. "But Conall gave you the ring?"

"Yeah, because I was…" Ishtar looked down, crossing her legs at the ankles. "Alicia was always soft on me, you see. Probably because I'm the same age as you and Conall. She always spoiled me, always had time for me. Always there for a hug, or when I needed any sort of help. She encouraged my… spiritedness. Said that I shouldn't change for anyone but myself. Lessons I still remember, and try to hold onto, even now."

"I see." I tried to not be jealous, but it was hard. Ishtar remembered Mom's hugs. Ishtar remembered lessons Mom taught her. Ishtar had Mom longer than I had. And I was just so jealous. I wanted those memories. I wanted those hugs. But I didn't get them, because Arvis decided to sacrifice… but at the same time, how many children were like me now because we killed… "Must've been
hard, when she died.

"I was devastated. It was so hard to comprehend, because even when she was too weak to get out of bed, she still had the warmest and gentlest of hugs." Ishtar glanced at me. "It was illness that took her. That's what they say, at least. Her body just... fell apart."

"Really?" I'd never known. And I wasn't sure how to feel about it. It was, at least, an explanation for why Mom died five years after the massacre, and why she never came for us in Isaach.

"Yeah." Ishtar sighed. "In retrospect, I have no idea how she held on as long as she did. Most days, I think she wanted to try to hold on long enough to see you and Conall again. Some days, I think it's because she wanted to make sure we learned important lessons young."

"Anything for the 'few days'? Just curious."

"Honestly? Every once in a while, I wonder if she held on as long as she did out of spite. After all, she was a living embodiment of what Arvis sacrificed. She never forgave him for that, though they did move past it."

"I see." I had to smile at that. I did like the idea of Mom holding on in the hopes of seeing us, but there was something amusing as all hell at her clinging to life to punish Arvis. "Ah, anyway..." I looked at the ring in my hand, sorely tempted to take it. It was Mom's, after all, and I had so few of her things. But hoarding something just for that reason seemed wrong, and I knew I'd never wear it. I hated rings. I honestly didn't really like wearing jewelry, save for the earrings. So, after studying it, I handed it back to her. "I appreciate it, Ishtar, but you should keep this. You loved Mom too, didn't you?"

"I love her, yes." It was a gentle correction and it made me smile. "Are you sure?" She waited for me to nod and then rather eagerly reclaimed the ring. And I smiled more because I realized that she hadn't really wanted to give the ring up. She had just thought it was the right thing to do. "Thank you."

"Of course." And now I grinned. "But wow, Conall gave you such a pretty ring~?"

"I-It's not like that!" Ishtar blushed prettily, but there was some very real fear in her eyes, so I chose to not press. It reminded me of that panic in Conall's eyes, when I'd tried to tease him about a similar thing. I had a bad feeling that there was more to all of that besides 'Ishtar was dating Julius'. "Though, the adults certainly laughed their heads off. Took Conall and me a good couple of years before realizing the joke."

"If it makes you feel better, that sounds like the sort of thing that would happen with my group."

"Right, there's a whole group. Conall would tell me all sorts of stories. He'd tell Julius and Julia as well..." She trailed off, falling silent. I looked up and saw Diarmuid and Conall still sparring. Both of them were grinning, looking like they were having the time of their lives. If things had gone just a bit differently, this sort of thing would've been common. "Riona?"

"Hmm?"

"I know you all are in a rebellion and I can't blame you. The Empire is built..." Again, she trailed off, and she wouldn't look at me. She just focused on the ground. "What do you all plan to do with Julius?"

"Why do anything? Children shouldn't be held responsible for their parents' crimes." I shrugged, wondering what we'd done to make her worry like that. "Seliph wants to meet Julius, actually."
"Really?"

"Yep! Conflicted as he's always been on his mother, which got far more complicated since Conall told us about the amnesia thing..." That was still so messed up. "Well, regardless, Julius and Julia are still his siblings." Though, I wondered why she asked about Julius. Was it because they were dating? Was there something else? I felt like there was, but I had no idea. I could just be jumping at shadows. "He's always wanted to meet them."

"I see." She looked up at me again, and smiled slightly. But there was pain and exhaustion in it too. I was... I was definitely missing something. "That sounds rather idealistic."

"Maybe, but sometimes, you have to be idealistic if you want to see some change in the world. You just have to temper it with the knowledge that you might fail." I shrugged again and looked up at the sky. Fluffy clouds floated overhead. "Truthfully, we'd rather people surrender. We know there's good people in the Empire. Just by logic. And we know that they have families waiting for them." I looked to her again. "Really, it would be better if no one had to fight. But sadly, that's not possible anymore. At least, here in Isaach."

"So, basically, you give them a chance, but if they refuse, you fight."

"Pretty much. We know damn well this is sacrificing the few for the many. We also know..." It was sacrificing people for the 'ideal' of a... gods, I hated this feeling. Really, everything would've been so much better if we didn't have to fight. But we did. At this point, we did. "Well, it's a complicated mess, and we're not going to pretend otherwise. Even if that might help us sleep better."

"Why fight at all? Others were."

"They were, but many of them have been placing their hopes on us." I winced as I thought of all the people who had died for us. The survivors of the labor camps who lit up when they saw who we were... "It's only fair." I frowned when Ishtar started giggling. "What's so amusing?"

"Mmm... nothing." Ishtar continued giggling, and I scowled. "I just find it endearing. Even if I worry your hearts will shatter."

"Even if they do, we'll piece them together again. Eventually, the jagged edges will wear down and other things will fill the cracks and holes." I rested a hand over my heart for emphasis. "I swore my heart had been ripped in half when Conall was taken, but I still made it through that. You just have to be around people who love and support you."

"Conall once said something similar to Tine, when Aunt Tailtiu died." Ishtar's voice grew soft, and I tried to not react to the name. I remembered my promise to Arthur, but... well, this didn't seem like a discussion to suddenly ask about either. "You two really are twins. It's fascinating how similar you two are, when you two were separated so long."

"We did have the same initial raising. We were together until we were six years old. Even if he lived in Belhalla for so long, Aideen and Oifeye were still the ones who shaped our early years." Though, since those traits remained, either Conall stubbornly clung to them or Arvis and Diadora had encouraged the same behaviors. "I imagine Conall is still used to people dying for him."

"He is. When we were little, during the assassination attempts, Conall was the one who remained calm, even when I was panicking." She sighed, and I was tempted to ask what she meant. "Honestly, if not for him, I..."
A loud crack made both of us jump and Hestia and Hekate… well, they tried to get to their feet, but ended up tangled in each other. But it was fine, because there was nothing 'bad' about the loud noise. Diarmuid had just broken the practice swords. Well, I assumed it was his fault, at least. It tended to be. At least this time, I reacted in time to set the flying pieces aflame and turned them to ash before they broke a window. Or before the window was broken by flaming pieces of wood. Because both had happened. A lot.

"Well, that was…" Conall began. He looked to the ashes and to the splintered practice sword in his hand. "So. Hezul."

"Yeah, that's happened a lot," Diarmuid noted sheepishly. He rubbed the back of his neck and looked to the side. His own broken practice sword dangled from his fingers. "Thankfully, the whole strength thing comes on gradually, so normally, I have pretty good control. Longer I fight, though, the more I get distracted and… well…"

"He and Seliph actually aren't allowed to spare with each other, since Baldur also gives a bit of a strength boost," I explained, absently petting Hestia while Ishtar tried to calm Hekate. Hestia was used to such things, and sometimes would try to catch the pieces. Hekate clearly wasn't, and whimpered a lot. "But distracted?" I grinned, deciding someone needed to break the tension. "My, my! Enjoyed the view too much?"

"Give me a damn break! Seliph wasn't joking about him being handsome." Diarmuid sighed mournfully and Conall's expression blanked. Ishtar burst into incredulous laughter, holding onto Hekate. "No wonder Seliph admitted to doing a double-take. Gods damn, he's as lovely as you are."

"Aw, so sweet~!" I laughed and Conall continued to look very confused. "Hey, curious, how does he compare to, say, Ishtar over here? Because she's so pretty."

"We are surrounded by too many hot people."

"We really are." I smirked, noticing that both Conall and Ishtar were blushing now. "Well, regardless, I imagine we need to wash up for lunch or something, right? That's probably a sign we should've done that an hour ago, so let's go, go, go!"

Things like this reminded me so much of Tirnanog that it was painful. I was well aware that I could fight Conall and Ishtar one of these days. And while Conall probably wouldn't fight-fight, Ishtar… just based on what I had seen, and based on that interaction with the ring? I was fairly certain the only leniency Ishtar would grant was that she'd try to avoid killing us. And, even then, since she appeared the 'duty before everything' type, that wasn't a guarantee. I hated it. She was fun. I liked her smile and laugh.

Maybe we'd get lucky. But luck often wasn't enough. I hated that.

Later that afternoon, Ishtar went hunting for Helswath, again, and Diarmuid took a nap, so Conall and I hung out in my room with the wolves. It surprised me how well-behaved Hestia had been the past few days, but it seemed like having Hekate around made her less likely to get bored. Either that or Hestia knew the importance of what was going on and was on her best behavior and would be a total brat later. One of the two. But, for now, she and Hekate played a bit on the floor while Conall and I read by the window. And I finally got around to ask about Tine.

"Surprised you've heard the name, unless Ishtar brought her up," Conall murmured, turning a page. He was reading through some memoir, though he wouldn't show me the title. I'd decided to read a history book he had, one that talked of the years after Grannvale's founding. "Actually, never mind.
"I'm no longer surprised. Ishtar dotes on her little cousin."

"So, you know her?" I asked, being nonchalant. I'd chosen against telling Conall about Arthur and the shared relation there. I didn't know who all Arthur wanted to know. "What is she like?"

"Shy, timid, but with a quiet stubbornness. She's been a little more confident ever since Hilda took over Miletos and no longer…" Conall scowled. "Hey, this is mean, but if you see Hilda, kick her in the face, will you?"

"Sure." I was just going to go with it. "How long have you known her?"

"Tine? We met at Tailtiu's funeral, so…" Conall looked up at the ceiling, calculating the number. "Nine years now or thereabouts. We write each other frequently, and I occasionally visit her in Alster."

"Why does she live in Alster and not, say, Friege?"

"Because as far as anyone knows, Tine is an illegitimate child, and Grannvale has a thing against them." Conall rolled his eyes. "The Manster District is much laxer on that sort of thing, probably because of the more constant warfare."

"Ah." That reminded me of the insult that one soldier had thrown at me. I'd never thought anything about it, but that technically did describe Conall and me. But I wondered why it mattered so much. My parents were my parents, and they had loved each other dearly, marriage or no marriage. There were married couples who couldn't say that much. "Did you ever face any trouble for that?"

"The illegitimate stuff? Some people tried, but they quickly learned it was a fast way to gain Arvis's ire. Arvis has never tolerated the stigma anyway, probably because of Mom and Uncle Azel, plus Aida's got an illegitimate son." Conall paused a bit there. "That's assuming Diadora didn't hear them first. Arvis would at least be subtle about it. Diadora would snap at the person and raise a fuss, damn the consequences."

"Really?"

"Arvis was constantly playing the political game. Diadora learned to a degree, but she never could master the whole 'manipulation' part of it. And if someone had displeased her, she would let them know, to their face. And give them a single warning before making them regret it." Conall laughed softly and set his book down to look out the window. "One of the first memories I have of her, actually, is her giving a tailor the third degree because she called Issachians 'barbarians'."

"You face any trouble for that part either?"

"A few tried. I'd get their names and tell Diadora, and then watch the metaphorical carnage. Like I said, Diadora just flat out did not care about insulting people who earned her wrath." His eyes were sad. "She was a good mother. I'm sad I got more of that mothering than Seliph."

"Ah…" I hadn't thought about that. I wondered if Seliph had. That was also something to discuss at a later time. Or never. I just… wasn't sure how to ask. "Was it weird? Being in Belhalla? Being raised by them?"

"It was the strangest damn thing and it more or less forced me into acknowledging how complicated the world was far too quickly." He sighed and rubbed at his eyes. "Take Arvis, for instance. He lowered taxes and strengthened protections on the poor. He personally went out to slums to make sure things were well, ask the people what was needed instead of relying on his preconceptions. He cracked down on poaching, how we had the lion by the way, and was
constantly working to make things better. At the same time, he killed Sigurd, our parents, and a bunch of honestly innocent and good people in a very brutal way. He tricked them into letting down their guards and weapons and then just obliterated them." He snapped his fingers, a spark of flame fluttering through the air. "Right. Reminded. Dad's buried in Belhalla's crypt."

"He is?!" I hadn't... I'd just assumed he was in some mass grave, if he was even in a grave at all. "Really?"

"Yeah, surprised me too. Arvis had him buried with the all the honors and whatnot befitting the love of an Imperial Duchess or... whatever Mom's title ended up being. They're buried together."

"Oh..." That was... that was far more than I expected. "I should get ribbons for them. I'm assuming you had the flowers part covered."

"I'll make sure they get there. I couldn't remember what the colors meant, so I chose against it. They might've forgiven mistakes, but..." He shrugged. "Anyway, that's just a sharp dichotomy, really. The same man who put my family through so much hell was also the same man who laughed at each of my antics and pranks, who was so happy at me just being polite to him."

"Yeah, that... yeah." Though that reminded me of a question we'd all had. "Oifeye thinks that Arvis isn't actually doing anything, and that's why there's so many problems. Is it?"

"That's... actually pretty damn close." Conall looked intrigued. Both of us stopped pretending to read by this point. "Surprised Oifeye is willing to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Oifeye chooses to believe in everyone in the army, and he pointed out that there were people who hated Sigurd for the same reasons we hate Arvis." I thought of that conversation and tried to not sigh. I was still deathly afraid of being like him, but... "He also said that everyone always told him how Mom and Arvis were similar, so he kind of feels like condemning Arvis is like condemning Mom."

"I'll have to ask Arvis about that. The only stories anyone in the palace has is about her after she had broken." Conall winced. "Regardless, it's pretty damn close. The only difference is that Arvis can't do anything."

"Really? Why is...?" I trailed off when I saw the raw pain in his eyes. Whatever was going on was complicated and it hurt him. I could press. I probably should. But I didn't want to see him in pain. "Never mind. What was it like being raised by Deirdre?"

"Honesty, after a few months, I just kind of mentally treated 'Deirdre' and 'Diadora' as totally different people. As I told Seliph, she had total amnesia. 'Diadora' was just a name people came up with for her. So, she didn't have the same past or anything, really."

"Nothing at all?"

"Every once in a while, there would be like... a bit of pain? A bit of a feeling? That was the extent of it, though." Conall paused and smiled bitterly. "Mostly. I lied a bit to Seliph."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. She remembered one thing, right before the end. Him." Somehow, his smile became even more bitter. "She remembered Seliph, right before she died. She called herself the worst mother over it. But I wasn't sure..."

"Not sure if Seliph would believe that?"
"That and, let's be honest, all of us were rather emotional and probably on the edge of a breakdown."

"Good point." I bit my lip and glanced outside. Sadly, there wasn't anything really interesting. Rivough was such a… it was like it was dead, really. Compared to Tirnanog and Ganeishire, it was practically a grave. "How did she die?"

"That…" Conall flinched, and the pain and nausea was so potent that I winced. "I'd… rather not…" His voice was a croak. "It was brutal. It was bad. She deserved better. And that's all…" His words shook. "I was the second person to see it." He hesitated a bit. "Julius was first. It broke him a little."

"I'm sorry." I shouldn't have asked. "I…"

"You know; I did come to love her. I never admitted it, though. I couldn't forgive any of them for the pain they inflicted on my family. Still can't, really. But I did love her." He laughed; the sound was hollow. "I wish I had properly told her. I could've told her. Her only 'crime' had been forgetting and trusting the people around her. And she always did her best by the empire. And by me."

"Maybe she knew." I wanted to ask if he came to love Arvis as well, but I had a feeling that would be a far more complicated answer.

"Oh, she probably did. She grew to know me very well. I just wish…" He sighed and shook his head, reaching back to fix his ponytail. "Well, if wishes were horses, beggars would ride."

"Unless they got the lessons to go with it, I think they'd keep a respectful distance, just like most smart people." I grinned and that was when I noticed something. It was far too quiet. And, with a sinking feeling, I glanced to the side to find out why that was. "Hey, Conall?"

"Yes?"

"Mind if we change the subject?"

"I'd welcome it. What is it?"

"We forgot to shut the door fully."

"We… oh. Oh no." Conall looked too and facepalmed. Hestia and Hekate weren't in the room. And a quick look up and down the hall showed they weren't within sight. "I hope she's not at the pond again. She was so excited about the prospect of there being an entire pool of 'snacks'."

"I just hope they're together because at least we're not-" There was the very distant sound of a yelp, of something shattering, and two happy barks. "Damn it."

"If Arvis is right and they are like toddlers, I feel so bad for anyone who had to deal with us."

"Same."

We followed the trail of startled people and broken things to find Hestia and Hekate happily chomping on some raw meat I had a sneaking suspicion was supposed to be part of dinner. Conall scolded them both while I handled the profuse apologies for our asshole, bratty wolves. When we dragged them back to my room, we made sure the door was firmly shut and, to help keep things chipper, I talked about life in Tirnanog. Conall listened eagerly, asking questions left and right. In return, he talked about some of the antics he got into in Belhalla. Fun memories. Things not darkened by more recent events.
Thirteen years was a lot to catch up on. But we could at least make a little headway.

I'd taken to nightly walks in Rivough, to learn the layout of the castle and to calm myself down so that I could actually get to sleep. Hestia followed me faithfully, keeping close and providing a perfect excuse to the few servants I passed on the walk. I made sure to always pass by Danann's study, mostly to see if he was consistently there in the late evenings. He was and, aside from that first night, he was always passed out in a drunken stupor. More than once I'd been tempted to see if he'd drown in a puddle, but I decided against it. Drowning was a poor way to go, even for someone as hateful as him, and there was a good chance he'd wake up before he died anyway. Instead, I continued walking, enjoying the quiet. Which meant it was rather awkward when I passed by the gardens and saw Conall and Ishtar there. Because both were normally asleep at this hour.

"So, you did find Helswath and overheard something that hints there might be Loptyr priests heading back this way," Conall murmured. I could barely hear him from where I hid, not wanting to walk past and get caught, but also not really wanting to go back the way I cam. I held onto Hestia, who delighted in simply leaning into me. A quick look showed no Hekate anywhere near where he and Ishtar sat. I wondered if Conall had let her run about as an excuse to be outside. "We'll need to tell Diarmuid and Riona about both. The first is a reassurance. The latter…"

"They'll need to know to prepare," Ishtar finished. She swung her legs back and forth, kicking the underside of the bench. "Conflicted as I feel about helping them, anything that makes things harder for the priests is very nice."

"Have I mentioned how much I appreciate it, Ishtar?"

"You have. Multiple times. Because you know how…" Ishtar sighed, looking down. Her hair wasn't in a side-ponytail for once, so I saw it was longer than Conall's. Barely. "This very same army is going to march south, Conall. They will fight my family. They'll kill my soldiers."

"I know. And believe me, it's a worry."

"But, at the same time, I am… I am aware that the Empire is built on the backs of the oppressed. Their broken backs, at that." Ishtar dug her fingers into the stone of the bench. Conall took her hands to keep her from hurting herself. "But I still have a duty to protect my soldiers, and my family."

"And Julius."

"And Julius. And you. Because you're not going to fight, are you?" She smiled wanly at him, laughing forlornly. "They're your family. You can't fight family."

"Oh, there's family I can fight easily. But you're right. I can't fight them." He shrugged. "I'm not one to enjoy a good fight like you anyway, even if I appreciate the exercise."

"And despite the fact that you're very good at it."

"People are good at a lot of things they hate. Or come to hate. I imagine Arvis is hating how good he was at playing people twenty years ago." Conall shrugged again, still holding her hands. He held them very gently, and Ishtar clung to him. "But yes, they're my family. So is Julius. I've family and friends on both side of this conflict."

"This isn't a conflict where one can be neutral, though. Manfroy…"

"Maybe. But I am stubborn and spiteful and enjoy doing whatever I can to make Manfroy mad, and
not picking a side seems to do exactly that. And annoying as I am sure it must be, maybe by remaining neutral, I can figure out..." He sighed. "I'm having trouble finding answers, but there must be one. Surely, there must."

"...Yeah." Ishtar's answering smile was a little broken. I wondered what the hell they were talking about. "You work so hard. I'm scared you're burning yourself to keep the rest of us warm, Conall. To keep me warm."

"If I am, it's my choice to make. Just like it's my choice to return with you."

"Are you sure you want to? I mean..."

"I adore catching up with Riona and Diarmuid. I love them both dearly. But I will not leave you alone in Belhalla. You sent Reinhardt to guard Tine in Alster, and Ishtore is running Melgen. Cyas is somewhere in the Manster District."

"If I'm the only reason, then..."

"My choice. That's always my choice." He smiled slightly. "Besides, what do you think Julius would do if I did try?"

"Probably level the place to be honest." She sighed, wincing and looking ready to cry. Again, I wondered what the hell they were talking about. Conall mentioned Julius broke a little at Deirdre's death. Was it related? "Sorry, I know I keep bugging you about it. You leaving has always been one of my biggest fears, but at the same time, I'm scared of chaining you."

"I am the Reaper's Wolf, and no chain can hold a wolf long." He made his voice comically dramatic and she actually laughed. A real laugh, even if it was quiet. "But it's always been one of your fears? Really?"

"Conall, you didn't come to Belhalla willingly. And you never hid that."

"Well, yes, That's true. I was captured and dragged across the desert against my will. Certainly wouldn't have chosen to be separated from everyone."

"It makes sense, certainly. So much sense that..." She sighed. "Ah, I'm just being foolish."

"You're my best friend." Conall pulled her into a hug, stroking her hair, and she leaned into him, clinging again. "I don't think it's foolish to be afraid of friends disappearing. Gods know..."

"You sure you heard a rumor about Julia? That she's okay?"

"Yep." Conall made sure to smile. "Didn't hear where, though. Probably a good thing. Manfroy..."

"If Manfroy tries to get within even half a day of her, I swear I'm going to make him wish for death!" She glared at the ground. "I mean it!"

"It'll be fine." Conall closed his eyes. "We'll find a way to make it fine."

"Riona, there you are." Diarmuid's quiet voice caught my ear, and I looked down the hall to see him there. "I got a message from the others, via a scout I know by name and face," he explained softly, smiling. "Labor camp has been successfully taken, all survivors safely within Sophara."

"I see," I whispered. I glanced back at Ishtar and Conall, noticing Conall was singing Isaachian lullabies. I was surprised he remembered them. "Well, I've been wandering and have a bit of a
layout.” I focused on Diarmuid, holding onto Hestia still. "Let's 'wander' and see if I'm correct. Also, is there a way to smuggle things out?"

"Probably. Why?"

"Just something I think Larcei might want for the fight. That's all."

Time to set up Danann's fall. It was a long time coming.

A few days later, after careful messages and a couple of ‘send Hestia and Hekate running outside the city to conveniently meet with people’ things, the day we fought Danann arrived. And I was nervous as all hell. As in Conall actually got me some medicine for how nauseous I was.

"Your battle outfit reminds me of that one picture Mom had of Ayra in hers," Conall noted, watching me buckle the last of my armor on. Hekate sat at his side; Hestia lay down at my feet. "You sure you can't delay a couple more days? I really would like to try and find out more information about the potential Loptyr priests. Like if they're already in Rivough or not."

"Sadly, if there are any more delays, Seliph might face a mutiny," I whispered. We had already delayed once, and the soldiers had been mad about it. I didn't know the details, but a letter from Arthur told me that it had been bad. Iuchar wasn't allowed to walk anywhere alone because of how bad it had been. "No one likes being told to wait when the object of their hatred is within sight." I knew that well. I'd almost lost it when that general had passed by, back in Ganeishire. If Diarmuid hadn't held onto me…

"Even if it might save some of their lives?"

"They honestly don't care." I smiled wanly at him, fussing with my gloves. Hestia whimpered and licked my leg. "That's how much they hate Danann."

"Might as well stop a landslide, huh?" Conall sighed, leaning against the doorframe and crossing his arms. "Emphasize the danger, then, and have them be cautious. I'd rather…" He laughed bitterly. "Selfish as it is, I'd rather none of the group get hurt, even if it's impossible."

"Well, it's only fair if we at least get a little hurt." I shrugged. That part I wasn't worried about. Losing because we moved too soon? That was a big worry. "People have died keeping us safe. If we don't bleed with them, how can we say we're really leading?"

"Why does that have to make sense?" Conall absently petted Hekate's head. "Ishtar and I will get the servants evacuated to minimize the chances of hostages. This doesn't protect any that the priests might bring, if they do show up. But it'll at least protect the ones already here."

"I really do appreciate it." Ishtar had lit up with I'd asked if she'd mind. Something like that wasn't as conflicting to her. "You'll use the confusion to take Helswath, yes?"

"Ishtar is actually securing it now, or trying to. It's damn heavy. But we'd rather it be not in its proper place when the battle starts." Conall smiled slightly. "We might use the confusion to leave, but I am interested in seeing Danann die and witnessing the moment Isaach is free again."

"I'm sure the others would love to at least see you."

"I would too. I miss them. But it's much safer if I..." He trailed off and he growled in frustration. I realized quickly that it was frustration at himself. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I know I should tell you more." He spoke quickly, far too quickly. "I should tell you, so that you're prepared, but I don't
"Conall." I held his face between my hands, wondering if that had actually been a bit of a panic attack. If so, then whatever was going on, it was both far worse and far more complicated than I could understand. Especially right now. "Whatever happened has traumatized you, hasn't it? That's why it's so hard to talk about."

"I…" Conall closed his eyes and nodded. "I'm sorry."

"No. Don't be sorry for trauma, Conall. I only wish I knew how to make it better." I smiled ruefully and kissed his forehead. "I'm your big sister-"

"Twin."

"Older twin. Yet I can't seem to keep you safe. It seems like you're desperately trying to protect all of us instead."

"And being well aware that I'm probably going to fail. But I have to try." He opened his eyes and smiled brokenly. "I'm sorry. This 'being neutral' must be annoying."

"Never." The world was far more complicated, and even if this was a conflict where 'neutrality' was impossible, I couldn't blame people for trying. I was just heartbroken that I couldn't help him. "Besides, you're not really being neutral, are you? You're just trying to find a path that might save more people you care about."

"And, as I said, I'm probably going to just fall off a cliff or something. But…"

"Julius relies on you. That's why you're leaving. He needs you to keep sane."

"That…" Conall laughed, and it edged on hysterics. "Close enough. We'll call it close enough. I'm sorry. I can't…"

"I love you." I pulled him into a hug, letting him rest his head against my shoulder. "My sweet twin brother… you always were so very gentle. That doesn't seem to have changed. I wish I could make it better."

"Shame that storybook-endings are bullshit, huh?"

"We can make it close."

"For some."

"Okay, point." And the ghosts of all those we killed would probably haunt us for the rest of our days. "We'll muddle through."

"That seems more plausible." This time, his laugh… well, it wasn't warm, but it wasn't hysterical either. "I'm… no, never mind." He reached one hand up to cling to my back. "I love you too. Try not to get killed, please. You always were the type to jump headfirst into danger to protect things."

"As if you were any different." I tightened my hug on him. "For all that we were different, we always did have too many similarities, huh?"

"That we do."

I held Conall until Ishtar swung by to snag him for evacuations, and then I left with Hestia to meet up with Diarmuid, keeping to the lesser traveled hallways so that no one questions just why I was
armored and armed. Why we were really, because after we met up, we immediately headed for the gates. After waiting a moment, we knocked the guards out and moved them to the side, binding them up to lessen the chances of getting caught. The one I'd knocked out happened to be the same one who let Diarmuid and I in, so I made sure they were a little more out of the way, and the bindings were a bit harder to pull apart. I didn't want them to end up in the battle. It was a silly, childish wish, but I did.

Then it was waiting. Waiting, waiting, waiting… waiting for Fee to fly up in the sky and send a bit of thunder magic across the sky. Waiting for Hestia to howl in return. Then Diarmuid and I opened the gates and let our army inside. By the time the alarms sounded, we had a full half of the city under control. At minimum.

"You need to fall back!" I ordered, pulling a badly wounded soldier out of the fighting, grimacing as they tried to break my grip. Unfortunately, everyone's fury and fervor made quite a few soldiers fight in a berserker rage, ignoring the wounds they picked up to simply charge as deep as they could into enemy lines. Formations were falling apart left and right, and only the fact that Rivough's soldiers couldn't even get into formation saved us. "Now! You can't enjoy freedom if you're dead!" I'd had people ignore my orders and spent more time bullying people into seeking medical help than I did actually fighting. "Don't make your friends tell your family you died, damn it!"

I pulled a few more back, snapping orders. Hestia took to growling to make them listen, and I actually had to carry a few back myself. Maybe I should've just let them die if they were so insistent on it, but I couldn't. I knew there would already be others I couldn't save. I couldn't stomach abandoning the ones right by me. It was probably stupid, especially for a leader, but…

"Riona, please, be careful." Yuria snagged my hand after I dropped off a few more injured. She was covered in so much blood and grime that for a second, I actually forgot her hair was supposed to be silver, not muddy-auburn. "I have a bad feeling," she whispered, squeezing my hand. "So…"

"I'll be as careful as I can," I told her, kissing her forehead. Then I made sure to smile for her, hoping it would be reassuring. "This is a dangerous battle."

"I am scolding the angrier ones for making more work. I don't know if they're listening, but it at least makes me feel better."

"Well, if it makes you feel better, have at it. But try not to tire yourself out with it."

"Anger and spite are wonderful motivators."

"That they are." I kissed her cheek and gave her a quick hug. "Off I go!"

"Wait, can you give Lana a hug? She's flagging, but I'm sure that'll help."

"I'm always up for hugs." I winked. "Snag her for me?"

"Of course!"

Yuria got Lana free soon enough, and she eagerly accepted the offered hug. We didn't say anything, simply shared the hug and kissed each other's cheeks, and then she was back to saving lives, and I was back in the battle, fighting where I could, but more evacuating wounded who refused to fall back. Someone had to, and I was the only one who could really afford the 'distraction'. Lester had brought Diarmuid's horse, so Lester, Diarmuid, Iuchar, and Oifeye were all with the cavalry and had their own difficulties. Arthur was our only mage and stayed near Seliph.
for precision strikes of his spells. Fee was similar, being our only flier and thus, having the only 'good' view of the battle. Seliph, of course, was leading everything. And Larcei and Ulster… well…

"Don't let up! We've got this!" Larcei called, laughing as she led the charge. Beside her, perfectly silent, was Ulster, keeping pace with her easily. Both wielded their parents' weapons, the Brave Sword and Brave Axe respectively, and they were at their absolute best, slaughtering enemies and leaving a very clear trail for everyone to follow. "Keep going, keep going!"

"I think they're both too focused to even think about checking for how badly everyone is wounded," I murmured, smiling slightly as I watched them. They had quite a bit of an extra motivation for this. Avenging their parents. Avenging their country. I was sure Seliph put them at the front specifically for that reason. "Okay, back to what I was doing." I petted Hestia, who was bloody but uninjured thankfully, and ran to a group of nearby soldiers. One of which had a gut wound. "Oh, come on! You need to fall back when you get hit like that!"

I'd bullied a couple of the group back when a strange heaviness to the air made all my instincts scream. I immediately shoved the last few back, wondering just what was going on, and then my vision went white. It took a full second to realize it went white from pain, because that's how long it took for it to slam into me. I choked on blood, coughing and wheezing as I desperately tried to get a good breath. Large gashes appeared on my arms. Blood poured into a puddle at my feet. More gashes were on my legs. My dress was ruined. My armor was intact, though, and that told me this had likely been a spell. What kind? I had no clue.

"My Lady!" "Riona!" "Lady Riona!" Bunches of screams bombarded my ears, along with Hestia's whimpers and yips. But I didn't pay attention to the noise. Instead, I made myself look up and I found a person in black robes standing a short distance away, tome in hand. One of the priests really did show up, then. There might be more. And I knew I should fall back, but…

"Hestia, make sure they get to the infirmary!" I snapped before lurching forward. Battle-fever made me numb again, and I ducked and dodged all manners of weapons. My focus was on that priest, wielding a magic none of us understood. Because… because.

Thankfully, the priest hadn't expected me to charge, so their guard was down. Two strikes later, they were choking in a pool of their own blood, breathing out their last, and I was fixing my footing to keep from collapsing. At least, I was until I heard a small child's cry and I jerked up to see two children running into the battle. Terror flooded me and I raced for them, pushing my way past soldiers as I tried to reach them before the two died. Why were children here? Why had they run into the battle? I had no idea. Or, well, I might have had one, but terror made everything focus on just getting to the two. Because what else was I supposed to do? I couldn't just leave them to 'someone else'. Everyone was so focused on killing Danann that they ignored their own injuries! They might hurt them on accident!

So, I ran. Ignoring my own pain, which was probably hypocritical, but I didn't care. I ran and ran until I caught up. Until I grabbed one child and reached out to the other to drag them towards me. The one I held sobbed and clung to me tightly, tightly enough that my vision went grey from pain. The one I reached out to sobbed and smiled, reaching back. Caught my hand. Then a black light lanced straight through their chest, dark flames eating at the wound. Dead in less than a second.

I fell to my knees and cradled them against my chest. The other, living, one I tucked protectively against my side, but I couldn't stop staring blankly at the dead child. They were still smiling. Tears still trickled down their face. Blood seeped into their shirt. There was still a sense of hope in the dead, dull eyes. I… I had them. I had them. But then I hadn't. I hadn't… I hadn't been fast enough…
"Let that be a warning of how serious I am!" Danann's voice boomed over the battlefield, bringing the chaos to a momentary pause. Danann himself wasn't in the battle. The pristine condition of his clothes showed he hadn't been anywhere near. He just stood there up on a… a floor… balcony… thing. Watching us with a smug smile, with two more priests and a bunch more children next to them. This had been the exact scenario we'd been most afraid of. This was why we had wanted to delay, but no one would listen. No one would… "Weapons down, or the children's heads roll!"

Danann laughed, mocking us. I looked around to see if I any of my friends were near, but there wasn't. It was just me, surrounded by angry soldiers, with a crying child clinging to my side and a dead child in my arms. "Make your choice, Prince of Light! You've only got two!" Silence. Silence. Silence. "Come now! Will you really sacrifice children for your goal? My, what will the people say when--"

"I imagine Lord Seliph isn't saying anything because he's actually observant, unlike you, you bastard son of a tied down bitch." The air hummed with power just seconds before a spear of thunder spiked through the air, cracking the walls and railing just from the sheer pressure of its passing. It obliterated one of the priests' heads, not even leaving blood behind as the rest of the body thumped to the ground, and then it connected with the outer wall, leaving a sizable crater and large, deep cracks spiralling from it. "Neir must be rolling in his grave, wondering how someone like you became his heir," Ishtar coolly mocked, stepping out onto the balcony. Her heels clacked on the stone with each purposeful step, thunder magic slinking about her hand and arm like a very affectionate cat. The air still hummed with power. "Acting like a spoilt child when you're losing. How pathetic."

"Couldn't you have angled the spell better? Now they're going to have to fix the castle, Ishtar."

Conall stepped out as well, staff in hand and silver flames flickering at his fingertips. "There's no need to cause wanton destruction just because you lost your temper," he chided, perfectly calm. He gestured sharply and the other priest was incinerated by a silver light, one that turned gold as blue sparkles trailed off of it. "Though, Danann, this really is quite the farce. Face your inevitable end with a touch of dignity, would you?"

"What the hell are you two doing?!" Danann roared. His face was an interesting purple color, but I didn't pay attention because a cold nose nuzzled my cheek. It took a couple of blinks to recognize Hekate, but she didn't care. She simply licked my face and continued nuzzling me, giving me what comfort she could. "Why are you helping them?!"

"Because you are a disgrace, and I love my family dearly. As for Ishtar, she was going to stay out of things, but then you got children involved." Conall shrugged. Ishtar smirked. "So, really, you only have yourself to blame for this."

"Because you are a disgrace, and I love my family dearly. As for Ishtar, she was going to stay out of things, but then you got children involved." Conall shrugged. Ishtar smirked. "So, really, you only have yourself to blame for this."

"You do, indeed," Ishtar agreed, bringing her hand up. The thunder magic still clung to her, and she wielded it like it was a part of her. "So, there's nothing more to be said. You will die here."

Danann, doing the first smart thing in his entire life, ran, clear out of sight. Ishtar scoffed, the thunder magic focusing in her palm. "Oh, please."

"Ishtar, leave him to the army, for poetic justice, and tend to the children, will you?" Conall requested. He vaulted over the railing and easily climbed down. "I'll join you soon."

I didn't hear a reply. Our army, realizing what had happened, began cheering and racing about, fighting with renewed fervor. I heard the others shouting orders, but I didn't move. I simply stayed with Hekate, holding onto the living and dead child. Protecting the surviving one, while I...

"I'm sorry," I whispered to them. I knew I should move or something, but I couldn't get my feet
under me. All I could think of was how I had been too slow to save them, and how we had been so weak, so untrustworthy, that our soldiers didn't trust us to wait just a little longer. We killed them. I killed them. "I'm so sorry."

"Knew it was a good idea to leave finding her to you, Hekate." Conall, however, knelt next to me, healing me up easily. I'd forgotten all about my injuries. "Where's Hestia?" he asked me, looking at me worriedly. He tried to heal the child, but of course, the magic didn't take. You couldn't heal the dead. "Separated?"

"I told her to make sure some injured got to the infirmary." I passed him the dead child, and nudged the surviving one to him as well. "Hey, sweetie, Conall is going to get you to a safe place, okay?" I kissed their forehead and smiled warmly at them. They tearfully smiled back, still crying, but trusting me. A trust I didn't deserve. "Thanks for the heal. But I need to get back to things."

"...I suppose you do." Conall still looked at me worriedly. "Ishtar and I did a run of the place, so I think those were the only priests."

"Good. They suck." I rolled my shoulders and sheathed my silver blade to draw my Fire Sword instead. Range. I needed range. If I had a bit more range, then my lack of speed wasn't as big of a deal. Hopefully. "Hestia will find me if she's not needed in the infirmary. Thanks for watching the children."

"Of course." Conall finally smiled and I smiled back. "Love you."

"Love you too." And I turned and jumped back into the fray. But after the first fight, a strange calm settled over me. Everything seemed both far away and far too close and yet, I felt perfectly fine. Even breath. Even footing. Calm, maybe a little cold. Perfectly fine.

I brought the Fire Sword up, intending on using it like a normal sword for close quarter fighting. But the flames flickered along the blade, and the flames were not orange. They were blue. Blue, burning hotter than anything, with tiny 'stars', sparkles, dancing on the edges. Much like Conall's spell. And that told me what this was, and what Conall had done with his own spell. Luna apparently would color the magic, change it into something more potent. Magic that overcame one's resistance to magic, no matter what barriers they had. And that gave me an entirely different idea.

"Mom… help me please…" I whispered, ignoring the fighting around me and walking until I was at the front, by the gates, where there were mostly (hopefully only, but I had no way or knowing) enemies ahead of me. "Okay…" I held the sword in front of me, flat side facing me, point near my left hand. I felt the heat, but it didn't hurt me. Again, I was perfectly calm. This had to be the calm one needed for Luna. This had to be why Dad was always described as 'stoic'. "Please work…!"

I used the sword as a catalyst and brought the full force of my magic down on the enemies. Blue flames flew through the air and slammed into the ground, clawing soldiers to ash, blackening the stone of the walls. All the way to the front gates. 'Fireproof', Danann had said. All well and good, but that was normal fire. That was with normal-magical fire. But it seemed like I was correct. Luna's magic allowed flames to bypass whatever treatment the doors had. Or the doors weren't nearly as flameproof as Danann had boasted. But, regardless, when I brought the sword down to my side, blue flames still flickering along the blade, there was nothing but charred bodies and splintered ash in front of me. I really, truly did hope that it had been only our enemies. I hoped I hadn't killed any of my own with that. Even if it did give us direct access to the castle's interior.

The army surged forward and I went with them, mostly to avoid being trampled. Then it was fighting, because there was nothing else to really do. At some point during the mess, Hestia
somehow found me and kept close to my side. We fell into our typical routine of 'Hestia cripples and I kill' thing, with the additional thing of me sometimes burning-burning people instead of simply their clothes or something. The blue flames eventually turned to simple, 'normal' flames but they served as enough of a catalyst to add a bit of a dramatic flair to my fighting. ...Mostly because I'd accidentally whip the fire around. It sure looked cool, but it was a damn miracle I didn't kill myself. Or Hestia.

Sometime between one blink and the next, I ended up near Ulster, by the doors to the throne room, and I helped him pry the doors open. Because sadly, these doors weren't made of entirely wood like the outer gates.

"Say, Riona, mind doing me a favor?" Ulster asked as we worked together. We both slipped a bit in blood, but kept our holds. Barely. "It's… mildly important?"

"Is it to send for Diarmuid so that we don't have to deal with this stupid door?" I asked dryly. The worst part was that we could get the door to move some. But only some. "Did he bar it badly or something? Wait, is that even the right word?"

"Too tired to care, but no, no Diarmuid yet. Larcei and I got separated, and Seliph's condition for letting us go ahead is that neither of us confront Danann alone."

"Makes sense." I glanced around, and there was no Larcei in sight. "Hestia, go find her, will you, sweetie?" Hestia whimpered a bit and licked my leg. "I know, but she could've cracked her head on a wall again." Hestia sighed and disappeared into the fighting. "Please don't let that have actually happened because we won't hear the end of Larcei complaining about it."

"That hadn't actually been the favor, though I certainly don't mind it." Ulster and I managed to get the door a bit open, but our grip slipped and, worse, the door shut right on my arm. "You okay?!"

"Been better…" Still, I could move my arm and, thanks to the painful propping, I could actually find the badly placed bar. And it was wooden. "What was the favor?"

"Coming with me to get Danann? Unless we find Larcei first."

"Yeah, sure, sounds good." It took a couple of tries, but I did manage to burn the bar. And we promptly slammed the doors open. "Not sure how much help I'll be with my arm like this." I winced when I saw how swollen it already was. I could move my hand, so nothing was broken, but… "But I can play distraction."

"That's all I'll need." Ulster glared ahead of us. "Though, Danann doesn't seem to be here."

"Nope." The throne room was empty. But I remembered the layout, and I saw the open door in the back. "There."

"Got it." And then we were running. We let the soldiers handle the area and ran down the hall, trying to find Danann. And, to our grim delight, we did catch up. After all, Danann was quite a bit slower than the two of us.

"Where the hell is it?!" Danann screamed, flailing about. He wielded a fairly good axe, silver I wanted to say, but he held it loosely, like he was prepared to fling it away. "Who moved it?! I'll kill them!"

"Hard to kill anyone if you're dead," Ulster noted dryly. Danann whirled, axe at the ready. I winced when I noticed how… well, it was a large hallway, so it should be relatively fine, but Ulster wouldn't be able to move as much. On the brighter side, I could set some of the tacky tapestries on
fire as a distraction. "So, am I supposed to be polite and introduce myself or-"

"No! No, you're dead!" At first, the words came off as a childish retort. The 'no, you!' sort of thing. But then I registered the desperation behind the words. The shock. The fear. And the madness in his eyes. "You're dead, damn it!" Danann stumbled back a bit, focused solely on Ulster. "Damn it, Lex! You're dead! Stop haunting me!"

"...My name is Ulster. I am the son of Duke Lex of Dozel and Princess Ayra of Isaach." Ulster's expression completely locked up. "Come on. I've been told I look like him, but we have completely different-"

"I beat you! I already beat you! I won! You lose!" Danann wasn't paying attention at all. "You can't keep winning! Not after you're dead! Not after I finally triumphed!"

"Well, there goes most of my righteous rage." Ulster sighed. "This is kind of pathetic, honestly."

"Stop pitying me! You always pitied me!" Danann swung the axe wildly. Both Ulster and I ducked and the axe slammed into the wall, cracking the stone. Neir's blood wasn't known for strength, not like Hezul's, but Danann either had a lot of strength anyway or madness gave it to him. "Always! Always, always, always!" He ripped the axe out, and there was a noticeable chip in the blade part. "With that sickeningly sweet smile, you'd mock me with reassurances!"

"For fuck's sake, I'm his son!" Ulster glanced at me, and I nodded, backing up and focusing. Just a simple thing, because the fight should really be him and just him. But that was the 'honorable' way to fight. We weren't the type to fight 'honorably'. "This is our first time meeting, you-!"

"Always the favored son! Always the better one! Always the one who got the praise! But look who's laughing now? Look who survived!" Danann broke into mad laughter and swung again. Ulster blocked it, but was sent crashing into the wall. He and I shared a wide-eyed look. "I did! Not you! Not Father! Me! I beat you both! So stop haunting me!" There was a hysterical sob. I had… no idea what to feel about any of this. "Stop it! Leave me alone!"

"How about you say all of that to someone who might give a damn?" Ulster glanced at me again, and I nodded, focusing once more. Those of Neir's blood were known for their defense. Ulster would need a good opening to end this quickly. "This is our first time meeting, you-!"

"Always the favored son! Always the better one! Always the one who got the praise! But look who's laughing now? Look who survived!" Danann broke into mad laughter and swung again. Ulster blocked it, but was sent crashing into the wall. He and I shared a wide-eyed look. "I did! Not you! Not Father! Me! I beat you both! So stop haunting me!" There was a hysterical sob. I had… no idea what to feel about any of this. "Stop it! Leave me alone!"

"How about you say all of that to someone who might give a damn?" Ulster glanced at me again, and I nodded, focusing once more. Those of Neir's blood were known for their defense. Ulster would need a good opening to end this quickly. "I have no patience for children throwing tantrums."

"Die again!"

"You won't even manage to kill me once."

I set Danann's hair on fire, thinking it might be the only thing that got through the madness, and the air was immediately filled with an acrid smell. But Danann didn't even seem to notice, just charging at Ulster with a bellowing war cry that echoed on and on. So I snapped twice more, setting his shirt and pants aflame. Then his cape. Then the hair on his arms as the fire burned away the cloth. That was when he finally faltered.

And that was when Ulster struck for the very quick fight. Two strikes before Danann could even attempt one. Miss. Another two strikes. Another two. A hit, one that made the blood pour down Ulster's side. Deciding to try something, I whispered another prayer to Mom, and added a second one to Salamander (just in case), and I used my Fire Sword as a catalyst to wrap fire magic around Ulster's Brave Axe. It held beautifully and Danann screamed when Ulster slammed two more hits directly into his face. Then Ulster jumped back and settled into a stance, and green light briefly sparked off the blade before the flames themselves turned green. And then Ulster moved faster
I saw 'two' swipes. I saw 'ten' for 'two', instead of the 'five' for 'one' I was used to. And Danann went down, gaping wounds making his limbs contort weirdly, but the Major Neir Blood keeping his limbs attached, unlike General Richard. I swore I heard his mad laughter and desperate yelling even after he breathed his last.

"The fire thing is cool, but that's definitely not something to ambush on me," Ulster noted weakly. He pressed a hand to his side and smiled wryly. I went through my medicine pack to tend to the wound, smiling apologetically in return. "How's your arm?"

"Lana is probably going to kill us both." My arm was very, very swollen and hurt every time I moved it. "Shame Larcei wasn't here for this. Or Iuchar."

"Iuchar requested to not be near. Will agree with Larcei, but she probably would've drawn it out with an emotional thing and gods, I didn't want to deal with that." He winced as I pulled his shirt up and quickly bandaged him up. It was a bad wound. "Lana is going to kill us."

"She is." I tied off the bandage and nudged the body. "What are we doing with this?"

"Well…" Ulster walked to a nearby window and peered out. "This overlooks the courtyard."

"Oh?" It took me a moment. "Oh." I glanced at the body, my swollen arm, and his wounded side. "Lana is going to kill us, bring us back, and kill us again."

"Can you set it on fire?"

"I can set whatever cloth is left, sure."

"Great." Ulster attempted to open the window, rolled his eyes, and then just took his axe to it, breaking it. "We have to fix the place anyway."

I didn't even bother answering. I just helped him pick up the body with my one good hand and we awkwardly flopped the body out of the window and I set the remaining clothes on fire to really make a statement. The various screams and gasps of shock outside hinted that we miiiiight have gone a tad overboard, but it was soon drowned out by cheers of victory and delight. Someone had recognized Danann fairly quickly, it seemed. I wondered what that said about… everything.

"Well, things seem to be winding down," I murmured, leaning against the wall by the window, hearing Seliph call for surrender. I couldn't see him, but that was fine. "Good. I am exhausted."

"Same," Ulster sighed. He made a confused noise for some reason. "I'm so exhausted that I'm hallucinating Hestia has black fur."

"Huh?" I looked at him weirdly for a moment before thinking to look down to see the black wolf nosing his hand. "Oh, no, that's Hekate. Conall's wolf. She's just as cute as Hestia, but she's smaller."

"Oh, yeah, she is smaller." Ulster blinked a few times. "Wait, why is she here?"

"Uh… actually, good question."

"Hekate, we need to leave, you… oh, that's why you ran." And suddenly Conall was in the hall. "So… uh… hi?" Conall greeted, with an awkward little wave and an even more awkward smile. Both Ulster and I stared. "Oh, damn it, you're both injured, and I left my working staff in my room
for Lana. Though, this is a good question… er, well, this is a good thing because I had a question and-WHOA!" And Conall was tackled clear off his feet by Ulster as Ulster hugged him tightly. "Easy, easy! You're not the scrawny one anymore!"

"Larcei is going to kill us," Ulster laughed. He did move off, but continued hugging Conall and kissed his hair. I just petted Hekate, giving her as good of a rub as I could. She panted happily, yipping a bit. "You sure you can't stay? The others would love to see you."

"And I would love to see them, but I made a promise. Promises are important."

"Even in Belhalla?"

"Belhalla didn't take away everything Oifeye, Aideen, and Shanan taught me." Conall smiled apologetically. "But I do need to get going. I was just chasing after Hekate."

"Does that mean you cannot spare one more hug for me?" To my utter shock, Oifeye walked up, having apparently come in to find Ulster and me, much as he found our group in Ganeishire. He smiled more softly than I had seen in a very, very long while. "Goodness, you look so much like Chuainn," he laughed, also softly. Ulster got off of Conall entirely, but Conall was frozen in shock.

I wondered briefly if the gods decided to intervene, just a little. Because the timing really was…”It looks like you grew into a fine young man. I saw your fighting, and you went around the army to heal."

"Yeah, I… um…" Conall began, voice shaking. His expression crumpled suddenly and he scrambled to his feet to run over and hug Oifeye. Oifeye hugged him back easily, and I noticed that Conall was actually a little taller than Oifeye. Conall and I were the same height, so that meant I was also… I hadn't noticed. I'd never noticed. Oifeye always seemed 'large' to me, but I supposed I'd gotten taller, at some point. Weird. "I missed you. I missed everyone. I wish I could give Aideen a hug. There's letters in my room, but…"

"Then we will send the letter, and your love, to her. She'll be relieved." Oifeye ruffled Conall's hair and kissed his forehead. "You walk the path you think is best for now. If you decide it's the wrong path, then you can always return to us. No matter how far you go, you have a home here. Never think that it's too late to change your path."

"...Okay…" Conall smiled brokenly, and Oifeye simply continued smiling back, gently and proudly. "Ha… you still read me well."

"You haven't changed nearly as much as you think. And also, no matter what you think, I know Alicia and Chulainn would be very proud of you." Oifeye laughed and Conall really did look ready to cry. "You're keeping your friend waiting. Tell her that she is always welcome with us as well. After all, she's your friend."

"I'll… I'll let her know." Conall gave Oifeye another hug before hugging Ulster and me. "I love you."

"We love you too. Always."

"Thank you." Conall had to snag Hekate by the fur and drag her a bit before she was willing to leave, and I wondered if she was a good indication of how much Conall, and Ishtar, actually wanted to stay. Then again, she might've just liked the new smells and people.

Regardless, Conall left, and after a moment, Ulster looked to me. "You really okay about this?" he asked me softly, leaning into my side. I rested my head on his shoulder. "I mean…"
"Things are complicated," I whispered. I thought about the conversations we'd had, and the conversations I'd overheard. "I'll tell everyone later what I know. But he's going back to keep Julius safe."

"Ah, Seliph will be glad to hear that." Ulster glanced out the open window. "It feels like it should feel like more."

"Hm?"

"Killing Danann. Feels like it should be grander."

"Mm… true." All I felt was tired. "Weird."

"Not as much as you think," Oifeye laughed, smiling. He was in the best mood I'd seen in a while. "After all, Danann is simply another step. A final step for this part of the journey, and an important one, but there's a long road ahead. You all are aware of that, and how the battles will be much harder." He walked over to the broken window, looking out. "But listen. Do you hear the cheers? That is the sound of a people who have realized it is safe to dream, and safe to hope. Isaach has dreamed and hoped for freedom for twenty years. And now…"

"Now, they have it," Ulster whispered. I began giggling as it really sunk in. "Feels weird to not have Shanan with us for it."

"He'll joke that it's appropriate, since he is so rarely with you anyway. It'll also be quite the shock because he's already well aware of how little he knows any of you anymore." Oifeye grinned. "You all gave him quite the birthday present, though."

"Yeah, here, have your country back and all the resulting paperwork."

"I didn't say it was entirely good." Oifeye looked back outside, expression too soft for us to continue with the joke. "I'll probably tell you all this again later, after we bandage the injured and bury the dead. But remember this feeling. This is an accomplishment, and the first victory against the Empire. Remember this for the days and battles ahead, when your spirits falter and you feel overwhelmed." He smiled proudly at us, eyes soft and warm. And sad. "You have taken the first step. Use that momentum to take the next."

"Right…" Ulster and I looked at each other, deciding silently to change the subject. "Well, speaking of injured, can you protect us from Lana?"

"I know better than to stop a healer's scolding."

"Damn." Ulster sighed mournfully and I laughed and laughed. "Well, let's at least find Larcei and Hestia. Lana can't kill us if Larcei does it first."

The next battles were going to be so much rougher. But, Oifeye was right. We did it. We had a goal, and we reached it. That… that was something. That was more than others. If we could continue it, then we… we could do this. Hopefully.

"What is with you all and getting ridiculous injuries?!" Lana scolded, tending to Ulster's side. While everyone was out and about, celebrating, Lana was giving us another checkover in Ulster's room. With the Recover staff Conall had left. He'd left a note, separate from the actual letters, apologizing for not leaving the Fortify, but it was broken and expensive to fix, so he decided to take it with him. Which might've been what Conall had wanted to ask us about before Ulster completely distracted that conversation. "Arm slammed in a door! Side that should be gouged out!
"Didn't we go through this when you were first treating it?" Ulster asked dryly. I lingered in the infirmary mostly because Lana had wanted to double check that my arm was okay. And that I was still okay from whatever dark spell hit me. Should've asked Conall what spell that was, but hindsight was perfect. "I had permission to pursue Danann. Didn't know he was completely bonkers."

"Why didn't you just dodge?" Lana glowered up at Ulster briefly before going back to double-checking that all the shrapnel was out of the injury. It was going to take a while to heal, thanks to all the digging Lana had to do during the initial treatment. "Ugh…"

"How's Iuchar doing?" I asked, leaning against the wall by Ulster's bed. I'd offered him Hestia, but he'd refused. Instead, Hestia was with Larcei, getting spoiled. "He asked to be a guard, yes? Instead of participating in the celebrations?"

"Yeah, he's more conflicted over his father's death than he thought he'd be, so he wanted to be left alone to his thoughts," Ulster explained. Lana continued to grumble. "I'll have a talk with him in a couple of days about it. If he needs to scream at someone, it should be me."

"Let him know that he's more than welcome to yell at me too." After all, I set his dad on fire. Multiple times.

"I will."

"Good." Deciding that we needed to lift the mood somehow, I smirked a bit. "Lana, am I clear?"

"Hmm? Ah, yes, you are," Lana replied. She smiled kindly at me, though it faltered when she saw me smirking. "That Recover staff was a wonderful gift. I'm not sure I'm skilled enough to use the Fortify he thought about leaving, but Recover? Easy-peasy. And since I'm not the most magically inclined person, it's especially helpful."

"Shame you couldn't see him yourself."

"I know! Lester, Larcei, and I are so jealous the rest of you did!" Lana playfully pouted, before smiling. "Well, something to look forward to. Ish. The letter he wrote was super sweet. It's surprising how much he remembers."

"You've already ready yours?" Ulster asked, a bit startled. He glanced at me and I brought up my hands because I hadn't either. "Really?"

"I needed a brief break after the initial waves of the injured were tended to, so I read it while recovering a bit," Lana explained. Her expression crumpled briefly before it went carefully neutral. We'd lost a lot, more than any other battle. And, worse, it was more than anticipated. That berserker rage… it had cost us a lot. There was now a distinct worry we wouldn't have enough soldiers to assist Leonster. Or even make it through the desert. "Ah, regardless, you were saying something, Riona?"

"Ah, yeah," I replied, jumping back to the original topic. Worries for the future, and the nightmares of tonight, were for later. "I was just making sure I was cleared."

"Yep, you are!"

"Then, in that case, I think I'll go make an appearance at the party. You two have fun now." I left with a casual wave and I had to bite back a laugh when I heard a tiny little 'squeak' before I closed
the door. "Not sure what she was expecting. It's too perfect of an opportunity." For both of them, though neither knew that! "Hmm… okay, what's the best way out?" I couldn't go the normal route. Some parts of the castle still needed to be cleaned and uh… we had to avoid the ruined areas until someone could get around to fixing them.

Shrugging, I decided to just walk down the hall because standing still wasn't going to get anything done. I smiled to people as I passed, focused on making my way to the front of the castle. The city was certainly lively now, and most everyone was just camping out in the abandoned buildings for the night. Assuming they got any sort of sleep, at least! From the sound of the singing and laughter, this celebration was going to go on for a long while!

"I'm glad everyone is having fun," I whispered, looking out a window. Despite the late hour, and it was late, the city was practically sparkling with candles and lanterns. I couldn't see much else from here, but the liveliness was a very welcome sight. Aside from the signs of neglect, this was what a city should look like. I wouldn't be so foolish as to expect festivals every day, or even happiness every day, but something that showed the city was alive. Activity. Sounds. "Shame Shanah isn't here to see this." I wondered how surprised he was going to be. Probably a lot. "Ha… we can finally pay him back, just a little." Shanah had never raised us, of course, but he had kept us safe. Either right there with us or from afar as he protected everyone. It was nice, to know that we freed his home.

Smiling to myself, I left the window, intending on walking down the hall. However, as I turned, I saw a bit of long back hair peeking out from behind a corner in the opposite direction. So, curious, I went to see who it was, but when I got to the corner, the 'person' disappeared, and lingered far ahead, far too fast for a human to travel.

"Another ghost, huh?" I laughed to myself and followed them at a sedate pace. Just when I 'caught up', they disappeared again, further down the path. "Do a bunch linger here because there's been so much death or something? And are you a nice one like the one before, or a mean one like what I've heard in the stories." I really shouldn't be following, especially so blindly, but I was just a little too tired to be smart. I did, at least, keep an eye on my surroundings. "If you're a nice one, are you Mariccle? Because I need to thank you for before."

At the next corner, the 'ghost' actually peeked out to see if I was following. Or maybe just to see my dumbfounded face. Because it wasn't Mariccle. Mariccle didn't have Larcei's face. Aunt Ayra, on the other hand…

I ran. I ran, chasing after her, some foolish, foolish, hope bubbling in me that she wasn't a ghost, but was real. After all, anyone could build a grave. Anyone could steal items. So, maybe we were all wrong. Maybe… well, I knew it was an idiotic hope. But I couldn't help it. So, I chased, wondering if maybe, just maybe, we'd be wrong. However, it was a fruitless hope. By the time I made it to the roof, which was apparently where she'd been leading me, she had completely disappeared.

"...If that was really you, you better have done something similar with Larcei." I swore I heard a bit of laughter on the wind. "Why get me up here, though?"

"Who are you talking too?" And, right there in plain sight, leaning against the little wall thing that kept people from falling off and probably provided cover for archers, was Seliph. "You feeling okay?" he asked, voice a little dry. "Didn't you hit your head or something earlier?"

"No, I actually didn't," I corrected, a bit testily. I scowled for good measure. "Diarmuid is the one who took the head injury. Yuria is tending to him, last I heard."

"That's right." Seliph sighed and looked out over the party. "I really think we should at least clean
"The place before celebrating."

"Give them a bit of a break. Isaach is free." I skipped to his side and peered down too. From here, it was just a mash of colors, but it was a lovely sight anyway. "How are the children?"

"They'll be fine. Conall and Ishtar got them to a perfectly safe place, and we'll work on getting them home in the days to come." Save for the one that died. I could still feel that weight in my arms. I wondered if we had a name for them. "How are you?"

"I'll answer that question in another week or so." I didn't want to think on them right now. Horrible as it was, since it was my fault, I just... I didn't want to think on it now. There was too much bouncing around in my head and I was tired. "You?"

"Nothing feels real, so I came up here to relax. I think Oifeye is making excuses for just about all of us."

"Makes sense." I sighed and stretched my arms out in front of me. "We're going to be so freaking busy. And then we'll be moving to Leonster." And Yied. The desert our parents didn't want us to cross. The desert where Quan, Ethlyn, Altena, and all their knights died in the sands. "Then who the hell knows where?"

"Probably Thracia. They're not officially part of the Empire, so perhaps we can negotiate a truce." Seliph grimaced. "I can't imagine the people of Leonster liking that, though. Especially Leif."

"Meh, he's been apparently leading an army of his own. He should understand. And if not, we'll hit him over the head until he does." I grinned and Seliph laughed. "Not to say we're right and he's wrong. But if we can come to a mutual understanding, that'll be good. From there, we can reach a compromise." I studied his expression a bit, and noticed the bags under his eyes. "You haven't been sleeping."

"I told you that I get uneasy when you're not near." He smiled like it was a joke, but he let it drop when I continued looking at him worriedly. "I've been thinking a lot about my mother."

"Oh?" I thought of what Conall had said, and thought about telling Seliph at least about Deirdre remembering him. But the pained looked on his face made me bite my tongue. Now wasn't the time. "What about specifically?"

"I... have no idea." He laughed bitterly. "On the one hand, I'm glad there's an explanation besides simple 'betrayal'. She didn't consciously abandon us. However, on the other hand, I can't help but still feel hurt. She just forgot me? She forgot everyone? Wonderful way to make someone feel important." He sighed and fussed with his hair. When I noticed him pulling, I caught his hand to stop him. "Still, I can't blame someone for amnesia. It's not like people choose to have it. There was no choice in the abandonment. And when she was in another place, surrounded by different people... well, why wouldn't she make different choices? She had nothing connecting her to her old life."

"Might be easier to think of it as Deirdre having died when she was captured?"

"It might, but if I do that, I feel like it would be denying Julia and Julius. And, regardless of my complicated feelings with our mother, they are my siblings. Yuria was so happy when she told me she figured it out." He smiled, pained and bitter. "It's a mess. It'll probably always be a mess. But hey, maybe now it'll messily scar instead of messily bleed."

"That's true." I kissed his cheek and smiled warmly. "In that case, it might be better to just not think
about it. Focus on the facts and let it sit for a while longer. It is what it is. We're going to be busy enough to distract you anyway."

"That is true. There's so much to do." Seliph grimaced. "So much. Letters to write, supplies to gather, scouts..."

"Waiting for Lewyn, training any new recruits, organizing things..." I could feel the weight of everything press into my shoulders with every word. So much... and here I was, too weak and too slow to save a single child. But someone had to keep smiling. Might as well be me. So, I smiled. "Shame we can't run back to Tirnanog now, huh?"

"Don't tempt me."

"Aw, but tempting you sounds fun~!" I grinned and he laughed, warm and brightly. I smiled at the sound, glad to hear it, and I realized something right then. He and I were alone. None of our friends were near to eavesdrop. And with the sparkling skies above, it was a rather romantic setting. Ignoring how tired both of us were and all. But something told me we'd always be tired. So... So, I... "Hey, Seliph?"

"Hmm?" He smiled at me. "What is it?"

"Well..." The panic nearly made give up almost immediately. But I reminded myself of what Diarmuid said, of how no one in our friend group discouraged the feelings. And of how we just liberated Isaach, so even if things did become awkward, gods knew I'd have bunches of ways to hide. And for escaping here? I was way better climbing than him, and I could already see a good path down. "I love you."

"I love you too." Then he paused, staring. I smiled innocently. "Wait, hold on. Clarification needed."

"For?"

"Well... uh..." Slowly, Seliph began blushing and I couldn't help but giggle, torn between nervousness, giddiness, and wanting to just bolt. "J-just to be sure we're on the same page, because... um..."

"May I kiss you?" I leaned forward slightly, clasping my hands behind my back. The hand I let go of hung awkwardly between us. "Please?"

"Um..." He went even redder, but he smiled softly. "Yeah, that's... what I was hoping you meant, actually."

He actually closed the distance, lifting his hand to tilt my face towards him and kissing me gently. When we broke for air, I initiated the next kiss, wrapping my arms around him so that I could pull him closer. He reciprocated, pressing himself against me as we kissed again and again, too many times to count. Some part of me felt like it was almost anti-climatic and that there should've been some big grandiose thing to it all. More drama to it. But Oifeye was right. Not every 'big moment' felt like it. Sometimes, it just felt like another thing, another step on the path. And, in this case, it was just... acknowledging what had always been there. Making it official.

He was damn good at kissing, though. I should've kissed him sooner.

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Diarmuid
Class: Free Knight; Skills: Charisma, Pursuit, Prayer

The 18-year-old son of Lady Lachesis of Nordion and Sir Finn of Leonster. Because he's always been 'certain' both of his parents were dead, he's reeling from the knowledge that his father still lives. He's almost nauseous from anxiety about meeting his father for the first time, and about the possibility of him having siblings.

Has a Holy Mark for Hezul on his upper right arm, with the jagged lines almost resembling a rerebrace in design. It's blessing gives him a boost to stamina and the ability to take damage. Hezul's blood also allows him to draw more power from his muscles than typical, giving him a significant boost to strength.

A mounted sword user with a gift for rallying the people. Oifeye was his primary teacher and actually offered to teach him lances. He refused, however, because he felt like if anyone should teach him lessons, it should've been his father. Though, he does regret that decision due to the need for weapon diversity in the group, particularly since they can't guarantee facing 'just axe users' in the coming battles.

Because he once suffered from health complications, he's very conscious of his health and often a little paranoid with it. He can also be very nagging when it looks like someone is sick, because he knows how badly things can go if you ignore an illness too long. However, his extended bouts of bedrest led to him studying his lessons more often, which is probably why he's the best of the group when it comes to math.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: And here's Game-Chapter 6. In game, Danann is a very easy boss for one crucial reason: he has no ranged option. You can literally just chip at him with Arthur or Julia with no fear of retaliation. While the inferiority-complex comes from the Oosawa manga, Danann's madness is more of a nod to how Oosawa portrayed Chagall in his final moments (albeit with much more of a fight than Chagall). In Oosawa, Ulster fights him alone until being badly wounded due to Danann playing a trick (Danann has Helswath in Oosawa), but then Larcei arrives and the twins tagteam to kill Danann. I figured Ulster alone was sufficient, especially since Larcei already had a 'big' boss kill (General Richard was a big thing for her).

Arthur promotes to Mage Knight, much like Azel, and thus, picks up a weapon level in swords. I thought it would be a bit of a cute way Arthur and Riona awkwardly try to bond. Yuria figuring out her past is a sharp departure from the game (where she never 'figures it out', so much as eventually remembers). But I figured it would be something that bothered her enough to try and piece together. Silesse not knowing much about the Child Hunts comes from Misha's dialogue in FE5 (which implies she's completely unaware about the Child Hunts). Same for the food crisis and the mercenary stuff.

I suppose it's obvious now why Ishtar got her chapter in Memoirs of the Lost so quickly. I thought this would be a good way for the cast to see Ishtar's good points (since otherwise, it's all secondhand), while also showcasing her incredible magical output. For clarification, she was wielding Thoron. Conall, for his thing, was wielding Aura, with the 'silver' light being due to activating Luna with it. As for the priests… part of it was to have the excuse for Ishtar to jump into the fight and part of it was
because since I had them appear at the beginning of the 'Game-Chapter', it felt off to not have them feature at the end of the Game-Chapter as well. A priest killing a child in front of the group comes from the Fuyuki manga (where a priest burns a child alive in front of Seliph).

Why are there ghosts? There's an event involving ghosts way late in Game-Chapter 10, so I thought it would be a little less 'out of nowhere' if there were more instances of it. (And yes, Larcei got her own little thing. Larcei just wasn't near Riona, and this is through Riona's POV.) Was Lex really haunting Danann? That's up to your own interpretation.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Rivough (as a reminder, there will be three interludes between game-chapters, just as there were for Gen1)
Interlude - Rivough

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude - Rivough

Isaach is free! It's so strange. Isaach has been a territory of Grannvale, and the Empire, since before I was born. Yet now, it is actually free. But now, the real fight begins. Well, sort of. We make preparations first. But we will leave Isaach and cross the Yied Desert, heading towards Leonster where Leif, and Uncle Finn, hopefully still alive. But the desert is harsh, and harsher still now that it is firmly under Imperial control. Plus there is healing from the battle with Danann, and trying to gather information.

Ah, so much to do… there’s not enough hours in the day.

"I can't believe it!" Larcei flailed about, horribly annoyed at me. "I simply cannot believe it! You two confessed where we couldn't see it!"

"Larcei, that's the hundredth time you've complained about that since Seliph and I announced our courting." I simply looked at her drolly. "Do you want my help or not?"

"Fine, fine…" She grumbled a bit more under her breath. "We are finding a way to get you two back for this! I swear it!"

"Yes, yes, we already know. Because that's the fiftieth time you, alone, have mentioned it."

"Rawr!"

"Leaving now."

"Nooooo! Don't leave me alone with this mess of paper!" She leaned over to cling to me, but the angle she did it at actually led to both of us falling off the bench, and all the paperwork we'd been working on to fall all over the place. "See! I'll drown if you don't!"

"You're just already getting back at me!" I rolled my eyes at her grin. "Ugh… let's pick up the papers. Thankfully, things are still bundled… mostly. There was a split second of silence before we both burst into laughter. "We're so ridiculous."

Larcei and I were out in the gardens, to keep out of way of the people repairing the castle while also doing some work. Larcei had asked me to help her figure out a good way to keep things organized, since Seliph did make her take charge of the infantry, but she hadn't found a system that worked for her. It also led to me helping her actually complete some of the paperwork because Larcei was the type to leave things to the last second. Not something you could do with paperwork. You fell behind fast if you tried.

"Lady Riona?" Thankfully for our dignity, Larcei and I had just gotten settled back on the bench, with all the paper, when one of our soldiers walked up and bowed. "My apologies, but I had a question," they murmured. I tried to not wince. This sort of thing was becoming distressingly common. "Why is it that we are no longer allowed on the sparring grounds after a certain hour?"
"Ah, that's from Lana in the infirmary," I explained, relaxing. This was the sort of question I did actually need to answer. "We had a couple of soldiers practicing late at night, and badly hurt themselves. Then we had one who ended up fainting and no one knew until the morning." I smiled, while Larcei facepalmed. "So, Lana's ordered that no one is allowed." Of course, there was another reason as well, but this was the main one. The other ended up being something we realized after implementing the rule.

"Ah, I see." They bowed again. "Thank you, my lady."

"Of course." I kept the smile until they left and then sighed, leaning against Larcei. She hugged me tightly and kissed my temple. "Ugh…"

"Why is it that many of them ask you questions?" Larcei grumbled. She ran her hand through my hair to reassure me. I closed my eyes and simply relaxed. "Where's Hestia again?"

"It's early morning, so Hestia is out hunting, and she's extra needed since Lester is with Ulster in Isaach Castle." We still had some of Danann's forces holed up there, refusing to surrender. They weren't so skilled that we'd bring the full might onto them, but… "And I don't know why they're asking so many. At least that one wasn't bad."

"What's bad?"

"Being asked where the duty roster is?" No small part of me wanted to snap at them, but what would that accomplish? The battle with Danann already proved we still needed to earn their trust. Yelling at them for questions… that would just hurt our cause even more. "That one comes up a lot."

"Seriously? We put up multiple copies all over the damn place!" She kissed my head and continued running her hand through my hair. "Blech. I wonder if it's some sort of power play."

"I have no idea." But I did know I needed a subject change. "Hey, Larcei?"

"Hmm?"

"After Danann died, during the party, did you see Aunt Ayra's ghost?" It was something I'd been wondering. She'd appeared before me. I would hope she 'showed up' in front of her children or something.

"Actually, yeah…" Larcei let go of me, and I sat up to pull her into a hug. She moved the papers so that she could sit a little closer. "She said that she was proud of me."

"You talked to her?"

"I think so?" She laughed hollowly. I kissed her hair and hugged her a little more tightly. "I mean; it could've been some sort of hallucination brought on by exhaustion. I was pretty loopy, truthfully. The battle… getting revenge… realizing Mother's dream… it was a lot. But Ulster said he saw Father, and that Father had laughed, so…"

"Well, I've seen a couple of ghosts, so I'm sure it was them." Marricle and Aunt Ayra… both tied to the land… though I did hope they could rest easily now. Or would soon. "And hey, we have always said that our parents are watching out for us." I frequently asked my parents for 'help'. Hell, I'd done it during the battle. "I consider that proof that they are."

"That's a good point." She sat up, giggling. I saw the tears in her eyes, though. "It's nice, knowing that we've more proof of that."
"Indeed." I touched her cheek and brushed my thumb under her eye, wiping away the tears she wouldn't shed now, but I knew she had shed in the past. "How are you doing? We haven't really talked about your parents after…"

"...I knew deep down it was foolish. I think all of you knew that I knew." She sighed, and leaned over to rest her head on my shoulder. I took her hand and kissed her head. "I just… I just wanted to see them again so badly, you know? I wanted more than just those vague memories. And I thought… well, maybe they did escape? Maybe they just couldn't find us? There are so many 'what-ifs' when it comes to that group."

"There are." Though it seemed that by traveling, we might find the answer to many of those questions. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not, though. I leaned towards 'good', but only because it meant Oifeye, Aideen, and Shanan would have answers. Even if those answers hurt. "And while the 'what-ifs' exist, you can't help but hope."

"Pretty much." Larcei closed her eyes and a couple of tears slipped down her face. I reached over to wipe them off with my sleeve. "So, I'm… hurting, but I'll be okay. I'm just… tending to the parts of me that the hope burned." She sat up and glanced over her shoulder. "And whoever is trying to be sneaky, be glad Hestia isn't here. She would be very offended."

"Ahaha… something tells me I won't be joining scouts any time soon." Arthur crawled out from behind some rose bushes, smiling sheepishly. "I didn't want to interrupt what seemed to be an 'Important Moment'," he explained, sitting back on his heels so that he could air-quote the last two words. "See, I was first coming over to tease and make dry remarks, but then I saw it was serious and… yeah." He shrugged. "I haven't been here long. Just into the 'you can't help but hope' part. Promise."

"Good," Larcei grumbled. Still, she waved him over and we both shifted down the bench to give him some room to sit. He smiled in appreciation, but continued crawling over to simply sit at our feet. My feet to be specific. "Tease and make remarks, huh? Do you really have that much free time?"

"Unlike the rest of you, I don't actually have duties." Arthur hesitantly leaned back against my legs. I leaned down to kiss the top of his head and promptly began playing with his hair. "Why is that, by the way? I'm grateful, of course. I love being lazy."

"Now you're just being smug." Larcei growled something under her breath before poking me in the side. "Hey, why does he get to be the exception? He's on our War Council thingumabob… thing."

"How eloquent."

"Shut up."

"Arthur is on our War Council because he's our only mage for the time being," I explained, braiding tiny braids in Arthur's hair. His hair was super soft and silky. I'd need to steal his hair-care stuff later. "Well, Yuria is a mage, but she's primarily helping in the infirmary because Lana needs all the help she can get." Hopefully, we would get more, but neither Dozel nor Isaach was known for magic. "However, Arthur, you're really only traveling with us as thanks to Fee, yes?"

"That and to make it to Alster a little more…" Arthur began. He paused and laughed, nodding a bit. I sulked when it messed up a braid and undid it to redo it. "I get it. I'm not a leader because you're not sure if I'll stay or not."

"Of course. You have your own goals, and you are looking for your little sister. You should spend
time with her." And none of us wanted to go through the trouble of finding a replacement for him. "So, that's the reason. Simple, yes?"

"I like it." Arthur poked my foot. "By the way, didn't you have a meeting?"

"About… oh." I yelped and scrambled off the bench, nearly kicking both Larcei and Arthur. I did have a meeting, dealing with relocating the children saved. "Shit, shit, shit! I'm going to be late!"

"I'll help Larcei!"

"Love you too, Arthur! Larcei, we'll talk more later!" And then I was gone, running as fast as I could down the paths and inside the castle proper. And nearly got myself a broken neck because I forgot which paths were under repair and almost ran straight into a long drop. Thankfully, Iuchar had been near and he caught me before I fell over the edge.

"Well, that was close," Iuchar noted, leading me back to a safe part of the halls. I could only smile sheepishly. "So, what has you imitating the fierce speed of the wind gods?"

"I'm going to be late for a meeting," I answered, glancing to the side. The area was very obviously under repairs, meaning I'd hyper-focused and lost track of my surroundings. That had been happening more and more lately. I should've brought it up with Oifeye before he left Rivough to secure some supplies for Yied. I'd talk to him about it when he returned. "But since I'm here, how go the repairs?"

"Slower than we would like, but it remains steady. Had some trouble getting supplies this morning, but we managed to clear that up."

"Was it because…?"

"Oh, no, it was because there was a miscommunication in how much we needed!" He laughed, and I smiled softly, glad to hear it. We were all worried about his mental and emotional state, given everything that happened, but he was recovering, slowly but surely. We could ask for nothing more. "There's actually not been as many… ah… instances lately."

"Really?" I had to keep myself from bouncing. Seliph had hoped that seeing Iuchar and his forces actively repairing Rivough Castle, and the interactions born from it, would soften people's opinions on them. It seemed the gamble was paying off, and I found that wonderful. For all his dramatics, Iuchar really was kind and eager to do the right thing. "Great, we can throw more work at you!" I grinned and he sighed so forlornly that I laughed too. "Sorry?"

"Well, I suppose I should make sure to pull my weight for this glorious endeavor!" He bowed with a little flourish, making me laugh even harder. "Now then, my lady, might you give me the honor of escorting you? I dread telling Prince Seliph that I let his love fall to her death from a window."

"Translation: please let me make sure you don't walk right into repair work again and make a mess." I grinned, amused. And just… I couldn't help but feel a little giddy about being called 'Seliph's love'. I had it bad it seemed. "I happily accept the escort. I need to head to the meeting room by our War Room."

"Translation: please let me make sure you don't walk right into repair work again and make a mess.” I grinned, amused. And just… I couldn't help but feel a little giddy about being called 'Seliph's love'. I had it bad it seemed. "I happily accept the escort. I need to head to the meeting room by our War Room."

"I have just the path." He gestured dramatically and led the way, purposely making his cape flutter. I had to snicker. "This way!"

I thankfully made it to the meeting in time, and managed to coordinate a good system for taking the children home. It took longer than expected, though, so I sent a message to Seliph letting him know
that I wouldn't be able to have lunch with him after all. Made me a bit sad, since we were both so busy that lunch was often the only time we could spend an extended amount of time together, but our work was important. And, unfortunately, Seliph's lunch 'break' was shorter than usual because of his own meetings, and by the time I was done, he was off. So, I ended up with a bit of unexpected free time and I decided, after snagging a quick bite to eat from the kitchens, to go to my room and read through the two letters I had again. One from Conall, and one that arrived just yesterday, from Aideen.

"This warning about Manfroy really does trouble me..." I whispered, skimming through that part of Conall's letter. Hestia yawned next to me and tucked her nose under my arm. Even though she really shouldn't have been on the bed with me. But I let her get away with it, because she was adorable. "The Archbishop..." Conall's letter wasn't all warnings. It shared some fun stories from Belhalla, Alster, and Thracia that he didn't get a chance to tell me. But the warnings... the warnings were troubling. "So, Manfroy is the one in charge or something now? Conall, your wording is damn confusing here." At the least, this Manfroy led the Loptyrians and was a powerful dark magic user, with access to spells that no other priests had. And Conall wrote down what he knew about dark magic, which he admitted wasn't much, but knew was more than me. "I need to take notes on this, don't I?" I made to get up, but Hestia quickly twisted to pin me. "Hestia!" She yawned and scooted to lay half on top of me. "Ugh... brat. You're heavy, you know." I sighed and just read through. I could make notes before bed or something.

Still, some of these spells were just... strange to me. Spells that left toxins in your body? Spells that made you choke on black blood? Spells that took you to the very brink of death, but not past? Then there were apparently illusions? 'Scrying', which let them see from afar through reflective surfaces somehow? And that was just what Conall knew about. He swore there had to be more, worse things that he didn't know of, yet.

"Then there's the thing on Julius..." I skipped to that little paragraph, where Conall talked a little bit more about Julius. How he'd broken after witnessing Deirdre's death, and Julia's disappearance, becoming almost childlike. About how Julius seemed to be forgetting things in his madness. How Conall was hunting for a way to cure him. "He wrote that he made sure to write this to Seliph as well." I hadn't gotten to talk to Seliph about it, though. Still, they were in Belhalla and had access to the best healers. There surely had to be a way, and I knew Conall was stubborn enough to find it. "Guess he got more of Mom's healer thing than me."

After a moment more of staring, I set Conall's letter on the nightstand and picked up Aideen's letter. It was a short one, a quick thing she sent immediately after receiving our letters. And it was all over the place. She talked about how proud she was about our victories, and how worried she was about our injuries. She was relieved to hear Conall was well, delighted by his letter, but sad that he didn't stay (though she did write a reply to his letter and sent it to me for safekeeping). She gossiped about how everyone was in Tirnanog, from how well Creidne was recovering to how Dalvin and Deimne were healing to how Muirne was trying to ask Dalvin out to how many ultimately died from the attack. She mentioned that the entire village was sending a care package, and that we would get it soon(ish). She all but begged that we be careful in the desert, and to write her frequently. All in all, it was like she was right here, and the letter made me miss her terribly.

Hestia suddenly lifted her head, tail wagging hard enough to rock the bed. After a moment, she jumped off, knocking the wind out of me and popping my back, and ran to the door, barking. I groaned, honestly wondering if something was broken, and refused to move, even as the door opened. I didn't even twitch until I felt someone crawl onto the bed and burrow under the covers with me. Then I looked to see Lana and raised my arm so that she could just snuggle against me. Which she did, right as Hestia jumped back onto the bed and laid down on our legs.
"Well, I don't think we're moving for a while," I wheezed, still recovering from Hestia using me as a platform. Hestia had the grace to whimper and lick my leg, through the blanket. "So, what brings you here, Lana? It's the middle of the day, meaning you're normally up to your ears in stupid injuries."

"Maybe I just wanted warmth? You do give off the most body heat," Lana teased. She yawned, though, and curled up more against me. "I had to deal with particularly stupid injuries, so I wanted rest. I was told you were in your room, so…"

"So, I have a little sister to cuddle~! I win!" I kissed her cheek and snuck my arm around her to hug her. She giggled. "So, particularly stupid?"

"Drinking contest. Followed immediately by an athletics contest."

"...Oh dear." Who in all the heavens and hells thought that was a good idea? "So, we're going to need a new set of rules, clearly."

"I only healed them enough to not be fatal. And they're denied hangover remedies. We'll see if that gets through their heads." She sighed gustily and reached up to pick up Aideen's letter to me. "Oh, this from Mother?" She glanced over it, and frowned. "Wait, did you not tell her about you and Seliph being together? Finally?"

"I ran out of paper and figured you all took care of it?" I plucked the letter from her hand and set it on the nightstand before settling in a bit better. Hestia gave me a dirty look when I moved my legs, but quickly laid down again. Definitely pinned. "Did you not?"

"Well, of course, I did. Surprised it didn't come up in her letter."

"There's an entire care package on the way. It's probably there."

"Mmm… point." She giggled and poked my cheek. "You and Seliph are together~! We're getting you back for doing it where we couldn't eavesdrop."

"I think I've heard that threat a million times now." I rolled my eyes, but she kept on giggling, beaming. "Does it really make you that happy?"

"Of course! I love you both super much."

"You're the sweetest." I tickled her and she shrieked in laughter, nearly kicking Hestia off the bed. Hestia gave us a dirty look again, but went straight back to sleep. Still pinning us. "Hey, how are the people from the camps doings?"

"We lost a few, but most are healing up." She smiled in relief, and I kissed her forehead, glad. I knew she'd been very worried about them. "It'll take them a very long time to recuperate, but we can get them stable by the time we move out, I think." Then there was a quiet knock on the door and, after a moment of both of us wondering 'who the hell', Lana lifted her head, frowning. "Yes? Who is it?"

"Oh, shoot, do I have the wrong room?" Fee's voice was muffled by the door. "Darn it, I was sure this was Riona's room," she continued, whimpering a little. "Ugh…"

"It is my room, Fee," I called, pushing myself up as well. I tried to turn and sit, but Hestia refused to move. "Come on in."

"Oh, yay!" A rather frazzled Fee opened the door and jumped inside, shutting it behind her. Like,
her hair was sticking up a little, like she'd been pulling at it. "Hey, so, I know you... wow, you both are resting," she mumbled, tucking some papers under her arm. Hestia lifted her head curiously. "I shouldn't bother, I know, but I am behind on paperwork for the scouting stuff, because I forgot I had to do Ulster's half as well, and-

"How about you first just lay down with us and join the break?" Lana suggested, scooting even closer to me to make room. I moved to the edge of the bed myself, and Hestia hopped off so that we could. "Then we'll help you. But rest first."

"I can agree to that!" Fee laughed and tossed the papers onto the nightstand, or tried to. She fell a little short. "Ack!"

"Here, I'll help," I volunteered, rolling off the bed and onto my feet. However, my vision immediately blurred and went fuzzy, so I sat back down hard. "Whoa..."

"Riona?" Lana called, immediately sitting up and hovering over my shoulder. Fee got all the papers up and onto the nightstand before hovering over my other shoulder. "Hey, are you okay?"

"My vision went a little weird for a moment..." However, it cleared up pretty quickly. That said, that didn't happen a lot. "Maybe the reason why Hestia insists on pinning is because I've been working too much?" I'd increased my training as well, hoping I could become stronger, faster. So that a child wouldn't be killed in front of me again. That would be even more stress, though...

"It could also just be you standing up too fast, but..." Lana took my wrist to check my pulse, while Fee snuck behind me to rub my shoulders. "Truthfully, I have been worried about how much we've all been working. All the new recruits, juggling things to account for how many died..." Trying to figure out a way to get the soldiers to trust us so that we didn't have that berserker rage again...

"Yeah..." Hestia whimpered and nosed my knee. I scratched her behind the ear and she licked my palm. "Surprised Oifeye hasn't said anything."

"Oifeye has been working two times as hard," Fee pointed out. She wrapped her arms around me for a hug, and rested her chin on my shoulder. "Truthfully, I have been worried about how much we've all been working. All the new recruits, juggling things to account for how many died..." Trying to figure out a way to get the soldiers to trust us so that we didn't have that berserker rage again...

"You have?" I asked, bursting into laughter. Lana gave us both a weird look. "It was a bit of a joke, but if she's really making one..."

"Working. I'm working on it. I was going mad because of all the reports!"

The three of us laid down under the blankets to joke around, and Hestia jumped right back on the bed to pin our legs, hinting that I was probably right. She was worried, and she was making sure we were going to rest a bit. Made sense. She was a brat, but a kind and worrywart of a brat. I'd give her an extra treat later.

"And I think the broken practice blade says we're done for the day," I joked to Diarmuid as the ashes of the wooden pieces fell. It was late at night, long past dinner, and Diarmuid and I were taking advantage of the 'no one allowed on the practice fields after a certain hour' thing to spar and train with each other. "Night. Whatever."

"We probably should've stopped sooner, but we were both stubborn about that spar," he laughed, a little breathlessly. He headed over to the side of the yard and snagged the towels we left out. "Catch!"
"Now that's just mean!" I barely managed it because of how heavy my arms felt now. My legs felt like jelly as well. "How are you holding up?"

"Like I said. Probably should've stopped sooner." He sat down on the ground and I stumbled over to sit next to him, toweling the sweat off. "Ugh… and I have to lift things in the morning."

"Oh, you'll be fine. Hezul strength and all." I bumped my shoulder against his and he rolled his eyes. "Funny how the sky just… looks the same and different at night, huh?"

"Same sky, same stars, except at the same time, they all look a little different. Like the constellations and guiding stars are in slightly different places, because we're further south. Or something." He looked up and traced out one. I didn't know which one. I was bad at finding constellations. "I wonder what the night sky looks like in Leonster?"

"I wonder if they have the 'same' constellations, or if they have different stories attached to the patterns." I leaned into him, resting my head on his shoulder. "Hey, how are you?"

"I just… oh, wait, different context."

"Yep. How are you about your dad?" Once we left Isaach, we would push on to Leonster. Ideally, Uncle Finn would still be there, fighting. "And I guess your mom too?"

"Since we've heard nothing on my mother, I am continuing with my assumption that she is dead." He smiled slightly, still looking up at the stars. "I mean; based on the stories…"

"Unless Aunt Lachesis mellowed out a lot, we probably would've heard about her even before Lewyn told us about Leif and Uncle Finn." If for no other reason than her being one of the few Master Knights of Jugdral. "Safe assumption."

"But the fact that she made it there, supposedly…" He fell silent, searching for his words, and I waited patiently, closing my eyes to rest a little. Wished Hestia was with us, but I'd sent her to keep Seliph company while Diarmuid and I sparred. "I wonder if I have a sibling."

"Oh, that's a possibility, isn't it?" I opened my eyes again, thinking. I hadn't thought about that at all. I wondered if the others had. "I bet that if you do have a sibling, you have a sister."

"Why bet that?"

"Because then you'd match the rest of us, silly!"

"The hell are… oh. Huh." Diarmuid chuckled, shaking his head. "I never thought about it, but you're right. One boy and one girl. Have it for…"

"Mom, Aideen, Aunt Ayra, Erinyx, Aunt Tailtiu…" Technically, I supposed Deirdre sort of counted? She had two boys and one girl. "Wouldn't that be funny?"

"Bit odd, truthfully, but whatever. Not the weirdest thing about our lives."

"True." I giggled. "I bet she'd be absolute adorable. Like Lana." The thought made me happy, truthfully. "We would totally spoil her with hugs and affection. I mean; if she's your sister, then she's really… like… everyone's sister? You know how we are."

"True." He laughed softly, and rested his head against mine, taking my hand. "That said, it's not the only thing I'm worried about."
"Oh?"

"I'm worried about Conall and Ishtar as well. We'll probably see them again once we're in Leonster. After all, Ishtar's family apparently rules the Manster District." That was… true. And it was a bit… awkward… "The more I think back on it, the more I'm convinced the two are being pulled apart by all their duties, morals, and obligations."

"...Yeah, I'm convinced too." It was painful, but what were we supposed to do? How could we 'fix' that? Was there even a way? "Everything is clearly more complicated and worse than we originally thought, and we even knew it would be complicated." I thought about Conall's letter and his warnings. "Deirdre's death was apparently so violent that it traumatized Conall, which I can't imagine is helping matters."

"Damn, what happened?"

"I didn't ask. I couldn't." He was so scared, so panicked… how could I press him? "I know he was trying to tell me more, but..." Even though I knew the information would be important, I just... I couldn't stand seeing him in pain. Fine way for a leader to act, to prioritize being a 'big sister' over useful information. Yet, at the same time, I knew I couldn't act any other way. To do so would be to lose a part of myself. "I'm sure we'll learn. Probably in the worst way possible."

"Probably. Life seems to like doing the worst case scenarios." We fell silent for a moment, enjoying the breeze, before Diarmuid spoke again. "Worst case scenario… we'll be crossing the desert."

"Yeah. It's rather odd, isn't it?" The Yied Desert… the place where Ethlyn and Quan died. The place our parents wanted us to avoid, so much so that they sent us away to safety. The place where everything began going wrong for our parents. "I know we talked about leaving Tirnanog and 'saving the world' or whatever. The whole Mythical Someday thing. But I never actually thought we'd cross the Yied."

"To be fair, I'm not sure we thought much about it at all." That was very true. "It was an expectation pushed on us, and we rose to meet it because we got so tired of being helpless and seeing people hurt. Tired of seeing all the atrocities, and knowing it was even worse elsewhere."

"Very true." It was just... humbling to realize how little we actually knew. "Wonder if we'll run into Shanan while in the desert."

"Hope so. We can finally help him out now." Diarmuid suddenly laughed. "Hey, we'll actually be able to spend more than a couple of weeks with him at a time, won't we?"

"We... oh, you're right. We will." Wow, that was going to be weird. Great, but weird. "We'd be traveling with him."

"And maybe we can even help Larcei with her crush?" He grinned. "She has, quietly, admitted it to us. I mean; we've known, but..."

"Of course." It was good, in my opinion, that she openly acknowledged it. Accepting was the first part in deciding what you wanted to do. And I hoped it went as well for her as it did for me. "We should probably wait for Shanan to get acclimated with all of our insanity. And see if Larcei's crush holds up under extended contact."

"True, true. Could be that after a month of spending constant time together, the feelings would fade." He poked my leg. "However, if she does still have them..."
"Then we are definitely, absolutely helping her out. No questions about that!" It would be so much fun! Teasing Larcei was hilarious, after all. "She's going to kill us, though."

"If she doesn't die from embarrassment first."

"True, true."

"Oh, good, you two did stop for the night." Yuria jogged over then, smiling sweetly at the two of us. She was still dressed in her normal clothes, though her circlet was off. "I was going to practice scolding on you two if you were still sparring," she teased, giggling a little. Diarmuid and I both laughed in return and stood up. "You are done, yes?"

"Yeah, I think so," Diarmuid replied, glancing at me. I nodded, still feeling the effects of pushing our sparring too far. The morning was going to be ever-so-much fun. "Unless you'd like to learn, Yuria?"

"Oh, goodness, no!" Yuria actually flailed a bit. "I can barely lift up a staff, much less a sword!"

"Good excuse to build up your strength."

"I have far too much to learn as it is, Diarmuid!" She sulked while he laughed. "You are being quite mean."

"It would be funny!"

"Quite. Mean." She ducked behind me, continuing to pout. I just had to snicker at the ridiculousness of it all. "Hmph."

"Well, you're quite lively for the hour," I teased, twisting slightly to kiss her cheek. She giggled, blushing a bit. "And it's been a while since we talked. How have you been about what you figured out?"

"About what…? Oh, you mean…" Yuria began. Her cheer faltered slightly, but she soon smiled again. "It is rather confusing still, truth be told, but at the same time, I'm glad. I have a base, even if I don't remember it, and it lets me piece together bits and pieces of my old life. And you all no longer have to talk around it."

"And you got a brother out of it."

"I did! And cousins! It's quite fun, having family. I'm so glad Lewyn left me here with you all. I've learned so much!" She giggled, back to her brightness, and Diarmuid and I both smiled. "It's been wonderful!"

"I'm glad." I really was. I'd been worried the weight of learning about her birth name and birth family would've been crushing her, but she seemed to be doing just fine. I hoped it would continue. "So, what brought you out here, Yuria? Scolding us for training too much?"

"Partially. Lana actually asked for me to look for you two." Yuria did her best to look serious, but she was smiling too much. "She's been very concerned about how much we've all been working, so she's given the order that all of us are to take the day off tomorrow."

"She did? I… but that… "There's so much work!"

"Healer's orders~!"
"And once that comes into play, we know we've lost," Diarmuid sighed, grimacing. He was also thinking of everything he needed to do, and what would now be pushed off a day. "Well, this will be… the hell are we going to do anyway?"

"I have no idea," I replied, completely honest. It had been a while since we had free time. "I suppose we could read? Or I could find some animals to-

"Denied."

"I didn't even finish."

"Don't care. Denied."

"Aw…"

"Actually, Riona, I had a question," Yuria began. She studied me curiously, frowning slightly for some reason. "Have you and Seliph gone on a date since you confessed?"

"Huh? Oh, no, of course not," I answered. Both Yuria and Diarmuid shared a look at that. "We have been far too busy. Some days we don't get to see each other because our schedules conflict."

"...That is an emergency." Yuria looked to Diarmuid again, and he nodded, both far too serious suddenly. "That must be rectified. Immediately."

I had a sudden bad feeling about all of this. I really did.

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I was right to have the bad feeling. Yuria and Diarmuid had rounded up everyone, save Seliph and myself, to arrange for Seliph and I to have a date. It turned into a picnic date, complete with hiking outside of the town, far away from anyone but patrolling soldiers. And we weren't allowed to do anything about it, really. The others cooked, arranged excuses, volunteered to take care of Hestia… What shocked me the most was how everyone pitched in to help out. Even Arthur. It was bizarre! Absolutely bizarre!

"I think what confuses me the most was how quickly they managed all of it," Seliph murmured. Both of us were sprawled out on the grass in a meadow, watching the clouds drift by in the sky. "I think it was less than an hour. I barely heard about the plan before they shoved us out of the castle."

"I'm more surprised they didn't take the opportunity to eavesdrop and spy," I pointed out, shifting a little closer to him. I was using his arm as a pillow and half-dozing. "I suppose Lana was right about us needing a break, though."

"Yeah, I think so too." Seliph sighed, smiling. "I forgot what it was like to simply lay down. Smell the flowers. They did smell nice… "You asleep?"

"Not fully yet." But I was tempted. He was warm, and so was the sun. I understood why cats liked to fall asleep in a patch of sunshine right now. I really did. "Hey, did Conall's letter to you mention Julius?"

"It did." He sighed, smile falling. "My poor little brother… driven mad by whatever is going on. I hope Conall does find a way to cure him. I want to meet him."

"Especially since you met Yuria."
"Exactly." He laughed a bit, though it was still sad. "I like being an older brother. It's nerve-wracking, but fun."

"You and Diarmuid should have a talk about that. Since, you know, he could have a sibling in Leonster."

"Oh, that's true. I didn't think about that." Seliph reached over to take my hand and absently began tracing patterns on my palm. "Of course, we've all been working so much that we've barely thought about anything, huh?" He grimaced. "How did our parents get through all of this?"

"I have absolutely no idea." I really understood now why Aideen's stories about Mom always mentioned how they had to seek her out, though. I sincerely felt like we were running as fast as we could and still falling behind. "Did we finish writing the letters to all the families of the deceased?"

" Barely, yes. There were so many. My hand cramped up halfway through, and I swore I was writing the same thing. I didn't want to, but I just..."

"Too tired, too sad." I sat up a bit and leaned over him, my hair falling down almost like a curtain, shielding out the world. "But it's at least done with, yes?"

"For now." He reached up and pulled my down to kiss me sweetly. "Until the next battle where..."

"Where their lack of trust in us leads to bad decisions again..." That was the crux of it. How did we make them trust us? How did we earn it? How...? "And our naivety just..." I remembered the insults that one soldier threw at me. 'Sheltered bitch'... described me accurately for sure. "You know; I have a feeling this isn't something most people talk about on dates."

"Well, it's not like they'll find out."

"True."

"Your highness? My lady?" Both Seliph and I rolled to our feet, hearts pounding because expected some sort of emergency. However, instead, it was simply one of our soldiers, Niamh, actually, from my first sword-lesson class. "My apologies for disturbing you," she murmured, bowing. In the distance, I could see another soldier fidgeting awkwardly. "We were on patrol and happened to overhear..."

"Ah, I suppose we really should've kept such talk behind closed doors," Seliph murmured, ducking his head. I facepalmed, absolutely mortified. Our soldiers deserved our best, and not hearing us complain so much. How could we inspire them if...? "I'm sorry you had to hear that."

"No, no, your highness. In truth, many of us have feared you didn't trust us." She looked at both of us sincerely, and both Seliph and I glanced at each other, startled. Neither of us thought that they would think that. We never even considered that. "We have seen how desperately you all have been working, even on things that I am certain could be delegated. If I may be blunt, we've been terribly worried about your health."

"I suppose Lana suddenly forcing a day off didn't help the worries..."

"On contrary, we were delighted you were taking the break. Of course, that made it more heartbreaking to hear you two talk so sadly while out on your first date." She smiled briefly, but went back to being serious. Her fellow patroller remained distant. "If I may, why is it that you feel as if we soldiers do not trust you?"

"I... well..."
"...There have been some minor things, but the major one was the battle with Danann," I began slowly. Perhaps it was because I had gotten so used to answering questions from the soldiers or perhaps it was because of Niamh's sincerity, but the answer came easily. "When we wanted to delay to double-check the presence of Loptyrian priests and potential children hostages, there was nearly a mutiny. I was not there to see it, and I still do not know the full details, but what Arthur wrote me was… rough. Iuchar and the Dozel soldiers could not go anywhere alone for fear of their safety. Despite there being a conversation, multiple conversations even, about the dangers of in-fighting."

"Ah, I do remember that…" Niamh murmured, looking down. She fussed with her sleeve, and I saw she wore her sword with a lot more ease than she used to. "I will admit to being among the ones annoyed, even if the reasons were understandable."

"Precisely. So, because of that, we were forced to move ahead early, and… well, you were on the battlefield. You saw the children hostages. You heard of…” Of the one who had died, because I had been too slow, and we could not calm our own army. "That is a failing on our part, and not even going into the many who died, so…”

"Oh, my lady…” Niamh smiled reassuring at us both. "I think I understand now. If I may, might I convey that to the soldiers? So that they might understand your feelings better?"

"Well…” I glanced at Seliph, and Seliph frowned, thinking. "I…"

"Actually, if you do not mind, perhaps you can try that?" Seliph agreed. He smiled sheepishly, laughing a bit. "After all, if our soldiers feel like we do not trust them, then clearly, our current methodology is off."

"That's true," I murmured, remembering Arthur's offer to 'counter-rumor'. Maybe… maybe the real problem hadn't been trust. Maybe it had been miscommunication and misunderstanding. Our group relief a lot on knowing each other, and I knew our habits had led to others feeling left out. Perhaps it had been the same. "Niamh, if you could also do me another favor?"

"Of course, my lady," Niamh replied instantly, with a bright smile. It really lit up her face, actually, and I was momentarily distracted by how pretty she was. "What is it?"

"While I certainly do not mind talking with soldiers, and answering their questions, I have noticed a tendency for them to ask me questions like, say, where the duty roster is." I smiled sheepishly. "I will admit that a lot of my workload would be decreased if people were more willing to ask each other questions like that before coming to me on them?"

"People have asked… oh, I think there's been miscommunication among our ranks. I'll be sure to rectify that." She bowed to both of us and continued smiling brightly at us both. "As for trust, though… your highness, my lady, you and yours have long since earned the trust of those from Tirnanog and Ganeishire. The rest will see why, in time. Please, don't hurt yourselves trying to quicken that. It makes our hearts ache."

"...Thank you…” Seliph whispered. He smiled warmly in return, and I did feel like a small bit of weight fell off my shoulders. "That means a lot."

"It is the truth," Niamh replied, bowing again. "However, if I may, you two do have your date, and I have my patrol…"

"Yes, of course. And thank you for coming to speak with us," Seliph and I shared an amused look. "Clearly, something like that has been needed."
"It is my pleasure to assist." She bowed one more time and left, joining her fellow soldier. Both Seliph and I waved goodbye as the two left and when they were out of sight, we sat down again and simply… laughed at our ridiculousness.

"No small part of me feels embarrassed that we were clearly so pathetic we required such a talk," I barely managed through the laughter. We leaned against each other, struggling to breathe. "At the same time, though…"

"I am glad to have that talk, and I'm glad she felt comfortable enough to approach us, though that could've just been because you were here," Seliph added, wiping at his eyes. He was actually tearing up. "But I do wonder if that was it. A lot of assumptions and not a lot of…" He smiled at me. "Maybe if you had been here for them to ask questions, we wouldn't have had the problem with Danann. Maybe I didn't explain it well enough, and so, it just felt like delaying for no reason."

"Could be. Well, for that last sentence." I wasn't sure I would've made much of a difference, truthfully. "We do have that berserker rage to address as well. But maybe we should just… you know…"

"Actually address it instead of working ourselves to the bone trying to earn their blind trust?"

"Yeah, that." I smiled mischievously at him and lunged forward to pin him to the ground. "So, while we're on the subject of things to change…"

"Going to tell you that if this is serious, I'm not paying attention." He grinned up at me, laughing. "You're too beautiful of a sight to not give my undivided attention."

"Flatterer." I leaned down to kiss him, giggling. It was amazing how a single conversation made me feel so much better. "But I think you'll like it."

"Oh?"

"The idea is that you and I make sure to kiss each other goodnight, every night, so that we see each other at least once a day, and… you know… actually make sure we're going to bed and not passing out at desks?"

"Oh, yes, I do like that idea. I even love it." Seliph caught my hand and, to my surprise, kissed it. I instantly blushed, not expecting that at all, and feeling strangely shy over that bit of affection. "Huh. Iuchar was right. That did get you to blush."

"Iuchar?" I couldn't believe… "When did he…?"

"I asked him for some advice, curious about how courting went among Grannvale nobility, and that was one of his suggestions, since he noticed that while we're free with affection, hand-kissing isn't exactly a thing we do a lot."

"You…!" I only had one way to retaliate and that was to tickle him, so I did just that. He shrieked with laughter, rolling away, and I chased, laughing too. From there, the date became not just relaxing, but fun. And filled with kisses, just because.

This… really was something we needed. I'd thank everyone later.

Seliph and I returned from our date, still laughing about everything, and we ended up having an equally fun dinner with everyone. Afterwards, and after giving Seliph a goodnight kiss like we
agreed, I went to bed at a reasonable hour for the first time since… all of this started. And I slept rather well, until I heard Hestia scratching at something. Then I woke up with a groan, grumbling about how Hestia could open up so many damn doors when she wanted to be a prankster, but couldn't go out on her own. In that half-awake state, I rolled over and saw three strange things. One, my window was open. Two, there was a dead body on the floor. Three, Hestia had blood all over her muzzle.

"Did… is that an assassin?" I asked groggily, yawning and sitting up. Then everything finally processed. "Oh, wait, what?!" And, even better, a second person was trying to climb in. "Shit!"

I jumped out of bed and attempted to shove the person out the window. They had a good grip, though, so instead, I jumped up and swung myself out the window, slammed both my heels into their gut. It worked well enough that they went flying, screaming all the while, but I lost my own grip and had to quickly catch myself on the ledge to not join them on the ground. I banged my knees hard enough for them to bleed, but I could still climb back into my room. Hestia whimpered by the window, but when I was safely inside, and shut the window again, she began howling, a loud and long howl, giving her own warning. While she did that, I scrambled about my room, hunting for my swords, and picked up the Fire Sword because it was the first one I found.

"Intruders! Assassins!" I screamed, slamming open my door and tossing my sheathe to the side. I wanted my sword out, damn it. "Intruders! Up, up, everyone!" I ran down the hall, Hestia following me closely, stopping only to howl again. "Okay, who to check on fi-" And a scream from Lana's room made my blood freeze. "Lana!"

I skidded to a stop in front of Lana's room, actually falling and landing hard on my hip. I didn't care, though. I got on my feet and went to open the door. But though the knob turned, the door didn't budge. I slammed my shoulder against it, and thought I heard something fall. I knew I heard another scream and the sound of a sob. Lana. Lana was in there, and Lana barely knew any fighting…!

"Bastards…!" I rested my hand on the door and sparked flame into life to burn the door. It was wood, after all, and wood burned very well, particularly when a pissed off Fjalar Minor was setting it on fire. The smell of smoke irritated my nose and eyes, but I held firm. We'd have to replace the door, but that was a small price to pay. "Lana! It's Riona! Hold on just a little longer!" Still, the door was large, so it burned far too slowly for my comfort.

So, I dragged a bit of magic from the sword to make it erupt into flames and I slammed my shoulder against it to make it splinter. Splinters dug into my skin and the fire burned, but the door began falling apart, along with whatever was behind it, so I kept at it. I kept at it until there was an opening just large enough for Hestia to burst through. Which she did with a snarl, and there was a panicked scream inside followed by the sound of Hestia tearing out someone's throat. I then dampened the flames and pushed through the charred remains to stumble inside.

Lana's room was a mess. Clothes, blankets, feathers, remnants of pillows… practically everything was thrown every which way, like a tornado blew through. Lana herself, though, was fine. She was bleeding from an arm wound, and she had some bruises, but she clung to Hestia tightly, shivering, while Hestia growled at the corpse on the floor, blood gushing out of the large hole in their throat.

"Told you it would only take a little longer," I rasped. The smoke and shouting had hurt my throat. "You going to be okay, Lana?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine," Lana replied shakily. She stood up slowly, still clinging to Hestia. Hestia whimpered and licked her hand. "They didn't… they didn't get me. I'd woken up to get some water. The blood is from falling into things." She wiped at it awkwardly, and I could see how jagged it
was. "I... wait, what happened to my door?"

"...It was blocked." I nudged the ashy chunks out of the way. "Come on, we should get out of here."

"Right..." Lana walked a few steps and nearly fell. Hestia supported her, though, so Lana was able to grab her Recover staff and then join me. "You're hurt..."

"Later." I stepped out into the hallway and saw others rushing about, reacting to the screaming and the like. "Shall we?"

"I can't run, but yes." She gripped Hestia tightly, still using her as a bit of a crutch. "Let's go."

Lana wasn't kidding when she said she couldn't run, but that was fine. Everyone else was, so we could afford to walk through. We had to stop a few times for Lana to tend to someone very badly hurt, but for the most part, everyone was on top of things. I left Lana and Hestia very briefly to duck into Seliph's office and find the lists of names we had for everyone in the army, before we continued to where everyone was converging: the main hall. We met our friends there, particularly a frazzled, bloody Yuria who was dealing with a lot of injured. Lana, of course, immediately went to join her, Hestia following closely, and I thumbed through the pages, ready to call out names myself. However, as I looked through just how many there were, I realized there was no way I could do this on my own. And I could call my friends, but...

"Niamh?" I called, looking around in the crowd. A couple of people glanced at me and whispered. "Niamh, you around?"

"I am, my lady!" Niamh jumped out of the crowd. "You're injured, my lady," she murmured, frowning. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah, I just panicked when I realized these bastards barricade Lana and went a bit overboard." I said the words absently, and only half-noticed the soldiers around me smile for unknown reasons. "However, we need to see who's here and who isn't. So..." I handed one of the pages. "You can read, right?"

"Yes, my lady." She smiled warmly at me. "I will get right on it."

"Thank you." I smiled back and then looked to everyone else. "Okay, people, if you can read, please step up! Need a bit of help making sure we're not missing anyone!"

People practically jumped over each other in their eagerness to volunteer. While I handled that, Seliph appeared and ordered every single injured to get checked over in case of poison. Fee, Iuchar, and Diarmuid headed outside with some groups of soldiers to patrol outside and see if more were sneaking in. Larcei and Arthur handled patrolling inside the castle, and I joined in with my own group of soldiers after finishing passing out the papers and getting bandaged up. Seliph hadn't really wanted me to leave, since I was rather injured, but I distracted him with a kiss and left before he regained his wits. I knew I'd pay for that later, but I needed to see, with my own eyes, that everything was safe and fine.

"Seems like we're clear in our area," I murmured, once we reached the end of our selected halls. They were the areas where Lana, Larcei, Yuria, Fee, and I slept, so I figured if there were going to be any lingering ones, it would be either here or where the boys slept. "Good job, everyone." I turned to smile warmly at them. I, sadly, didn't know any of their names. One was a new one, while the other four had been with us since Ganeishire. "Let's not relax our guard, but I think we can chat and joke and the like, if you want."
"That… could be fun, my lady," one whispered. She was one of our younger ones, honestly one that I half-thought had lied about her age. Still, she held her bow with ease, showing she'd trained hard. "Um… may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly." I made sure to keep up the smile, even as I feared what sort of question it was. Just because of how they had been in the past. "What is it?"

"Well, it's not a serious question…" She fiddled with the arrows in the quiver on her belt, and her fellows gave her stern looks. "What's it like being in love, my lady?"

"That… er…" Wasn't expecting that. Wasn't expecting that at all. "It's a bit hard to explain. I've been in love with Seliph for forever, so much so that I had to get help to notice!" I instantly regretted saying that, though. They deserved my best, and not-

"That's adorable, my lady!" She giggled, and the others in the group relaxed. "I'm sorry. I know it's a weird question. My village was burned by Dozel… by Danann's soldiers." It touched me that she made the distinction. "So, I haven't really been able to ask many people about that."

"Well, I have dated others in the past, and I'm sure I'm not the only one out of this group of beauties who's at least had a crush!"

That sparked a bit of laughter, and more followed as we returned to the Main Room to report. We gossiped about all sorts of things, from fun and hilarious dates, to most embarrassing crushes to favorite colors and flowers and dresses. The sort of talk I'd have with Creidne and Muirne in Tirnanog. And as we talked, I saw them become more and more relaxed, and smile much more.

I wondered… maybe 'my best' wasn't what was needed. Maybe it was just 'me'. Just 'us'. It wasn't just possible miscommunication and misunderstanding… or, rather, it was, but not just of our words. It was also of us. We stayed apart, and so, they didn't know us. It was hard to trust those you didn't know, after all.

Maybe that was how our parents made it through. Or, at least, that might be how we would make it through.

After all the injured were treated, and we had it confirmed that there were no more assassins to find, Seliph ordered that everyone group together to sleep, just in case. Our group, of course, followed the order, after changing into clean clothes and dragging extra blankets and pillows into Yuria's room. Why hers? Surprisingly, her room hadn't been touched by the fighting. And, while we had started by trying to figure out who might've sent the assassins, the current lack of information meant we hit a dead-end pretty fast. Worse, all the assassins were dead. Ideally, information could be found on their corpses, but no one would be able to shift through any items found until the morning. So, all seriousness soon bled away for a fun little get-together thing.

"Ulster, Lester, and Oifeye are going to be so mad when they get back," I murmured, dozing off in Fee's lap. Wasn't quite sure how it happened, but I was, and Fee was having fun braiding my hair. "Or, well, Oifeye will be mad after panicking."

"He's not going to let you all out of sight for a few days, I bet," Fee joked, giggling. She was putting lots of little braids in my hair, and I absentely wondered how many there were. "Father did that once. There was a bandit attack or something, so Father…" She trailed off, all sense of cheer vanishing.

"You okay?"
"Give me a moment?"

"Of course." And, to make sure I did, I focused my attention on the others in the room. Due to the late hour, and our tiredness, we were more in separate groups enjoying each other's company and whatnot. So, I looked to each group and tried to piece together what was going on.

In the far corner, away from where Fee and I were under the window, Iuchar and Seliph were chatting happily. Iuchar was gesturing dramatically, eyes closed and fully into the grandness of the gestures. Seliph nodded along, laughing at the antics, and was actually taking notes, so I had a very bad feeling Seliph was preparing his revenge against me. Because only with us could grand gestures of affections be 'revenge'. He'd probably do it in public too, because any embarrassment he'd suffer would be worth making me blush.

In the center of the room, Lana and Larcei were curled up on Hestia, Lana wanting the extra bit of comfort given earlier and Larcei wanting her favorite 'pillow'. However, they weren't just resting. Arthur was with them, and he was actually teaching them some card game. They used some buttons Yuria had to 'bet', mostly so that he could teach them the rules. I was certain he was also showing them how to cheat, given that I saw him pull a card from his sleeve. Larcei laughed at it, and laughed even harder when, despite the cheating, Lana 'won' the hand. Luck didn't always trump skill, but it was hilarious when it did. Or sobering depending on the context.

A short distance away, Yuria and Diarmuid were actually studying medicinal herbs. Yuria had requested it, because it helped calm her down, and Diarmuid had gladly agreed to it. So, the two of them were bent over one of the books, with two more stacked next to them, going through each page very carefully. I almost didn't pay more attention, but then I saw Diarmuid brush Yuria's hair behind her ear, to keep it out of her eyes, and then I saw Yuria blush. Now that was interesting. Very. Interesting. I'd keep quiet about it for now, but I was definitely going to pay more attention to their interactions over the next few days. Just to see if that was a one time thing or not.

"...I'm worried about seeing my father again," Fee whispered softly, catching my attention again. She continued to braid my hair, so I didn't turn over to face her, but I did make a noise so that she knew I was listening. "I haven't seen him in five years. He just left five years ago, and now, I'll finally get to see him. And it's weird, because Ced left home to try and find him, yet it seems like I'll get to see him first?"

"That does sound a little…" I began, trying to think of the words I wanted. 'Ironic' was all I could think of, but that felt too sarcastic for something so sad. He had left home, missing his own mother's death and abandoning his little sister, to search for his father, and yet… "It's not just 'weird', though, is it?"

"I'm terrified. How is he going to react? Will he hug me? Will he yell? Will he ignore? I don't have any idea. I have my hopes, but I know they could be answered with nothing." Her hands shook. "And he will be returning here. That's what you're waiting on."

"We are." I decided to sit up then, and I pulled her into a hug, letting her rest her head against my shoulder. "And we're here for you. All of us. We'll be right by your side when he does come to Rivough." I kissed her head and rubbed her shoulder. "And if he is a jackass? If he yells or ignores you? We will pull the biggest pranks on him. Promise."

"But he'll have information for you…"

"Being useful is no reason to be a jerk. Being able to help is no excuse to be an asshole. After all, every single person in this room… in this city, even… is helpful and useful. We all pull our own weight, each one of us." I kissed her cheek and leaned down so that I could smile directly at her.
"We'd be professional, certainly, but you're family, Fee. And that means two things with this crazy as hell group."

"And those are…?"

"One, you're never alone. Ever." I gestured at all of us. "We're still learning, and we make mistakes, but we are all here for each other and nothing is going to change that." I poked her nose, laughing at her squeak. "And the second thing is that no one hurts our family without some form of retaliation. We will at least pull pranks. With Hestia's help. We've got a long list of things planned in case Diarmuid's dad ends up being a jackass. We can easily pull similar ones on Lewyn."

"...Hee…" Fee began giggling, and then laughing. "Well, that does make me feel a bit better about it. Still nervous, but…" She muffled her laughter and looked at everyone with sparkling eyes. "But I'm not… I'm not alone. I can cry around you all. I can scream."

"Precisely." I decided to be a little mischeivous. "And if you really want to, we could have Hestia drop her kills or something in his shoes."

"Riona!" And she was right back to laughing, loud enough that the others gave us curious looks. I winked, and they smiled and shrugged, deciding it was just us being weird. "That's horrible."

"Just a possibility to consider. That's all." I ruffled her hair and kissed her forehead. "Come on. Let's see if we can guess all the way Arthur is cheating."

"That'll be fun. Let's go!"

Arthur easily agreed to the 'game', and funnily enough, we only managed to guess about three of the ten tricks he tried. Seliph, Iuchar, Diarmuid, and Yuria joined us and it turned into a big lesson and then a free-for-all where we kind of just played however we wanted. In the middle of one hand, I became incredibly sleepy, so I forfeited and curled up in Seliph's lap to sleep. He nudged me up just long enough to give me another goodnight kiss, to the amusement and even cheers of the others, and I was back to laying down and falling asleep.

Not every assassination attempt would lead to such a fun time. I could only hope the next ones, whenever they were, were just as ineffectual, though.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note: Assassins, assassins, assassins. Because they're fun to utilize. I… actually don't have many notes for the chapter. Weird. Anyway, the thing with Hestia pinning Riona is something my dogs have done to me often.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Magic
Interlude - Magic

Well, things have been quite busy. Work, questions, assassins… guess we're a 'real' army now that they've sent assassins after us. But through it, I think we've all learned a great deal about how we need to lead an army like this. Maybe. It's a work in progress. But at this point, I'm certain it's going to be a 'work in progress' all the way to the end of this. There's always ways to improve and things to learn. We just have to keep at it. It's not like we can stop now, at least. Might have more luck stopping a landslide.

"Seliph, what is it that you're reading?" I asked him. We were in his study, reading through reports, with me standing by the desk because Hestia was sleeping on my feet and him sitting like he was half-glued to the chair, and he had sighed and winced about ten times in the space of a single minute. "If it's so painful, I can handle looking through it for you."

"It's not quite…" he began, before sighing. Again. I was half-tempted to make a running tally of it, just to tease him about it later. "I'm reading through scouting reports."

"And is Ulster's seriousness driving you up the wall or something?"

"If that was the case, I think I would've been living on the ceiling since we were five years old. Or gone straight through." He leaned back in his chair and absently moved the light globes around. It was still very early in the morning, so there wasn't a lot of light from the sun yet. Lester hadn't even left with the hunters yet, hence why Hestia was with me. "No, it's the information they've gathered from rumors outside Isaach's borders."

"Bad?"

"Apparently, in the wake of our victory here, others have become emboldened and set up their own resistances." He tossed the paper to the side. "And were annihilated."

"...Oh..." That was… I supposed it was something we had to consider. Our victory here proved the Empire wasn't invincible. But still… "I..."

"It's just like Iucharba said." He smiled bitterly, and I winced, remembering the same conversation. I wondered if his spirit was laughing at us now. "Killing them with hope."

"Is it faster or longer than death by despair?" Despite my own pain and discomfort, I focused on countering the view. And nudging Hestia awake so that she could comfort Seliph. Not that it required much nudging. She'd lifted her head as soon as Seliph started talking, paying close attention, so with one little 'nudge', she was sitting by Seliph with her head in his lap, and he was petting her. "And remember, based on what we've heard, Isaach has been better off than the other countries. That means that there are hundreds, even thousands, of people who have suffered like the people in the labor camps, like those children the priests had, and like Creidne. Or have suffered worse." My throat closed up and I coughed to clear it. Hestia's ears twitched back towards me, but she remained with Seliph, who gave me his undivided attention. "Perhaps we 'kill' them with hope, but at least we do not make them suffer from despair. We just..."
"We just need to keep going, so that the sacrifices mean something at the end."

"And be willing to change our tactics if it looks like we're sacrificing 'too much' for the cause or something." Just look at Arvis and the eventual fallout to it all. "Recent events have proven we don't know everything, by any means."

"Sometimes, I wonder if we know anything, but you're quite right." Seliph smiled slightly, and I smiled back, a little shakily. What happened with the people here, with the children, and with Creidne would haunt me forever. "Speaking of things we don't know, though, those assassins?"

"Just finished reading through those reports, actually." Glad for the subject change, I quickly found the ones in question in the stack I was holding and moved them to the front. "There's sadly not much, but since we've got awesome-amazing-wonderful soldiers…"

"Before I forget, we're doing the group lunch thing again, right?"

"We are." It had been Arthur's idea, actually, one of those simple yet brilliant ideas. Basically, when we were discussing how to better connect with our soldiers, he'd suggested we make sure to share a meal with them. Breakfast and dinner were mostly private affairs in the army, but everyone ate lunch more or less at the same time, so we decided we'd try that out. Our first one had been yesterday, and it seemed to have improved everyone's moods. "Should I feed you again~?"

"Riona!" Seliph instantly went red, and I laughed. I'd decided to tease him and feed him a bit of the rice we were having, and the soldiers had been delighted by the exchange. "I'm going to get you back for that!"

"No way! That was revenge for the hand-kissing!" I huffed a bit, not really angry. He knew it too, so he just kept on petting Hestia, who was wagging her tail now that both of us were back in a good mood. "Besides, it was better than Larcei's suggestion."

"She actually whispered it to you, so I didn't hear what it was."

"Kissing or licking the syrup you got on your cheek?" Though I knew I blushed at the thought, it was hilarious to see him choke on a yelp and turn even redder. "So, what do we say to the glorious embodiment of mercy that I am?"

"Hestia, go tackle her." Hestia gave him a weird look before scooting closer to him. "Aw, Hestia!"

"Does this mean I have to compete with her for your affection?"

"Maybe~!" I walked over to the chair and kissed him, though. When I pulled away, he slid his hand into my hair to cup the back of my head and pulled me back for another kiss. "Feeling a bit more secure?"

"Perhaps." He smirked before kissing me again, a nice long kiss that made my knees weak. He was a really good kisser. "So, those assassins?"

"Yes, yes." Smiling, I leaned against his chair and absently scratched Hestia behind the ear. She opened her mouth to pant happily, her tail wagging enough to actually make a clean spot on the floor. "So, because our soldiers are amazing and have a wealth of knowledge, the current suspicion is that Bloom sent them."

"Duke Blood of Friege?" Seliph frowned. "Really?"
"Bloom, Seliph. *Bloom.* Like a flower." I grinned and he looked away sheepishly. "Though I suppose Duke 'Blood' is also accurate, if the rumors are right. Not nearly as manic as Danann and interested in ruling and ruling well, but very strict when it comes to said ruling and supposedly pretty quick with threats. And if his own soldiers won't suffice for the job, he has no qualms hiring mercenaries to do the job for him." He was also Ishtar's father, and Arthur's uncle. Of course, Arthur hated him for kidnapping Tailtiu and Tine. "But yes, him."

"What makes them say that?"

"We have quite a few former traders in our army, those few Isaachians who would make the journey to Darna to trade and whatnot. And they said that the cut of the assassins' clothing is a Manster District cut."

"Clothes can be easily bought." Seliph rested his index and middle finger against his temple, thinking. "However, it has to be obvious just where we're heading to next. Us going to Leonster is probably more obvious than Larcei's crush on Shanan." I knew it was bad that I laughed, but I couldn't help it. "And I somehow doubt one victory, no matter how major, is going to be enough to make Belhalla think of us as a viable threat."

"I agree. We are, after all, only one country. And even the Crusaders needed the help of the entire continent to take down the Loptyrian Empire of old." However, a single country's army versus another? Now *that* was a more believable threat. "There's also rumors that Bloom is quick to eliminate 'trouble' with assassins."

"So, either someone is being very clever with their framing or it's him." Seliph smiled wryly up at me. "I suppose we should be flattered that we are considered enough of a threat for either."

"Well, if someone is doing a framing job, then they want us to take out Bloom. Probably ideally hoping for a mutual destruction." I set those particular reports on his desk. "Sadly, though, that's about all we've got on them. They were definitely professionals."

"I see." Seliph closed his eyes and let himself slump. "If we're dealing with threats like this, then we definitely need to increase our training."

"We are." A thought occurred to me, but I hesitated in saying it. But then I decided to just go for it. "Hey, Seliph. Have you thought about training in magic?"


"Why? Naga's blood is known for magic as well." Perhaps not as *infamously* as Fjalar's, but it was still known for it. "It just occurred to me that no one ever really brought it up with you."

"I… right…" Seliph bit his lip and sighed heavily. Hestia nosed his hand, her tail no longer wagging, and Seliph began petting her again. "I guess it's because there's such a focus on Father, and the… complications… with my mother." He looked to me again. "Why suggest it?"

"For one thing, how many people have a good resistance to magic? And it would give you a ranged option." I made sure to smile softly at him. "For the non-pragmatic answer, it would give you a good excuse to spend time with Yuria, particularly since we're doing our best to keep her heritage quiet for now." Just in case. After all, look at the trouble Iuchar suffered. Now, Yuria might have the advantage of being one of the people who made sure our soldiers' insides stayed where they were supposed to, but still. "And it would put her in a 'teacher role', which she hasn't had yet and might be good for her."
"That…" He fell silent and then suddenly, he pulled me into his lap, hugging me tightly and burying his face in my hair. Hestia barked a protest and laid down, pointedly turning away because he'd pulled me on her, but he didn't notice. "I'll think on it."

"Okay." I shifted so that I was sitting a little more properly and used my foot to pet Hestia in an attempt to appease her. She gave me a look that said 'it will do, for now' and settled a little more on the floor to rest. "I think you need a break, though."

"Yeah, I think so." He held me a little tighter. "So, it's been a while since I've had a break. What does one do?"

"Well…~" I leaned back a bit to smirk and slowly moved closer. "I have a couple of ideas. Most involve kissing you."

"I like that." He laughed softly, lower than normal. "So…"

"Hey, Seliph, you had wanted… oh, hello, whoops." Growling in frustration, both of us turned our attention to the now-open door, where Lester stood with the smuggest smirk on his face, leaning against the doorframe. "No, no, don't mind me," he teased, eyes dancing with mischief. "I can totally come back later. But you might consider locking the door and, just a warning, that desk doesn't look all that sturdy."

"Lester!" Seliph snapped, glowering. I debated standing up, but shrugged and just stayed sitting in Seliph's lap and picked up my stack of papers to go through again. "I'm assuming you wouldn't come into my study without knocking unless it was at least mildly important?"

"My, my, you're so mad~!" Lester cackled and walked up to the desk. "Isn't it a bit early to be getting into such things?"

"I'm going to throw a paperweight at you." Though we knew it was an empty threat, Seliph did gesture and 'batted' Lester with three of the light globes floating about. "So?"

"Riona, you going to move?"

"Why? It's just you," I replied, leaning back against Seliph's chest. This was remarkably cozy, actually. "Just get on with your damn report, Lester."

"I just need to turn this in before I head out," Lester replied, still laughing a little. He passed Seliph some papers. "Final report about Isaach Castle. Larcei wants to visit, though. Visit the crypts." And her parents.

"Tell her to go ahead and go. It'll be good for her."

"Yes, I agree," Seliph murmured, smiling sadly. Hopefully, it really would be good. It could also be very bad. But it was also Larcei, so… "We should make arrangements for someone to take over her duties, and Oifeye's since I'm sure…" He trailed off as Lester shook his head. "No?"

"I asked Oifeye already, and he said 'no'," Lester explained. He shrugged at our frowns. "I know. It's weird. But that's what he said." He grinned again. "Anyway, that's it, so I'm going to leave." He started for the door, back to his laughter. "Lock the door~!"

"Hestia, tackle him," I deadpanned. Since the 'order' came from me, and because she needed to go with him anyway for hunting, she immediately lunged for Lester. Lester squawked and ran out and down the hall, but Hestia was faster and quickly caught up to him, tacking him to the ground based on the 'thud' we heard. Then, amusingly, she came back and hooked her paws under the door to
mostly close it. Lester must've gotten up, since soon afterwards, it closed fully. "Ugh… everyone is
going to hear about this in an hour."

"They are," Seliph agreed, groaning. He then sighed and looked at the report Lester gave him,
eyeing it warily. "I suppose it's back to work."

"Seems so." I, however, didn't move. "You don't mind if I stay right here, do you?"

"I might be very distracted." He laughed softly and kissed my cheek. "Ah, well. I'm not in a hurry
to let you go either."

"My, my… you say that as if you're not the one caught~!"

We did actually get work done, and quite a bit of it too. I wasn't sure if it was 'less' or 'more' than
what we would've gotten done otherwise, but I knew there would be no complaints from anyone
else. That was important.

Larcei ended up leaving after breakfast, along with some others who wanted to pay their respects.
Our group thought about going with her, but decided we would go pay our own respects at
different times, keeping as many leaders here in Rivough as possible. So, I took over Larcei's
duties, splitting them with Arthur who volunteered to help out because, in his own words, 'he was
bored stiff'. It ended up being a very enjoyable morning, and lunch was even better because we
could all gossip and chat, and tease each other relentlessly. Things that helped the soldiers talk to
us, and make everything very lively. However, there was one dark spot to it. Oifeye didn't join us.
So, after talking more with the soldiers, explaining policies and answering questions, I checked the
kitchens to see if Oifeye had gotten anything to eat. Upon learning that Oifeye hadn't even had
breakfast, though… well, I had a couple hours free.

"My lady, is everything well?" Of course, me being 'free' didn't mean it wasn't an odd sight to see
me carrying a tray ladened with food down the hall. "Does that need to be delivered to someone?"
the soldier asked. Their name escaped me, but I knew they were a newer recruit, from a
neighboring village. "I can… er…” I could tell they were new for one big reason; Hestia made
them nervous. Older soldiers were at least used to her presence. "Um…”

"Hestia won't bite unless she thinks you're a threat," I reassured, smiling reassuringly. Hestia did
her best to look as innocent and sweet as possible… for a giant wolf who could crush people's
spines between her jaws and looked it no matter how sweet and cute she was. "But no, I can handle
this. I'm just bullying a certain father into eating because he forgot he possesses a stomach that
needs food."

"Uh…” They blinked slowly. "So…”

"Oifeye skipped breakfast and lunch. I'm guilting him into eating." I giggled and, tentatively, they
smiled back. "Sorry. Oifeye raised us Tirnanog kids, so we joke he's our 'father'."

"Oh, I see, my lady." They bowed and their smile was a little warmer. "Good luck then. I had to do
the same with my father and some days, I had to all but cry to get him to remember."

"Thankfully, Hestia is more than willing to mess his papers up before I have to resort to such
things." I laughed when Hestia barked in agreement and, to my delight, so did the soldier. "We are
her dumb humans, you see. Her pack."

"I think I understand a bit more. Even if she's a wolf, she's still a little like my family's dog. He's
basically family, like she is to you." They crouched a little bit, looking at Hestia. "I'm sorry, fierce
one, for being afraid. You are very big and very fast." Hestia wagged her chair and yipped, panting happily in a wolf's smile. "Thank you." They straightened and bowed again. "Ah, but I am keeping you."

"No, it's fine. I think this is the first time since Ganeishire one of us had to feed Oifeye, so the sight is unusual." I winked and they smiled. "I'll see you around, okay?"

I kept my poise and dignity until I turned a corner, and then I did a little half-skip in excitement. Little conversations like that were more and more frequent, and I loved it. Little things like that really helped the army feel like it was coming together, or at least, that we were becoming respected and trusted. Hestia joined me in the little happiness trot, because more people who liked her meant more treats, and so, she practically leapt for Oifeye's study door, opening it and rushing inside. And jumping right on Oifeye, based on his yelp. And knocking him over based on the loud 'crash' I heard.

"Hestia, in case you have someone forgotten, you are not a puppy anymore…" Oifeye wheezed, the sound barely carrying outside the room. I walked inside and saw Hestia had more than 'knocked Oifeye over'. She'd tackled him out and over the chair itself and had him pinned not just with her body, but with the chair as well. "Ugh… I thought it was locked…"

"Nope, it wasn't," I cheerfully noted, doing my best to not laugh. Oifeye just groaned. "Hestia, sweetie, let him up, will you? I know you love him, but he's right. You're very heavy." Hestia barked and instead began licking Oifeye's face. "Hestia, sweetie."

"Can you not pull her off?"

"My hands are full." I whistled, though, and Hestia finally got off and, sweetly, pushed the chair off of Oifeye too. "Aw, what a sweetheart!"

"Yes, she's so affectionate." Oifeye groaned and stood up slowly, wincing a bit. "I am too old for this."

"You're not that old, Oifeye!" I grinned. "You're younger than Aideen!" If I recalled correctly, Oifeye would turn thirty-six soon. ...Very soon, actually. We'd need to get him a present as soon as we could. "Anyway, you may think of it as her also scolding you."

"For what?" He eyed me skeptically, and then noticed the tray of food I was carrying. "Why do you have…? Surely, it's not…" He looked out the window, blinked slowly, and sighed, dropping his head a little. "Or it could be far later than I thought."

"Staff working the kitchens today also outed you for skipping breakfast, so I made you a lot of food." I giggled, and held the tray out. "So, let's get some space cleared. Surprised your stomach didn't keen bitterly to remind you it needs meals."

"Considering how many times you all tried to whimper your way into and out of trouble, I suppose I got an immunity." He cracked a smile and I laughed. "Okay, okay… what can be moved? And let me get this chair back in place."

It took a while to clear Oifeye's desk enough to safely set down all the food and drinks, to the point that Hestia outright stole some of the papers and dropped them to the side. Since it was my wolf who caused that little problem, I stayed in the room to reorganize the papers for Oifeye while he ate. And conveniently let me stick around and make sure he ate. So, win for me?

"I'm surprised you used your precious free time to make this," Oifeye teased after he ate about half
of the food. Which was normally enough for three people, but it was fine. I made sure Oifeye had some teas good for digestion with the meal. "You're not with Seliph?"

"Oh, dear father, how cruel of you to think that your daughter would forget you once she found the love of her life," I deadpanned, not even looking up from the papers. I wished I knew what they said, but a lot of them were in Oifeye's weird shorthand. "Truly, I am aghast that you think so lowly of me." Hestia whimpered then, though her tail wagged too much for it to be an actual sign of worry. "See? You've even made Hestia sad."

"So sad that her tail wags to make her feel happy again." Oifeye's tone was equally dry. "No, that wasn't it. I just remember how, when the various couples in the army got together, they would spend a lot of time together, especially at first. And you two are quite busy typically because all of you have forgotten how to rest."

"And think of how devastated all of us would be if you faint from hunger." I gave him a look, doing my best to emulate Aideen's 'Mom Look'. "I also don't think you're one to talk about 'forgetting how to rest'."

"Do as I say, not as I do. It is the job of a parent to make sure the children don't take on their flaws." Oifeye smiled a bit, eyes dancing in amusement. "That's in the rules."

"Blech, rules." I stuck my tongue out and he laughed. "Anyway, since you brought it up first, sort of, what would Mom have thought about my being with Seliph?"

"Alicia might've laughed herself sick, truthfully." He laughed again at the thought. "Before we met Deirdre, there were quite a few people who wondered if Sigurd and Alicia would become a couple. The two of them laughed themselves to tears at the thought, or so Quan and Deirdre told me. They found it ridiculous."

"Oh. Huh." I set the papers on his desk, now freshly organized, and nudged Hestia up so that I could pet her without having to bend in two. "Then, what about Dad?"

"By the time he joined-"

"No, not about Sigurd and Mom." Though, admittedly, I was a bit curious. But I wanted to keep focused. "About Seliph and me."

"I'm not too sure on Chulainn, truthfully." Oifeye sipped his tea, clearly thinking. All of the plates were empty. "I believe that he wouldn't have much of a reaction, save being happy that you were happy. He was always doing his best to make sure you and Conall were happy and knew you were loved." He laughed suddenly. "He'd let you two get away with a lot of things. Staying up past your bedtimes, splashing while taking baths... once he scared Alicia into tears because he let you two play with a wolf, or so Claude told me in secrecy."

"He did?" At first, I was shock, but then there was an... impression, I supposed the word should be. Too vague to be a memory. But I felt an impression of warmth and safety, of soft fur, and the smell of the Ephrelas oil used to help maintain swords. It was a distinct smell, calming and like the forest after a good rain, mostly because only Isaachians used that particular kind. Other countries used different types to tend to their blades. "Ah." I wished I remembered more. I really did. But if we talked of 'memories', then it was just that scent and Dad singing Isaachian lullabies. "And Sigurd? What would he have thought?"

"Sigurd also would've laughed himself silly, and teased you both relentlessly." Despite the smile, his eyes became sad. "The Deirdre I knew would've been delighted. Alicia was her best friend,
after all." Which made me wonder what 'Diadora' would've thought. And what Mom's relationship with 'Diadora' was. I wished I had thought to ask Ishtar about Mom's life in Belhalla. "I wonder… what their graves look like. If Sigurd even has a grave."

"The songs say he didn't have a body once Arvis was done." Because, of course, there were songs about it. And I was inclined to believe this particular part of the songs, because he'd been killed by Valflame, infamous for leaving nothing but ashes, if that. "I wonder why he didn't have Tyrfing. Would it have protected him?"

"Possibly." Oifeye sighed, sipping his tea. Hestia walked around the desk to press herself into his leg. "All of the physical Holy Weapons have extra abilities, possibly to balance how the magical Holy Bloods grant additional abilities outside of the 'boosts'."

"Like my fire and Seliph's light."

"Correct." He closed his eyes, thinking, and absently petted Hestia. "Mystletainn drains the life out of those it slays to heal its wielder. Balmung is said to allow the wielder to 'disappear', like a spirit."

"Tyrfing blocks magic, right?" I leaned against his desk, remembering the lessons. "Or… wait, Mystletainn can do that too, right?"

"Both help their wielders resist magic, yes. Tyrfing is known as the Holy Weapon second only to the Book of Naga in divine might, and will prevent its wielder from dying." Meaning it would've been really useful if Sigurd had kept it in hand, back then. "The stories say that Gae Bolg will obliterate the heart of any target if thrown, and there's other stories of its destructive might. Helswath will return to its owner's hand without fail, no matter how far it is thrown. Yewfelle will heal the injuries its owner sustains continuously, and fires arrows of light."

"And the arrows go straight through, right?" We had heard many stories of Yewfelle, mostly because Aideen knew most of them by heart. "So, the wound won't be plugged up by anything."

"Precisely." Oifeye opened his eyes again, smiling slightly. He still petted Hestia, who had all but attached herself to his leg. "The last of them is Gungnir. As can be expected, the stories surrounding Gungnir are similar to Gae Bolg's, though I think the descriptions differ slightly."

"That's because they're specifically known as 'twin weapons', right?" The thought made my heart hurt. Conall… I hoped we would not fight… "Regardless, though, it's only really been in the past twenty years that you've had Holy Weapon users fighting each other, aside from Gae Bolg and Gungnir. So, I don't know if Tyrfing would've saved Sigurd or not. Fjalar didn't exactly attack Baldr."

"Right…" If the stories were in any way accurate, then Fjalar and Baldr had been as close as siblings. Shame that didn't continue. "Hey, Oifeye?"

"Yes?"

"Why won't you visit Aunt Ayra and Uncle Lex?" I probably shouldn't have asked so bluntly, but while we were on sad topics, I might as well. "I'm sure they would love it."

"As would I. But I made a promise." He set his empty cup down and focused solely on petting Hestia. "On that day… the last day I saw them… we all promised we would see each other again when things are 'safe'. And it is perhaps a fool's logic, but…" He shrugged. "I will visit when things are 'safe'. When this long war of ours finally ends." Oifeye smiled sadly, eyes distant. I
thought of how, in many ways, this 'war' of ours had been fought for over nineteen years. ...No, it had been fought for twenty-two years, all the way from Verdane's first assault on Junghy. "I will visit after I stand in the same city Sigurd and so many others died in, and see the last victory."

"Oifeye..." I felt like crying. If I thought of it like that, then Oifeye had been fighting this 'war' since he was fourteen years old. "We don't know how long that'll be, though."

"I've waited nineteen years, Riona. A few more won't matter much." He chuckled and shook his head. "Ah, but where did such dreary talk come from? That's not a good way to spend time with you."

"That's true." I desperately tried to think of a way to change the subject and came up on one that I thought sounded fun. "So, what's Grannvelian courting like normally? Seliph asked Iuchar, and I want to get him back."

"Ah, so that's why Seliph is practicing his poetry." He laughed when I groaned. Because I knew that would get me. Because that was just so... so cheesy and the like. "Sadly, when it comes to what women can do during traditional courtship, you are much better off asking Aideen." He smiled, however. "That said, I do remember some things Aideen did for Midir."

"I'll take that!" And I'd take the stories that would no doubt go along with them. "Tell me, tell me!"

"Well, you're enthusiastic." Oifeye petted Hestia a bit more and then nudged her back over to me. "Let's see... ah, yes, there was the piano bit..."

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A few days after Larcei left for Isaach Castle, we got packages from Tirnanog. Lots of packages. And even more letters. There was so much that we had to designated a room just to keep it all and only then actually distribute everything. It felt like the entire town had sent everyone packages. Eventually, due to the amount, Seliph announced that everyone, including we leaders, was to take the day off to relax and read letters from home. Or write letters. Whichever.

"I think they used every bit of paper and boxes that had been in Tirnanog!" Lana laughed once our group was sequestered away in Seliph's room, after dropping off all of Larcei's stuff in her room since she wasn't here. By 'our group', I meant all of us on the War Council, minus Oifeye, but plus Yuria. He'd wanted to read his stuff in private. "Goodness!"

"Is it... uh... normal in Tirnanog to just adopt strangers?" Arthur asked, looking at his own pile. It was smaller, of course, than say... Lester's, but he still had one. So did Yuria, Fee, and Iuchar. "Because if so, so much of your personalities makes sense."

"Well, it's not like we haven't written about you guys."

"You have? Why?"

"Well, we're friends, yes? And family." Lana beamed and Arthur blinked slowly before glancing at me. I just grinned and continued looking through my stuff. "Anyway, let's see what we got!"

Of course, most of us had already tore through the packaging to get the presents, and helped Hestia get to hers so that we didn't have pieces of paper all over the place. Because all of Tirnanog had sent Hestia treats from them, along with little notes that we read aloud so that Hestia knew just how much she was missed, with the result of Hestia being so happy that she only stopped barking to chew on some of the bones and I half-feared she'd somehow wag her tail off!

But once she was settled, we looked through ours. Trinkets and treats that traveled well, of course.
Muirne had made us lotions and makeup, each one personalized with scents she knew we loved, as well as flowers she had carefully pressed and wrote poems for courage to go with them. Creidne had sent us clothes she had made, with a little note apologizing for 'too many' because she'd found that sewing helped her not remember her rape and helped her not worry so much about us. Dalvin had sent us charms to put on our belts (or quivers or bridles or whatever), each one meticulously woven and carved to best symbolize 'us', while also incorporating good luck and protection. Deimne sent us sketches of the town and of the people there, with little notes about how everyone was doing (and a tongue-in-cheek note of 'making sure you don't forget us!' as if we ever could).

Aideen had sent us medicines she had made, as well as blankets and cloaks she and the other townsfolk had made for us, since the desert could be brutally cold at night. She also sent little items we had left behind that she thought we'd might want, like books or jewelry. Plus some things of hers that she was 'letting us borrow', another quiet promise that we would see her again, alive and well. Mine was actually a pair of diamond studs, and I immediately slipped one of them on, replacing my other stud. I couldn't take off Dad's earring, but now, I'd wear something from them both. It would be like both were protecting me.

In that happy mood, I opened up the last package I had from Aideen, intending on joining the laughter and conversation from the others. However, all sound washed away when I saw there were tomes inside. Three of them, to be specific, and right on top was an Elfire. Well, it wasn't right on top. There was a note on top of it. Which I picked up silently, wondering just why….

'I am sure that you are wondering why I sent this to you. You're also probably very silent, frozen, and not paying attention to your surroundings at the moment as well. Take a moment to breathe and calm yourself, Riona. Then come back to the letter, okay?'

Laughing quietly at myself, I did as she instructed, taking some deep breaths and just being amused about how right she had been. It made sense; she had known me all of my life and had raised me for most of it. But it was still quite amusing to see that in a letter. And, of course, once I had calmed down, and once the laughter and squeaks of everyone filtered back into my hearing, I returned to the letter, now more curious than anything.

'Feeling better? You're probably more curious than anything at the moment.'

...She really did know me well. I glanced around and caught the others giving me concerned looks. I smiled, waved them away, but did move back just a little to silently convey that I wanted to 'not be in the group' to read this. They nodded and shifted a bit so that I was safely hidden, given me the privacy I needed.

'These are tomes I found over the years. Too complicated for me to really use, but I held onto them anyway. Because I knew that one day, if you wanted, you could use them. Of course, you don't have to. You have dear Arthur and, while I'm not sure he can use Elwind yet, I'm sure he can use the Elfire and Elthunder tomes. But I do hope that you will, Riona. But not out of any sense of obligation to me or your soldiers. I hope that you will because the magic is part of you, Riona.

I know you worry about your fires and how they can burn the very things you wish to keep safe. But just as fire burns, it warms. The flames you have conjured in the past... they have sterilized the needles I use to make sure no one gets sick, and boiled the waters I use to make medicinal teas. They have kept us warm in cold months, and let us cook the foods we love so dearly. And so much more. Because they are your flames, Riona.

Again, you don't have to use these tomes. You don't have to learn. I only wanted to encourage you, and remind you of the warmth of fire, since I am certain I did not do that good of a job with that while you were growing up. Make the choice you think is best for you. Even though you will be my
'baby girl' forever, you are an adult, walking a new path. One you felt obligated to walk, but I hope that you will find joy and wonder in it. Remember that despite expectations, you are allowed to pick your own direction. I'm sure Oifeye has been doing what he can to encourage that, but I wanted to make sure.

Fight this war as you choose. Pick what weapons you wish to use. I know they will be what's best for you. After all, I raised you.

-Love, Aideen'

I read through the letter a couple of times, mostly to make sure I understood it. Then I looked at the three tomes, just… staring at them for a long while. Then, sighing, I pulled out the Elthunder tome, dropped Aideen's letter back into the box, and crawled over to where Arthur was also away from the group, reading through the notes he had. He glanced up at me curiously and I passed him the tome before sitting beside him, just… trying to think. Not out of obligation… but that had been the reason I had been pushing myself. But, then again, I did realize recently that the soldiers didn't necessarily need my best. They just needed me to be me, and open with them. So, I wasn't 'obligated' to pursue it for them. And Aideen had said that I shouldn't be 'obligated' on her part. So, why…? Well, I only had an idea, and it was basically what I'd told Seliph a few days ago.

"Hey, Arthur?" I called softly. He nodded, showing me that he was paying attention. "Can you teach me how you learned to love magic?"

"I can show you, sure," he replied with a sad smile. He tucked the tome under his arm. "You'll have to find your own reason."

"That's fine." And honestly, what I'd expect. "So, when are you free again?"

"I think we're going to be building this around your schedule."

"Okay, point."

The two of us hashed out a tentative lesson schedule, going alongside the sword lessons I gave him, before we joined the others in the group, laughing and giggling. The others knew that something was bothering me, but recognized that I didn't want to talk yet. So, Lana just pinned me on one side, Diarmuid leaned on my other side, and we all joked and smiled. They knew I'd tell them later.

That evening, Ulster asked that I'd spar with him. He wanted more practice with using an axe, especially since swordsmen tended to give axemen trouble. I agreed, of course, because I knew I needed the training. Besides, it had been a while since I had time alone with Ulster. We'd all been far too busy. It was almost frustrating, since we used to be able to spend time together whenever we wanted. Now? We had to schedule it in.

"Ah, that was a good workout," I breathed, stretching out as best as I could while laying on the ground. It was delightfully cool, and I needed the break. "How's your shoulder, Ulster?"

"I popped it back into place," Ulster replied, not moving from the ground either. It was just nice to lay down. "I forget your damn axe kicks."

"I'm sorry for retaliating like that."

"To be fair, I flipped you. Didn't mean to, but I definitely fell into habits." He nudged my leg with his foot. "How's your knee?"
"Aching a bit, but I think it's fine. I'll have Lana or Yuria check it over in the morning." I'd been the one who stupidly landed on one leg instead of doing the smart thing, like rolling. "I wonder what the sky looks in the desert."

"Same sky. Same stars."

"Ulster, there's such a thing as too sensible." I elbowed him in the side, and he rolled his eyes before scooting a little closer. "But I can't get over how weird it is. To be heading to Yied. I swear it's come up over a thousand times with us, but…"

"Yied is important. Yied was the last place our parents saw us, really. Where we last saw them." Ulster reached up towards the sky, tracing out a shape. Probably a constellation. "I find it weird too. It's always been this 'dreaded land' for our family."

"It has." It was in Yied when Quan, Ethlyn, Altena, and their knights died. It was in Yied where everything started falling apart for our parents. If we looked back even farther, it was in Yied where Isaach lost the war and its independence. "There's supposed to be dark mages there, right?"

"That's what the rumors say." Ulster let his hand fall to his side. "Wonder if there are children we'll need to save."

"Yeah…" I winced, thinking again of the child who died in front of me. Last I'd heard, we still hadn't learned who they were. There was just too little to go on. "Hey, Ulster?"

"Hmm?"

"How did it feel to visit your parents' graves?"

"It…" Ulster fell silent, thinking of the words he wanted. I waited patiently, knowing there was no point in hurrying him along. "It felt… final. But not entirely in a bad way." He pushed himself up slowly, sitting and looking up at the stars. "There was the answer. Nothing more to hope for. Nothing more to wish for. Nothing more to wonder. I can use that energy now for other things."

"I see." Maybe because of how tired I was, but my brain instantly jumped to a certain thought and I was saying it before the thought was even complete in my head. "So, like courting Lana?"

"Riona!" He scowled. "I'm being serious!"

"You're always serious."

"Did you seriously ask just to tease me?"

"No, I was genuinely curious." I just had no impulse control at the moment. "I do think you've got a good shot, though."

"Romance isn't a contagious disease that infects everyone, you know."

"As if Lana is the type to be in love with love!" I swung up so that I was sitting to, and I glared, offended on Lana's behalf. "Seriously?"

"That's not…" He glowered right on back. For two seconds before we both just burst into laughter. "I think I should be asking 'seriously' about that subject change!"

"Sorry! I emulated Larcei too much! We need her around to remind us to not put our feet in our mouths!" I covered my mouth to muffle the laughter, shaking my head. "No, I was genuinely
curious, and then my mind jumped to a happier topic. But I had a reason for starting that conversation too."

"So, we should continue with the seriousness?"

"Sadly. For now." I managed to calm my laughter and I pulled my knees to my chest before resting my cheek on them to look at him. "Did you have any hesitations about taking up axes, Ulster? Because of everything House Dozel has done to Isaach?" Because everyone knew. It wasn't just what Danann had done. This all started because Langbalt took advantage of one lord's greed and twisted it into a war just to open up the opportunity to assassinate Prince Kurth. Of course, the 'official version' was still Byron and Ring, with Sigurd conspiring, but Isaach knew the truth. Or, at least, more of the truth than Belhalla was willing to say. "I know I joked about it, but…"

"Why would…? Oh. Oh, wait, I get it now. Probably why you've been moody since we've gotten the packages too." He rolled his shoulders before slowly stretching out his arms. "I think you're overthinking. Again."

"That… that's not what I asked!" I huffed and poked his cheek. "Come on. Did you?"

"Not really. Though, then again, I didn't take up the axe until I had Father's. But when I had it, I didn't hesitate, no."

"I see." I sighed, letting myself slump. "I can't… Mom used her magic to heal. But I am no healer. I can pull a shift in the infirmary and stitch up wounds, but…" I couldn't do it all the time. I couldn't be neutral and heal all who came my way. I couldn't just wait for my loved ones, wondering if they'd return as corpses or people I had to heal. I wasn't suited to such things. "Mom also never fought, really. There's no tome from her." Aideen said that they tried to get Mom to learn how to fight, but she always refused. Shanan said it was because Mom could keep her poise and maybe get one or two hits in, but ultimately, she'd hesitate. You had to get her really angry to even make her consider hurting someone. And you couldn't hesitate in a fight. You couldn't always fight angry.

"You don't really have any items from her, do you? You've the earring from your father and his sword, but…"

"None of us really have anything from our parents, remember?" It wasn't as if our parents planned on that being the last time they saw us. "But no, I don't. And I'm trying to work through the whole magic thing via the Fire Sword…" Because 'swords' were Dad. I had a 'bond' with them because of him. By connecting it that way, I hoped I could push through. "And I'm going to try to work through it with Arthur." Because Arthur was family and it both gave us a good excuse to spend time together and helped 'even out' our relationship in my opinion. "I was just…"

"Kind of hoping I had advice?" Ulster shrugged. "Could just be easier because I have never thought of them as family. Iuchar… I'm slowly getting there. Because Iuchar is nice, if a bit weird."

"Fits in well with us."

"That he does!" He laughed, but soon became serious again. "But Danann? Nothing but a criminal. Iucharba? Nothing but someone who chose to fight us. Brian or whatever his name is? Don't give a damn. If he fights us, he'll fall." He pulled me into a one-armed hug and kissed the top of my head. "But you're not like that. You may never call him 'uncle', but you acknowledge that Arvis is your uncle. You accept him as 'family', even if you hate him."

"Well, yes…" Because Mom had loved him. Because it was because of him that Yuria was my
family, that Julius was my family. "So…"

"In that case, I think my suggestion is just to declare it. Own it. He's your uncle. You are the niece of the man who thought he could hold the sun and didn't notice it scorching him until it was too late." Ulster smiled at me, rubbing my shoulder. "And so, learn the same magic, and show him how to actually utilize the sun's flames."

"Uh… Ulster?" I gave him my best skeptical look. "He's the Major, remember?"

"So was Danann. But I beat him. At axes. With help." His smile grew. "Oh, now what's that thing you like reminding Seliph again?"

"...Ah…" I had to laugh. Because he was right, and I was an idiot. "Our strength comes from each other. We watch each other." Oifeye had told me that it wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing to be 'like Arvis', because unlike him, I had friends. I had people willing to stop me if I went too far. "Even if I reach for the flames, you all will stop be before I burn everything we're fighting for."

"Way before." His eyes danced and now he grinned. "If, you know, you can stop making out with Seliph."

"You make it sound like we're always kissing each other!" I groaned, scowling. As predicted, Lester had told freaking everyone. "We have to steal moments, damn it!"

"We really need to figure out how to delegate better so that we have more time to just be our goofy selves. But we're getting distracted." He went back to smiling. "You've used your magic often to keep us safe, and to make sure we were warm. Just as I have used the defensiveness of the Neir blood to keep myself and others safe by blocking weapons." He patted me on the back. "We are our own people, Riona."

"True, true." I sighed. "Maybe I am overthinking it. I should just seize the prey like Hestia." I was the daughter of 'Death's Hound', sister of the 'Reaper's Wolf'. And no matter how much I loved Mom, I was definitely Dad's daughter through and through, which meant that the flames I inherited from her… they would burn my enemies in the hopes that the ash would help the plants grow. Which was like Arvis. But that… that would be okay. Because my friends, my family, would make sure I didn't go too far. "And speaking of being stubborn like Hestia…"

"I'm suddenly very terrified."

"Back to the possibility of you courting Lana. Because I'm not letting that go."

"Oh, gods damn it, Riona!"

I continued making suggestions until I got Ulster to blush, and then I dragged him inside to make him a snack. It felt like the least I could do to thank him.

Some nights, I wondered if I should just hold off on sleeping until after Hestia needed to go out one last time. That way I wouldn't be sleeping all peacefully and then have to wake up and stumble about in my pajamas to take her outside. I might be able to get extra work done too, and free up more time during the actual day for me to do what I wanted. Then again, sleep was nice. And wandering about in the middle of the night did let me observe interesting things. Like pretty owls flying silently through the skies, kitty cats chasing squirrels, and Yuria and Diarmuid talking in the garden.

"You have been bouncy ever since you left the infirmary," Diarmuid laughed, smiling warmly.
Yuria simply giggled, and I ducked down behind some shrubs to shamelessly eavesdrop. Hestia was running about anyway, hunting for a midnight snack. "So, what has you all giddy? Is it because Lana left you in charge of the infirmary by yourself for the first time?"

"No, but I am very proud of that!" Yuria giggled, kicking her legs back and forth. She was short enough that her legs didn't touch the ground while sitting. "No, it's because Seliph asked me to teach him light magic! Me!"

"Well, who else would he ask? You're our expert." Diarmuid's smile warmed, and I had to smile as well. I knew she'd be excited. "Still, it is nice to know you can be depended on."

"It is! I'm so grateful that I'll be able to help him! And… you know…" She looked around cautiously and I ducked down more to make sure she couldn't see me. "Spending time with my older brother."

"How are you doing about all of that?" Diarmuid gently touched her shoulder. "I know you keep saying you're fine, but…"

"Oh, but I am. I'm not alone, and I'm surrounded by wonderful people!" Yuria laughed. "Even if all of you are much too pretty and good-looking. It's so easy to become flustered!"

"Going to point out that you're extremely beautiful yourself." Diarmuid smiled warmly, and Yuria blushed a nice bright-pink. "But you're certain?"

"Well, there's still confusion and disorientation. Making connections without a 'base' is difficult. But I'd like to focus on the good parts. Not because I want to ignore the bad stuff, but because I do not want it to overwhelm me and take this joy that I love so much."

"I should try to take that advice. It's quite wise." Honestly, all of us should try to do that. "Well, if you are certain, I'll try to stop pestering you about it."

"Oh, you're not pestering me in the slightest. I know you and everyone is simply very worried, even more so because our duties do not let us see everything." Yuria sighed. "Riona and Seliph haven't even had a chance to go on a second date."

"You're even more invested than the rest of us with that!"

"I like it when all of you are smiling. You all work far too hard, so you should have all the happiness you can. At least, that's what I think." She clapped her hands. "Ah! I got distracted. I wanted to ask you something."

"That you did, and I apologize for the tangent." Diarmuid leaned forward slightly, mostly to look her better in the face. "What is it?"

"Well, you've done such a wonderful job teaching me herbs, so I was wondering if you could help me figure out how to teach Seliph?" She clasped her hands in front of her. "I know teaching magic is different than teaching herbs, but please?"

"Of course, though I'm not so sure how good of a teacher I am. I think it's more that you're a good student." Diarmuid laughed softly and Yuria beamed. "You can also talk to Arthur. I think he's going to teach Riona."

"Oh, that's wonderful! I'll be sure to talk to him." Yuria giggled. "Thank you, though. I mean it."

"Of course." Diarmuid stood and helped Yuria up. "Still, the hour is very late. I think I see Hestia
rushing about, which means she's been let out and Riona is no doubt grumbling curses around here somewhere." Normally, he'd be right, but I was having far too much fun eavesdropping at the moment. "Shall we head inside?"

"I think I'll say 'hello' to Hestia first, but please, go on ahead. It is very late, and I'm sure you have an early meeting." She smiled softly. "Good night, Diarmuid."

"Good night, Yuria." Diarmuid smiled at her one more time and then left, thankfully not walking past me. Yuria, for her part, didn't go after Hestia. Instead, she just stared after Diarmuid, watching him leave while blushing slightly.

So, I carefully crept out from behind the shrub and, seeing she hadn't noticed me, casually walked over and rested my elbow on her shoulder. "Diarmuid's got a very nice ass, doesn't he?" I noted blithely, leaning on her. She promptly squeaked and jumped. "Nice back too, but riding really tones that ass, you know?"

"R-Riona!" Yuria hissed, now blushing badly. Her eyes darted back towards where Diarmuid was, but he was out of sight. "Where did you come from?!"

"My mom." I poked her cheek, grinning. "Diarmuid told you I'd be out here."

"I… er…" She whimpered and covered her face with her hands. "Oh, darn it."

"Surprised you don't curse, considering us, but I suppose that's just the next stage of corruption." I whistled to let Hestia know where I was and moved to hug Yuria, cuddling her because she was just so cute~! "So, do you have a crush on him?"

"I have no idea." She glanced up at me hesitantly. "I have amnesia and only had contact with Lewyn until I came here."

"That is a very good point." I kissed her head and hugged her tighter. "A very good point."

"I do feel warm when near him, though, and his smile makes me happy. But I can't say for sure until…"

"I understand." I kissed her head again. "I'll make sure to not tease. Too much. And if it does become too much, you tell me at once, okay?"

"Okay."

"And I'm not sure if anyone else has noticed, but if they have and they tease, you also tell them to stop. Or tell me, and I'll make them stop. Or have Hestia do it." I grinned and she giggled.

"Remember, we are family and we want everyone to be as comfortable as possible."

"I know." Yuria leaned into me. "Many times, though, I feel like I need an adult."

"I know the feeling very well."

The two of us chatted about lighter things before Hestia returned, muzzle bloody because she'd caught a squirrel or something. Afterwards, we headed inside, still chatting and cooing over Hestia, because she was doing her best to be cute. And then we promptly got ambushed by Larcei. Somehow.

"Finally, found someone!" Larcei cheered, clinging to my back. She'd jumped on my back, and I barely caught her. "Yay~!"
"When did you get back?" Yuria asked her, startled. I was more surprised Hestia didn't warn us about her, since Hestia normally charged us when separated. "You were…?"

"Oh, I got back just now."

"Just now?!" Now her voice got squeaky. I just kept on walking, deciding this was just Larcei being Larcei. "It's after midnight!"

"I wanted to get home to everyone!" Larcei giggled, so tired that she was loopy. "Riona, you smell nice. Did someone buy you perfume?"

"Muirne made us new lotions," I explained, pausing so that Yuria could catch up. Hestia fell in step with me, licking Larcei's leg in welcome. "Packages arrived. Yours are in your room."

"Really? Awesome!" Larcei laughed. Yep, she had gone crazy with exhaustion. "Hey, why is the ceiling swirly?"

"That's what left of your mind spiraling away."

"Good riddance!"

I carried Larcei to bed, Yuria helping me tuck her in. After Hestia made sure to lick Larcei enough times for a proper 'welcome home', I walked Yuria to her room and waited while Hestia got her fur all over Yuria as a 'good night'. Then I decided to check on everyone, making sure they were asleep. Even Diarmuid was, showing he'd been much more tired than he'd shown because he had barely changed into nightclothes and hadn't even bothered with a blanket. I tucked him in and wrote a note to let him know, while Hestia checked on some of the others.

Satisfied that everyone was fast asleep, I returned to my own room and sat down on the bed. Hestia laid down at my feet, and I snapped my fingers, producing a small flame. A sign of my Fjalair blood… something I used without the slightest hesitation… Ulster was right. I had been overthinking it. And Aideen was right in that it was a part of me. If I stopped focusing so much on my fear of being 'like Arvis', focusing on how negatively everyone has viewed magic all my life, then I could admit that I'd used magic all my life. Warming things, starting fires, burning clothes to get an advantage… all of that came naturally to me. And denying this magic… it meant denying Mom, who I loved dearly. Who I respected highly.

"I am a big silly sometimes," I whispered, dismissing the flames and flopping onto my back. Hestia immediately jumped onto the bed with me and burrowed into my side. "And you have been taking advantage of me being tired to scold you for doing things you're not supposed to." Hestia yawned, licked my cheek, and rested her head on my chest, pointedly closing her eyes. "Yeah, I know. Sleep time for Riona and Hestia."

Tomorrow… tomorrow, I would start learning magic. Not out of obligation. But because it was what I had inherited from Mom. Because it connected me to my family. And even if I hated Arvis, would always hate and never forgive him… I loved my family. So, if I thought of it like that, then I was sure I would come to learn to love magic too. In time. Maybe.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: So, Seliph actually has a decent magic growth (30%) thanks to the
Naga blood. The only way he can take advantage of this in game is via magic swords, but hey, this is a novelization and there's nothing that says I can't have Seliph use magic instead of lances, so we're taking advantage of that Naga blood in this story. As for Hestia closing the door… my dogs have done that. All the 'El-' spells are B level spells in FE4, and Aideen (as a High Priest/Bishop) only has a C-rank in the elemental magics (and, in FE4, weapon ranks are set) which is why I chose to have her state that she couldn't use them. If Arthur is Azel's son, you can get Elfire at this point in the game via inheritance. If Arthur is Lewyn's son, you can get Elwind (and Forseti, meaning Elwind is rather useless on him). You can't get Elthunder at this point in the game as it's not available in Gen1 at all. But novelization. Again, I get to have fun.

'Oil' is put on swords to keep them from rusting, typically some sort of clove or mineral oil (or Choji oil, which is a mix of both). Ephrelas is a completely fictional plant. Tyrfing gives the most 'boosts' to stats outside of the Book of Naga, and it also grants the 'miracle' skill. There's nothing about the other weapons having extra things, really. I just added that in for fun.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Storm
My magic studies proceed slowly. No matter how much I resolve myself, I do still have to push past years of hesitation and discomfort. Thankfully, Arthur is patient, and I think he liked being in a 'teacher' role. Certainly Yuria did, though Seliph's magic studies went just as slow as mine. But we have time. Sort of. At this point, we're just waiting for more information, and all of us are all too aware that this is the calm before the storm. The calm before the next campaign, and the next set of battles. Gods help us all.

One day, I had unexpected free time in the afternoon, and struggled to think of what to do since no one else shared my good fortune. I did consider helping one of my friends with their duties, but then a thought wormed its way into my head, one that was very intriguing given the recent comparisons. But King Od died in Gran 707, give or take. That was a little over seventy years ago. So, it occurred to me that the oldest of the civilians… they might know something about him, and learning at least a little about them beyond the common stories… that proved far, far too tempting.

A couple of quick questions around town and I learned I was more than correct. They didn't just have memories of King Od. They had memories of most of the Crusaders. Obviously not of Njorun, though, or her brother. They had died much earlier, in what was called the 'Tragedy of the Gae Bolg'. Uncle Finn had told Oifeye the story, and he had told it to us while also teaching us about what little he knew of the Yied Massacre. If I recalled the books correctly, Njorun died in Gran 679, from suicide after accidentally killing her spouse. Or something. I didn't really know. I didn't really know much about any of the Crusaders besides the common songs and stories. But the elders remembered. And they remembered a great deal.

"King Od would walk through town every morning, no matter the weather," Elder Muir reminisced with a soft and fond smile. We sat in his house, drinking tea that I insisted on preparing. Of course, this was after spending time playing with his grandchildren, who he raised since their parents had been taken to the labor camps, and died there. "And no matter how old he got either. I remember him clearly, hair as white as snow, face lined with wrinkles… sitting in the market to listen to gossip while we children braided flowers in his hair."

"That sounds like fun," I replied, refilling his cup. And I made a mental note to suggest that to the others, since it did sound like fun. "What about the other Crusaders?"

"Hmm… ah, Duchess Fjalar visited often, perhaps because of how close Velthomer is to Yied." According to the maps, and Oifeye, it was the Grannvale duchy closest to the desert. Probably very convenient for Arvis's plan all those years ago. "Even with her hair streaked gray, she was bright and fiery, laughing and dancing. Duke Baldr was similar, helping the children play pranks." He sighed gustily, lost in the memories. "I think our favorite times were when King Ced would come down from Silesse, and play jaunty sounds despite swollen and aching joints. Then there was Duke Neir and his boisterous laughter, carrying children on his shoulders and…" And all the cheer faded, no doubt thinking of Danann and everything he had done to Isaach. "They were good people."
"They sound like it." I took a sip of the tea, a very light herbal mix. He didn't have anything stronger. He barely had anything; people only began moving back into town recently, after all the repairs finally finished. "Shame Danan didn't share that same cheer." The stories I had heard of Uncle Lex, though… it seemed like he had inherited at least some of Neir's… personality, I supposed.

"Yes, many of these past few generations prove that morals are not inherited. They are instilled." He paused and then shook his head, laughing darkly. "No, that's not right. Perhaps the fall of the Holy Blood began at their deaths, when their children took over… or their grandchildren."

"What do you mean?" I frowned, confused by the sudden mood change. "Aideen has told me about how Grannvale relied a lot on political manipulation and whatnot… and I suppose there is the conflict between Thracia and Leonster…"

"No, I don't mean those things. I talk of the Hunts." Absently, he picked up his mug, and I spared a bit of attention to make sure nothing was leaking or anything. His mugs were all chipped and cracked. "The Loptyrian Hunts."

"The… Loptyrian Hunts?" I had actually never heard of those before. Neither Aideen nor Oifeye had mentioned them. "I… uh…" I couldn't even think of a dry joke or anything. "When did those begin?"

"Shortly after the death of the last Crusader, Duke Bragi." He closed his eyes, doing his best to remember. "When the Loptyrian Empire fell, the Loptyrians escaped into the Yied, the one place that could be called 'neutral'. And the Crusaders did not pursue. There was too much to do, and if they didn't fight, then why draw out the conflict?" I could understand that easily. "But others did not share their mentality. The desert people weren't so welcoming, and pushed them into harsh terrain, refused to help."

"That…" I thought of all the preparations we were doing to cross the desert ourselves. Yes, some of it was paranoia, due to how… ominous the desert had always been to us. But I knew not all of it was. "What happened?"

"Eventually, they snapped, and tried to fight back. A paltry attempt, except they did kill one of King Heim's great-grandchildren. A toddler." He smiled bitterly and opened his eyes again. I could only wince. "You can guess from there."

"Yes, I suppose so." The battle here in Rivough showed well how out of control anger could become, especially when fighting against the source of that anger. "So, was it like the Child Hunts?"

"Very similar, yes. At least, in my opinion." He shrugged and sipped his tea. "The Loptyrian Hunts killed any and all who worshiped Loptyr. And for many of them, they had no idea of any other life. They were banned from the sunshine, banned from the fresh breeze. If they came up, they risked being burned alive. The elderly and the young… babes in arms and toddlers… anyone."

"That sounds…' Nauseating' was the only word I had. "How was that any better than the Child Hunts? How would that not have…?"

"You had a very good upbringing, Lady Riona. Empathy and the ability to see enemies as humans, even when you fight them. A heavy burden for the heart, but perhaps an important one." He smiled sadly at me. "But for us… for us, they were the monsters in the shadows. The demons who were vanquished and now just dregs." He hesitated a bit before bowing his head. "The burnings were great shows to us, back then."
"...Shows...?" I couldn't have heard right. I could not have heard... "How...?"

"There were picnics. Fathers would settle their children on their shoulders to give them a better view. We cheered at the first flames, and we laughed as they screamed." His hands shook as he picked up his glass. I could only stare in silent horror. "I am ashamed of it now. More so, even, because I lost one of my grandchildren to the Child Hunts. I would've lost another, but you saved her, Lady Riona. You held her in the middle of the battlefield, and then gave her to your twin so that she remained safe."

"...How could anyone celebrate...?" But I trailed off because I got it after a moment. I remembered the glee I had when General Richard died. I had been exhausted. We got distracted quickly. But I remembered, and I remembered writing Creidne at the first opportunity. Eager about it. Not to mention the elation that had followed Danann's death. "No, never mind. They weren't human to you. They were just..."

"Monsters. Not human. Killing them weighed no more heavily on our minds as slaughtering livestock. Less even." He looked up at met my eyes with his old, weary ones. "My lady, this old man has no right to make demands, but I do ask that you remember such things. What we have now, in my opinion, is simply another part of revenge's wheel. Another turn in the cycle."

"...Perhaps we need to break the wheel then." I stood up, taking the words as a dismissal. "I thank you for being so honest with me. I appreciate it greatly."

I left then, my mind churning from what I just heard. Then I jumped a few times to try and get some pep into me again, and with a smile on my face, I strode down the street like nothing was wrong. At least, until I heard thunder rumbling above, and looked up to see purple-gray storm clouds rolling in.

How marvelous, yes? Heavy topics and storms all in the same day. I was so cuddling with Hestia when I got back. Both just sucked.

Oh, it ended up so much worse than I had expected. Sooooo much worse. It was one of those storms where the thunder rattled the windows hard enough to make you sincerely wonder if the glass was going to shatter, and where the lightning was so sharp and bright that you swore it was a god's blade cutting through reality. And it was also one of those all day sort of things, meaning that once it started, it wasn't stopping. If anything, it just got stronger. Basically, my worst nightmare (that didn't involve people dying or being tortured). So, my plan for the evening had been to just... hide under my bed with Hestia or something, but Seliph snagged me before I could figure out how to make a blanket-cocoon there.

"Okay, you were right. This is better than being huddled under the bed with some blankets," I sighed, leaning back against him. After all, his solution to my fear was us sitting on the bed, with me wrapped up in his arms, and a blanket around us both. Maybe a bit warm, but I wouldn't have traded it. "Or in the bathroom. I hadn't decided quite yet."

"I thought you might like it," Seliph laughed, kissing my hair. I worried about how comfortable he was, but he seemed content, at least. "And good excuse to spend time with you."

"Yeah, when I'm-" I yelped and ducked when thunder boomed, rattling the nearby window. "I. Hate. Storms."

"I know." He hugged me a little tighter, and slowly, I relaxed again. I missed the lightning this time. "We're nice and safe, though. And look, it's the first storm after seeing Conall."
"That is true…" Still, my heart ached. I hoped he was okay. I hoped Ishtar was okay. Maybe it was wrong, since they were technically on the enemy side, but… ugh… complicated… "I told you about the conversation I had earlier, right?"

"About the Crusaders? Yep. We'll have a group meeting about ways of incorporating what they did later."

"Okay." Sighing, I glanced at the door warily, expecting it to burst open. "You know; I'm surprised no one else barged in."

"I may have asked to have time alone with you." He chuckled, and rested his chin on my shoulder. "Or, to be more accurate, I hesitated a bit because I wasn't sure what would be best for you, Yuria noticed and brought it up, and then…"

"Everyone else jumped on it so that they can tease us in the morning." Typical. "Well, I'm not complaining. You're very cozy. Almost as much as Hestia."

"Again, I compete with her for your affection. And lose."

"Many lose to Hestia." I leaned back and kissed his cheek. "But you have to admit she is cozy."

"That's true, as we all know very well. It's amazing how easily she comforts us." He looked over to where she was resting by the door, firmly blocking and listening for any potential eavesdroppers. "Ah, but it's getting late. How do you want to do sleeping arrangements?"

"I figured we'd just share the bed. Not like we haven't done that in the past." Especially during a thunderstorm. However, another look at Hestia, and her twitching ears, reminded me of something. "Er… we'll have to try and keep Hestia from jumping onto the bed. She's been bad like that lately."

"Yeah, no, I love her dearly, but no." He looked over at Hestia, who 'ror'ed and titled her head all innocently before settling down again. "Already got to deal with her needing to go outside. In the storm."

"You can just-"

"Nope." He went back to cuddling, and I laughed. "Rather make you laugh, or give you someone to cling to. Like usual."

"Like usual." I smiled softly at him, and tucked myself against his chest. Things like that were why it had taken me so long to realize and acknowledge the feelings I had always had. And that made me very curious about something. "Say, Seliph?"

"Hmm?"

"When did you fall in love with me?"

"Uh…" He leaned back a bit, looking at the ceiling and clearly trying to think. "Honestly, I think I always have. Like, it started as a child's crush, but it never went away? But it was always there, so I grew used to it and kind of became oblivious." Sounded a bit like me, then. We were both so weird. "If I have to pick a time… well, I realized a few years ago."

"A few years ago?" I leaned back to frown at him. "And you never said anything?"

"Got scared. I didn't want to make things awkward, and I was very convinced you didn't feel the same?" He smiled sheepishly. "And I was very wrong."
"Very wrong. I've loved you forever."

"Then why didn't you say anything?"

"Because it was so much a part of me that I didn't think of it anymore and so, needed a little prompting to put it into words." I turned to that I could face him. "My hair is blonde, my eyes are red, the sky is blue, and I love you. Simple, yes?"

"Ah…" And Seliph went delightfully red, blushing bright enough to be used as a lamp. "You seriously just said that."

"I seriously did." I smirked. "So, what are you going to do ab-?" And a crack of thunder make me yelp and I was back to curling up against him, trying to cover my ears. "Ugh… storms and romantic moments don't mix!" I flinched when lightning flickered in the window. "At all!"

"I'm content simply having you in my arms, though I do wish I could take the fear away."

"One, you're being sweet on purpose." I sulked up at him and he grinned. "Two, you like teasing me."

"Yes, when there's not a storm." He kissed my forehead and then my cheeks before kissing me on the mouth. "So, shall we think of silly responses to everyone else's teasing?"

"Yes, that sounds good."

We stayed awake a little longer, trying to anticipate everyone's comments, and then we both went to sleep when we were yawning more than talking. Hestia did try to climb onto the bed too, but relented when Seliph told her 'no'. He was the first one she woke up when she had to go out, though, as her revenge, but she at least didn't jump into the mud puddle this time. All in all, it was probably the most rest I had gotten during a storm in a long while. So, maybe they wouldn't be so bad in the future. Maybe. Biiiiig maybe.

The others teased, of course. If they hadn't, I would've been very worried. However, there were other things to focus on, and it wasn't as if there weren't other things to tease about. Like Lester walking straight into a glass window or Arthur getting his hair stuck in a door and trying to hide it while subtly reopening the door. Or Yuria being so focused on her medicinal notes that she walked through some paint and got it all over the floor. Or… well, all of us did silly things. The soldiers laughed and the ones who had been with us for a while even teased us too. I think they had a lovely time watching me try to pull Hestia out of the river because she really wanted a snake. And in the midst of all of that Lewyn finally returned.

"Seems you all did quite the good job here!" Lewyn noted with a laugh, striding in with confidence. Since our scouts told us he was arriving, we made sure Seliph, at least, was free to greet him. Ulster and Larcei had to take over his duties for it. I had volunteered, but then everyone was like "no!" and so, I was here with Seliph. Fee was somewhere behind us, having been one of the scouts who spotted him and, thus, needed to dismount and change, and I thought Arthur was hiding in the shadows. Oifeye, of course, was here as well, and I saw Diarmuid hovering not far away. I thought about sending Hestia to him, but she insisted on staying glued to my legs. "And… Gods above, this can't be Oifeye. Oifeye's all little and scrawny!"

"I wasn't that little or scrawny when you last saw me," Oifeye joked, hugging Lewyn. Lewyn hugged him back, but I thought it looked a little awkward. "You look well, for the most part. I'm glad."
"You look good too." Lewyn grinned. "Ah, but before I forget…" He dug through his pack and produced a letter. "From Finn."

"You talked to him?" Oifeye's entire face lit up with one of the brightest smiles I had ever seen him wear. "He still lives?"

"He does indeed. Doing very well, given everything." Lewyn's eyes scanned over the little group before focusing on Seliph. "Congratulations on Isaach, by the way, Seliph."

"It was thanks to all of us that we prevailed, Lewyn," Seliph replied formally. I caught Diarmuid's eye and we shared a grin; his far more nervous. "I'm glad to hear Finn is doing well. How fares Leonster?"

"Leonster stands… barely," Lewyn replied, becoming serious. Hestia left my side. I wondered why, but decided to keep focused on Lewyn for now. Something was just… bothering me. And she probably just went to support Diarmuid anyway. "It has endured a very long siege from Alster and Friege's forces. A year or even more. Walls are crumbling, and supplies are running low."

"So, we need to assist them as soon as possible."

"Ideally, yes. If Leonster falls, you'll find it that much harder to find a foothold in the peninsula there." Lewyn dug through his pack again, and I frowned. If Leonster fell, many innocent people would die. I would think that more important… though I supposed we did need to think of strategic importance as well… "But that is for later. Here." He produced two more letters, and I frowned. If Leonster fell, many innocent people would die. I would think that more important… though I supposed we did need to think of strategic importance as well… "But that is for later. Here." He produced two more letters, and handed a second one to Oifeye. "That one, Oifeye, is for Shanan. Figured you'd like to hold onto it. And this one…" He passed it to Seliph. "That is from Leif, Seliph. Your cousin."

"It is?" Seliph smiled softly, though his hand trembled. A letter… this was the first bit of correspondence between them. "I'm glad…"

"And then there is these two," Lewyn murmured, pulling out two more letters. He walked over and handed them to Diarmuid. "One is from Finn. He can't wait to meet you as well, and I wish I had the words to describe the smile he had when I told him your message."

"I… I see…" Diarmuid whispered shakily. Seliph immediately went to his side to support him. I almost did the same, but I noticed Oifeye frowning and wondered what was going on. I also noticed Hestia wasn't with Diarmuid. "And the second one?"

"Nanna. Your little sister." Lewyn smiled gently. Diarmuid almost dropped the letters, but Seliph caught his hands. "She was born shortly before Leonster's fall. And she can't wait to meet you at last, Diarmuid."

Unable to figure out what was bothering me, and bothering Oifeye, I decided to look for Hestia to see if she was getting into trouble. And I found her not far away, pressing into Fee's legs, and I finally pieced it all together. Fee was right there. There weren't many of us, and she wasn't hiding. She was in plain sight. Lewyn had to have seen her. And yet, he didn't even glance her way…

Immediately, I went to her side, and pointed to the door. Fee nodded, so I helped her out, Hestia keeping close, and we made it just down the hall and around a corner before she began trembling.

"I… it was him," she whispered. Her eyes wavered with tears. "It was him. I know it was him. But he didn't… he didn't look at me. Didn't acknowledge me. Not even an annoyed look. I was just… I was just there. Just a face in the crowd, and… and…" She hugged herself, knees buckling. I caught and held her, though, kissing her hair and rocking her. Hestia pressed herself into her legs, radiating
as much comfort as she could. "Gods, if Hestia hadn't…"

"Hestia is amazingly good at sensing when someone needs comfort." It was another reason why I half-thought she was a gift from my parents. "Offer to punch him is still there."

"So tempted to take you up on it. Another part of me is tempted to punch him myself to see if he would still ignore…" Her voice wavered and cracked. "What did I do? What did I do? Why does he not love me anymore? Why did he leave?"

I had no answers, so I just held her as she shook. She didn't cry, though. Her voice trembled and her eyes shone with tears, but she didn't cry. She just continued whispering questions that only one man knew the answers to, and somehow, I doubted he'd answer anything. Just an ass of a father and his daughter who wondered what had caused the change.

I had no idea how long I held her, but Hestia's ear twitched and I looked up to see Arthur hovering awkwardly nearby, clearly wondering what to do. After a moment, I waved him over and passed Fee to him. She continued shaking, hiding her face in his shoulder, and he hesitantly hugged her, patting her back. I waited a bit, to make sure they would be all right, and then I left, with Hestia staying with Fee to continue giving what comfort she could. And now that I was no longer focused on Fee… well, I had one goal in mind. I was finding Lewyn because I needed to make one thing very clear to him. This sort of behavior… well, it wasn't going to earn him any respect here. If anything, it would earn our anger. And my temper was already burning. In fact, I was so focused on trying to keep calm and not punching something that I almost walked right into Lewyn and Oifeyere and I was only able to hide because they were both too distracted.

"What the hell, Lewyn?" Oifeye demanded. "Do you think we are blind? Dumb? Your own daughter is here and yet, you pretended like she was nothing but a stranger!" Oifeye was mad. Oifeye was super mad. You could tell because every word was terse, like the fury and sharpness of his glare made even his words scared. "And she tells us that you haven't been with your family in five years! Erinys died, Lewyn! She died while you were away, doing whatever!"

"So, this is why you dragged me off?" Lewyn replied. He sounded annoyed, but his face bore no expression. "Save your words, Oifeye. I threw away my family to focus on what needed to be done."

"Did you now? You, of all people?" Oifeye's voice grew louder, even as they remained terse, and he began gesturing sharply. "You, who swore to Erinys on your wedding day that you would stand together? Who was excited about being a father? Who adored people and those you loved so much that you couldn't bear to lead them to war? And who promised to not run away anymore once taking the throne? You?!

"Yes." Lewyn continued to be expressionless, completely unaffected by it all. Like the uncaring wind that always blew. "So, are you done, Oifeye?"

"...Yes. With you, I am done." Oifeye's expression flattened and then turned to stone. He was beyond furious now. "It seems I must mourn yet another good man, because I don't know the one I am looking at. Only whose face he mimics, and whose legacy he mocks."

"I apologize for the disappointment." Lewyn shrugged, unbothered. I ground my teeth in frustration. "So, this has been a lovely talk and-"

"But let me inform you of something, Lewyn." I never knew Oifeye could speak with such venom. "That mentality? Thinking that you must ignore your family? That won't earn you any respect among this group. It will earn you their anger. Their hatred." Every word was cold, and I could
hear the pain in the ice. "Oh, they'll be professional, certainly, but you will find all of your suggestions mocked or met with pointed remarks. You will find yourself the victim of many pranks and accidents, most of which will be caused by Hestia to allow them plausible deniability."

The worst part was how quiet he was. He was so angry that he could no longer yell or anything. "And you will find that they will not be as inclined to listen to you, because your morals clearly don't align with theirs. You know nothing about the children I raised, Lewyn. It would do you well to remember that."

Oifeye stormed off, and I winced, remembering just how happy he had been earlier. Except here they were, with Lewyn being completely uncaring. Completely unlike how he had been earlier. And completely unlike… how he had been with Diarmuid...

"It seems I asked a bigger favor, and sacrifice, than I had originally thought…" Lewyn murmured quietly, so softly that I barely heard him. "So, little wolf, how accurate is he?" He turned to look my way, smiling slightly like he'd known I was there the whole time. "How much "You will call me by name or I will set you on fire," I replied coldly, stepping out. I glared at him with all my anger, bristling. "Because like hell do I want to be so familiar with someone like you."

"And that tells me that I am in worse trouble than Oifeye implied." He chuckled, like my anger amused him. Which made it all the worse. I couldn't believe this was the same man my mom called 'friend', and who Aideen, Oifeye, and Shanan had respected. "Reminds me of a saying I once heard. 'Death smiles at all, but the wolf snarls back.'"

"You're not making a good case for listening to you, you know." I crossed my arms and dug my nails into my elbows to minimize the chances of me actually setting him on fire. Might be fun to see if he remained so damn condescending if I burned his hair, but it wouldn't be right. And I had morals. Sadly. " Doesn't matter how helpful you are and can be. It doesn't give you the right to be a jerk. And none of us are killing our hearts for this conflict. I think Jugdral has seen enough of that sort of thing." I shrugged, wishing I could be as cold as Oifeye was. But I couldn't manage it. It took everything I had to not punch him in the damn face. "Regardless, every bit that Oifeye said is true, and if you hurt my Hestia, I will burn you. And then you'll be kicked into the woods and left behind." I drew myself up to my full height, and noticed with amusement that I was taller than him. "Fee is family. We protect our family. And we want people in this army to be comfortable. Seeing you so callous about your own family… it makes me sincerely wonder if we should trust you when our soldiers' lives are on the line."

I stormed off then, at first pleased with the 'last word'. But when I glanced back, I saw he wasn't even looking at me, and so, felt like he let me have the last word because he didn't think replying was worth the effort. That I wasn't worth the effort. How condescending could one human be?

"Riona?" I looked up and saw Lester walking towards me. His forlorn expression told me he already knew. "Judging by the look on your face, we should continue keeping Larcei from Lewyn," he noted softly. My only response was to loose a bunch of curses in an attempt to make myself feel better. "Yep. Definitely." He slung an arm around my shoulder and I leaned into him, doing my best to relax. "Come on. No need to deal with the asshole anymore."

"How mad is everyone?" I asked, taking deep breaths. This was just so… "Please tell me… I don't know…"

"Iuchar is the only one not completely pissed off, and even then, he's upset Fee was hurt so badly." Lester's eyes darkened. "Family is important to us, after all. And it's clear that he has chosen to remove Fee from his 'family', so we are mad at the hurt he has inflicted on her. We are mad at the
hurt he inflicted on Oifeye. But we'll keep professional. Ish."

"...I suppose the… irrational… feeling of betrayal isn't helping." We had grown up with stories about Lewyn. We knew him as someone Oifeye had respected, who Aideen had befriended. We knew him as someone our parents had considered one of their dearest friends. It led to certain… expectations. Expectations Lewyn completely destroyed. And I supposed it did make some sense. It had been eighteen years, and he was a person who suffered through the Belhalla Massacre, his mother's death, his country's fall, years in exile… "Still, I don't think a hard life is a good excuse to be an asshole." Though, I supposed that could be just because I'd been raised by Oifeye and Aideen, who did their best to be kind, despite their own heartbreak. "Changing the subject, why is it that you came looking for me?"

"Because Ulster and Lana were setting up a prank for his room, Arthur and Yuria are with Fee, and Larcei, Seliph, and Iuchar are all sparring." Lester grinned. "So, what shall we do?"

"No clue." I paused, realizing something. He hadn't mentioned... "So… uh… who has Hestia? Is she still with Fee?"

"Uh…" Lester froze, and I facepalmed. Because that was a 'no'. "...Uh oh."

We eventually found Hestia with Ulster and Lana, leaving half-eaten squirrels under Lewyn's bed. I scolded her… while also giving her pets, in the hopes that she remembered that she really shouldn't do this, but Lewyn was an asshole who deserved it. Was it childish? Probably. Did I care? Not as much as I should. And I was fine with that, for now. You couldn't be a mature leader all the time. I'd learned that.

We all did our very, very best to be polite, respectful, and even dignified in our interactions with Lewyn. Larcei and Arthur avoided him like the plague, not trusting themselves to not snap. Fee decided she wanted nothing to do with him, which was even more painful. None of us really discussed our feelings on him. Some were more confused than others, like Diarmuid who was grateful for the letters and furious over his treatment of Fee. Only Iuchar was ambivalent towards him, no doubt because he didn't hold such strong feelings about 'family'... and because he didn't know Lewyn (or hear stories of Lewyn) before this point, so he didn't feel 'betrayed'. Still, he focused on keeping our moods up, and making us laugh. More importantly, making Fee laugh, because if anyone deserved cheering up, it was her. And so, a few days after Lewyn joined us, Seliph decided that the army needed a day off. So that we had the excuse to spend the day making Fee laugh, but officially (and the only reason Fee was told), it was because we would be marching soon.

I, however, wasn't in the room with everyone. Instead, I was trying to find Yuria. Lana wanted some of their trainees to 'run' the infirmary today, in a more controlled setting, to see how they would do and so that she and Yuria could relax with the rest of us. However, no one seemed to be able to find Yuria. So, since I needed to leave to grab more snacks for us, I decided I'd look for her. Sadly without Hestia, since she kept close to Fee. No matter how much she tried to pretend otherwise, being denied by her father, when she had been looking forward to seeing him again… even if she had acknowledged the possibility, it was still painful.

"Lewyn?" Yuria's voice made me smile, even if her call told me she was with Lewyn. "Lewyn, I know you can hear me," she continued. I followed her voice and leaned against the wall when I saw her and Lewyn facing each other. "You have been avoiding me."

"Is it me or is it the other way around, busy bee that you are?" Lewyn teased. His smile was warm, and made his eyes crinkle or something at the corners. "But I am sorry, Yuria. Did you have
"Yes." Yuria drew herself up, and held herself much as I had seen Larcei hold herself. "First of all, I wanted to thank you for taking care of me, as I figured out my heritage and am now aware of the dangers involved. And I don't doubt you knew it as well." Her eyes narrowed, though. "However, I am also very cross with you."

"For leaving you alone here?"

"No, of course not. It's one of the best things to happen to me. I have friends and family. People who depend on me, and give me hugs for no reason except they want to." She leaned forward a bit, sulking. "However, you hurt Fee. And I am cross about that."

"...Oh?"

"Yes, because she is important to me." Yuria held her head up just a little higher. "Fee is my friend and... well, she has declared that we're like sisters. She's family, and I have learned here that while family and blood doesn't dictate you and your life, and that those you share blood ties with can make horrible decisions and be horrible people... the family you choose is important and should be protected. The family that welcomes you with open arms, encourages you to speak up and helps you find your footing... you protect them. And Fee is part of that family I choose." She sighed, and wilted, back to being her typical shyer self. "Of course, you are as well, which is probably another reason I am cross. It feels like my family is split and fighting, and I don't like that."

"...Well, this group clearly has been good for you. I think that's the most words you've ever said about your feelings." Lewyn sighed, and I noticed something. He was considerably softer with Yuria. Like he had been with Diarmuid. "That's good. You need to be assertive."

"I am glad you approve." She put her hands on her hips, scowling. "So? Is there an explanation? Oifeye is also hurt by this, and I am also mad about that because Oifeye is very nice and fatherly and kind and I don't like to see him hurting either. But I'll let the others handle dealing with you on his behalf."

"I think they are leaving it to their wolf who leaves her kills in my shoes." He sighed, though, and brought his ponytail over his shoulder to fix the binding. "It's just... well, things are..."

"You're going to say complicated." She frowned, and crossed her arms. "That just means I have to observe you until I figure it out. Like always."

"I look forward to your observations." Lewyn's eyes fell on me, and he wasn't surprised. He had known I was there the entire time. "Ah, Caitriona."

"Hello," I replied, nodding my head. And trying to not laugh when Yuria squeaked. I couldn't hold back my laughter this time. "No need to tease me!"

"Who's teasing? Am I not always truthful?" I skipped over and kissed her cheek before ruffling her hair. "Though I also did leave to get snacks."

"Oh, I'll help!" And she was off in a hurry, no doubt to escape further teasing.

I followed, pointedly ignoring Lewyn... and then I heard him whisper, "heritage? What is she
talking about?" Which made me pause, because how could he not know? He knew Deirdre. Yuria… Julia looked just like her. We figured it out within a day, and he had spent five years with her. He had to know. However, he lifted his hand to press it to his mouth, and his sleeve fell to reveal haphazard bandaging. And I thought… I thought I saw black...

"If you're injured, you need to get it treated," I grumbled, reaching over to fix the bandages without even thinking about it. He immediately flinched away, though, and I winced. I should've known better to just reach out like that. "I'm sorry." I held up my hands and moved so that I was standing in front of him and he could see me. "I won't undo much. But that's not going to stay on as it is."

"...Ah, you're right," he murmured. After a moment, he unraveled a little bit of the bandaging. On both wrists. He had them on both wrists. "It's… related to the Massacre."

"Then I am extra sorry." Deciding that he had unraveled the bandaging as far as he felt comfortable, I did my best to tighten them with so little 'wiggle room'. This time, I thought I smelled something off. "You should see Yuria about this. It might be infected, and infection is bad. You know; in case you forgot."

"I think you're just smelling the medicine I use." He watched me closely, likely making sure I didn't undo more. "My, my. Considering our last conversation, I am surprised by how cordial you are being."

"Being helpful and having good intentions is no reason to be a jerk. However, it also means that anger is no excuse in hurting an ally, nor is it an excuse to trod on someone's trauma." I kept most of my focus on the bandaging, wishing he'd just let me do the full thing. But this was what he was comfortable with, so this was what I worked with. "And just because you accidentally hurt someone, or pressed on old scars, doesn't mean you shouldn't apologize. And wounded is wounded. Even if you're a jerk and I'm mad, I don't want you to hurt."

"You might need to communicate that to your wolf. I swear she almost bit my fingers off."

"I will do what I can, but Hestia is a wolf. I don't own her. If anything, she owns me." I finished with one wrist, and moved to fix the other. Again, the smell was off. Infection… or necrosis… that's what I associated that smell with. "Also, we have way better smelling medicines. She might have just been trying to bite off the bad smell. If it's bothering me, imagine what it's like for her."

"It might have also been the food I was eating, now that I think about it."

"Don't taunt the wolf with food. She is fully capable of crushing your arm off." I finished tying the bandage and stepped back. "And there. Any of us…" I paused, thinking. "Any of us save Larcei will be willing to fix the bandages for you again. Larcei might, but she's especially pissed off at you for… personal reason." Her heart was still keening over Aunt Ayra and Uncle Lex. To see a reunion like… well, it just hit nerves. Which was honestly another reason why we were pissed off. "But I'm going to catch up with Yuria now."

"Thank you, Caitriona." He bowed his head slightly, and studied me closely. And something about his eyes seemed so old suddenly. "I will remember if I need the assistance again."

"Of course." And I was off again, wondering about those strange things I had seen. But then I shrugged and decided to simply leave it to Yuria. Knowing my luck, I'd awkwardly eavesdrop again before long anyway.

Yuria and I returned to my room with the promised snacks, and we spent some time just laughing
and teasing one another. With a focus on Fee, though we did our best to spread it around so that it wasn't obvious. I think she still saw through our attempts, but she laughed so much that I didn't think she minded at all. Particularly when it was decided that Seliph and Diarmuid read their letters aloud. Which... probably wasn't a good idea, but it was only later that we thought it might be a violation of privacy or anything.

"Father's letter to me is fairly short, with lots of bits crossed out," Diarmuid explained, showing the letter. And he was right. More than half the page was filled with crossed out words. "And an apology for how messy it is."

"I know I should try to use another sheet of paper, but there are already so many discarded around me'," Lana read, leaning on Diarmuid's back to read it over his shoulder. She hugged him around the neck and kept on reading. "'No, I won't say the number, for fear you might lose any respect you have for me.'"

"As if a mess would do that. I mean; it can't be worse than Larcei's room."

"True."

"Hey!" Larcei yelped, throwing a pillow at them both before going back to braiding Yuria's hair. Diarmuid caught it and tossed it over to Lester, who promptly tucked it behind his back and leaned more against the wall before resuming his talk with Iuchar about tactics. "Don't be mean!"

"Is it mean when he's telling the truth?" Ulster deadpanned, not even glancing at her. Instead, he and Arthur were playing cards, so he was focused on that. "What else does it say, Diarmuid?"

"From there, it simply talks about how he can't wait to meet me either... and how he's wanted to ever since Mother wrote to him about me," Diarmuid explained shyly, with a bright smile. I knew, in the days ahead, there would be lots of talks about how guilty he felt, especially so soon after we had Aunt Ayra and Uncle Lex's fates confirmed and because of how Lewyn was acting towards Fee. But for today, we would be happy and celebrate properly. "It ends a bit awkwardly, like he didn't know what else to say. But he did write that he loves me, so..."

"Sounds amazing." Ulster spared a smile for him. "Watch, though. You're going to trip over your own feet when you meet him."

"I will not!"

"Now I want to arrange that you do!" Larcei grumbled, but with a hint of a smile. She was having fun. "Be great! But whatever. Seliph, you awake? I want to hear about your cousin now!"

"Of course I'm awake," Seliph replied, frowning slightly. His eyes weren't even closed; I was brushing and braiding his hair while both of us chatted with Fee, who was curled up with Hestia. Hestia, after all, refused to leave her side. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Lost in la-la land because your lover is running her hands through your hair?"

"Which... she's done since we were itty-bitty-little?" He rolled his eyes and produced the letter, though. "Leif focuses on the situation at Leonster, so I'm afraid it's not an entirely happy letter. But he does talk about how he looks forward to meeting me, especially since we're cousins."

"Seriously?"

"Yep." He looked down at the letter, smiling. "He mentions there is a lot he wants to talk about, but he specifically wants to save it until we're face to face so that we can go back and forth."
"Boring."


"Can't believe you have a sister!" Larcei turned her attention right back to Diarmuid, who had already pulled out the letter from Nanna. "Make sure you don't learn how to be a big brother from this lot. You've got some practice with Lana, so build off that. And especially don't follow Ulster's example."

"You should follow Seliph's?" Yuria suggest with a happy, shy smile. She was careful to not move, though, to avoid messing up the complicated braids Larcei was putting in her hair. "I think he's a wonderful big brother, at least." And Seliph blushed in pleased embarrassment, smiling shyly at her. "So…"

"When we meet him, you can also follow Ced's example!" Fee added, laughing. Her hands were clinging to Hestia's fur, though, and Hestia licked her cheek. "He's seriously amazing. And I'm sure we'll meet him soon." Meaning we'd have… another awkward reunion… well, hopefully, someone could warn him. "Soooo…!"

"Though really, Diarmuid, you're already wonderful, so I think you'll be just fine as you are."

"She's right about that. Be yourself first and foremost!"

"Ah, but that leads me to a thought…" Seliph began slowly. He looked at Fee, shifting even to face her, and I simply set the brush down to pet Hestia. "I know this is fun and we're supposed to be on break… despite what Lester and Iuchar think." Lester and Iuchar grinned at the rest of us before resuming their talks. "Lewyn's ability to hear things on the wind. That will be helpful for the scouts. However…" However, that was part of Fee's job.

"I…” Fee began. However, she paused, and closed her eyes to think. All of us fell silent, waiting for her. "I think… I will be fine. But I might need someone else to talk to him."

"I'll handle that part," Ulster volunteered easily. He left the game temporarily to ruffle her hair before returning. "It'll be fine."

"Oh, good. And I'll be sure to say something if it's going worse." Still, Fee hesitantly glanced over at Arthur, who shrugged. They must've talked about it. "So… um… Nanna?"

"Ah, yes, Nanna's letter!" Diarmuid laughed, easily helping with the subject change. Lana left Diarmuid to curl up next to Fee. "Hers is very rambly and it talks a lot about what she looks like and things she likes… dislikes… funny stories…" Diarmuid held up the letter… which was at least four pages. Front and back. "It's really great, actually. Let me find a particularly funny one… it dealt with someone named Orsin and another person named Mareeta…"

We did our best to keep the mood up, to the point of separating Lester and Iuchar so that even they stopped talking of serious thinks. After all, this might be the last time in a long while that we could afford a day off. We might as well make the most of it.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Lewyn returns, and… well… Lewyn is much more serious and harsh
in Gen2 compared to Gen1. And that's all I'm saying on him for the time being. Fee being elated and then heartbroken by Lewyn ignoring her comes from the Game-Chapter 10 talk. While the game glosses over it, because technological limitations, I felt like it would be out of character for Oifeye to not confront Lewyn over it (or, at least, how I have characterized Oifeye). And the others being angry… well, saying "I threw away my family for the goal" to a group of people who a) value family HIGHLY and are very affectionate and b) miss their parents greatly? Nooooot the best of ideas.

There's no letters or anything in-game, but I thought that would be a fun little touch. Based on his conversation with Oifeye, Diarmuid learns of Nanna during the interlude between Game-Chapter 6 and Game-Chapter 7. So, here's how!

Now, for that opening scene, I wanted to highlight the Loptyrian Hunts again, since they play such a huge part in so many things, and I wanted to show that this conflict still isn't black and white and whatever, even when you have irredeemable villains like Manfroy. (Though you do have some on the enemy side who ARE just plain evil.) The description of how much of a 'party' the burnings were comes from descriptions of executions during the French Revolution/Reign of Terror. I also wanted to give an explanation for why the Loptyrian Hunts started, especially given my characterization of the Crusaders in *Memoirs of the Crusaders*.

Next Chapter - Phantoms (Game-Chapter 7 start)
Chapter 36) Phantoms

Lewyn has returned with all the information we need. Now preparations begin in earnest to finally cross the desert. No small part of me feels relieved because it feels like we've been preparing for forever. But the rest of me is worried. There was just... on the edge of this desert, to the north... that was where we said goodbye to our parents. It felt like... I didn't even know what it felt like. Even more like a point of no return, with doors slamming shut behind us.

I hope Mom and Dad are watching over me. Over all of us. I don't think I'll get through this without them.

"Considering how up-close I fight, hoops are probably not a very smart thing for me to wear," Larcei mused, examining a pair of Fee's before slipping them on and checking herself out in the mirror. "But they are so pretty. Simple, but pretty."

"Yeah, I like their simplicity, but sometimes, I just want something a tiny bit fancier, you know?" Fee laughed, putting on a pair of Larcei's earrings, simple pearl drops. She examined them in the mirror, giggling and beaming. "I look like I'm about to head to a ball!"

"They're actually rather plain by Isaachian standards. Granted, Isaach hasn't been able to really go full out with colors and whatnot, but Isaach used to leave the fanciness to things like jewelry or scarves, so jewelry could get super creative."

"Really?"

"Yeah, they're like... actually, Riona, you brought one of your fancier outfits, right?" Larcei glanced over her shoulder at me, where I was sitting on the floor by the bed, brushing Yuria's hair. "With the scarves and things?"

"It's in the back of the closet, yes," I confirmed, more focused on Yuria. Thanks to a particularly windy day, her hair was tangled all over the place. I had to keep flicking water on it to have a chance of getting the tangles out without just ripping her hair. Yuria endured without complaint, but I still wanted to minimize the pain for her. "It's one of the plainer ones, but I think it'll show what you mean."

"Awesome!" Larcei laughed, skipping over to the closet. We were, after all, in my room. "Why did you bring it again?"

"Just in case we had to do something fancy. Like attend a fancy dinner for allies or something."

"So, diplomatic bullshit that I'd avoid. Got it." She pulled out the dress, careful to keep everything on the hanger with it, because I kept all the scarves and jewelry with the dress. Creidne had made and designed it for me, one of her firsts, and though it was 'plain', it was one of my favorites. "But see, Fee? This is what I mean."

Fee squealed in delight, looking it over, and the two rapidly began talking about different parts of
the outfit. I rolled my eyes, but smiled, finishing up with brushing Yuria's hair. We had spent most of the morning like this, just relaxing and having fun. A girls' day where we could laugh. Well, most of us. Lana was fast asleep, using Hestia as a pillow right by the door, and it was a bit of a shame since part of the reason why Larcei and I organized this was so that Lana could have some fun, but if she needed the sleep, then she needed the sleep. Time to sleep was important for a healer, and it wasn't like we didn't enjoy the relaxation time.

"Yuria, I'm going to pin up your hair, okay?" I told her, gathering up the strands. After a moment, I decided to twist it into a partial bun, letting the rest hang down in a ponytail. Her hair was much too long to simply put into a bun, after all, even with as thin as it was. "Any pinching or anything?"

"No, it feels fine," Yuria reassured. When I finished, she shifted her head side to side, giggling a bit. "Well, it feels weird, but fine. I've never worn my hair up before."

"With your hair as long as it is, I'm not surprised. Gods know that I don't bother pulling mine back unless I know I'm going to fight or something." And Yuria's hair was way longer than mine! "And there's a reason why Larcei keeps hers short."

"Brushing hair is a pain in the neck, back, and shoulders," Larcei groaned, rolling her eyes. She tried to keep it long, since Aunt Ayra's had been long, but inevitably, Larcei would get frustrated and hack it all off. "Hey, Fee, why do you keep your hair short?"

"I got tired of feeling like the wind was going to pull my head off with my hair!" Fee laughed. She was switching to a different pair of Larcei's earrings, giggling. "It was also just easier to give people rides with it short. When my hair was long, they had to either ride in front of me or be treated to a full course meal consisting of my hair!"

"No tangling?"

"Thick hair. I can get caught in an avalanche and have only a few tangles." She sighed gustily suddenly and began finger-combing Larcei's hair. "What I want to know is how you guys keep your hair and skin so soft! Whenever one of you hugs me, I swear I'm being swaddled in silk!"

"I always imagine it as petals, mostly because of how nice they always smell," Yuria giggled, moving so that she sat next to me. After hesitating, she tentatively picked up the brush, and I moved in front of her so that she could brush and play with my hair. "Wait, is that a weird thing to say?"

"If you want soft hair, you should talk to Arthur because his hair is super soft, and when he shared what he did with me, I made sure to tell the others," I replied, not sure how to answer Yuria's question. First time my hugs had been compared to silk or petals, though. "As for skin care, I just do what Larcei and Lana tell me. I try to retain the whys and whats of it, but…" It all blurred together for me. I got basics, of course, like 'this cleans your face' and 'this softens your skin', but that was about it.

"Meanwhile, you are practically an encyclopedia when it comes to animals," Larcei teased, grinning. I simply smiled, because she was right. "You know; there are stories about Od's bond with animals."

"Oh, yes, I remember hearing a couple." There was apparently something about Od befriending a snow leopard. I wanted to see one so badly! "Ha… maybe it is the Od blood and it's all Dad's fault."

"I'm not sure you can blame the Od blood entirely, when Ulster and I have sense."

"Reminder that you were the quickest to latch onto Hestia."

"Has Riona always liked animals?" Yuria asked curiously, sadly saving Larcei from more teasing. She brushed my hair slowly, like she was afraid of hurting me. "I think… I remember someone close who loved animals…"

"Probably Conall, since he and Riona were always chasing after stray cats and petting any animal they could find," Larcei noted. She sat down in front of me and after Fee finished with the earrings, she did the same. "But yes, she always has. I remember when we were little and a soldier called Riona a bitch for… something." Larcei grinned and I groaned, remembering this story. "Riona got a bright smile on her face and thanked them for the compliment because she was like 'I think that is another word for a female dog, and they are amazing and make puppies'.'"

"Really?"

"We were like five," I grumbled. I still had no idea why the soldier had called me that. I did remember the stupefied look on the soldier's face at my reply, though. "Didn't know it was supposed to be an insult." Conall had shared my confusion. We both just... liked animals. "But dogs are pretty neat. I prefer Hestia, of course, but they are friendly and adorable and~"

"And if we let you, you will literally talk for hours about them!" Larcei laughed, briefly tickling my side. She then focused on Fee, grinning. "But, to spare our ears, you find a set of earrings you like? You're more than welcome to borrow them."

"I did!" Fee squealed, giggling. After a moment, she moved to my side and began braiding my hair. Larcei quickly did the same on the other side, and I resigned myself to being a doll for the moment. "Sorry it took so long. You have so many!"

"Yeah, I should stick to just the one pair as Riona does, sort of…" Larcei batted my dangling earring playfully and I rolled my eyes. But I also smiled because I didn't mind. I loved the earring, all the more because I knew Conall wore its twin. "But I kept seeing pretty ones that called to me so pleadingly…"

"I know that feeling!" Fee smiled brightly. "When we get a chance, we should totally go shopping together."

"That does sound like fun!"

We continued chatting, and once my hair was brushed and filled with all sorts of braids, it was Fee's turn to have her hair brushed and styled, or so Yuria and Larcei decided. I, however, grabbed my spare brush and went to brush the still-sleeping Lana's hair. She sleepily complained and briefly woke up, but when she saw it was just me, she went right back to sleep, curling up in my lap instead of on Hestia. Hestia, meanwhile, licked my cheek and then trotted over to the other three to give them affection. After all, we were her pack, and she refused to let anyone feel like they were unloved, especially by her.

Mornings like this were nice. I hoped we'd have them again soon.

"That's it… look, you're walking…" I murmured, helping a young woman, Sari, limp-stumble around the infirmary. She had been one of the ones in the camps, and only recently recovered enough to begin physical therapy to regain her full range of motion. My part of it was holding her hands and walking backwards while she took her first shaking steps forward, letting her use me as a balance since her legs still weren't quite strong enough. "See? I told you that you could do it."
"I… I am…" she whispered, tears slipping down her face. But she smiled brightly, in utter disbelief. "I can't… I thought for sure that…"

"Everyone has the power to change their world, one step at a time." I smiled softly at her, and stopped, noticing how she was wobbling more than walking. While she had been trembling the whole time, the wobbling showed she had reached her limits. "Do you need me to carry you back?"

"No… no, I'd like to try and walk back to my bed." She giggled breathlessly, squeezing my hands. "Though, a break would be good. Is that okay, Lady Riona?"

"Of course." I pulled her into a hug so that she could lean on me and get some weight off her legs, and looked around the infirmary while she rested. Today, helping out in the infirmary meant helping some of the healthier ones see that, yes, they could in fact recover their strength. Nearby, Hestia helped a little boy walk, by letting him cling to her fur and shuffle next to her, and get licks for making it to certain points. It made me wonder if there was a way we could train other animals, like dogs, to do the same. It was a lot easier to convince someone to walk if it was for a cute puppy, or so I thought.

Laughter, however, drew my attention towards the center of the room, where Diarmuid and Seliph were playing with the children recovered enough from the camps to interact and play, but not enough that they could begin physical therapy to walk or anything. Since they had to be careful, it mostly consisted of picking them up and twirling them about, or letting them ride on their shoulders or the like. Simple 'games', really. Still, the children loved it, and Diarmuid and Seliph both smiled brightly as they played with them. I knew it was their favorite part of the day, to help these children remember how to smile and laugh again.

Sari tugged my sleeve to let me know she was ready to try again, and I focused back on her, taking her hands and walking slowly. Together, we walked all the way back to her bed, and I tucked her in since her legs shook far too much to try anymore. I kissed her forehead and praised her for her strength, and she sleepily giggled, pleased and proud of herself, and fell asleep, exhausted. I told Lana so that she could check her over, and went to go help the next one. However, Niamh appeared and informed me that we had a guest in the courtyard. Which was confusing because we weren't expecting anyone, certainly no one that would require a leader's attention. Still, I knew to trust Niamh, so I asked her to take over helping out for me while I went to investigation. But damn if I wasn't dumbfounded when I made it to the courtyard and discovered just who our guest was.

"Ah, there's my little bit of sunshine!" Aideen laughed, leaving her things on the ground and rushing over to hug me. It wasn't until I smelled her perfume and felt the warmth of her hug that I processed that she was actually here. "You're a bit thin, Riona. You've been eating, haven't you?"

"Yes, though they have been lighter than before," I answered, hugging her back. I felt months of tension just melt away, and I felt relaxed, fully relaxed, for the first time in ages. "But we all make sure we eat, and get sleep."

"Good." She pulled away, and cupped my face, smiling warmly. "Ah, you've a sadder look in your eyes as well. I knew war would do that, but I wish I could've spared you all from it."

"It's only fair, Aideen." I smiled back, because it was just… everything felt like it would be okay. She had that effect. "What brings you all the way down here, though? Not that I'm not happy to see you or anything, but we're a long way from Tirnanog."

"The patients in Tirnanog are doing well enough for Muirne to take over their care and I knew you all were torn about leaving the wounded and ill here." She giggled and I just sighed. She was, of course, completely right. We hadn't written anything about it, not wanting to stress her out, but
she'd known anyway. "So, I decided I would come down and take over for you, so that you could march forward with minimal worries." She rested her forehead against mine, eyes dancing with mirth. "I also missed you dreadfully and had to see you before you left Isaach. Letters simply are not enough."

"They really aren't." Go from seeing her every day to not at all? Weird experience. "I'm afraid a lot of us are busy, but..." I glanced over my shoulder, and saw Yuria, Arthur, Fee, and Iuchar standing awkwardly not far away. They must've been called here as well. "Ah, but you can at least meet the five you haven't met yet." I paused and did a mental count before facepalming, irritated. "Four. I meant 'four'. It's too early."

"I was about to ask who else joined!" Aideen laughed, kissed my cheek, and walked over to the others, starting with Arthur. She gave him a warm hug, pulling away quickly when he stiffened in shock, and brushed the hair out of his face. "Ah, you must be Arthur. You might have Tailtiu's coloring, but I see Azel so clearly in your face and gaze." She combed her fingers through his hair absently, smiling gently. "You know... I have some poems Azel wrote. They were rough drafts of ones he gave to Tailtiu after they started courting, so they're quite messy with crossed out words and the like. But he had me proofread them, and I kept the copies specifically to show their children later. I'm pretty sure I brought them with me."

"Um... that's..." Arthur began, eyes a bit wide. He looked at me with a 'is she always like this?' expression before focusing on Aideen again. "Father wrote poems?"

"He wrote many poems, and not just for Tailtiu either. He was very good at it, though he would always blush and squirm when people complimented him." Sensing that Arthur was getting overwhelmed, she kissed his forehead and moved to Iuchar, since he was closest. Arthur, meanwhile, actually hid behind me to escape her. "You're Iuchar, yes? I'm so sorry about your family. It must be hard."

"That's kind of you to say, Duchess Aideen," Iuchar replied softly, bowing his head. Unlike usual, he didn't try to flirt or be dramatic or anything. Instead, he gave Aideen the utmost respect. "But we weren't very close."

"That doesn't mean it doesn't hurt anyway," she countered gently, stroking his hair. She then smiled sadly. "Ah, I wish Jamke was still around. I'm sure he could help you far better than me, but if you need a shoulder or a hug, please let me know?"

"Of course." He grinned suddenly, switching to his more typical self. "Far be it for me to refuse a goddess!"

"Oh, hush. I'm more than old enough to be your mother." She laughed, though, and went to hug Fee. "You have to be Fee. You look just like Erinys."

"Do I?" Fee asked with a laugh of her own, immediately hugging Aideen back. I saw the pain in her eyes, though, and I couldn't help but wince at how she got a warmer welcome from a total stranger than she had from her own father. "I always thought I was too round in the face."

"Erinys was like that too when she joined. It took a couple of years." Aideen kissed her forehead, and Fee giggled. "I'll share some stories with you about her. She was a wonderful woman."

"I'd like that!" Shyly, Fee looked down, before tugging Yuria up suddenly. "Ah, you've probably figured it out, but this is Yuria!"

"Yes, I guessed that." Aideen's cheer faltered briefly, no doubt remembering Deirdre. But then she
smiled softly and pulled Yuria into a hug. "I'm very glad to meet you, Yuria. I'm sure things must be terribly confusing for you."

"It's not so bad, Miss Aideen," Yuria whispered, smiling. She caught my eye over Aideen's shoulder, and I winked at her before gesturing to where Arthur was still hiding behind me. It made her giggle. "I'm glad to meet and bond with so many people. But would you like to see the infirmary? Lana is there."

"That does sound good," Aideen replied, stepping back. After a moment, she took Yuria's hand and then turned to me. "Riona, there's letters from Tirnanog in my stuff. Do you mind passing it out for me?"

"You mean there was paper left?" I joked, laughing. Arthur mouthed 'what the hell?' and I just laughed harder. "Yeah, I'll handle that. You go tease Lana. She's been much too serious."

"We can't have that, now can we?" She laughed, and walked down the path with Yuria. Iuchar and Fee left as well, both chatting about something. "I'll get her fixed up."

"Have fun!" I looked to Arthur, grinning. "Yes, she raised us, along with Oifeye. Probably explains even more than the care packages. Want to help me with passing things out?"

Arthur agreed, and so, we ran around trying to find everyone to give them their letters. A few were out on patrol, so we left them with trusted friends. Because, of course, it was letters from everyone in Tirnanog. I seriously wondered how much paper they had left in the town after the care package before and this, but hey, if they wanted to send them, I wouldn't say 'no' to the reminder that we were loved. Besides, it was fun looking over my friend's shoulders to read little bits of whatever letter they had opened first. They pretended to protest, but really, they would've done the same, so it didn't really matter. It did, however, lead to one hell of an awkward discovery when I looked over Lester's shoulder to read the letter he got from Creidne. And one that nearly had me screaming.

"Hold up, what the hell is this?" I half-demanded, leaning more on his back as if the words would change if I got a little closer. But, of course, they didn't. They were the exact same ones, written in Creidne's slightly shaky, but otherwise neat, writing. "You proposed to Creidne?!"

"Yes, let's loudly announce that directly into my ear," Lester deadpanned, scowling at me. I did take a look around to make sure no one was near, but thankfully, the courtyard where I had caught him was clear. "You're the one spying, you know."

"But you two…!" I huffed and stomped my foot. "Okay, mister, start talking! And you better have told Lana!" That was when I noticed the ring in his hand. A ring I didn't recognize and knew wasn't his, because Lester didn't wear rings. "And what is that?!"

"You're so loud…" Lester sighed and folded up the letter to put it into his pocket. "No, no one proposed, Riona. We talked about it, and decided to think on it."

"And the ring?"

"Creidne sent it with her letter." He smiled softly, though, holding it up to study it better. "So, I think technically she proposed to me. Sort of."

"I cannot believe you hid this from us!" I scowled, actually annoyed by this. "If Seliph proposes to me, I swear I'll make sure you're the last one to know."

"If? I think we all know that it's more of a 'when'." He rolled his eyes, and I scowled more. "Are
you... you are really mad, aren't you?"

"More annoyed than mad. But we were all seriously wondering why you two suddenly broke up and all. Lana was actually rather upset by it." I stamped my foot, mostly to bleed off frustration. "So..."

"Ah, I'm sorry..." He finally got that I wasn't teasing, and looked guilty. "I didn't think that worried you all that much..."

"We tried to not make a big deal about it, just in case, but we were worried. And curious." I crossed my arms, digging my fingers into my elbows. "And, like I said, Lana was upset by it, though she made sure not to show you. We had no idea what happened, after all, so she didn't want to make you feel bad."

"Wow, that..." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Again, I'm sorry. It felt like something I shouldn't share until we had both talked about it again. And... well..." He winced, pain lingering on his face. "It wasn't long afterwards that..."

"...Oh, right." A few months after Lester and Creidne broke up, Creidne had been caught by General Richard. "I forgot about the timing. Time is weird."

"It is." Lester laughed softly, forcing himself to lighten the mood. "Though, I suppose I could've mentioned something like 'we are taking a break to think' or... something."

"And it really isn't our business. Just... you know..." I sighed, calming down finally. I felt bad now. "That seems like an important thing to share with us? I mean; I understand, especially now, but..." I hadn't even known he was considering marriage.

"I am going to get you all to help me pick a ring to send back." He smiled, and I smiled back, both of us relaxing again. "It wasn't anything official. Just..."

"Just discussions. Like the discussions Seliph and I have about making our own relationship work with all our duties." I slung an arm around his shoulder and steered him towards the market. "Here. I'm buying you a treat."

"Oh, you don't have to do..."

"Reminder that you have to tell the others all of this."

"...Yeah, I want sweets before I try that." He whimpered and I laughed, unable to help it. "I'm seriously, though. You have to help me figure out a ring. I'm not even sure what size she wears."

"Same size as Larcei and me. We traded jewelry all the time." I giggled, pleased about all of this now. I mean; once I got past the initial shock of not knowing, it was probably one of the best things I had ever heard! "Oh, hey, new thing to tease. Once Lana stops killing you for it."

"Gods, help me now."

When we got back from the market, and Lester did inform the others, I swore you could've heard everyone's shocked screams and yelps all the way in Agustria or Verdane. And Lana didn't speak to him for a full hour to let him know how mad she was. It was hilarious.

A few days after Aideen arrived, I made lunch for her, since she had been in the infirmary all morning looking over Lana's notes on all the patients. Which, hilariously, confused the kitchen
staff because they were used to me having to make food for Oife, and Oife had actually eaten lunch with everyone for once. But no, this time, it was Aideen, simply because I was sure she lost track of time. Of course, when I arrived, she was busy talking to Lewyn, but that just meant I had to stand by the door to her office awkwardly, holding a tray heavy with food and drink. No big deal. No, not at all. I didn't even have Hestia to keep me amused; she was with Lana, helping with physical therapy for the children again.

"I must admit, Aideen, that I wasn't expecting so pleasant a conversation," Lewyn was saying as I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, hoping that the words meant they were wrapping things up. He always seemed to know when people are near, and despite us having a semi-cordial conversation, I still did my best to avoid him like he had rabies. "Considering… well…"

"Oh, Lewyn…" Aideen laughed, but there was a hard look in her eyes. And her sweet smile was razor sharp. "You wouldn't have been the first person I was wrong about. There was Andrei, for instance. Arvis. You've simply joined the list. That's all."

Lewyn, wisely, left the conversation at that and simply left. I tried to not snicker when he passed, and simply focused on giving Aideen my brightest smile and setting out her food. "So, what was he in here for anyway?" I asked nonchalantly, careful to not set the plates or cups on the notes.

"Testing the waters?"

"Ultimately, I think that's why, but he came in here to ask how everyone was doing," Aideen replied, sighing gustily. She then mimed strangling someone before throwing her hands up in the air. "I'd like to think it's something he and Erinys talked about, at least. It's the only thing keeping me from slapping him. And giving him a long lecture about how he spent years struggling with running away, only to do it again under the guise of altruism. Again."

"It's so rare to see you get irritated!" Now I laughed, unable to help it, and I tucked the tray under my arm. "Anyway, you missed lunch, so I made you a quick thing. I had time off."

"I was just thinking that I had spent more time in here than I'd planned." She beamed at me briefly before she pretended to be scolding. "However, you should have used your free time to spend time with Seliph."

"Seriously?" I rolled my eyes, shaking my head. "So many people suggest that."

"Because you two are adorable together, with your little smiles and the warm and fond looks. It is fun, watching you two interact." She giggled. "So, it's really a selfish reason. It warms the heart, and that is sorely needed in times like this."

"I like that answer better than the ones I've been getting."

"I'm sure." She giggled again, and took a big bite of the pastry I had made her. However, her cheer soon faltered, especially as she looked over the notes again. "Ha… I keep expecting to see stars."

"Stars?"

"Alicia had a habit of using stars to label things. I'm not sure she even really noticed, but I found it adorable." She ran her fingers over the paper, smiling sadly. "Stars for who were able to fight. Those with an 'x' by their name could be fielded in emergencies. That was the system she used, and that Ethlyn, Claude, and I picked up. And whenever we had to move things, she would put stars on the boxes to show what they were. Like three stars for the box with staves."

"Oh." I never knew that. I wondered why she'd done that. "Are you okay, Aideen?"
"I will be, Riona." She sighed and shook her head before setting down the pastry and reaching up to fix her ponytail. "I was just remembering. Remembering all those who are lost, and who I will not see again until my passing."

"Which will be a while."

"In theory, yes, and it is what I hope. But if the gods try to take any of you, I will demand that they take mine instead." She took my hand and looked up at me entreatingly. "I know I said it before, but you all must come back, alive and well."

"We will, Aideen." I made sure to smile. "And look, we'll get to meet Uncle Finn soon!"

"That will be nice. I'm so glad to hear he's still alive, and that Lachesis at least made it down there, even if we don't know where she is now." Pain flicked across her face again, but she shook her head, and she was back to her 'mom' look. "But what of you, Riona? I know something troubles you. You're not standing as tall as you usually do."

"Ha… how is it that you see through all of us so easily?" I leaned against her desk, trying to think of how to word an issue I'd had for a while, but… "I'm not sure what I do."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I mean… I'm a leader, but I'm not like… I'm no 'scoutmaster', like Ulster. I'm no healer, like Lana. I don't lead… anything, really. I'm the person soldiers come to for questions, and I help the others where I can, but…" I groped for words, trying to find the one I wanted, the one that best fit my feelings. "Floating. I kind of feel like I'm floating or something, Aideen. Or, worse, that I'm more defined as 'Seliph's lover' than I am as an actual leader."

"Ha… I remember Deirdre and I having a similar conversation." Aideen smiled sadly; I wasn't sure I quite liked the comparison. Given how she ended up and all. "You'll be surprised, Riona, by how important that job is… and how hard. You have to pick up and keep track of many different things, both so that you can take over when needed and to answer those questions. And soldiers who know why they are given orders are much more cooperative. Soldiers who know they can ask someone, a leader, about those reasons makes them feel more at ease." She squeezed my hand reassuringly. "Being that person is important for keeping the army united, and for helping the army run smoothly. If it feels like you are floating, it is because you are like a fairy, blessing and protecting them."

"Like the Fairy of the Skies, who blessed Od's twins with Astra and Luna?" My tone was drier than I would've liked, but… "I'm nowhere near pretty enough to be a fairy, Aideen."

"Then perhaps like a wolf, patrolling the area to lend what aid you can to your pack?" She continued smiling, and slowly, I smiled back. "You hold many threads together, and pull them taunt when the others have to rest so that nothing falls apart. Like how when Larcei left to visit Ayra and Lex, you took over her work."

"So, jack of all trades, master of none? That sort of thing?"

"You know the rest of the saying. Jack of all trades, master of none, but oftentimes better than a master of one." She laughed. "You used to be so quick at correcting people about that."

"And 'blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb' and 'curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back'." I shook my head, embarrassed. "I was such a brat."

"No more than any other child. If anything, I was glad to see such normality. None of your lives
were normal, after all. They couldn't be." She smiled proudly at me. "But that is your job, Riona. You help ensure everything runs smoothly."

"Mmm… I'll think on it." At the least, it was something to think on, instead of random words and feelings. "Love you, Aideen."

"I love you more, Riona." She laughed and let go of my hand to begin eating. "And thank you for the food. I've missed your cooking."

"Not sure why, since I learned from you." I kissed her cheek. "I'll talk to you later, okay? I've got to see Fee and Arthur off."

"Give them my love? I think I frighten poor Arthur, so I'll stay here, but...

"I will! And he's just not used to a motherly person." I gave her a hug. "Bye for now!"

I left her office and skipped a bit down the halls, feeling lighter. I still wasn't quite sure I got what she meant, or believed what she said, but at the least, I knew she believed it and it did feel nice to both get that off my chest and to have that feeling validated. Besides, talking to Aideen always made me feel better. I had a feeling that would never, ever change. However, there wasn't much time to muse on how lucky I was. I had to quickly race for the courtyard because… well, since we were marching soon, Iuchar had suggested that we send a messenger to Leonster. A means of giving them hope. Fee had agreed instantly, and Arthur decided to come along just in case Fee got into trouble. And since they were heading to Leonster, they were also carrying letters and presents, which meant...

"It's practically a damn puzzle!" Arthur growled as I entered the courtyard, trying to rearrange things in his pack again. "Gods damn it! Why are there so many things?"

"At least they're little things?" Diarmuid replied, a touch sheepish. He, Yuria, and I were the only ones free at the hour, so we made sure to see them off. "I'm sorry. It's all my fault." It really was. After all, it had all started with him wanting to send a present to Nanna and Uncle Finn. Which led Seliph to decide he should get one for Leif. Which… eventually led to all of us getting presents. "We… uh…"

"I should've expected this. Your home village… town… whatever sent all those care packages, after all." Arthur sighed, and looked up right at me, not surprised to see me there at all. "Get over here and help me. Yuria is helping Fee."

Laughing, I skipped over and we unpacked everything to repack it again. It took a couple of tries, but we did manage to fit everything without it being obnoxiously bulky. In silent thanks, Diarmuid picked it up to attach it to Annand's saddle, so that Fee and Yuria could say their goodbyes. It also left me free to help Arthur up and hug him tightly.

"We should hopefully move within the week, so make sure you plan for that for the return trip," I whispered. As typical, Arthur remained frozen, but he wasn't as stiff as he used to be. I think he was getting used to the hugs. "And Alster is south of Leonster, so you might be able to find out more information about Tine." I pulled away and cupped his face, smiling. "You can try to sneak there as well, but I think you might want to wait until things are a little calmer."

"More than likely. At the moment, I'm planning on returning with Fee. Think it'll be safer for both Tine and me," Arthur replied, smiling hesitantly. He seemed a bit baffled, and I wondered if he ever had someone 'see him off' before. "If that changes, I'll make sure Fee knows."
"Good. We'll be waiting for your return." I hugged him again and, this time, he hugged me back. "Be careful. I'm sure some people will see the hair color first and attack without thinking."

"Of course. And you be careful in the desert."

"We will. Promise." I pulled back and kissed his cheek. "Extra promise."

Arthur rolled his eyes at that, and probably was going to say something. However, Yuria had apparently finished saying 'goodbye' to Fee, and so, rushed over to hug Arthur goodbye as well. Poor Arthur yelped, knocked a bit unbalanced, and I jumped back to avoid getting caught in that. Fee used the distraction to hug me, laughing.

"I might have literally pushed her because she was being hesitant," she teased, hugging me tightly. I rolled my eyes, but had to grin, because that did make a lot of sense. "I think I'll finish that cat-headband while away. I'll wait to give it to him until others can see, though."

"Please and thank you!" I replied, biting back a laugh. Instead, I turned to face her and kissed her forehead. "Thank you so much for this, Fee. I know it's a huge favor."

"It's fine. Almost a shame that you have to go so far out of your way. Flying is such a direct path." She giggled and winked at me when she pulled away. "I'm sure they'll be relieved to hear we're moving as well."

"I hope so." I also hoped we got there in time. Traveling through the desert would be rough, even though we were sticking to maintained 'roads'. "Don't rush or push yourself though. We'd be heartbroken if you made yourself sick because of that."

"And that's why Arthur is coming along. He'll snark long before I'll need the break." She grinned and I laughed. "Okay, we're off!"

"We'll be waiting!" I glanced over at Yuria and Arthur, who were in the middle of an apologizing spiral. "We should intervene."

"Yep!"

We managed to get Yuria and Arthur to stop apologizing to each other, and Diarmuid gave them his own hugs and thanks. Then Fee and Arthur mounted up, and Annand did a couple of steps on the ground to check the weight. Then she cantered up into the sky, arcing out to ease her journey up. Yuria, Diarmuid, and I waved goodbye, and kept on waving until they were completely out of sight. Only then did I look around and sigh, confirming what I already suspected. I hadn't even spared a thought about it when I saw him, but it would've been nice if Lewyn had been in the courtyard to see Fee off with us. Even if he awkwardly stood back in the shadows or something. But no, he wasn't here. Not at all.

"So, I was nervous earlier and Oifeye offered to teach me a little," Diarmuid said, breaking the silence. He smiled warmly at both Yuria and me. "Want to tag along and watch him beat my ass into the ground?"

That made Yuria yelp, and me laugh, and the two of us did join him at the practice yards with Oifeye. To make it a bit more fair, I decided to take up the lessons as well, and poor Yuria fretted over us. It was a good way to distract ourselves from the awkwardness, and the worry for Fee and Arthur being alone in enemy territory.

Gods… please… keep them safe…
"Well, the market is lively," I whispered, smiling warmly. Though nowhere near as cheerful as Tirnanog's market, this was the most energetic I had ever seen Rivough. "I'm glad."

"Same," Seliph agreed, just as softly. He poked my cheek and kissed me as soon as I looked at him. "Come on. Let's walk through."

"I'm right beside you. Always."

Whenever we could, our group decided to follow the Crusaders' 'example' and walk through the town, listening to gossip or shopping or playing with the children... whatever we felt like at the time. Since we were leaving soon, all of us, even Oifeye, decided to take the morning off specifically to spend it with the people. Not that I was really sure where everyone was. True to form with our friends, they promptly decided they needed to do random things and conveniently leave Seliph and I to ourselves for a 'date'. Even Hestia got in on it; she had decided to curl up with Aideen inside the castle instead of walking out here where she could get random treats. But, even if I thought everyone was ridiculous, I couldn't deny that I liked being able to simply walk down the street with Seliph, hand in hand. I mean; I'd done it before, but this time... well... er...

"You are making the most interesting faces," Seliph observed, half-skipping to avoid stepping on a cat that decided to suddenly get in the way. I thought about following, because they were a cute tabby, but they were far too quick. Must've been chasing a mouse or something. "What is it?"

"Mentally complaining about how my mind is turning to mush like a romance novel," I 'grumbled', pouting up at him. He simply grinned. "That's all."

"You adore romance novels."

"Well, that is true. I do love them." I rolled my eyes and looked away. I barely caught sight of another cat dashing away from the square. Followed by a couple of dogs. "It's the principle of the matter, though."

"Is it?" Seliph lifted our intertwined hands and kissed mine. "Maybe I should find a few of those lines to quote them for you."

"I'll probably spend too much time correcting you to get into the mood." However, I did have to laugh at the mental image, and then laugh even harder when an idea popped into my head. "I wonder if we should try to convince Ulster to confess with Lana with some of her favorite quotes?"

"That..." Seliph frowned for a split-second, before laughing so hard that he had to lean on me to stay standing. Nearby, a dog started barking loudly. "I would pay to see that. I would."

"Great idea, isn't it?"

"We're sharing this with Larcei."

"Oh, of course!" I giggled, already imagining her reaction, and then looked around to see if there was anyone we knew nearby. I caught sight of Oifeye talking with a group of men of similar age, making me wonder if it was a 'fathers' discussion, not too far away. Lester was playing with some children a little further away. "It'll be..." I saw a mama-cat herding her kittens away from the square with frantic movements, her fur standing on end. And as I paid more attention, I noticed there were more dogs barking. More dogs running. Birds flying quickly through the skies. "...Hey, Seliph?"

"Yes?" He frowned, noticing my unease. "What is it?"
"I think… I think the animals sense something." I looked at him. "We should-"

The sky suddenly darkened. The wind ripped through the streets, nearly tearing out my hair as I looked up and saw black flames twisting through the clouds. The flames converged into a skull-shape, and it grinned sickly before opening up its mouth. An ear-splitting screech nearly shattered my ears, and though I covered them automatically, the sound continued on and on and on. And black light shot out from the 'mouth', raining down like spears. More screams joined the screech, along with the splintering of wood and the tumbling of stones as buildings collapsed. People were crushed. People were skewered. People were dying. But I couldn't move. The screech had me immobilized, even as the light-spears headed straight for Seliph and me, and all I could do was close my eyes and wait...

There was an impact. Something splintered behind me. I fell on my ass, dragging Seliph with me. Or maybe it was Seliph who fell and me who was dragged. I wasn't sure. But either way, we were on the ground, and not in as much pain as I would've thought. But there was a shadow over us, and something dripping on us…

I finally thought to open my eyes, and could only stare in horror when I saw Oifeye standing over Seliph and me, with blood pouring down his face, neck, arms… everywhere… he had shielded us. Oifeye had shielded us.

"Are you two okay?" he asked shakily, expression pinched from pain. But he smiled when Seliph and I nodded. "Good… good…" And Oifeye collapsed in a heap, his blood soaking our clothes and puddling in the street…

I couldn't move. I couldn't breath. Seliph shook Oifeye with trembling hands, trying to get him to respond. But he didn't. He didn't. He just laid there limply, like a bunch of rags. Bleeding. It was all I could see, even as the light returned to the skies. At least, until the screams ripped through the roaring in my ears, reminding me that… that whatever that spell that had been… it hadn't just hit people. It had hit and destroyed buildings. No fires yet, but there were people trapped and… and…!

"L-Lester!" I shouted, forcing myself to react. I pulled Oifeye onto my back and teetered as I stood. Oifeye was a bit heavy for me, and I was shaken, so I almost fell. Seliph steadied me, though. "Lester, Oifeye needs to get to the infirmary!"

"Diarmuid, you and I are going to clear rubble!" Seliph ordered, his voice cracking slightly. But he stood tall enough to pretend he knew what to do. "Quickly, everyone! We don't have time!"

The next few hours were a huge blur. I gave Oifeye to a pale and wide-eyed Lester. Seliph and Diarmuid lifted and moved rubble to let rescuers crawl into ruined, fallen buildings to drag out potential survivors. The wounded were rushed back to the castle. The dead were set to the side. I bounced between pulling people out, burning wooden beams blocking the way, taking people to the infirmary, and reassuring the trapped that help was on the way and would be there soon. I think. It was difficult to say, really, because I simply moved so that I wouldn't freeze. Moved so that I wouldn't scream. Moved because these people trusted us, and we had to live up to that trust.

It wasn't until our group was safely in the War Room that I let myself just stop. The dazed looks on everyone else's mud-and-blood-streaked faces showed that they were feeling just as shocked and confused as I was.

"M-Mother says that it's a dark magic spell," Lana whispered after a moment. She had angry red welts on her arms that she attempted to cover with bandages, but her fingers fumbled too much. Ulster reached over to do it himself, letting her just focus on talking. "They saw it in Verdane.
Sigurd's army, I mean. The ones hit... if they didn't die immediately, then they'll be fine. The spell just has to run its course, and only healers with Holy Blood are allowed to tend to them."

"Why is that?" Seliph asked dully. He stood more... well, loosely I supposed the word should be. Sagging. Wilting. Anyway, not his normal. But he did stand at the head of the table, like usual. "I heard..."

"It seems the spell is more for demoralization, if that's even a word." Lana held still while Ulster bandaged her other arm. "It kills, yes, but it's main purpose seems to be to inflict a long and painful... something... sorry, words are hard. I honestly can't remember what's a word and what's gibberish."

"Ramble all you want." Seliph gestured at all of us. The typical group, with Yuria joining us, and Oifeye, Arthur, and Fee not here. "We're all..."

"Right..." She smiled at Ulster when he finished the bandages and took a deep breath. "The healers without Holy Blood were inflicted with some sort of... let's go with poison for now. While trying to treat those hit. It's something in the black liquid the survivors cough and spew. The welts on my arm seem to be the Holy Blood containing it or... something. I'm not sure. But we..." Her voice cracked. Lester moved to her side and pulled her into a hug. "We've lost two healers already. Only those with Holy Blood can safely tend... tend to them. Mother is handling it now. She remembers what they did in Verdane."

"I see..." Seliph sighed and looked to Lester and Iuchar. "You two did patrols yes?"

"We did," Iuchar replied. He glanced at Lester, and Lester gestured at him, more focused on comforting Lana. "No one near. No signs of anyone. We even got Hestia to help us out. Nothing."

"Well, that sucks," Larcei deadpanned. She wobbled a bit and I moved to support her, letting her lean on me. Hestia was in the infirmary, comforting the children who had nearly been crushed by their own homes. Aideen had asked, because it kept them from wandering about for comfort, and getting underfoot. "Anything interesting, at least?"

"Well, there was something I noticed..." Iuchar hesitated before chuckling mirthlessly. "Sorry, I keep thinking of a way to try and lighten the mood, but can't. But the worst damage seems to be where each of us were. With a focus on where Seliph was. The building and stall behind where he and Riona were was obliterated."

"Meaning this was an attempt on our lives." Larcei growled and we all winced. Assassins again, but this time... "Damn it... how...?"

"I'd suggest 'traitor', but I know exactly who will be targeted if those rumors start circulating."

"You. Right."

"Actually, Fee and Arthur might be more in trouble," Diarmuid sighed. He reached up to run a hand through his hair, but Yuria stopped him; his hands were bandaged because of how badly the splinters had torn up his palms. Honestly, all of us were bruised and scraped up. But we'd refused healing staves, wanting them to be saved for the others. For the civilians who shouldn't have been caught up in this, but were. "It's only been a few days since they left."

"And while we know that they wouldn't..." Ulster began. He then shook his head. "No, no point in even saying it. If people want to blame them..."

"They'll come up with their own explanations." Diarmuid shook his head and clenched his fists.
His palm began bleeding, and Yuria quietly took his hand to rebandage it. "So, maybe we should focus on that… whatever it was. Some sort of spell, but…"

"It's a siege tome known as Fenrir." Lewyn stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. He had mud and blood on his clothes, same as the rest of us. "My apologies for being late," he continued, looking at all of us. He then moved to the wall and leaned against it. "Like most siege tomes, it is normally limited by sight, but scrying lets one get around that."

"...I think… Conall mentioned something about that, actually…?" I whispered, trying to think. I felt like my head was full of cotton, or a whole bunch of Hestia's fur. "Something about seeing from afar?"

"Yes, that is exactly it. Now, granted, performing the combination is very stressful for the body and only a handful can cast a spell while scrying, but that is my best guess for what happened today." Lewyn's eyes narrowed, looking over all of us again. "I listened to the wind and got a likely location for them."

"Where?" I leaned over the map, tracing random patterns. "And how long do we have before another attempt like this?"

"The Yied Shrine." Lewyn walked over and pointed it out on the map. It was far more north than we had planned to go, off the main roads entirely. "I imagine you will have a good bit, but I also imagine you will have another attempt."

"So, we have to use the window to do…" I almost stumbled when I straightened, but Lewyn supported my back. "Thank you. Are there limitations to this… scrying thing?"

"Needs a reflective surface, and since they had to reconstruct a lot of their old dark magic, there's probably only a few who can use it."

"Did the wind tell you that?"

"I've spent the last five years gathering information." Well, nice to see he abandoned his family for that. "So…"

"...Small group," Seliph whispered then. He frowned, looking at the map. "No cavalry. It's the desert. Yied Massacre proved how detrimental cavalry is in the desert. And we'll limit it to people in this group here."

"In that case, let's just have it be those of us here who don't fight on horseback," Ulster suggested. He glanced over at Lewyn. "Will you cover the spymaster stuff? Fee isn't here to take over."

Lewyn nodded, smiling slightly. "Thank you."

"Someone else divide up Larcei's duties. Lana? Yuria?" Seliph looked at them. "What about you two?"

"Yuria, you should go with them," Lana encouraged. Yuria looked a little hesitant, and confused. "They'll need a healer, and you haven't worked with the black-blood-patients yet. I have and I know Mother will need help. We have more conventionally wounded as well." Yuria still hesitated, but she then nodded. "Thank you. I already feel better about this, knowing you'll be there with them."

"I'll be leaving Hestia here," I added absently. I shrugged when everyone gave me a weird look. "Desert. Fur. Hestia is adapted to super cold weather, which is good at night time but not during the day. It'll be easier on her if she stays with the large group."
"Will she stay?"

"She should. It's no different from when Diarmuid and I went to Ganeishire." Yes, it was. But hopefully, I could get her to behave. "The animals in town seemed to sense something, so maybe she can give you some warning if it happens again."

"Though, hopefully, we'll get there before that," Seliph murmured. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before opening his eyes again and looking at each of us. "Everyone else, start moving our army out as soon as possible. We'll meet you to the south, near the road to Darna. Rivough cannot take another attack like that. We have to leave, just in case."

"Something else you might want to consider..." Lewyn began, while the rest of us nodded and already planning what to pack. "The Yied Shrine was the home of the Loptyrians for over a hundred years, so I imagine that they have kept many precious things there..." Lewyn became almost thoughtful. "It would behoove you to see about freeing what prisoners are there, and what items you can find."

"I think it would behoove the prisoners and that is all the reason one should need." Seliph looked at Lewyn impassively, and Lewyn bowed his head, acknowledging the point. "Okay. Let's... first, let's make sure Aideen doesn't need us. Then we get moving."

Aideen, of course, did need us. There were a thousand and one things that needed to be done, but most of her attention had to be with the black-blood-patients. Meaning that others had to tend to the rest, including the healers who had taken ill from the black blood. We did what we could, and did our best to reassure everyone. It felt like empty words and gestures, but they were all we had. So, we worked until we just about fainted, and Aideen chased us out to rest. Except I didn't go rest. I sent Hestia off with Seliph, and then I went... I went to visit Oifeye, who unlike most, was resting in his room. Probably because of his Holy Blood, Oifeye didn't vomit up black blood or have his skin discolored or anything. He had just... taken quite a bit of magical damage when he didn't have a lot of resistance. So, he was unconscious, and would be for a while. Aideen said he'd live, which was why she felt comfortable leaving him in his room and thus freeing up some space in the infirmary, but...

"Hey, Oifeye..." I whispered, sitting on the edge of his bed. Despite normally being a light sleeper, he didn't even stir. He just laid there, blankets rising and falling with each breath. "So, we're going to go to the Yied Shrine. Who knows? Maybe we'll run into Shanan. A shrine seems like a good place to hide Balmung and all." No answer, of course, so I rested my head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat. It was, thankfully, steady. "So, some of us might not be here when you wake up, but we'll... we'll be fine, okay? So, you just rest, because you've b-been working too hard anyway. This is prob... probably the gods telling you to relax and..."

I broke down crying, unable to talk anymore. Then I cried more, because normally when we cried, Oifeye was there with a reassuring hug and comforting words. But there were no hugs or words here. It was just me, crying into his chest while he was unconscious, desperately listening to his heartbeat as proof that he'd live. And it hurt. It hurt so, so much...

I knew the desert would be scorching during the day. I knew it would be freezing at night. I knew the sand would get everywhere. But I didn't expect how tiring trudging through the desert was. Nor did I expect how unexpectedly deep the sand could be. It was a good thing I hadn't brought Hestia. We almost lost Yuria in one of the dunes, after all.

"I'm beginning to wonder why we didn't try to just sail down to Leonster," Seliph grumbled, helping Ulster balance on the constantly shifting sands. Fucking sand. Coarse, itchy, and made
walking a chore. I hated it with a passion. "Why didn't we?"

"Leonster might be by the water, but the closest port is over by Conote," I reminded him, barely keeping my own footing. Didn't help that I was helping Yuria not fall. Or trying to, at least. It more felt like we kept falling, but happened to fall into each other and stayed upright. Ish. "Not to mention the whole 'getting enough boats' thing? Isaach isn't exactly known for its sailing."

"It's too hot to be logical." Seliph sighed, and coughed as he caught a mouthful of sand from the wind. No sandstorms, or regular storms, but that didn't mean the wind didn't carry the sand anyway. "I am never, ever traveling the desert again. I will hike through the mountains if that's what it takes."

"Or stick to roads?"

"Or that." Seliph and Ulster both yelped as they both found an unexpected deep spot in the sand. Yuria and I quickly pulled them away and brushed the worst of the sand off. "That's it. Larcei, fall back to us for a bit. We're stopping for a rest."

"Sounds good to me," Larcei called from up ahead. She had been scouting, but now gladly took the opportunity to rush back. And jump on Ulster's back. "My feet hurt!"

"Get off," Ulster growled, making absolutely no effort to actually get her off. Larcei whined wordlessly and clung tighter. "It's too hot for that."

"Remind me again why we can't just strip down?" Larcei rolled her eyes, but at Yuria's sudden squeak, she grinned. "My, my… what are you imagining, Yuria~?"

"The answer is sunburn." Ulster made his voice as dry and deadpan as possible. And conveniently kept Larcei from teasing Yuria. "I don't know about you, but the idea of a full body sunburn sounds uncomfortable."

"Oh, ick… especially on the sensitive skin." Larcei grimaced, and got off Ulster to pull out her water. "Running low…" Which wasn't good. We'd have to find an oasis or something in order to fill up the water again. "Still, there's some good news."

"Is there?" Yuria asked, voice raspy. Seliph immediately passed her his water, and she gratefully took a sip. "Sorry… I ran out."

"You should've said something earlier," Seliph chided, taking his back. He then grabbed hers and split his water between them. "Though, I suppose I should've been paying more attention and spent less time complaining."

"Oh, no, that's not…" Yuria sighed and pulled her hood a little further up. Miraculously, we had all escaped sunburns so far, thanks to keeping covered and copious amounts of balm, but I didn't count on that continuing. "Oh, never mind. It's too hot to go in circles and I know we will. Larcei, you said good news?"

"Yeah, see this giant ass plateau thing we're walking beside?" Larcei pointed to it, as if we could miss the humongous pile of rock we were using for shade. "There's a path up. Non-sandy path. And where there's a path…"

"There's likely something at the end of the path," Ulster murmured. He glanced at Larcei and both nodded. "Okay, Larcei and I will scout ahead, Seliph. See what we can find."

"After a bit more rest."
"And water." Ulster, however, looked at Seliph and after a moment, Seliph nodded, agreeing to it. "Fun times ahead."

Fun times indeed. After resting for a while, Ulster and Larcei went ahead on the path she had found, with Seliph, Yuria, and I following behind. It soon became obvious that we had found our destination, because what else could a giant ruin on the top of a plateau in the middle of nowhere be? However, there seemed to be some sort of commotion, so we instead looked for some sort of alternate route inside. Because charging through the front doors with only five people against unknown numbers wasn't a smart thing to do even if everything had been nice and calm. And, thankfully, we did find one, though it was one with a drop. A long drop. Might have injured my knees with the landing drop. And, of course, I'd decided to be the first one. By falling into it. ...Not quite so 'thankfully', actually, but it was a way in.

"I think this was actually supposed to be some sort of ventilation thing..." I hissed, limping a bit before leaning down to stretch out my legs. I looked around and saw that I was at least in a hallway, though it was darker than dark down here. Cold too. "I'm alive, but Seliph, can you send some light down?" My voice echoed up, and when I looked up, I saw it had been quite a distance. I could barely see them, and it took a while for Seliph's light-globes to float down. "I have no idea if Yuria can make the drop." Yes, she had Holy Blood, but Yuria wasn't exactly the most durable person. She could survive a lot sure, but... "So, I'm moving out of the way now while you figure that out."

It was a good thing I did. A few seconds later, Seliph joined me, wincing at his own landing. "I think my skull rattled," he groaned, sending out a few more light-globes. Even with them, there was something about the hall that just continued to seem dark. "Yuria, come down next. I'll catch you." And Yuria jumped down without the slightest bit of hesitation, showing complete trust in Seliph. "Ooph…!" And Seliph actually did manage to catch her, Baldr blood's strength coming in, but just barely. "Right, momentum. Totally forgot that was a thing."

"Next time she has to jump, Diarmuid is catching her." I tugged both of them over to me and looked up. "Hey, murder twins, it's clear."

"Did you seriously just call us that?" Ulster asked before jumping down. He landed with a roll, bleeding off momentum and leaving room for Larcei to do the same. Which she promptly did, and hopped to her feet with a flourish. "Seriously?"

"It fits you," Seliph immediately pointed out, grinning. He looked around though, and brought up a few more lights. "No matter how many I put out, this place just feels… dark. Sad."

"Not to mention damned cold." Ulster immediately huddled up with me. "Stealing Riona. She's the only warm thing here."

"Hey now…"

There was a bit of playful jostling over who got to stand closer to me, which was alleviated when the others noticed Yuria was almost as warm. At which point the three of them clustered around us two and we made our way through the hall. The cold, dank, somehow always dark hall. The air felt heavier and heavier the farther we got from the ventilation hole I'd fallen through. Sadder. Darker. It was oppressive really, and I swore even my blood was screaming 'get out! Get out of here now!'.

"Look at the wall," Seliph suddenly whispered, brushing some dust off of the stone. He brought a light globe closer so that we could see the messy writing on the walls. It took a moment to decipher the scribbles, mostly because some words were misspelled, but it was a prayer. A prayer for
"Loptyr, likely written by a child. "Why would a child…?"

"If you think of the Loptyrian Hunts, then they had to hide," I reminded softly. I looked around, noticing there wasn't even a slit in the wall for ventilation where we were now. A child had been here. A child had been trapped here. "Gods, I'd go mad in a place like this…"

"Was Loptyr the only god they had?"

"Well, when the other gods apparently denied them…" Or rather, the people who worshipped those gods… they denied and hurt the Loptyrians. "I wonder what happened to the writer. Are they…?" Were they here? Had they grown up? Had they been caught and killed? Had they died without ever seeing the sun?

"This isn't helping us find the people who killed all the civilians," Ulster reminded us gently. In the words, we heard his real meaning. 'Do not forget that people are depending on us' and 'sympathize, but do not let it stop you from doing what must be done'. "Or the dungeons where people supposedly are."

"You're right, of course," Yuria whispered, looking sadly at the writing. She crept a little closer and traced the words. "...That child died. I can sense it. They wrote it as they were dying."

"...Of what?"

"I'm not sure. But given what Diarmuid and Lana have taught me, I would guess some sort of lung disease." She looked at the rest of us, eyes dull with sadness. "I wonder how many others died like that."

"More than those who died to the flames," I whispered. Larcei leaned into me wordlessly, giving me comfort. "But Ulster is right. We can do nothing for the dead. We have to focus on the living for now, and then remember the dead."

"Let's take time for a prayer, though," Larcei suggested quietly. "We can do that for them."

We all agreed, of course, and after that quiet prayer, we moved on, looking for a way to the main part of the temple. I made sure to hold Seliph's hand as we continued to walk down the hall, to try and reassure him. But I wasn't sure it worked, because everything about this place just didn't feel right. Our steps echoed no matter how quietly we tried to walk, because there was nothing. No people. No light. No sound. No warmth. It was like we were walking straight into an abyss. Or the gaping maw of a creature just waiting to devour us.

Then, all of a sudden, there was a pulse of magic. Purple light swept across the walls. And then I was alone. Absolutely alone.

"Seliph? Larcei?" I called desperately, frantically looking around for them. I had just been holding Seliph's hand, damn it! "Ulster? Yuria?" My voice echoed off the walls of the empty hall. No answer. I was alone. In the cold and dark. "In retrospect, I suppose it was stupid to not be… you know… checking for traps or something…" I took a few deep breaths to try and keep from shaking. "Okay… um… I guess I just… go back…?" When I turned, though, I saw there was no 'back'. Just a solid wall. With one way forward. In other words, I was in a completely different place. "Why is…?" Logic… logic… it was difficult to think, but eventually, I came up with some explanation. "Warp. I was Warped. That's the only thing that makes sense." Wasn't sure how, but even a partial explanation was enough to settle my nerves. Sort of. "Okay… forward then…"

I drew my silver blade, wanting the comfort from it and comfort from the belief that Dad was
watching out for me, and strode forward with my head held high. With a confidence I didn't feel. I wanted my family. I wanted my Hestia. But I was alone, in the middle of a shrine where I was sure despair and madness slept and wept. And I had to keep going, because I was a leader for the Liberation Army, one of the ones who raised the flags and sang the songs of war. I couldn't falter, no matter how much my nerves shook.

It was still a relief, though, when I stepped into a large, open room, just because it eased the oppressiveness of the place to have so much space. At least, it was a relief until I saw a person on the other side of the room. An armed person, carrying a spear. An armed person, carrying a spear, with glowing red eyes. Because nothing said 'evil' and 'enemy' like glowing red eyes. Same with them just lunging and attacking me without saying a word. Without… any sort of sound, really. I dodged their strike and slashed at their arm, but they didn't react. They just kept on fighting, like I hadn't done anything. And since I was unnerved and shocked, they actually tackled me to the ground and I saw that they weren't actually bleeding. It was just… oozing out of the cut. And the neck was… it was rotted. And the person didn't breath. A corpse. I was fighting a corpse. "I was fighting a corpse."

The revelation was so startling that I automatically hooked my legs around them and twisted to throw them into the wall. They hit at an awkward angle, and I heard the snap of bone. But it got up like the impact was nothing… even though the 'snap' had been their neck. Its head was now leaning at an angle, bone splinters poking out of the flesh, but it readied its spear and lunged again, aiming for my heart. I dodged and spun, blue sparkles trailing off my sword as I somehow managed to call on Luna, and I decapitated the thing. I screamed when the body lunched forward anyway and jumped back when it fell. The body twitched and squirmed for far, far too long before laying still. Thick, coagulated blood dribbled out of the neck. The smell of rot permeated everything. That really had been a corpse. Not some weird magic thing. Well, it was a weird magic thing, but...

"Whoever came up with this idea… I hope your ashes are burning in the fires of the blackest hells," I whispered, mostly to make me feel better. I crept towards the door, facing the body and head at all times, before bolting down the hall, running as fast as I could.

I didn't pay attention to anything except getting as far away from whatever the hell that was. I was so done with all of this. So, so done. So, it wasn't even a surprise when I ran into someone. What was a surprise was who I ran into.

"Riona?" Shanan asked. And I knew it was him. Same face, same hair, same clothes, same pendant from Aunt Alicia and Mom. The only thing different about him was the sword on his belt, a beautiful sword that almost seemed to flicker like a ghost. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Ha… we thought we might find you…” I answered shakily. I poked his face, making sure he was really there, and then leaned into him, resting my head on his shoulder. "This place is crazy."

"Yeah, it is." Awkwardly, Shanan hugged me, patting me on the back. "Please tell me you didn't come in here alone."

"I'm not stupid. I came here with others. But there was some sort of light and I think I was warped and…"

"Sounds like you all stepped on one of the Warp tiles. Places with bunches of dark mages tend to have them.” That was an unknown voice, and I looked behind Shanan to see it belonged to a surprisingly chipper looking girl. Blonde hair was tied back in a braid and covered with a blue hat. She wore a matching scarf around her neck, had an unusual sword tucked into her belt, and was carrying-dragging a very large sack behind her. "Hi, I'm Patty!" she chirped, grinning. "I'm Shanan's girlfriend!"
"You're not busty enough for that," I instantly deadpanned, going for the first thing I thought of for calling out that bit of bullshit. Shanan promptly choked on a yelp, but Patty simply laughed, not bothered at all. "You're pretty enough, though."

"Aw, thanks~! Though I'm glad to not have big boobs. It would make crawling so much harder." She winked. "I'm a thief! I was swiping things from the treasury here, and met my idol! So, I had to help."

"That's a short version I suppose," Shanan sighed, shaking his head. However, he soon smiled and ruffled my hair. "I heard you all liberated Isaach. I'm sad I wasn't there to see it, but thank you. But why did you all even leave to fight? Why not wait for me to get back?"

"Oh, that's a story," I replied, whimpering a bit. There was a lot… "Where should I even start? And we have to find the others."

"Talk while we walk, and start anywhere. It'll get jumbled together in the end."

"Okay. Well, first off, Conall's fine and calls you an idiot for blaming yourself..."

"...What the hell did I miss?!"

As we walked, I quietly told Shanan everything we had learned over the past few weeks… months… whatever. Conall being alive and well, and torn between the sides. Yuria and her heritage. Deirdre's amnesia. Lewyn being a total jackass now. Fee and Arthur. Finn's survival. Danann's death. Aunt Ayra and Uncle Lex's deaths. Why we were out here at all. Anything and everything I could think of, I shared and he listened closely, asking questions for clarification. Patty, meanwhile, scouted ahead for us, disabling traps and picking locks. And since this apparently wasn't her first time sneaking in here, she actually had a freaking map. Or something. Either way, thanks to her, we made it out of the dark and shadowy halls and into halls where there were actually candles and the like. And the others. We found the others too. Thank you, convenience.

"There you are!" Yuria laughed, rushing over and hugging me. She trembled slightly when I hugged her back. "I'm so glad I followed that feeling."

"Feeling, huh?" I asked, stroking her hair and kissing her head to reassure her. Meanwhile, Seliph, Ulster, and Larcei greeted Shanan with hugs. "Is that how you found the others?"

"I did!" She looked up at me and grinned. "I was very scared, but I thought of what you and Larcei would do and went for it!"

"I can think of many others who are preferable role models." I was, however, touched that she thought that highly of me. "But that was a good thing to do. You're amazing, Yuria."

"Hee..." She looked down shyly, and then took my hand to pull me to the others. Or, more specifically, Seliph, who greeted me with a kiss, before gesturing to Shanan to introduce her to him. "Um... hello?"

"...Okay, Riona warned me, but wow, that is some resemblance," Shanan noted, looking right at Yuria. Yuria tried not to squirm, but soon ducked behind me. "The amount of things I missed, by the way, is frankly terrifying. I shouldn't have left." He looked at the rest of us, eyes sad. "I'm sorry. I wasn't there to keep you safe."

"You've been keeping us safe for years, Shanan," Larcei pointed out instantly. She hid a bit behind
Ulster, though she did her best to not act abnormally or anything. We noticed, but I doubted Shanan or Yuria did, and I knew Patty didn't. She did watch us with fascination, but didn't interrupt. "It's only fair that we pull our share now."

"That's..." Shanan sighed. "Not sure why I'm even thinking of arguing. Given how stubborn all of your parents were, and how stubborn Oifeye and Aideen are, you all can't be anything but stubborn."

"Not sure the person who started and maintained a ten-year-long rebellion is the one who should be saying that."

"But the sword is new," Ulster pointed out, shifting the subject. He smiled softly and proudly at Shanan. "Is that it? Is that Balmung?"

"It is," Shanan confirmed, drawing it from its sheath. Almost immediately, it seemed to hum, with my very blood warming at the sight. "It's unbelievably light. I half-fear a good hit will snap it in half." He sheathed it again, and smiled back at Ulster before gesturing at Patty. "Ah, but I'm being rude. This is Patty."

"Nice to meet you!" Patty replied, waving at us. Now that I wasn't distracted, I tried to guess her age and thought she might be younger than Lana. "I was showing Prince Shanan the way to the central chamber, where the big baddies like to do their evil rituals of evil because they don't have anything better to do. Based on what Riona said, you guys are after them too, right?"

"I had hoped I could deal with them before you all made it to the desert, but it seems they decided to show their hand first. I'm sorry." Shanan turned away. Larcei sighed, and nudged me. I reached over and pulled her in a hug. "Let's go."

"So, does he always apologize, or does he only apologize to you all?" Despite being the one to know the path, Patty stuck near us as we followed Shanan, bouncing a bit. "But wow, I've heard so many stories and songs about you all," she breathed, smiling. "This is unreal."

"Songs? Stories?" Seliph repeated. He glanced at the rest of us and we shrugged. We hadn't heard anything yet. "Seriously?"

"Yep! There is, of course, the Prince of Light, herald of hope." Poor Seliph squirmed at that, though we had long known of that little 'name'. "He leads the armies with the help of his generals. Like the Lunar Wolf, the lady of flames who oversees the soldiers' health and morale." Now that name, I hadn't heard before. I never had my own little 'title' thing, actually. That was weird. "And songs of the love and courting between the Prince of Light and the Lunar Wolf are super popular." And that made both Seliph and I choke on yelps. I even stumbled a bit from shock. Larcei laughed outright, while Ulster at least muffled his. Yuria giggled, because of course she did. "Then there's Death's Blade and Death's Herald, twin warriors who rip through their enemies like paper."

"I think we know who those two are, right, murder twins?" I noted dryly, grinning because now it was their turn to squirm. Yuria continued giggling. "Any others?"

"Well, there's the White Knight, a charming knight in shining armor who rides through battles with blade in hand."

"...Diarmuid is going to have a heart attack when he hears that one." I could easily see it. "So what about-?"

"Reminder that we're in enemy territory," Shanan called back. He gave us the most skeptical look.
"And we're technically sneaking."

"We're *always* like this, Shanan," Seliph joked, smiling now. Probably because the topic had shifted away from him. "But I suppose we can pretend to be mature. Maybe."

"Aw, but I wanted to see reactions about the Lady's Grace," Patty 'complained', her eyes dancing far too much to actually be complaining. "She's supposed to be the chief healer?"

"Lana is going to blush *so* badly at that nickname!" Larcei teased, laughing again. She made sure to muffle it, though. "There's got to be more, right?"

"There's *lots*. And there's bunches of songs." Patty turned somber suddenly. "It makes sense. People need hope, and those songs carry that message. Hope, and things being okay eventually." She smiled warmly at us. "I'm glad you guys live up to the songs. It's really cool."

She skipped ahead then, scouting and disabling traps. The rest of us fell silent, keeping our weapons out just in case. Yuria and Seliph had a whispered conversation and she tried to give him her nosferatu tome, but he shook his head, saying something that made her smile in relief. I wondered what, but decided it could wait. It was probably just him reassuring and praising her, after all.

We reached the main room, and… well, we did *try* to sneak. But they were ready for us, so instead, we had to scatter immediately to avoid getting annihilated, and the battle instantly became a free-for-all. Spells everywhere, cracking the ground. Blood everywhere from where we got hits in and from our own injuries. Blood spilling into the cracks when dark mages died. At first, I didn't actually fight them, though. The first thing I did was look for anything reflective, and knocked over some bowls of water set up in the back. Just in case. It almost earned me a barrage of spells straight to the back, but suddenly, wind magic flew through the air, ripping apart the dark mage targeting me. At first, I thought it had been Yuria, but then I saw her on the other side of the room, using nosferatu. So, I turned, wondering what the hell, and saw Patty had drawn her sword. And now that it was drawn, I recognized it as a Wind Sword. Useful for someone who didn't wear armor, even if they weren't that magically powerful.

I thought about pulling out my Fire Sword to do the same thing, but I remembered the lessons. Elemental magic was devoured by light and shadows. So, I just stuck with the silver blade, pairing up with Yuria to keep her safe. She had less battle experience than the rest of us, after all, and it was easy to see with how shaky she was, and how she tired more quickly. Thankfully, there weren't that many priests here. Just a small group. A powerful group, but a small one.

However, the last one was determined to be defiant until the end, and fired a spell at Seliph. The spell knocked Seliph's sword clean out of his hand, and someone screamed when the Loptyr priest surged forward to better aim a killing spell right at Seliph's head. It might've been me, but everything felt distance in that terrifying split-second. But then Seliph pulled something out of his pocket, rested his hands against the priest's chest, and made their entire top half explode in a torrent of light. All of us stared, startled, except Yuria. She simply looked relieved, and I pieced together what happened from there. While we had been walking, Yuria had offered her tome in case Seliph was disarmed, but Seliph had kept pages from a different tome in his pocket to use in that situation. And proved quite effective at it.

"Well, that was… more dramatic than I thought it would be," Seliph murmured, wiping his hands on his pants. It wasn't like he could get much bloodier anyway. He was covered. "So, everyone alive? Everyone okay?"

"Can I get back to you on that?" Patty asked weakly. She was doubled-over in the corner, with
Larcei rubbing her back. Yuria and I immediately rushed over to her, to hold her hand and make sure she was okay. "Battles are even suckier than I thought. Febail's insane taking mercenary jobs."

"Battles are the worst." Seliph smiled wryly, and accepted a handkerchief from Ulster to wipe his face. Shanan lingered back, looking at all of us sorrowfully, and not saying a word. I thought… he was probably sad that here we were, fighting. And here we were, used to it. "I think I'm carrying a proper tome from now on, though. Bathing in blood is not my idea of fun."

"Blood, and whatever else is there," Ulster commented, picking out some sort of glompy piece of flesh from Seliph's hair. He then proceeded to pick out a few more. "So, injuries and dungeons?"

"That seems like a good plan to me," I replied. I looked at Patty, brushing the hair out of her face. She felt clammy, but her eyes were still sharp when she looked at me. "Do you mind helping us a little longer? If there are dungeons, there are locks." Patty nodded before curling up again. Larcei just pulled her into her lap. "Anyone got ginger for her?"

I hoped this at least meant the others would be safe. Gods knew they would need that reassurance.

After Yuria healed us up, and after Patty's stomach stopped trying to eject itself from her body, we decided to patrol the temple to make sure we wouldn't get ambushed. After confirming the place was empty, we began looking for the dungeons. And, unfortunately, we had only one real 'clue' to where they were; they weren't on Patty's map, because she had never gone looking. She'd known she couldn't do anything. Now she could, and she did gladly. But it did mean that we had to wander through unknown territory. Literally.

"Gods, I am exhausted…" I whispered, checking another set of rooms. I thought these might've been bedrooms, at some point. Though I only guessed based on the beds inside. They were horribly small and cramped. A child would feel squashed in them. "Did people really live down here? No wonder they're all mad." I opened the last door on the hall, expecting to find nothing but dust. Instead, I found a group of children, staring at me in fear. The oldest looked about thirteen. The youngest was a babe in arms. "Uh… hi?"

"Hi," one replied, voice dripping with sarcasm. She was the oldest of the group, with long blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. "Great. You guys are doing a thorough search."

"Well, we're looking for the dungeons."

"And you thought they were here?"

"Honestly, was more looking for a clue. Or maybe a secret staircase or something." I shrugged, a little too out of it to really be bothered by… any of this. "That's all."

"Great." She glared at me. "Well, you found us. What are you going to do?"

"Well…" I debated a few things. Honestly, I was tempted to pretend I didn't see them, let them make their own choice. But there was a baby. There was a baby and a toddler, and I couldn't just… "How about you leave the temple with us?"

"And burn?" Her eyes flashed with anger. "I know the stories. And you've the eyes of Fjalar, wielder of the supposed flames of justice. Or so her grandson claimed when he started the Loptyrian Hunts."

"I am not my ancestor. Just as you are not yours." But it did make me ill to hear that piece of information. "I'm sure it's hard to trust me, and not even just because of my eye color. I'm covered
in blood, for one thing. Probably the blood of someone you knew." However, I held out my hand to her. "You don't have to like me. You don't have to respect me. You don't have to do anything. But, if you would like to take a leap of faith… I am right here."

"..." The girl stared at me for a long time before hesitantly taking my hand. "I am Inanna. You are?"

"Riona. Caitriona, really, but please, call me 'Riona'." I smiled warmly at her. "Come on. Do you need help?"

"We'll take care of it." Her leap only went so far, after all. "...But thank you. We were wondering what to do. We know we can't stay here if the others are dead and none of us know how to take care of babies."

"Of course. I'm sorry for the trouble." I stepped back. "Take your time."

"...Not sure you have it." She looked down. "I'll give you directions to the dungeons. I don't know who all is down there, but I know there's at least one who has been there for... god, I think she's been there five years, at least. And I think they are others."

"You can't take more time than we have wandering around aimlessly." I shook my head, and smiled again when she glanced up. "The directions will balance out the time you use. So, take your time."

Inanna nodded and rounded up her group, a group of ten children all in all. They picked up a few things before following me down the hall where the others were. Patty stiffened at the sight of the children, and gave us weird looks when we did our best to reassure them, and get them comfortable. Well, Shanan watched Seliph, Ulster, Larcei, Yuria, and me with a soft, fond smile while we got them comfortable. After some discussion, it was decided that Ulster, Seliph, and Yuria would remain with them, while Shanan, Larcei, Patty, and I would follow Inanna's directions to head for the dungeons. Patty took her time checking for traps, apparently distrusting Inanna's helpfulness, but it soon proved that they were correct. We knew by the smell before we saw anything.

"It's going to be okay," I whispered, picking up a small child and carrying them out of the filth that had been their cell. They didn't react, just stared dully at the rotted flesh that had been their cellmate. I had no idea who they had been or how long they had been there. "Okay, so that's... five..." Most were dead. Most were rotting, in fact. What the hell had they been doing here? I didn't know, and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

"Shanan and Larcei went to go check the last hall, the one that's furthest back," Patty explained to me when I joined her with the other four. She was doing some sleight of hand to make them smile. "They're taking longer than normal, though."

"They might be tired." I set the child I was carrying down, and another child pulled them into a hug. "I'll tell them to trade off with us."

"Sounds good. I'll wait here until they get back."

"Okay." Absently, I kissed her cheek, and left, barely noticing her weird look. It was only when I was near the back of the dungeon's halls, way out of her sight, that I realized it was probably because that was more affection than she'd expected from a near stranger. Really needed to work on that, or something, especially now that we were out of Isaach...
"Shanan, why don't we head back and let Riona and Patty take this last hall?" I heard Larcei say. Curious, I poked my head down the hall, row… whatever. Where Shanan and Larcei were. Except Larcei was resting her hands on Shanan's back and shoulder, and Shanan was looking down, shaking. "It's been a long day, and even longer for you. We can take up some of the burden, you know. It won't kill you or us if you rest a little."

"I'm fine," Shanan insisted quietly. He refused to look up, though. And he continued to tremble. "Just hallucinating. A phantom. Nothing more."

"Hallucinations don't normally qualify as 'fine', you know." Larcei sighed, and looked away briefly to hide her worry. "Come on, Shanan. We don't know if Balmung is doing weird things to your health anyway. You told me how it sent a surge of power through you, you know."

"But…"

"Shanan, seriously. We liberated Isaach. We killed Danann. I think Riona can handle checking one last hall."

"Riona definitely can," I murmured, smiling when both whirled to look at me. Best to pretend I just got here. "Hello there. I found a fifth child. Why not say 'hello'? They were stuck with a rotting corpse for a while."

"Oh, gross…" Larcei replied. She took Shanan's arm and tugged him along. After a bit of resistance, Shanan followed, deciding that reassuring the child was more important that insisting he was fine. "Come on. You probably have more experience than us in getting children to at least move."

"Send Patty down when you get there." I kept on smiling until they were gone, and then I sighed, brushing my hair behind my ear. I needed twenty baths when I got out of here and a nice long nap. Shanan wasn't the only one tired. "Okay then…"

I walked down the hall, checking each cell. Sadly, it was just bones and corpses in every one. But when I reached the last ones, I saw something odd. I saw a bit of red hair fluttering at a corner… a corner where there wasn't a door. Or so I first thought. When I touched the stone, though, my hand went straight through and the stone disappeared to reveal a staircase and someone with long red hair disappearing down them. Fjalar-red hair.

"Conall?" I called automatically, trying to think of who else would have that hair color. The person didn't answer, though. They just continued running until they were out of sight. "Hey! Hold up a moment!" I sighed and almost waited for Patty. But then I caught a different scent amidst the rot and death. A scent I'd always know. Medicinal herbs. A very specific mix… of medicinal herbs...

I rushed down the steps three at a time, desperately trying to catch up with the someone… with the ghost. I fell on the last one and hit the ground hard, but I scrambled up and kept on running. Before long, the… the ghost was within sight again. Waiting. Waiting for me. And as I got closer, I saw a face I knew well. I knew it from hours upon hours of studying pictures. Hours of studying my reflection to guess which features were hers. Red hair, green eyes, and a calm and warm smile. Calm, warm, and proud…

"Mom?" I called shakily, not sure if I was right. But her smile grew. "Mom, why are…?" She held up her hand, perfectly silent, and then pointed to the side. I looked and saw there was a small hallway there, and with more cells. Another dungeon hidden under the first. "That way? Is there someone that way?" She nodded, still smiling. But her form was transparent and flickering, done with whatever she had wanted to do. "Mom, I…" Thousands of things rushed through my head, all
things I'd longed to say to her, but I could only choke out one. "I love you, Mama…"

Her smile brightened, as bright as the sun… and then she was gone. I blinked and she was gone, like she had never been there at all.

I took a few moments to gather my composure before walking down that hidden hall. Because if Mom had appeared as a ghost to lead me here, then there was someone who needed help. So, I walked, checking each cell closely, but it was only the one at the end that was occupied. A horribly thin woman, practically skin and bones, was bound up with filthy, blood-encrusted ropes. She wore rags for clothes, and her hair was so matted and dirty that it was difficult to guess the proper shade. Her eyes, however, were a fierce gold and looked straight at me when I stopped in front of the cell. Unbroken and defiant, despite clearly having been here in for a while. This might even be the prisoner Inanna mentioned.

"Well, you're a bit too pretty to be one of theirs," the woman murmured. Her voice rasped, but there was strength in it. "Huh. Look like a friend of mine, actually. That's weird." She swung herself around so that she was sitting up, and I saw that she wore a ring on a makeshift necklace, made from strip of cloth. It was the only bit of jewelry or whatever she wore. "So? You are?"

"Here to get you out of here," I replied, making sure to smile. She raised an eyebrow, looking skeptical. There was something familiar about that look... "Yes, I know. It sounds weird. But the Loptryrians here are a little too dead to care about what we do."

"Are they? Good. Not many of their nice ones stuck around here. Just bastards who delight in experiments and whatnot. At least, that's all I encountered." She sighed and shrugged as best as she could. I saw a bleeding cut on her neck, too neat to be anything but surgical. "But I was asking for your name, you know."

"Oh. Right." I laughed sheepishly before suddenly freezing as a few pieces thunked together in my head. Gold hair. Gold eyes. A skeptical look that I recognized now as being like Diarmuid's… and someone that Mom had wanted to make sure I found… "Um… what's your name, though?"

"Mine? Lachesis." She laughed bitterly, but I felt like crying. "Lachesis of Nordion. Technically. So, you are?"

"I…" My voice wavered, but I made sure to smile instead of bursting into tears. I couldn't believe this. I couldn't… this was…! "Caitriona. I go by Riona, but it's…"

"Caitriona…?" Her eyes widened and she gasped. "You can't be…"

"The friend you mentioned is Alicia, right? My mom? Aideen and Oifeye mentioned I look like her." I saw Patty rushing over and had to fight to keep from bouncing. She probably had chased me down, and I'd apologize for not waiting later, but for now…! "Diarmuid's not in our group. He's with the main army. We're heading to Leonster to meet Uncle Finn and Nanna. Seliph is here, though. Seliph and Larcei and Ulster and Shanan…" Patty slid to a stop in front of me, and quickly began working on the lock. "Oh, there's a lot to talk about! Let's get you out first!"

Patty got the lock open in less than a blink, and the two of us quickly cut the ropes to free Aunt Lachesis. Then I hugged her, while Patty left to go do… something. I didn't pay attention. I just… I just hugged Aunt Lachesis, not quite believing any of this. But she was here. She was really here. She felt even thinner than she looked, but she didn't disappear like a phantom when I hugged her. This was just plain insane, and I loved it.

"I'm so glad to see you, Aunt Lachesis…" I whispered. I felt her jump and belated realized that I…
"I'm sorry. Is it okay for me to call you that?"

"Of course it is," she reassured, weakly hugging me back. But even weakened, there was still strength in it. "Was just a bit startled, but I love it." She pulled back and smiled. "Let me look at you..." She studied my face before chuckling. "I should've guessed as soon as I saw you. Alicia's features, blonde hair, red eyes... how could you be anyone else but her daughter? I suppose it just seemed so impossible that I couldn't think of the possibility."

"You're telling me!" I laughed, practically bouncing from excitement. This was so unbelievable. I couldn't... "I only put the pieces together because you and Diarmuid have the same skeptical look. Sort of."

"Do we now? I can't wait to see. But how did you know to come here? It's hidden."

"Mom. Her ghost..." I felt like sobbing, but also laughing. It was such a weird, bubbly, overwhelming feeling. "I think she tried to get Shanan's attention, but he panicked, so I ended up running after her instead."

"Alicia?" Aunt Lachesis laughed, a sad and resigned sound. "Of course. She was always looking after me. She promised Eldie, after all."

"Promises are important. Not even death stopped a promise. "Can you stand?"

"Mmm... probably better to not risk it." She grimaced. "I can find the strength, certainly, but I have no idea what damage there is."

"Then I'll carry you."

It took a bit to get Aunt Lachesis on my back, mostly because I was worried about hurting her. She was just so thin. But we managed and I carried her out of the cell and down the hall. And met Shanan, who was staring. I wondered why, but then realized that Patty must've gotten him. Or at least, Patty told him and Larcei, and Shanan had rushed down here to confirm with his own eyes that one of the army, one of Sigurd's army, one of his family... they were really here, alive.

"Wow, Shanan, you got big," Aunt Lachesis laughed, breaking the silence. She reached out with a trembling hand and Shanan caught and held it. Clung, really, because that touch was proof that this was real. "You might be Lex's height, actually."

"You think so?" Shanan replied softly. He smiled, and tears silently slipped down his face. "I can't believe you're alive. I can't believe you're here."

"I can't believe it either. But look at where we are," Aunt Lachesis giggled. "And look! Seems like you kept your promise well. Thank you, Shanan."

"Well, I did what I could. You should really be thanking Aideen and Oifeye and..." Shanan bowed his head. "Ha... I can't stop crying... sorry..."

"Oh please, I'm only not a weepy mess right now because I'm already a mess and I'm too prideful to make myself look any worse than I do." She pulled her hand away and pulled off her necklace. "Hey, can you hold onto this for me? So that it's not digging into Riona's back?"

"That's... ah, that's your wedding ring." Shanan took it and tucked it into his pocket. "Of course. I'll give it back when we set up camp."

"Sounds good to me." Aunt Lachesis clung to me a little tighter. "But let's get the hell out of here.
There's no one else down here. I know that for a fact."

"Then I think it's time we left the shrine, then." Shanan laughed, though it shook with his crying. "There's a lot to catch you up on. I mean… I have missed a lot, so…"

"Tell me everything. But take your time." Aunt Lachesis laughed again. "I'm not going anywhere, after all. Especially right now. But seriously, let's get going so that Riona stops fretting. She frets as much as Alicia."

"Tell me about it."

The two bantered back and forth as we returned to the others, almost as if they had never been separated, especially not for twenty years. Larcei had a conflicted look on her face when she saw us, standing guard as she was while Patty entertained the kids, but she quickly smiled and greeted Aunt Lachesis with a laugh. We'd probably talk about it in the coming days, but for now, we'd just… be grateful. And imagine Diarmuid's reaction. He might actually faint. That would be funny.

There was a bit of worry trying to transport people, since not everyone could walk properly and not everyone could be carried. However, Inanna and her group remembered there was a supply wagon and some horses, so when we found it, we got all the children in, along with Lachesis, who helped with the babies. Once we were sure everyone was secured, we left the shrine through the front door and Shanan led us to an oasis not too far away, where he had made camp the night before. Once there, we set up our own camp, cooking and cleaning as needed. And tending to Inanna's group and the prisoners. Aunt Lachesis insisted we take care of the children first, so it was actually after dinner that we finally had time to help her bathe and change clothes. Well, I helped her bathe, and also cut her hair to get rid of the matts. Larcei helped her dress.

"I don't think my hair has been this short since I was a little girl," Aunt Lachesis laughed, shaking her head. Her hair was very short now, barely longer than Ulster's, but she didn't seem to mind. "And goodness, I can't believe I fit into your clothes! Mostly."

"You'll fit properly once you gain a bit of weight," Larcei pointed out, grinning. Aunt Lachesis was wearing one of her dresses, after all. "And it looks better than Ulster's shirt on the kids!"

"I would hope it's not so baggy!" She laughed again, but held still while I brushed her hair. I was making sure everything was even and that we hadn't missed any bites or lice or whatnot on her scalp. "Strange to hear about everything." I'd made sure to tell Aunt Lachesis everything I could think of on the way out, especially about Yuria. "Can't wait to slap Lewyn, though." And Lewyn. Because she didn't need the same shock Oifeye had gotten.

"Lachesis, do you want more food?" Ulster asked, careful to not speak too loudly. He, Shanan, Seliph, and Patty were around the fire we made by the oasis. The children, including Inanna's group, were fast asleep. Inanna and her group were a noticeable distance away, but that they fell asleep showed a great amount of trust. "We still have a bit."

"Thank you, but I think any more might lead to my stomach protesting vehemently," Aunt Lachesis refused. When I was done brushing her hair, I helped her over to the fire and sat down between her and Shanan. Larcei sat on her other side, between her and Yuria. Well, the sleeping Yuria, rather. She'd exhausted herself while healing everyone, and we just let her sleep. "Ah, Shanan?"

"Right here," Shanan replied, passing her back her ring. It wasn't on the cloth-necklace anymore, though. Instead, it had thread wrapped around the bottom. "See if that fits. I can take some off or add more if needed."
"Ah, thank you!" Aunt Lachesis smiled softly when she slipped it on, it fitting almost perfectly. Just a tad loose. "I haven't been able to wear it properly in so long…"

"What were you doing there? How did you…?"

"The full story will take a bit, but the short version is that Finn went one way with Leif and Nanna, and I went another way when we had to leave Tahrna. I ended up near Yied, and thought about crossing it to try and get more information about how you all were doing." She shrugged. "Then I got caught. However, they didn't kill me because they wanted to do some experiments utilizing Holy Blood. So, they've just been bleeding me and keeping me locked up. Tell me the year later, by the way. Time lost meaning in there."

"I can imagine…"

"We're glad you hung on, though," Seliph murmured, smiling sweetly at her. Aunt Lachesis blinked a couple of times before smiling back. "Ah, but before I forget…" He turned his attention to Patty. "Where should we take you?"

"Actually, do you mind if I join up?" Patty asked. She had her hair down and she absently finger-combed it. "I'm not too bad to have around. I mean; I stole all of this stuff…" She gestured at the large bag she had been dragging. "All on my own."

"Wait, you stole it all?"

"Yeah, what about it?" Patty bristled, defensive, and Seliph shot us 'how did I mess up' looks. I had a feeling that she heard emphasis on words Seliph didn't mean to emphasize. "The soldiers and priests stole it from the villagers, so I'm taking it back!"

"Er… I… uh…" Seliph paused, taking the time to pick his words with care. "My apologies, I misspoke. I was more surprised you snuck in and stole it. I didn't mean to imply that… well, I mean, stealing is wrong, but when it's… uh…"

"...Hee… sorry, I'm used to having to defend myself." Patty slowly relaxed, and smiled. "But you did see how useful it was. And I'm used to surveying things. And I promise to share what I find."

"I don't see a problem with it, so long as you're aware of the dangers." He nodded to the bag to change the subject. "What's in there, though?"

"Gold, mostly, buuuuut I snatched a bunch of interesting tomes and weapons too." She shrugged. "I'll have to sort through them first to know specifics. And if you're willing to wait a bit in the morning, I can sneak back in to get documents."

"It's like having Dew again," Aunt Lachesis laughed, smiling. Patty tilted her head at that curiously. "We got a lot of need supplies that way, particularly medicines." Aunt Lachesis looked to Seliph, her smile becoming sad and nostalgic. She must've been seeing Sigurd in him or something. "So, you're meeting your army in Darna?"

"That's the idea, at least," Seliph confirmed, nodding. Patty shrugged and moved to crouch sit behind Larcei and Ulster to talk quietly with them. "Will you fight?"

"Ha… my pride says 'yes'. My sense says 'no'. We'll see how I am in a few months." She shrugged. "But I can still heal, and I think I have Alicia's methods imprinted into my soul from the number of times I saw her do it. So, if nothing else, I can lessen the burden on… Lana, you said?"

"Yes, Lana. She was born afterwards, so you never met her."
"I can't wait!" Aunt Lachesis giggled and then focused on Shanan. "Ah, but before I forget to ask…"

Shanan and Aunt Lachesis began bantering again, reminiscing about their time with Sigurd's army, and I noticed Patty's conversation with Larcei and Ulster had become questions about the army. After a while, I saw Seliph slip away, walking to the outer edge of the oasis. I decided to follow him, but I made sure to check on all the sleeping children first. I wanted to make sure they were sleeping peacefully before I made sure Seliph was okay. It was my responsibility, after all, to take care of them. Especially Inanna's group.

"I noticed this the first night we were here, but the lack of clouds really means you get to see the stars," I noted quietly when I finally joined him. He glanced over at me, before looking up at the sky. "There's so many."

"Yes, and they're all quite beautiful," Seliph murmured. He absently traced a couple of patterns in the air, and I wondered if he could still find the constellations with so many stars shining bright. "Quite beautiful, indeed."

"If you say something like 'the stars are beautiful, but not as beautiful as you', I will push you into the sand."

"Even if it's true?" Seliph grinned, and I rolled my eyes. "They are a close second, though."

"Flatterer." I crossed my arms and leaned into him for a little bit more warmth. "Diarmuid's going to freak out. He'd always been so certain that both of his parents were dead…" I glanced back at the others, noticing Larcei eagerly talking with Aunt Lachesis now, while Ulster and Patty chatted about something else entirely. Shanan watched with a smile, his eyes narrowed like he was staring at something far too bright. "We should keep an eye on Larcei."

"I'll talk with her in a couple of days. Might be better for her to vent at someone who didn't find Lachesis."

"Yes, that's probably a good idea." Still, we needed to make sure she was okay. Well, that all of us were okay, but since Larcei had clung to hope the longest… "And you? How are you feeling?"

"Glad, mostly. I've always wished I could meet her properly, and I know that Shanan is happy beyond words. Can't even imagine how Oifeye and Aideen will react. But…" He bit his lip and then sighed. "I do wish I could have a proper conversation with my parents, though. Or at least my mother." Seliph looked up at the stars again, squinting as if he could see her among them. "Just… something that might help me move on from that scared little boy who didn't know why his mother left him behind."

"I think you're farther from that 'little boy' than you think." I smiled at him, giggling. "Besides, I like that little boy. I fell in love with him, after all. And then I simply continued falling in love as we got older."

"...I can't believe you said that with a straight face." Seliph smiled, though, and he leaned in to kiss me softly. "Though, it's the same for me. I seem to fall more in love every day."

"How lucky we are, then." I kissed him back and then took his hand. "Come on. Aunt Lachesis is sure to have new stories about our parents."

"That's true… and she's a childhood friend of Father's, isn't she? Like Aideen." Seliph grinned, eyes sparkling. "I wonder if she has tales of Oifeye."
"I'm sure she does. Come on!"

Aunt Lachesis did have stories, many of them. A surprising number, in fact, but I wondered if she clung to those memories as a way to try and stay mostly sane during her captivity. No way I could ask, of course, and it did mean lots of funny stories. What a way to start this desert journey, huh?

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**Lester**

*Class: Bow Knight; Skills: Pursuit, Charge, Bargain*

The 19-year-old son of Aideen of Jungby and Sir Midir of the Jungby Knights, the older brother of Lana. Often felt guilty growing up because he had his mother while the others lost their parents, but he also knows the others rarely cared because they were all one big family anyway and he shared his mother with them.

His Holy Mark is on his right hand and fingers, stretched out almost like a spider's web. Its blessings give him boosts to stamina, the ability to take damage, and the famous 'Ulir Luck', which always seems to work in mysterious ways. Like on the battlefield where he dodges far more strikes than he knows is plausible or actually finding his father's lost bow in the hands of one random soldier on an equally random patrol.

Learned archery in an attempt to feel closer to his father, who he has no memories of. Wielding the brave bow his father held is an interesting experience, but he likes it because it makes him feel as if his father is guiding him along this crazy path they're on. He's not the best fighter by any means, but he's fine with not being the 'best'. There's other jobs for him.

While he has dated others, his relationship with Creidne was his longest, and indeed, the longest any of the group had. They mutually agreed to 'pause' their relationship until after things started moving again, mostly to see how events and war would change them. However, he can't deny being happy she sent a ring to him, and hopes she likes the ring he sent her in return.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Author's Notes: Well, welcome to Game-Chapter 7. Where I added a lot. Ish. Aideen showing up was mostly just because I wanted to have a few more interactions with her and to contrast Lewyn. Fee going to Leonster is based on a fairly typical strategy, where you send Fee down to Leonster Castle (because fliers) to assist Leif, Nanna, and Finn (especially if you didn't promote Finn prior to him leaving in Gen1). Having an attack in town, and Oifeye being injured protecting Seliph comes from the Fuyuki Manga, though Fenrir's effects are based off of Oosawa's rendition during the Verdane arc. And to serve as an in-story reason for why the group heads so far north (Game-Chapter 7 involves a lot of backtracking and the like). In-game, you actually have like… a thirteen turn window before the boss of Yied Shrine gets their Fenrir tome (and, because Shanan starts there with Balmung, nine times out of ten, he's killed everyone, so you just have to have Seliph wind his way around to seize the place, especially if Patty has a Return Ring in her inventory). Oifeye and Diarmuid having a training lesson is due to the fact that in Game-Chapter 7, the two have a talk where Diarmuid gains some stats (+1 to str, skl, and def, I think).
Seliph's comment about children's writing on the wall comes from the game dialogue once you have conquered the Yied Shrine, though Lewyn is there in game to wax poetically about how the true evil is the evil within all of us or something. There's nothing with phantoms or fighting corpses (deadlords) or anything in the game. I just threw that in for fun. Warp tiles show up in FE5 when in places important to the Loptyrians, so I brought that in here. Also, have some not-crazy-Loptyrians. 'Inanna' is the name of a Sumerian god for love, fertility, and war.

The magic 'triangle' works a bit differently in FE4 than it does in future games (like the GBA ones). Wind, Fire, and Thunder form their own triangle, and Light and Dark magic trump both of them, while being equal to each other.

But now, Shanan and Patty have officially joined, with Shanan having the first Holy Weapon of Gen2, Balmung. It boosts Shanan's skill by 10, and his speed by 20, and combined with his good bases, means that Shanan can potentially one-round enemies even in the Final Chapter. He obtains the Balmung by talking to Patty, who stole it from the shrine prior to everything. Patty is your thief of the generation, though she's more durable than Dew. She can still be a bit of a pain to train, though. All just depends. Patty joking that she's Shanan's girlfriend comes from her in-game talk with Seliph, as does her conversation with Seliph in the last scene. In game, you'd get a second brave sword with that conversation, but we'll be going with something a little different. The Wind Sword can be obtained in Gen1 during the last part of Game-Chapter 3, if you have Dew 'wait' on the Bragi Tower.

Now, for Lachesis. Lachesis's fate in the games is very ambiguous, with her just disappearing into Yied, never to be seen again. I decided to not only show what happened, but actually have her feature for a few reasons. I will go ahead and admit that Lachesis likely isn't going to see much combat (she's very out of practice and has a lengthy recovery ahead of her), but she'll be helping as a healer, a teacher, and as another person the Gen2 kids can talk to about things.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Darna
Interlude - Darna

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude - Darna

Our journey through the desert started with a massive attack on Rivough, leading us to head to the Yied Shrine, a place we didn't plan on going, focused on Leonster as we were. But it's good that we did go, because we saved some children who were captured, took in some Loptyrian children who... we might have orphaned... and we found Aunt Lachesis, who had been captured by the Loptyrians seven years ago. Seven years... and she'd still be there if we hadn't gone to the shrine.

What others secrets lie hidden in the desert? I'm almost afraid to find out.

Most of the towns near the Yied Shrine were abandoned. Sands blew through crumbling houses, coated once-well-used furniture. Some of the houses and towns were neat aside from the sand, and signs of animals passing through, as if their people had simply walked away, finding sanctuary somewhere far from the shrine. Others, however, were haphazard, with splintered tables and splotches of dried blood on the walls. Animals ransacked those places for the leftover food, causing even more of a mess, and a couple of times, we had to stop and dig out the wagon because it had gotten stuck on mummified corpses hidden under the sand. That was the word Aunt Lachesis used for them, at least. I'd never heard it before, but she had grown up as a 'proper' noble, complete with the best of tutors. Words were weird, anyway. And 'mummified' did sound more impressive than 'shriveled husk'.

Regardless, it was a relief when, somewhere halfway between the shrine and Darna, we finally found a village with people. It was run down, and the patched, loosely fitting clothes showed hard times, as did the black ribbons they wore on their arms and in their hair. But they were here, they were alive, and they greeted us with smiles. Even better, they were willing to take in the children, quite a generous thing since there were ten in total, with a couple of babies and a toddler. What kind people...

"We appreciate you letting us resupply here," Seliph murmured, talking to... someone. I was more focused on helping the children get past the initial awkward-stranger-phase and play with the village children, because they all deserved some fun. "However, it doesn't feel right to simply take. We didn't carry much money with us when we left Rivough, but we can at least help out here."

"Prince Seliph, there's no need for that!" someone replied instantly. They sounded shocked, for some reason. "Someone of your rank shouldn't..."

"Oh, I've done chores since I was little, so I promise we're all pretty good. We don't even have our lethally bad cooks with us, so we can help there." Seliph, however, sounded like he was going to laugh, and when I glanced back, I saw that he wasn't the only one. Larcei and Ulster were both trying desperately to bite back their snickering. "So, what needs to be done?"

"Your highness...!"

"If you have wounded or ill, Yuria and I can look them over," Aunt Lachesis offered, leaning over the wall of the wagon to wave at them. Yuria, who was checking Aunt Lachesis over, nodded
vigorously. "But you might as well give up, because these kids are stubborn, and Shanan has already started fixing that broken door over there." That… that he did. And now that I looked, the roof needed fixing.

"In that case, let's get to work, everyone!" I laughed, standing up now that the children were all beginning to play. I checked on each of the children, making sure they were okay, before turning to the others. "Ulster, the roof there. Larcei, how about you and I scrabble up and check the others?"

"Climb the houses?" Aunt Lachesis frowned. "Really? How?"

"Oh, Riona, Ulster, and Larcei are very good at climbing!" Yuria chirped, laughing. Seliph hid a smile behind his hand; Shanan groaned, remembering all the incidents where we gave him heart attacks because we climbed out of sight. "I've seen them climb the side of castles! Same with Diarmuid, actually."

"...Shanan?" Aunt Lachesis began, smiling sweetly. Shanan threw his hands up in a clear 'don't blame me' motion before getting the door off to replace the broken hinges. "Who taught them?"

"Oh… did I get someone in trouble? I thought it was amazing."

"You think most things about Diarmuid are amazing," Larcei instantly teased, laughing when Yuria yelped and turned bright red. However, I caught her eye and shook my head, and Larcei immediately quieted. "Ah, whatever. Seliph, what are you going to do? Laundry or something?"

"Laundry, or mending," Seliph replied, smiling. The poor villagers looked like they were going to have an apoplexy at all of this. "Been a while."

"I know, right? Normal chores sounds fun."

"Exactly what I was thinking." Seliph turned back to the villagers. "So, please, where might we start?"

We had repaired four roofs and seven doors before the villagers gave up on getting us to stop and simply accepted our help. At that point, it became a fun learning experience, since there were certain tricks they did to help the buildings endure in the desert climate. They also told us stories, like fairies of the oases who watched over travelers and guided them to shelter, or the sand spirits that raced through sandstorms to devour the wicked and the damned. There were also their ancient stories which predated the Crusaders, such as a storyteller who weaved a story for her captors every night to prolong her life until rescue came or a desert thief who brought salvation to Yied during a never ending storm, by rescuing a trapped fairy. It was so much fun, learning about their way of life and their culture.

"So, you utilize the natural flooding of the nearby river to water your plants?" I asked, fascinated as I helped a village woman reinforce the levee they used to 'trap' the water. In Isaach, we used little channels and whatnot to coax the water through. "How do you deal with the excess water, ma'am?"

"We return it to the river, or store it for the dryer seasons," the woman laughed, no doubt amused by how a 'Scion of Light' could be so entranced by irrigation. But it was so cool! Though, I did wish I remembered her name. There had been introductions, but fascination beat down politeness. "It depends on how our reservoir is doing."

"I see…" I tried to copy how she was packing extra mud against the levee, but… well, it was easy to tell where I had done the packing and where she had. Hers were much smoother, for one thing, without awkward excess clumps that I had to slowly cut away with a little dagger because this stuff
dried quick. "This method must be very useful for places with poor irrigation typically..." I had a point to the thought, but I happened to look up and I gasped when I saw smoke spiraling up from the village. "Ah, that's...!"

"Oh, that's nothing to worry about." She smiled reassuringly, and I relaxed, thinking the smoke must be like a bonfire to get rid of trash or- "It's just the Loptyrians."

"...Pardon?"

"Yes, there was a group of Loptyrians skulking about." She scoffed and shook her head. I went cold. While it could be others, I knew... I had a bad feeling that... "We're just dealing with them. Don't mind it."

"...Like hell I'm ignoring you burning people!"

I scrambled up the embankment and sprinted towards the town, pushing past startled people who were just standing around as if burning people alive, when there was no battle or threat or anything, was totally normal! Even worse, I saw a crowd gathered by the burning pyre, laughing and joking at the screams and sobs of those they were murdering, just as Elder Muir in Rivough explained to me. But the absolute worst part was that I was right. The 'Loptyrians' they had 'caught'... the children who were tied up and burning... it was Inanna and her group. Children, all of them... and they even had the babies tied up to burn...!

Fury roared through me and I reached out both hands to 'seize' the flames and 'ripped' through them, actually making the fire whip past me to strike the ground. Burning embers and chunks of charred wood scattered everywhere with the force, and the people standing around the pyre screamed and ducked to try and avoid getting injured. And then they froze when they looked and saw me standing there, glaring with all the fury I had ever felt. Gods, only General Richard had made me this angry before, and considering just what he did, that sure as hell said something!

"Move." Then they got another shock, because Seliph shoved his way through the crowd and leapt onto the pyre. Ash and soot immediately stained his hands and clothes, but he didn't care. He just continued working on the knots, though it wasn't until Larcei joined him that they actually made any headway on the ropes. "It's okay," he whispered to the children, easily heard over the silence. The hush only grew longer and longer when Ulster and Shanan rushed over and helped all five of the group off the pyre, where Aunt Lachesis and Yuria waited to begin treatment. "It's going to be okay..."

"Your highness, why are you...?" someone began slowly. I hunted for them in the crowd, still cold with raw fury, and saw they were an older man, not quite old enough for his hair to turn gray. Old enough to have children the same age as the ones he tried to kill, though. "They are..."

"They're children," I finished, speaking softly. The others were focused on the children, so I focused on the man. "You were burning children."

"They're Loptyrians!" The man whirled on me, practically spitting with his own rage. His face even turned purple. "Filthy murderers! Monsters! All of them!"

"They are children." I kept my voice even and cold, because I knew that if I screamed, I'd burn them and see if they felt so justified when they were the ones in the flames. "Tell me what threat they are. Tell me, in detail, just how a baby who can't even feed themselves is a murderer." I kept my glare on them the entire time, and they flinched away. "I'm waiting. Tell me." There was no answer. "I don't think you heard me. I am waiting for a response." Still nothing. "So, you were going to kill children for no reason? Is that it?"
"The Loptyrians-!

"At least sacrifice and kill children for a reason. Not a good one, and one I can never agree with, but they at least have a reason for it all." I drew myself up to stand as tall as I could, feeling like I was in the middle of a snowstorm. I was just so furious. "I apologize for whatever pain you have suffered, but your own pain doesn't justify you killing children for no reason. Your own pain may be an explanation, but it is not excuse. It is never an excuse." I met their eyes. "You wish to inflict pain? Then inflict it on us. If you wish to burn someone, burn us who did not hear your screams for help. If you wish to throw rocks at someone, throw them at us, who came too late to help. If you wish to call someone inhuman… well, I would think those of us with Holy Blood are far less human than them. Call us the 'monsters'. Gods know that we're already murderers. Or is it only 'murder' when it involves people you know?" I ignored his attempt to respond, and focused on the group by the pyre. "We're leaving?"

"Yes, we are," Seliph confirmed, stepping off the pyre to address the crowd. Though he was covered in ash and soot, he held himself with all the dignity in the world. "We thank you for your hospitality, but I believe we shall be on our way." Unlike me, He regarded them not with anger, but disappointment. That seemed to cut them deeper than any anger did. "I hope the wounds on your heart heal by the time we next meet."

The villagers tried to say something. Apologies? Explanations? I wasn't sure. I did know that we ignored them, though. We helped Inanna and her group back into the wagon, and then hesitation with the children saved from the temple, because this was a stable place for them (sort of) and surely they felt the same… except they didn't. Without the slightest bit of hesitation, the five we saved joined the five raised by Loptyrians in the wagon and they purposely made sure to hold their hands or even hug them. Silent, yet firm, solidarity. It was heartwarming, especially since these children had suffered so much.

"Lady Crusader, Lady Crusader!" A little girl rushed over as we began leaving, her pigtails threatening to fall out of the black ribbons that tied them because of her haste, and tugged on my shirt to make sure she had my attention. "Here!" she declared, handing me a beautiful, handmade doll with little stains here and there showing it was well-loved, and well-played-with. Though I almost dropped it at the 'Lady Crusader' part. I was no Crusader. If I was, then… "I'm not sure why the adults were so mad. We were having so much fun!" Still, she smiled sweetly at me. "But Anat really liked my doll, so she can borrow it."

"Borrow, huh?" I repeated, cradling the doll in my hands. Anat… she was the second oldest in that group, if I remembered correctly. The only other one who wasn't a toddler or baby, but she was still very young. Eight or so. "Why borrow?"

"Because I hope she comes back so we can play again!" The little girl laughed and I almost felt like crying. "So, if it's 'borrow', then she has to return it, right? You have to return what you borrow!"

"That's… that's very true." I knelt down and kissed her forehead. "I'll make sure it gets to her. You think of what you want to play when you next see her, okay?"

"Okay!" She giggled and then hopped back so that she could wave at the retreating wagon with both hands. "Byebye!"

I ruffled her hair and jogged to catch up with the others. I heard other farewells, though, and looked back to see it wasn't just that little girl saying goodbye. It was an entire group of children. Only seven or so, no doubt all who remained after the Child Hunts here, but each of them was smiling brightly, waving enthusiastically while waving goodbye. Each of them was bright and hopeful, eager for the day when they'd reunite. Many even called out names, and I saw the children in the
wagon look back tentatively and wave goodbye too.

Ha… this was what we were fighting for. A future where all children could place in peace with each other. I was glad to see that, especially considering what just happened. I needed that reminder.

We made sure to put a good bit of distance between us and the village before stopping for the day. Aunt Lachesis led us to an oasis that she remembered, a place where she had camped with others when she escaped Belhalla. When we were there, we set up camp, and I gave little Anat the doll, along with the message. Anat smiled shyly, clinging to it tightly, though careful to keep blood and soot off of it. Because of course it hadn't just been tying them up and trying to burn them alive. No, the villagers had thrown rocks at them as well. I'd just said that to the man as an example of pain to inflict, but they ran truer than I could've ever wanted. Gods above...

"I'm sorry," I whispered to Inanna. She had insisted on just having her injuries tended to via bandages and medicines, saving the staff charges for the younger ones. A good thing, since the two babies had some lung damage and other problems. If not for Aunt Lachesis, they would've died. "I'm so sorry." I ended up being the one tending to her, and so I tended to every bruise, every cut and gash, every burn… the worst were the ones I had to dig into in order pick out splinters and rocks that had burrowed in. "It was stupid of us to not consider the villagers would have that sort of reaction." We should've kept them near us. We shouldn't have just left them to play without us watching. "I'm so, so sorry."

"You've apologized so much," Inanna whispered. She held herself completely still, watching me clean and bandage her injuries. "You don't know those people. Why apologize for them?"

"I'm apologizing because, as I said, it was stupid for us to just…" I sighed. We should've considered it. Look at the trouble there was with the Dozel soldiers and ours! That we simply let a situation escalate like that again… "I'm sorry."

"...No. No, I don't think it was stupidity or…" She smiled hesitantly, like she wasn't quite sure she was looking at something 'real'. "You just… you don't think of it. You give your trust freely. Without hesitation. People don't have to prove worthy of your trust; they have to prove worthy of your distrust. So, you welcome people with open arms and bright smiles, all of you. And you forget that others are not like that."

"That… well…" Had to admit that she had a point there. We did give most people a chance, or tried to. We just… we didn't want more fighting. There was enough death. "I suppose that is weird, huh?"

"Extremely. Not only weird, but it seems like a good way to get hurt. And you all seem to know that. Yet you do it anyway. You all just…" She trailed off and we lapsed into silence, with me continuing to treat her various injuries by the water. The others were scattered all over, doing the same thing as me. No one was really up for laughing or joking, so it was mostly quiet. Just some murmuring here and there. "We're taught that only he listens to us."

"Pardon?"

"Loptyr. We're taught that only Loptyr hears us. We're taught that there are many gods, but only Loptyr listens to our prayers. The other gods hate us, loathe us even, and encourage their worshipers to kill us. All for crimes done by people who lived a hundred years ago or more."

Inanna spoke more to the water than me, absentely trailing her fingers through it, the ripples carrying out and out. "Beaten, burned… it didn't matter. They cheer at our dying screams, much as
"...I have heard a little about the Loptyrian Hunts."

"There's not one family among the Loptyrians who hasn't lost multiple family members to them. My mother's little sister was three years old when they caught and burned her." Gods, who could do that to a child? I could understand anger and pain, but not... "And her brother... he was raped before being tied up and set on fire. My grandparents managed to save him, but the trauma was too much and he killed himself. You had that a lot with the survivors. The guilt and trauma broke them into pieces."

"...Of course that happened..." I shouldn't be shocked, because of what happened to Creidne. But I was. "I take it you learned this young?" After all... she was young. But I remembered learning about similar dangers when I was her age.

"As soon as we can learn. We learn how outsiders ripped our families to shreds. Nothing is spared, because it could... well, before the Empire, it could've happened to anyone. I'm the first in my family to grow up without having to fear that happening to me." Just the first... she was thirteen years old. Her parents were probably around Oifeye's age, or Aideen's. Yet they... "We also learn about what happened to others. Archbishop Manfroy, for instance, survived a burning. His parents, his best friend, and his friend's parents all died, but he didn't. And he would tell us how the killers laughed at their screams, how they cheered at their sobs. How the priests said the blessings of the gods would fall on all of them, for ridding the world of us."

"Thus reinforcing what you were always taught." That only 'Loptyr' would ever hear their cries of pain and suffering.

"Yes. And I thought it was the same when those people grabbed us..." Her arm shook under my hands, making it harder to bandage it. "So, when they threw rocks at us... when they tied us up... when they set the flames... I prayed. I prayed for Loptyr to come and save us. Or at least spare the younger ones. I'd gladly die if it meant the younger ones lived."

"Inanna..." I knew the feeling, though. I remembered when, when Danann's forces had found our hiding place and we had to run... when things were on fire and we weren't sure where to go or anything... I remembered holding Lana and wishing that if the gods needed one of us, to take me instead of her. "I..."

"But he didn't come. He didn't answer. It was you..." Her voice broke and she started to cry. I almost hugged her, just by instinct, but I held back. I'd wait for her. I knew, especially right now, that I had to. So, I just focused on bandaging the last of her injuries. I could at least fix them. "You ripped the flames away. You freed us. You treat us with care, apologize because we got hurt." She laughed, but it was a hollow sound. "It's just so different... I was so sure those with Holy Blood would loathe us. Why? Why are you so...?"

"...I want to break the cycle of revenge." I spoke softly, thinking of what I'd thought when I was first told of the Loptyrian Hunts. The horror... the confusion... and the understanding... "It's hard. When I confronted the general who raped one of my dearest friends, I had to be held down to keep from slaughtering him in the streets and completely screwing up our plan. When we fought Danann..." I winced, thinking about it. "When we fought him... while I did burn him during battle, I also burned him afterwards. Just because I could. Ulster and I threw his corpse out of a window and I set his clothes aflame. Because I hated him for what he had done to Isaach."

"That seems... extreme."
"It was. It is." I leaned down slightly and looked her in the eye. "But you? Your fellows? What have you done? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. You were born, and you were raised. That's it. No child is guilty of their parents' crimes. No one should be judged guilty for what their relatives have done." I smiled at her. "So, I want to break the cycle of revenge. I want it to stop. Because I know…" I thought of Iucharba, who fought us because he thought we were the worse alternative. "I know that there are many who think us the villains in this war. And I'm sure there are many Loptyrians who fight us only because they are afraid. I'm even more certain, given what you just told me."

"That's…"

"So, when we can, when I can, I'd like to avoid fighting. I'd like to reach out. Yes, I could get hurt. Yes, I could get killed. But I feel like it's a better choice than killing all in my way, simply because they are the 'enemy'." I laughed mirthlessly, shaking my head. "Ah, I'm rambling like a drunkard. I don't think I even answered your question." I thought about it again, and decided it was as simple as… "I was raised knowing that few things in this world are clear-cut. Oifeye, my father figure, always emphasized it. There was more than one truth in the world. There are more than two sides to every story. And Aideen, my mother figure… she always emphasized compassion. That we, who would one day lead people to war, had to know the sorrows of our people. She would encourage us to feel, to not lock our hearts away. And the combination…" I thought of Danann, who screamed at ghosts for pitying him. I thought of what she just said, and what I had learned, back in Rivough. "That combination lets us remember that there are no monsters in this world. Not truly. There are only humans, and we are all capable of great good and great evil. What makes us different are our choices." And you had to make sure people felt they had that choice. If they thought there was only one way… then why would they choose differently? So, you reached out, and trusted them. "That's all."

"...No offense, but my head is way too muddled to try and make sense of any of that." Still, she smiled, even as she continued to cry. "Hey, can I have a hug?"

"You can have all the hugs you want." I hugged her gently, stroking her hair. "Seriously, we're an affectionate group of people. If you need a hug, just find one of us."

"Thank you…"

I rocked her in my arms, singing the lullabies I 'remembered' Dad singing to me to soothe me to sleep. As I did, I looked to the others, and I saw Lachesis and Shanan playing with the babies, though their worried looks hinted they were wondering how we'd feed them. Seliph raced about the oasis with one of the toddlers on his shoulders, making them laugh and squeal with joy. Yuria listened patiently as a couple of the other children taught her a clapping game, while Larcei and Ulster entertained the rest with fun tales. Patty stayed apart, looked at us in confusion. Like she, too, wondered why we gave such care to Loptyrians, even if they were children.

What a messed up world we lived in, if such a thing was unusual. We had to change it. We had to.

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We chose against leaving any of the children in the next village we encountered, simply getting supplies and things to help with the babies and the toddlers, like diapers and milk. We did make the offer to the five we rescued from the cells, but they refused. Sandas, the oldest of the five at the grand old age of eight, stated that they wouldn't leave the others, meaning Inanna, Anat, and their group. Which was touching, even if it did make us panic over the idea of having literal children in the army. In the desert. The exact thing our parents avoided, and the exact thing that led to Altena's death during the Yied Massacre. So much fun, this journey was. So much fun.
"I really hope I'm doing this right…" I whispered, adjusting the sling I had to carry one of the two babies, a squishy baby boy named… something I'd remember in a few hours. He yawned and continued to slumber, tucked as he was amidst both the cloth of the sling and the cloth of my hooded cloak. "Really, Aunt Lachesis…" Aunt Lachesis had tied the sling on me and promptly gave him to me before ushering me off to go walking as I normally did. Something about it being good for the baby. I thought Seliph or Ulster would be way better at this. ...Well, Ulster did have the other one. Seliph had the toddler, whose name also escaped me for the moment, on his shoulders not far away, with Shanan walking close to make sure that the toddler didn't fall because of the uneven, ever shifting footing.

"Ah, so that's what happened," Shanan murmured. He'd asked Seliph for a more in-depth story about Isaach's liberation than the summary I had given, and of course, Seliph had obliged. "I really can't thank you enough, Seliph." He smiled softly, ruffling Seliph's hair. "You freed my country."

"You act as if you played no part in it!" Seliph laughed, beaming at Shanan. And nearly tripping over his own feet, but he caught himself in time. "Did you forget that you were the one who first taught me swords? And if not for your courage, there might not have been an Isaach to save."

"I'm not so sure about the latter, but I do remember the former. You've come so far since that day, though, and it shows."

"Does it?"

"You hold yourself taller than you used to, and you've got a bit more muscle on you. You'd be just about…" Shanan trailed off, eyes unfocusing slightly. I wondered if he was thinking about Sigurd. Ofeye had mentioned, once, that Shanan had thought the world of Sigurd. "Ah, never mind. Sentence doesn't even make sense in my own head."

"Okay?"

"Riona!" Patty skipped up beside me, distracting me from my eavesdropping. "You doing okay with the baby?" she asked, peeking at the sleeping baby in the sling. I was amazed at how much he slept. "Looks like he's pretty happy! But what about you? I can take over if you want."

"I seem to be doing well enough, but when it comes to diapers, I think I'll hand him to you," I teased, laughing. We tried to keep diaper duty as even as possible, because all of us had helped out the new mothers in Tirnanog, but I would admit that I would gladly give that duty to someone else. "You're really good at it. Do you have little siblings?"

"Not exactly." Patty hopped over to my other side, using me as shade against the sun. "By blood, I've only got an older brother, Febail. But when Father settled near Conote, he noticed a lot of orphans just left to fend for themselves, and so, he took them in."

"So, he started an orphanage?"

"Yep! So, I learned because some of the orphans are little." Patty sighed gustily. "And when the empire went to hell and back and back to hell again, it got harder to make ends meet, so I took up thieving. That's why I'm all the way up here. Febail does mercenary work, while my uncle handles the more dangerous thieving."

"More dangerous than sneaking into a shrine filled with Loptyrian priests?"

"He steals from Bloom!" She mimed quiet, though, and I had to laugh. I supposed that would be a tad more dangerous, if only because the shrine had seemed emptier. "He's apparently stolen from
castles before and calls it 'easy', but he won't let me help with it. Just in casies."

"I am going to steal that phase, by the way." Unfortunately, my laughter woke up the baby, but Patty got him quieted and back to sleep before I could even think to do anything. When he went back to sleep, though, she lingered, holding his hand. "Hey, Patty, I've noticed you've given us some weird looks whenever... well..."

"Oh, damn it, that was on my face?" She sighed gustily, and I muffled another laugh. "It's not really anything wrong. It's just I've never seen 'nice' Loptyrians before. I've heard of them, of course, but..." She shrugged. "From what Uncle Dew says, the moderate and nice ones either break, turn corrupt, or die. Because of those who are in charge."

"Oh, I see. So the looks were because it was odd to see..." I trailed off because I knew that name. I knew that name. "Dew?"

"Yep! Uncle Dew!" Patty grinned up at me, bouncing a bit, clearly glad to switch the topic back to her family. "He's the one who taught me how to steal and all. Oh, but he's not my uncle by blood or anything. He and Father were like brothers, though, and he's raised Febail and me since Father died. Helped Father too when Father was alive, since Father had a bad leg. Something about falling off a cliff and it not healing right."

"And who was your dad?" I swear to everything that was holy, there was no freaking way... "His name was Jamke!" Patty giggled, perfectly proud. But my jaw dropped at the name. Because I knew that one too. "He died ten years ago, super bad pneumonia. I miss him terribly."

"And your mother?"

"She died when I was a baby. Febail only has a couple memories of her and he's a year older than me. But I'm told she was the best archer, even better than Father!"

"I... I see..." Archer. Jamke. Dew. I knew of a single woman connected to all three words, and one who had been 'missing' for almost two decades. "Was her name Brigid?"

"It was!" Patty gasped, shocked. "Wow, can you read minds?"

"No, but..." I studied her a bit and would've facepalmed if I weren't carrying a baby. She looked like Lana. She looked like Lana, and one of us really should've noticed that sooner, damn it! Yes, we were all stressed and distracted, but come on! "But I can see a thread eventually." I waved to catch Shanan's eye and pointed to Patty when he glanced over. "Hey, sorry to interrupt, but Patty is Brigid and Jamke's kid, and Dew is apparently alive. Thought you might want to know."

"She's what?! And Dew's alive?!" Shanan immediately yelped, though it was followed closely by Aunt Lachesis's own yelp of surprise from the wagon. We actually had to stop the wagon because she automatically tried to climb out and run over, and her health didn't really allow that quite yet. Meaning we had a few moments of panic before we found a nice little plateau to hide near for shade while Aunt Lachesis and Shanan stole Patty to ask her questions.

"What's going on?" Inanna asked softly, walking over to me. She'd taken to finding me more often to ask questions. "Are the names important?" She took the baby from me, rocking him absently in her arms. "They seem to be."

"They are the names of friends of theirs," I explained, smiling. Both Aunt Lachesis and Shanan were practically vibrating with excitement, though Seliph rushed over to help mediate. Larcei also joined them to give poor Patty some support, because she was overwhelmed. "I could've handled it
way better, though." In retrospect, I really should've brought it up to her first instead of just dragging Shanan into it, but I'd been so surprised that I'd gone with the first thing I'd thought of. "I'll have to make it up to her."

"So, they're excited because they know that their friends are dead?"

"They're excited because they know, Inanna. No one has known anything about Brigid or Jamke in eighteen or nineteen years." I grinned at her. "That's longer than you've been alive."

"Mmm… yeah, I can understand. I'd love to know what happened to my mother."

"Did she disappear?"

"Yes…" Inanna leaned back against the rocks, and I slipped the sling off and tied it around her so that she could support the baby better. "My father died when I was little. But my mother went on some sort of mission for Archbishop Manfroy and disappeared. That was four years ago. I've lived at the shrine since."

"Was the shrine an orphanage now or something?"

"A bit? It was a place where the particularly talented orphans, or orphans born to talented parents, would go to live and be trained. That's why there were only five of us there."

"I see." I wondered what happened to her mother. I wondered if we could figure it out. I thought about suggesting it, but decided it was probably a little too hopeful. For now. If we ran into more friendly Loptyrians, then maybe. "So, if you don't mind a subject change…"

"Please?"

"Well…" Desperately, I tried to think of something and remembered that creepy as all hell fight I had to deal with. "Actually, I've a question about something I fought in the shrine."

"A spell?"

"No, it's this strange corpse thing I fought?" I grimaced at how that sounded. "I know it's unbelievable, but…"

"You fought a Deadlord and won?" Her eyes widened and she actually gasped. Well, at least she didn't think I was crazy. "You're quite strong indeed to make it out of a fight with one. They only make Deadlords out of the fiercest of warriors. I imagine Lachesis would've become one, if she had died."

"It was a close thing." Deadlord? There was… I vaguely remembered something about them in the stories of the Crusaders, but the wording implied it had been some sort of title. Not… you know… a literally dead thing. "Why do you have them?"

"My mother always taught me that they were our guardians. They kept outsiders from climbing down into the dark to slaughter us all." She looked down, twisting one hand in her skirt. The other supported the baby in the sling. "I didn't really think of…"

"What do Loptyrians do with the dead?"

"Typically we just throw them somewhere. Bodies are just bodies to us. Husks. Things that have to be dealt with quickly so that we don't get sick." She shrugged. "It might've been different before the first empire fell, but it became a necessity, or so I was always taught. I only know of 'funerals'
as distant things."

"...Yes, I imagine it would've been hard to bury bodies when you were trapped underneath the ground." And when you risked being burned if you ventured above... better to simply leave the bodies. "Please, don't fret so much. You are taught what you are taught. I'm sure other countries have different burial practices." And considering what I saw... well, having a 'guardian' that never died, never slept... it was probably preferable to having your babies burned alive just for being born, no matter what moral hesitations you might have. "Easy, Inanna. I don't judge for things like that. Eating babies, sure! Burial practices, not so much."

"I'm not sure why you would want to eat a baby anyway. They're all squishy with fat, and if they're not shattering your eardrums with their screaming, then they're tainting the air with their diapers." She was perfectly sarcastic, and covered her mouth like something like that would get her in trouble, but all I could do was laugh and laugh, and slowly, she relaxed, smiling slightly. "But speaking of babies, I think it's time for his meal."

"Probably." I almost took the baby from her, but Ulster caught my eye and pointed ahead. A quick look showed he had given the baby he'd been taking care of to Yuria. "Looks like Ulster wants help scouting ahead. Do you mind if I leave him to you?"

"I'm used to taking care of him." Inanna's smile grew. "I've got it."

"Then he's in good hands." I almost ruffled her hair, but I checked myself and simply smiled. After all, I needed to wait for her when it came to gestures of affections. "Let the others know, okay? I think they're distracted."

Deadlords, though... that wasn't going to leave me for a while. And I made sure to tell Ulster while we were scouting, because if we faced one, then there was a chance we'd face more. I just hoped I wouldn't know the person. That would be so, so wrong.

There was something wrong. We knew it the second we caught up to the others at last and made our way into the army camp. There was a nervous, frustrated energy to the air that reminded me of the days before taking Ganeishire. I wondered what it could be. Surely the others weren't waiting for us. We were at the edge of the desert, right by Darna, and we had encouraged them to push forward at least until we were outside Melgen. So, something had happened. Something not bad, since there was no grief, but something frustrating. And there were far too many things that fit those requirements, and even more I couldn't think of.

"Lady Riona!" Still, the soldiers welcomed us with open arms, and easily took charge of the children. "Welcome back," Niamh greeted, continuing her greeting. She had been the first one to spot me, and in fact, the first to spot our group. "We have been worried. The shrine?"

"All nice and cleared out, so hopefully, we won't have to go so far out of our way to deal with troublesome siege tomes," I reassured. I noticed the soldiers trying to separate children and panicked briefly. "Hey, easy! They're getting overwhelmed! Keep them together at the very least!"

"Survivors?"

"And some Loptyrian children. We couldn't just leave them there." I scowled when Niamh shook her head, smiling with fond exasperation. "There's two babies and a toddler in that group of five! And you can't leave children in that hellhole of a ruin. Gods, no wonder the Loptyrians hate everything. Walking through nearly drove me mad with how dark and cold it was."
"I imagine you will have many soldiers complaining, my lady, as we did when Dozel's soldiers joined us."

"They may come to me and I will listen, as always. But I maintain that you can't leave children to fend for themselves." I decided to pretend to be haughty. "Besides, I don't hear anyone complaining nowadays about Iuchar and his people."

"Of course not, my lady." She muffled a laugh and I grinned, glancing over at the others. They were dealing with other soldiers giving them greetings. "My lady, Lord Oifeye was just getting a checkup if you want to sneak ahead? You basically just head straight from here."

"He's awake?!" I barely held onto my manners and didn't immediately rush off. "Thanks, Niamh! Can you make sure the soldiers don't make the kids panic for me?"

"Of course, my lady." She smiled warmly. "Go on, go on! He's been terribly worried."

"Again, thanks so much!" And that's all the politeness I had because I bolted through the crowd, weaving my way through the tents as I hunted for where I needed to go. However, it didn't really matter. I didn't need to hunt for long.

"Riona!" Because apparently someone had told Oifeye that we were back, and he'd been pushing his way through the same crowd to come meet us. "There you are…!" he breathed, wrapping me up in a hug. I laughed, delighted to see him up, but I was careful in returning the hug. I could feel the bandages even through his shirt. "Did you have to go to the shrine?"

"We had to do something, Oifeye," I protested, barely staving off tears. A few soldiers smiled at us indulgently, and I saw many bitter-happy, like they wished they could hug their own 'fathers', but couldn't. I knew the feeling. "Surely Lewyn explained."

"He attempted. I might have told him to go to hell because he was far too logical about the whole thing." He let go of me so that he could study my face, combing his fingers through my hair.

"You've got a bit of a sunburn."

"Nothing bad!" I took his arm and began dragging him back to where the others were. I knew they'd want to see him too. "Where are the others?"

"At the moment, no doubt attempting to finish what they're in the middle of so that they can rush to greet you as well. I'm sure that's also why you have not been tackled by Hestia yet. She was with Lana." Oifeye had to lean on me to walk, something he never did and was an all too clear sign of the pain he was in. He was still recovering… "Except Diarmuid. He is currently trying to negotiate with Darna to remove this blasted blockade they've got set up."

"Oh, so that's what's been going on." Blockade, huh? We didn't expect that exactly. We expected fighting, not someone just… blocking us. "And because they are only blocking us, we don't want to crush our way through, yes?"

"That and Lana decided it would be best for everyone simply to wait and rest. Roads or not, desert travel is rough." It was probably even rougher on him. I wondered if he had to leave later than the rest. "Aideen has letters for us to give you, by the way, since she couldn't give you a long farewell like she wanted."

"So, she's in Rivough?" We were almost to the front. We had to walk slowly for him. "I figured, but…" Would've been nice for her to reunite with Aunt Lachesis and for her to meet her niece.

"Yes, she is." Oifeye frowned a bit and watched as some soldiers played with the children, helping
them calm down with how loud everything was. "From the shrine?"

"Half of them were prisoners, while the other half are Loptyrians. We had originally planned on dropping them off at a village, but…" And my mood plummeted faster than a shot bird, remembering that whole incident. "We had a bit of a… shock, shall we say?"

"…Aideen and I did our best to emphasize that no conflict is straightforward, hoping that it would keep you from meeting the same fate as Sigurd…” Oifeye kissed my head, already knowing what it was, and how badly it hurt. "It seems to cause its own trouble, though."

"I think I prefer that sort of trouble." If it meant not burning children alive, that is. "Anyway, we went too serious." I managed to catch Seliph's eye amidst the crowd and pointed to Oifeye, smiling when Seliph's face lit up. "Prepare for hugs. You scared us."

"You say that like it's a threat. I adore hugging you all."

I might've teased or something, just because I was happy and embarrassed, but Seliph finished up his conversation quickly and raced over to hug Oifeye. I helped Oifeye steady himself, and Larcei, the next one to free herself, realized what it meant and waited for Seliph to be done with his hug before hugging Oifeye herself. Ulster did the same thing, followed by a hesitant Yuria. However, she hugged Oifeye as enthusiastically as we did when he held out his arms to her.

Last to hug Oifeye out of the Tirnanog group was Shanan, and he hugged Oifeye as tightly as he dared. "Heard you decided to emulate Finn and use your body as a shield," Shanan noted, not pulling away. "Idiot. Even he would scold you on that one."

"I couldn't pull both of them away in time, and you can't expect me to just choose," Oifeye protested, hugging Shanan back with as much strength as he could. It was much weaker than normal, and that made me wince, but I was glad he had the strength at all. "Don't stay away so long next time."

"Ha, with luck, I'm just leaving on short missions from here on out." Shanan stepped back and rested a hand on Balmung. "The rumor was true."

"Miracle of miracles." Oifeye shook his head. "I still say you were ridiculous for chasing after it."

"Clearly, I should've just stayed, but hindsight." Shanan glanced at me in silent question, and I shook my head, grinning. I had wanted to leave that revelation to Shanan. "But speaking of miracles…” Shanan looked back to the wagon, where Aunt Lachesis was reassuring some kindly soldier that she really didn't need any more help, now that she was out of the wagon and on the ground. "Lachesis, come say hi to Oifeye!"

"...Did you just say…?!” Oifeye's jaw dropped, and he covered his mouth when Aunt Lachesis whirled and skipped over. "Lady Lachesis…?"

"Oifeye, you've literally raised my son, there is no reason to fall back on old habits," Aunt Lachesis laughed, hugging him. Oifeye hugged her back, and I noticed that both were at about the same 'strength'. "Hey, you're allowed to cry, you know. I saw those tears."

"I know I'm allowed to cry," Oifeye replied, voice thick. He closed his eyes to stave off the tears, though. "I get the most horrible headaches when I cry, though, and I don't want to deal with that on top of the back pain right now."

"Oh, right, Seliph mentioned you had been hit bad by a Fenrir spell…” Aunt Lachesis pulled away briefly before hugging him again. "Well, it took a lot longer than we thought, but I did come back."
"You did. Though, I'm not sure it's really safe and all."

"Meh, I've always been a touch impatient." This time when Aunt Lachesis pulled away, she kissed his cheek in quiet thanks. "Um... where is Diarmuid, though?"

"Negotiating at the moment. He'll be back soon. You've still got time to gather up your courage." Oifeye smiled warmly at her, and Aunt Lachesis beamed at him. "So, any more heart attacks you people want to give me?"

"Actually..." Shanan began, to Oifeye's complete and utter shock. Larcei and I leaned onto each other as we started giggling. Yuria muffled her own giggling in Seliph's shoulder, while Seliph and Ulster grinned. "There's someone else you should meet. Patty? Did you get trampled by the crowd?"

"No, but it was a near thing!" Patty popped out from behind the wagon and jogged over, fiddling with her scarf. "Should've guessed they'd get a warm welcome," Patty murmured, before smiling at Oifeye. Who stared back, stunned. "So... uh... hi! You're Oifeye, right? I've heard a lot about you."

"...You look like Aideen when she was young," Oifeye whispered. I wondered how he knew that before realizing the obvious. There had to have been pictures in Chalphy. Aideen and Sigurd were childhood friends. "But I know where Aideen's children are, so are you Brigid and Jamke's daughter?"

"Those are my parents names, yes." Patty bowed, now fiddling with her hands. "Mom died when I was small, and Dad died about ten years ago now. Uncle Dew has been taking care of Febail and me since."

"I'm glad to hear Dew is doing well." The sadness in his eyes told me how he wasn't looking forward to confirming to Aideen that her twin sister and brother-in-law were both deceased, though. But at least there was three bits of good news with it! "Aideen is probably going to flood us with gifts for you. She always looked forward to when Brigid and Jamke would have children."

"Uncle Dew always said that Febail and I had an aunt and cousins, and that they were in Isaach somewhere, but I never thought that they'd be some of the Scions!" Patty sulked, puffing out her cheeks. "Wonder what else he hid."

"Now, now... I'm sure it was much more dangerous to share that sort of information here than it was where we lived."

Though I looked forward to eavesdropping on more, if it was even called 'eavesdropping' when they were talking right in front of you, a series of yelps through the crowd warned us of someone's very rapid approach, and I had just enough time to get away from Larcei before a giant mass of fur and muscle tackled me clear off my feet. And proceeded to try and lick my face off because Hestia decided to make up for the days she couldn't lick me. And try to suffocate me because she was damn heavy!

"Okay, okay!" I laughed-wheezed, pushing her a bit off me so that I could actually breathe. Hestia barked and continued licking me. "Yes, I know! You missed me and love me sooooo much!" I finally had to shove her completely off so that I could sit up, and was almost knocked right back over when Hestia pressed her full weight against me, whimpering. "Fine, fine! Next time, you can come along!" Hestia barked again and licked my face some more, tail wagging so much that I thought it left bruises when it hit my leg. "Hestia!"

"Okay, I know you mentioned having a wolf, but I didn't quite believe it for some reason?" Aunt
Lachesis mused, leaning over me. I was curious as to what was going on, but Hestia decided that giving me all the love I had missed out on, and letting her displeasure about being separated for so long be known, was far more important. "Alicia would've had a heart attack."

"There is not one person who knew her who hasn't said that." I finally got Hestia to calm down enough so that I could give her a good rub, kissing her muzzle. "Even Lewyn did."

"Lewyn who has not joined the group that appeared." Aunt Lachesis pointed, and I saw Lana, Lester, and Iuchar had finally come to greet us and they had stolen the others for copious hugs and teasing. "Apparently, the Arthur and Fee you mentioned haven't returned yet."

"That so?" I mentally counted days, and decided it hadn't been long enough to worry yet. Besides, the blockade could be making them hesitant to fly over, or they thought we were further up. "A shame, but you can meet them later. Did you meet Lana?"

"I did! She's so adorable. And Lester reminds me of a blue-haired Midir now." She held out her hand to Hestia, who nosed it curiously. "Hiya, Hestia. I'm Lachesis."

"She's pack too, Hestia. Family." I giggled when Hestia sniffed her a bit more before licking her hand. "That's her saying 'guess I will adopt another dumb human'."

"Reminds me of when Chulainn would feed the stray dogs and cats and scold us for scaring them." Aunt Lachesis smiled, though it was sad. "That was actually my first proper interaction with him. I'd seen him in the distance and the like, but while we were in Nordion, he would take care of the animals. And boy, did I ever get an earful for scaring a puppy."

"Really?" I hadn't know he did things like that. It made sense, but… "Do you have-?"

"Riona!" Lana appeared and hugged me tightly, ignoring all the wolf fur and travel stains. "I can't believe what all you guys found or whatever the grammatically correct sentence is," she laughed, helping me up. "Lachesis, Patty, Shanan… and bunches of sweetheart children!"

"Excited about meeting your cousin?" I asked with a grin. Aunt Lachesis moved a bit away, and Hestia followed her, no doubt curious about the new pack member. "I know I was when I realized who Arthur was!" Not to mention Yuria, of course.

"Extremely!" Lana tugged me to where our group, minus Diarmuid, was basically just hugging each other. And dragging Yuria and Iuchar in when they tried to 'be polite' and stay away. As if they weren't part of the family. Patty didn't have even that, though; she was pinned in the middle. "Lester! Hestia finally let her go!"

And so we got all of our hugs, babbling about this and that, focused mostly on how glad we were to be reunited. Vaguely, I worried about how the soldiers would think about us acting like this so openly, but the few I saw simply smiled indulgently, so I just let myself have fun. We were back together again, as things should be.

However, when Diarmuid returned, no doubt rushing over because he heard we were back, he stumbled to a stop when he saw Aunt Lachesis near the crowd. He stared. Opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. Pinched his cheek even. And then he glared at the rest of us, who stood to the side with smug smiles. "I have to give a report, damn it!" he complained. However, he couldn't keep from smiling. "Not cry because…"

"Oh, go spend time with your mother," Larcei insisted, shoving him towards her. Aunt Lachesis glanced over and hesitated, no doubt worried about how Diarmuid would react. Hestia remained
near her, now providing comfort. "We have to settle in anyway. And we need hugs from you later."

"...You and I are going to talk later."

"I know. But go."

Diarmuid stayed with us just long enough to hug Larcei and kiss her cheek before sprinting towards Aunt Lachesis and giving her the biggest hug. He even lifted her a bit off her feet, but she didn't care. She hugged him back just as tightly, crying from happiness. After watching for a moment, basking in the warmth, we split off to handle our own things, like get our tents set up and whatnot. We didn't want to stay so long that jealousy overrode our joy.

I wished I could hug Mom one more time, but I at least saw her ghost. I at least got to tell her that I love her. It hurt that I had to be content with that, but I would be. It was more than others got.

After settling in, I decided to walk among the soldiers and listen to their frustrations, since I was sure that many just wished to be heard. And I was right, and even better, was able to help calm the angrier ones. Well, one or two required Hestia growling at them first, but that was less because they were being unreasonable and more because they flailed about in anger and nearly hit me, to their horror. Overall, though, the army understood all of the reasons for just why we weren't punching our way through (or sneaking around). Which was nice, considering what happened last time we delayed things. Though, then again, no one in this army had been personally harmed by Darna. Yet.

But those were thoughts for another time. In the middle of listening, Sandas, now happily helping out as a messenger apparently, informed me that Seliph was calling a War Meeting to hear Diarmuid's report and discuss our next options. However, Sandas was having trouble finding Lewyn and Aunt Lachesis. Lewyn was… Lewyn, and Aunt Lachesis was supposed to be in the infirmary getting a check-up, but wasn't, and the camp was huge. I volunteered to look for them with Hestia, since Hestia was an excellent tracker, and that's how I ended up in the back part of the camp, the part closest to the blockade. Which gave me an idea that I was sure the others would scold me for, but…

"Well, I suppose it can't hurt…" I whispered, seeing the soldiers stationed within easy walking distance. I debated a moment more before shrugging and just heading over, Hestia keeping close to me. When I got close enough, I smiled brightly and waved. "Hello!"

"Ah, hello, miss?" one replied automatically. Though their helmet covered most of their face, I could see their 'what the hell?' look easily. "Um… you all can't cross. Lord Bramsel's orders."

"Nah, I'm not here to ask for crossing. We left that to someone else." I laughed, and quickly grabbed Hestia by the fur before she nosed her way through. And barely caught her because she had smelled something that had her full attention and she didn't see why a 'blockade' should stop her. "That said, do you mind if my Hestia gets whatever caught her ear and stomach? She shouldn't go far, and if she does, you can come with me to get her."

"Er… well…” He glanced at his fellows and they all shrugged. "That should be fine, miss."

"Thank you!" I let Hestia go, and she excitedly went after… whatever it was. "Hestia, you better not be going after a mama or a baby. I'll get mad at you!" Hestia barked in protest, and continued her hunt. "Sorry, I think she's scared all the animals on this side and even if she can go long periods without eating, that doesn't mean she enjoys it."
"Biggest dog I've ever seen."

"Hestia is a wolf, actually." I laughed at their yelp, though I quickly muffled it. "Sorry, I do get a kick out of people's first reactions. I'm Riona, by the way. What's your name?"

"Princess Caitriona?!" The guard stiffened and quickly bowed. His fellows followed suit, with one almost falling over from their bow! "O-our deepest apologies!"

"Those are some strange names!" I had to laugh again, and tentatively, they looked up. "So?"

"Um… Mursili, ma'am." Slowly, he straightened, though he kept his head bowed. "My lady. Er…"

"Oh, please, relax. I was just curious about Darna and hoped you could tell me about it, and give some insight into why Bramsel is blocking us." I made sure to smile my warmest smile, and he tilted his helmet back a bit to smile back. "Do you mind? It's fine if you can't because of orders or because Bramsel doesn't think soldiers should know why things are done. I'm just trying to understand the situation, to increase the chances of us being able to solve it non-violently."

"Well, my lady…" Mursili hesitated before glancing at the others. Most avoided his gaze, but one, with sharp eyes, nodded. "Truthfully, Lord Bramsel has a habit of prancing about like he's the gods' gift to humanity and then sucking up to whoever is most powerful. So…"

"Ah, so he's analyzing the situation so that he profits the most." Good bit of insight. "And since we did liberate Isaach, he's curious as to whether we are the stronger ones or not."

"That's our best guess, my lady." He hesitated again, before whispering. "Um… my lady, there… there are rumors that you and yours cleared out the Shrine."

"We did." Rumors already? I knew words could travel fast, but that was just startling. ...Unless he heard it here while I had been settling in. That made much more sense. "I just returned from it, actually."

"Was… was there a little boy named 'Sandas' there?" He spoke slowly, his words shaking slightly. "My fiance, Maliya… her brother was taken…"

"About this high?" I held my hand up around my hip and waist. "Terribly adorable, around eight years old?" I grinned when he nodded. "Yes, he's in the camp, actually, helping out as a messenger. Been an utter delight." I softened, however, when he breathed a sigh of relief. One of his friends, the sharp-eyed one, clapped him on the back, hinting they were old friends. "I'm surprised he didn't mention that his home was near, though." Gods, how awkward would that have been to tell him 'yeah, we had him, but we left him in a random village somewhere to the north'?"

"It's not, actually. We lived much further north, near where the Yied Massacre occurred." He said it casually, but it startled me to hear it used as a 'location marker', as you would a house or a tree. "Our village burned when the Child Hunt happened. Fled south since I had family here, and…" He shrugged. "Got a job as a guard."

"I'm sorry to hear that…" I looked at the ground briefly before making sure to look him in the eye. I couldn't turn away from things like this, after all. If I turned away from those we couldn't save, how could I ever look the families of those we killed in the eye? "Should I bring Sandas to you? So that you can take him to your new house?"

"I'm on duty for a good four hours still, so I'd love to see him, but I'm sure he's safer in your camp." He smiled, though I fought to keep from wincing. Safer in an army… That didn't speak well at all. "Doubt a wall is going to suddenly fall with you all, for one thing!"
"Pardon?"

"Darna has a protective wall that's supposed to be maintained." He pointed up to Darna, situated on the cliff nearby, and the wall that was easily seen, especially from here. "Lord Bramsel didn't, however, so part of it suddenly fell last year. Killed a few people."

"I… I see…" I wasn't sure how exactly to respond to that, but thankfully, I didn't have to. Hestia was done with her hunting and decided to throw her half-eaten kill at me. I caught it automatically, and held out the remains of what used to be some sort of rabbit or hare before Hestia had devoured her fill. Seeing that I had it, she barked and wagged her tail enthusiastically, her muzzle bloody from her meal. "Why thank you, Hestia. I am, as always, delighted to have carcasses thrown at me." Mursili desperately tried to hide his laughter; his friends didn't even do that. "I'm glad you aimed for my hand this time, instead of my face like usual."

Mursili couldn't hide his laughter after that, and desperately tried to apologize, but I waved it off, tossing the carcass back at Hestia, who promptly caught it and decided to gorge herself on the remains. And, amusingly, she then raced back and carried over a few that hadn't been eaten and dropped them on the guards' feet, her own 'thank you' for letting her hunt. Once we got all that settled, and said our farewells, Hestia and I headed back to the camp proper, intending on finding Sandas since I was sure someone else had found Lewyn and Aunt Lachesis and I was eager to let him know that his family was near.

However, Hestia suddenly growled and lead me behind the supply tents, showing that Lewyn wasn't at the War Meeting. He was talking to someone. A not-human someone. I could tell that in an instance, and not just because of the beautiful, soft-looking white wings that sprouted from her back. It was how she held herself with an unearthly grace, her long green hair floating in a breeze I couldn't feel. Her eyes, a matching green, glowed with an ethereal light. Her armor, pure white, shimmered as if it were made of thousands of crushed diamonds or millions of pieces of snow and ice. Her features and form appeared human, but…

"You cut me off last time, but I still believe you are being too harsh with Fee," the being scolded, her voice a strange sort of whisper. It was like the wind blowing past, instead of just someone talking. "Too harsh and too cold."

"And what would you have me do?" Lewyn retorted gruffly. His eyes were narrowed and he held himself stiffly. "I cannot be her father. You know this."

"She isn't a child." She shook her head at Lewyn's amused look and glared. "If you are going to do this to them..." She trailed off when Lewyn raised his hand to stop her. "Yes?"

"We have an eavesdropper." And Lewyn looked right at me. Because the wind apparently told him I was here. "Rather rude, Caitriona."

"You are standing in the middle of camp, behind the supply tents where anyone could walk," I countered immediately, defaulting to dryness. Hestia growled again, but calmed when I petted her head. "Besides, you're late. War Meeting."

"I would've thought Diarmuid would be bonding with his mother," Lewyn murmured. The being drifted a little closer to me, studying me for some reason. "Since it's the first time they've seen each other in… how long now?"

"Unlike certain people, Aunt Lachesis has no plans of just abandoning her child, so they have a lot of time to catch up. Besides, her health comes first." I glanced at the being again, who smiled at me. "Is… is she a fairy?" Was it even proper to refer to her as 'she'? I had no idea, but if I had to
take a guess, her figure implied female. "Ah, whatever. Hello, and welcome to our camp. Please scold Lewyn more. He's a jackass."

"He likes making things complicated and then not explaining, so I can see why you think that," the fairy laughed. She floated a bit closer still, her smile growing. Distantly, I thought her smile looked familiar... like I had seen it in a picture or something. "But you and yours are watching out for Fee, yes? Thank you for that."

"Of course we are," I replied, smiling. Lewyn, meanwhile, shook his head in exasperation. "Ah, what is your name? I'm Riona."

"...For now, please, call me 'Mahnya'." She giggled, her eyes dancing with mirth. They looked younger than I would've thought for a fairy. "It is more of a 'title' than a name, but since he wants to keep things complicated..."

"Yuria complained about it as well, Lady Mahnya." Distantly, I knew I should've been a little more freaked out about talking to a fairy, but there was something soothing about her. It was like I was talking to Creidne or something, a 'big sister'. "I do fear we are very late for that Meeting, though."

"I'm sure."

She brushed a kiss over my cheek and then whispered in my ear. "Please continue to watch over Fee for me, please? Fee and Ced both. I'd appreciate it." With those words, she disappeared into the wind, her form scattering into a thousand motes of light that drifted off like petals or feathers.

I watched the motes disappear and then turned back to Lewyn. And noticed he was desperately trying to fend off Hestia, who was trying to jump on him. "Er... I guess I was super distracted," I noted sheepishly, whistling. Hestia huffed, but returned to my side. "So, is she like a wind fairy or something? I didn't give you a chance to answer."

"That's a pretty close comparison, yes," Lewyn confirmed, breathing a sigh of relief. He then moved so that I was definitively between him and Hestia. "I value her insight greatly for a number of reasons."

"Including that she doesn't let you get away with being a jerk."

"Well, depends on the person." He half-smiled. "Those with Forseti's blood... well, she's soft on them." Which explained why she was worried about Fee and her brother, Ced. Though I was curious why she was 'soft on them'. The shared connection to the wind?

"Good, since we're all still waiting for you to apologize to at least Fee." I nudged Hestia and turned away, heading towards where the War Tent was set up. "Anyway, we should get there. I'm sure they're waiting for us and-"

"Oh, hey there, Lewyn!" Aunt Lachesis's bright and chipper voice announced her sudden presence, and I turned back just in time to see her punch Lewyn in the face. A nice, good punch, with a bruise blooming on his jaw and cheek already and he was sent flying before hitting the ground hard. "Ah, I feel so much better!" she declared happily, hands on her hips. She then caught sight of me and waved. "Hello! Sorry, I wanted to get this out of the way before it turned to more violence. Like a kick to the groin in addition to the punch in the face."

"Okay, ow..." Lewyn hissed, wobbling a bit as he pushed himself up. He prodded the area around his jaw and then opened his mouth to tap his teeth. "Jarl's strength still flows strongly... ow..."

"Jarl?" Aunt Lachesis frowned. I tried to think of who 'Jarl' was. "Why the hell bring up Jarl of
"War? I didn't hit you so hard in the head that you bring up gods instead of Crusaders like normal people." Oh, that was right. Jarl was the god who blessed Hezul.

"You sure about that?"

"Not even my full strength, in this weakened state, so... yeah, I'm pretty sure." She glared at him. "Anyway, that's going to be the only punch unless you do something super stupid. It was going to be a slap, but I decided that because of the pain you inflicted on Erinys, Fee, Ced, Oifeye, your people... that all deserved a punch."

"You've never even met Fee!"

"Why does that matter? She's Erinys's daughter. I already love her." She rolled her eyes and snagged Lewyn by the collar before dragging him behind her. "Anyway, there's a War Meeting, right? Riona, is it okay if I sit in?"

"You are one of the people sent for, so I'm sure it is," I replied, falling in step with her. I kept a good grip on Hestia because I could see her wanting to nip at Lewyn's legs while he tried to regain his balance. And failed because since Aunt Lachesis was shorter, he was bent at an awkward angle. She still had a grip on his collar, after all, and he was not breaking free! "How did the check go?"

"More or less confirms what I suspected. If it's an emergency, I can fight, but for my own sake, I'll be better off staying behind." She sighed at that, but smiled. "I was telling Lana about what Claude and Alicia would do, and her eyes lit up, so I'll help her out. And if any of you want more training... well, I am a Master Knight still, regardless of my physical condition."

"I can think of many who will take you up on that." Though honestly, the help to Lana alone was a blessing beyond compare. "That all said, though we're late, let's find Sandas to reassure him and get some ice for Lewyn."

"Must we get the ice?"

"We can't have people thinking it's okay to punch jerks, Aunt Lachesis!" Now that we were in the main part of the camp, we were getting some odd looks. I just pretended nothing was wrong. "At least not without helping them get treatment!"

"Drat."

"We should also let Sandas know you two were found... and I need to tell him that his sister's fiance is one of the guards here. I had a lovely conversation."

"Really? Do tell, do tell!"

"Can you at least let go of me before you two gossip?!" Lewyn yelped. He then yelped again because Hestia escaped me and nipped at his pant leg. "Also, why does she have blood on her?"

"Hestia had a good meal," I replied, snagging her again. Lewyn probably had enough for now. Even I had to see that. "You don't expect a wolf to eat cleanly, do you?"

Lewyn protested, Aunt Lachesis laughed, and our little group headed towards the infirmary. Aunt Lachesis didn't let go of Lewyn's collar, though. I had a feeling it was part of her punishment.

We did eventually get Lewyn to the infirmary and got him some ice for his face, since a bruise on
the face wasn't serious enough for a staff. I also found and applied some bruise balm on it for him, since even if the whole thing was funny, he was hurting and injured. Aunt Lachesis found Sandas for me and told him what I had learned. Which resulted in Sandas bursting into the infirmary and latching onto my legs with the biggest hug he could manage, thanking me profusely. Which extended how long it took me to treat Lewyn's bruise because it was hard to move when you had an adorable child attached to your legs. And Hestia was no help either, because one of the other children was in the infirmary with scraped knees and she decided they were more important. As she should. All in all, it took even longer to make it to the War Meeting, and when I arrived with Lewyn and Aunt Lachesis (because Hestia decided to stay and help Yuria), I could tell everyone (our usual group, minus Arthur and Fee and plus Shanan and a wide-eyed Patty) was wondering what the hell happened.

"Uh… I have so many questions, but I think I'll start with the obvious," Oifeye began, raising a hand to his face. I took my place by Seliph and held up my hands in a 'this isn't entirely my fault' fashion. Seliph promptly caught one of my hands to kiss it. "Lewyn, why do you have a frankly massive bruise on your face?"

"Isn't it obvious by how smug Lachesis looks?" Shanan answered for Lewyn, smirking slightly. He helped Aunt Lachesis over to a chair set up for her next to him and Oifeye. And right by Diarmuid as well, to Diarmuid's complete joy. Seriously, it had been a while since I saw him smile so brightly. "Last time she was this smug… oh, wow, there's so many incidents, actually."

"Very true."

"Watch it, because I'm sure there's stories Aideen hasn't shared that I can," Aunt Lachesis pointed out, pretending to be insulted. Her smile shattered that illusion, though. "Particularly you, Oifeye. Oh, the stories I have heard…"

"We can hear those later, at dinner," Seliph laughed, grinning. However, noticing Larcei looking longingly at Diarmuid and Aunt Lachesis, I poked her side and looked at her worriedly. She rolled her eyes and leaned over to kiss my cheek, quietly reassuring me that everything really was well. I wondered if she and Diarmuid had that talk while I was busy. "But, interesting as they no doubt are, this meeting was supposed to start a while ago."

"Of course. I won't hurt Oifeye's dignity at a serious event." She hid a smile behind her hand, though her eyes danced. "I'm sorry. I'm still a bit giddy at seeing all of you. And all of you grew up so well! Makes me happy."

"I… thank you, Lachesis." Seliph's grin became a shy smile, and I knew I also felt a bit giddy at it. I hid it, however, by checking on Patty, since she was across from me, and she looked more than a little nauseous at all of this. But Lana held her hand and Lester repeatedly looked at her too, so I moved my attention to Iuchar, worried he might find this all awkward. But he was smiling, and he caught my eye and winked, quietly reassuring me that all as well. "Well, for now, we'll get an explanation for what fascinating adventure you three had later, since I am very curious about it all. But Diarmuid? Mind giving your report about the negotiations?"

"Of course not," Diarmuid replied, holding himself a little taller than normal. Probably to try and impress his mom. Though we'd tease him later, we all made sure to do the same, so that he didn't seem obvious about it. And, you know, we wanted to impress her too. And Shanan, since this was the first War Meeting he'd attended with us. "After literally hours of negotiating, because no one in that city wanted to talk to Bramsel directly…"

"Sounds like my father," Iuchar noted dryly. He even rolled his eyes. "That speaks oh-so-well of Bramsel."
"We're not going into the whispers and rumors I heard while negotiating, as we don't need Riona and Larcei losing their tempers and storming the place." Well, *that* pretty much told me what it was, and Larcei and I did immediately stiffen. Ulster immediately switched places with Larcei so that Diarmuid could wrap an arm around her, while Ulster himself took my hand and squeezed it reassuringly. Larcei was a *tiny* bit more likely to explode than me. Barely. "But I did get one who was willing to brave him and thus, talked to Bramsel directly."

"How many conditions did he set?"

"Surprisingly, just one to potentially move the blockade." Diarmuid's exasperated look, though, screamed that this was going to make us sigh. "He wants to talk to Seliph."

"And conveniently get me inside his walls for a trap," Seliph immediately deadpanned. The rest of us either groaned or sighed, depending on personal preference. "That's almost too obvious." Seliph rolled his eyes, and I noticed Aunt Lachesis looked surprised and she tugged Shanan's sleeve to whisper something to him. Shanan whispered something back and both shared a wry smile that hinted they might've been talking about Sigurd. "Well then… okay, probably something that should've been addressed sooner, but Patty, I'm sure you're wondering why I requested you'd be here?"

"More than a little," Patty replied, smiling awkwardly. Lester ruffled her hair, though, and Lana smiled reassuringly. "I'm going to assume it's not family connections?"

"Nope. It's because you actually have knowledge of the area, and none of us do." Seliph smiled warmly at her. "So, I wanted to ask about what you've heard about Darna and it's military force."

"Oh, rumor stuff. Yeah, Uncle Dew taught me how to filter through the mess. Good way to find treasures." Patty squirmed when all eyes turned to her, but she took a deep breath and nodded. "Darna technically, *technically*, doesn't have an army. It's got a city guard, the lovely folks who are blocking our way, and mercenaries. Bunches of mercenaries."

"I wonder if we might be able to hire some of them?" Seliph frowned and looked over at Oifeye, Shanan, and Aunt Lachesis. Lewyn, of course, was in the complete opposite corner of the tent. Normally, I'd grouse, but I couldn't blame him for wanting as much space as possible between him and Aunt Lachesis. His bruise was black and blue and purple, and it took up a good quarter of his face. "I remember Aideen mentioning Father did that? In Agustria?"

"Beowolf," Shanan answered, nodding. He glanced at Oifeye, but Oifeye gestured for him to continue. He then looked at Aunt Lachesis, but she did the same. "From what I understand, Beowolf wasn't exactly happy with his employer and asked Sylvia if the army was looking to hire. She pointed him to Sigurd, and Sigurd hired him on the spot. And so he stayed with the army until…” Until he died at the Belhalla Massacre. He was one of the confirmed deaths, from what I gathered. "I'm not sure you can count on that, though. With the world as it is, people prefer steady coin over morals. Morals don't buy food."

"Though, we *do* have a bunch of gold and jewels that I swiped from the Shrine, and if you want, I can sneak into Darna to steal some from them," Patty offered, still a bit hesitant. At our smiles, though, she relaxed. "I want to send some back home, of course, but..."

"Of course. We need to send a letter to Dew anyway."

"And who knows? Maybe a few decide that there are limits to how much they're willing to ignore their morals for gold," Lester pointed out, shrugging. He patted Patty on the back, a silent 'you are doing great'. "Or even those who decide that they don't want to get in the middle of this. Dead
employers don't pay."

"We can even spook them," I murmured, thinking of the stories I'd been told. Even if that village had been... well, I had learned a lot. "I've heard stories of sand spirits who conjure sandstorms to snatch up the wicked?"

"Oh, we can definitely use that."

"I know a few of those, so we can even tailor it!" Patty noted, bouncing a bit now. It did wonders for her confidence to realize that, yes, we really did need her help. "But it won't deal with all of them. Like I said, Bramsel has a bunch and well..." Her cheer faltered then. "The most famous of them is the Black Knight, who is also called a God of War." Her voice dropped to a whisper, like even talking about him taboo. Aunt Lachesis frowned, for some reason, but kept silent, simply watching us. "They say he's immortal, and that he can slaughter entire armies by himself. Now, I'm sure that's a bit of exaggeration, but he's Bloom's mercenary of choice when dealing with troublesome deserters. I've heard that he's the highest paid mercenary outside of Thracia, and every employer states that it's still too cheap for his skills. He's that good. And Bramsel has had him in his employ for over a year now."

"So definitely someone we will want to try and deal with outside of battle," Seliph murmured, drumming his fingers on the table. He closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them again to look at Diarmuid. "However, what to do with the mercenaries is for the future. As for right now, I think I will go meet with Bramsel. Let's pretend to fall for the scheme. If they expect us to see things as straightforward, then why not play into it and see what we learn?"

"I'll head in with you," I suggested, mind already whirling with ideas. This could work out well for us. "Patty's mentioned there's freaking songs about us dating." The others snickered, and I rolled my eyes. "There's songs about all of us, my darling family. Complete with fanciful titles for us all." I smirked at the various squeaks, but then shook my head. "But we can play into that too. People don't expect new lovers to have a damn thought in their head, and it gives a convenient excuse for Hestia to come along."

"Which means Hestia can wander off and give you a reason to explore," Larcei added, catching my thought instantly. She grinned at the thought, though she remained leaning against Diarmuid. "Meanwhile... well, actually we should have Diarmuid accompany as a bodyguard or something. He can chat with guards, get some info, maybe score another date..." Diarmuid choked on a yelp, and the rest of us laughed. Shanan and Aunt Lachesis exchanged confused looks and poked Oifeye, who bent down to whisper an explanation to them. "While you all are distracting them, we can sneak some people in?"

"And we might want to try sneaking some people past the blockade for scouting." I leaned over the map, frowning. "If Bramsel agrees... we need to consider him wanting to pin us between Melgen and Darna. A pincer in that area..."

"That area has bunches of hills and valleys, so there's a lot of hiding places," Patty added, tracing it on the map. She frowned a bit, and seemed hesitant, but Lester patted her on the back encouragingly. "I've had to sneak through there before, so I can help?"

"I'll gladly take the help," Ulster replied, smiling warmly at her. Patty grinned, but I saw Lana look a bit uncomfortable, no doubt a little bit of jealousy. Seliph noticed as well, and he reached around to pat her shoulder. "Shanan? Her, me, you, and Larcei?"

"That should be enough of a group, particularly since Balmung gives me a bit of an edge, stealth-wise," Shanan agreed. He had the most interesting expression on his face, like he didn't know if he
wanted to be proud or sad. "Who will sneak into Darna?"

"Need to see who is up for it first. But it might be a good idea to start getting some whispers in about ghosts and spirits, and feeling out which mercenaries we can hire." Ulster glanced over at Lewyn, who remained perfectly silent. "Think you can use the wind to find out some stuff for us on that? You're unusually silent."

"It hurts to talk because of the bruise," Lewyn groused. Ulster smiled sheepishly, realizing that the comment had been more than a little stupid. "But I can see what I can find out. The wind is more focused towards Alster and Leonster, though."

"Even that would be helpful, because that could give us an estimate on how much time we have," Iuchar noted, frowning as he tapped Alster on the map. "Friege has always been a bit spread out in influence. I didn't hear much, being in Isaach as I was, but I remember Father's whining over it. You have the Bloom's youngest sister, Ethnia, ruling Friege itself, Bloom in Alster and Conote… supposedly, Melgen is governed by Ishtore, Bloom's son, so we'll have a good force there. And if Bloom isn't in Alster, then I don't know who is governing it for him, but if General Reinhardt is there, then we're in trouble."

"Reinhardt?" I repeated, curious. A couple of Conall's stories had involved him. Some had involved Ishtore as well, and I… I didn't like the idea that we would have to fight him. But if we couldn't negotiate some sort of peace, then… "He's Ishtar's personal knight, yes?"

"And so powerful of a mage knight that some truly believe he's the second coming of Thrud. And that's without Holy Blood, by the way." Iuchar shook his head and crossed his arms. "With luck, though, he's with Lady Ishtar, and they'll both be in Belhalla. Far from here." That would be nice, for more than one reason. "That's for later, though. Something to keep in mind."

"Definitely." I hid my worries behind a smile, since I was so very good at that. Because someone had to smile. "Well, we have a plan for now. Let's see about getting things set up, yes?"

We discussed a few more details, mostly just potential safety measures, and then we all dispersed to go wherever. I didn't pay much attention, save to make sure to give everyone hugs and kisses, as we do, because I tried to think of what exactly I needed to do. But then I noticed Larcei tugging Shanan to the side and… well… I would be an absolutely horrible friend if I didn't try to eavesdrop. So, of course, I followed.

"Hey, Shanan, are you okay?" Larcei asked as soon as the two were a couple tents away. I ducked behind one, peering out to watch. "You looked off during the entire meeting. If you're not feeling well, then we should get you medicine sooner rather than later."

"Oh, no, I'm well," Shanan reassured immediately. Larcei looked at him skeptically, and he sighed. "I just… I wish I could keep you all safer. That's all."

"We've been safe, Shanan." Larcei scowled, hands on her hips. "We've been safe ever since we left Sigurd's army. Everyone has been keeping us safe. It's now time we repaid the favor. It's not fair if everyone else makes the sacrifices for us."

"...Am I being scolded?"

"Damn right you are!" Larcei huffed, stomping her foot. "Because you have always been the biggest sacrificer! It's beyond time to even things out!"

"Well, I promised…" Shanan sighed, and absently played with the hair by his face. "No, I suppose
that reason doesn't work anymore. Especially since we'll all be fighting together now."

"That's right, we will. Which is a huge relief. You have any idea how worried I… we'd get when you were off on your own doing missions?" Larcei grinned, puffing out her chest proudly. "But this time, I can guard your back!"

"Guard my back, huh?" Shanan laughed softly, and Larcei went right back to glaring. "I'm not laughing at you."

"Yes, you are."

"...Well, I'm laughing at how earnest you are." He continued laughing and Larcei looked ready to throw something at him. "I'm sorry."

"You are not."

"I am; I am." He did have to muffle his laughter, though. "Here, how about a sword lesson? It's been a bit, and I'd like to see how strong you've become."

"I hope this isn't a 'are you on my level?' thing, because one, I doubt I'm as strong as you yet and two, I don't need to be as strong as you are to take up some of your burden. I just have to be strong enough to hold you up." Larcei glanced to the side in embarrassment, thankfully looking the opposite way of me. I was enjoying this far too much. "But anyway, yes, sword lesson. Let's go."

"...Yeah." Shanan smiled softly at her, but there was a trace of disbelief in it. I wondered if it was because he didn't believe the words, or he couldn't believe Larcei had said them. "Let's find the practice area then. It seems the layout is much like how Sigurd set his camps, so I'm sure we can find it quickly."

"Sounds good to me." Larcei smiled warmly at him in return. "Let's go!"

I decided it would be a good idea to leave then, now in a good mood. However, there were things to do, things to prepare, and I thought of just what I needed to do first. Check on the children, particularly Inanna's group. Just in case.

On the surface, Darna was festive. Bright colors, bright laughter, bunches of people in the market… it was like bad paint that you used to cover the cracks in a wall, and a little bit of inspection showed the damage all too easily. A large portion of the outer wall was noticeably newer than the rest, no doubt the area that collapsed. The poorer district had people all scrunched together, with whole families sharing one room apartments in teetering buildings. The wealthier district had whole houses and moderate space in between them. The people smiled, but kept wary eyes about as they spoke, scared that one errant word might land them into a world of trouble. I wondered if people would be so 'normal' if Seliph and I had actively been paying attention. As it was, though, Seliph and I did our level best to pretend to be a completely besotted couple who were entranced with all the colors. And tried to not kill Diarmuid by having him crack his ribs from suppressed laughter.

"If you bloody your lip, I swear the story is going to be that you got super into making out with someone," Seliph teased Diarmuid after the upteenth time Diarmuid had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. Diarmuid rolled his eyes. "Look more exasperated with us."

"It can't be easy with the flowery compliments you've been giving me," I noted, keeping Hestia near. Hestia looked up at me with forlorn eyes because, in order to make sure she got past the guards and no one looked twice at her, it was decided that she'd wear a 'collar', really a ribbon
Yuria tied. And she hated it. To be fair, I hated it too and looked forward to getting it off her. Even if the ribbon was cute, she was no mere pet. She was my wolf. "Did you get suggestions from Iuchar?"

"I have an entire script that Iuchar helped me with, actually, my divine goddess of beauty and grace." He hid his grin by kissing my cheek, and I pretended to be shy to hide how much I wanted to roll my eyes. "But seriously, Diarmuid, don't die. Dying is bad."

"I am doing my level best," Diarmuid reassured, rolling his eyes to feign exasperation. Despite our teasing, I doubted anyone was in any danger of seeing through the act. People tended to make snap judgements, after all. "Can I just say, by the way, that I feel like I should be at a festival and not a bodyguard? And that this outfit wasn't meant to carry a sword. I swear the weight is going to drag my pants down."

"Well, I'd say that's distracting," Seliph teased, before subtly checking that the tome he had was tucked into his scarf-belt. All of us were wearing our best clothes, which meant our Isaachian festival outfits, with bits of jewelry and scarves to help brighten them even further. I even had flowers braided into my hair, courtesy of Aunt Lachesis (who brushed and braided my hair) and Lester (who picked the flowers for me). "But I know what you mean. We all spent… far too long getting ready. Or having the others get us ready."

"Tell me about it." Diarmuid made a face, and I quickly leaned around to kiss Seliph on the mouth so that it looked like he was reacting to that. "The others had too much fun with this."

"They better get good information from this. I'm already regretting this."

"You regret having the excuse to cuddle with your girlfriend? And embarrass her?"

"When it's a spectacle?"

"Later, let's do this where people can't see us," I suggested, purposely smirking. It was worth Seliph's sudden blush, though Diarmuid quickly had to facepalm to hide how much he wanted to laugh. "My, my… dearest lord of my heart, whatever are you thinking?"

"I hate you," Seliph mumbled, quickly kissing me. And ghosting his fingers over my cheek and neck. "Things like that should be discussed later."

"You want to discuss cuddling?"

"Maybe a specific kind."

"Friends, dearest people of my heart, please, you are making it so hard to not laugh," Diarmuid quietly complained, shooting us a dirty look. Which hopefully helped the act. "I also swear that I'm sharing all of this with the others. As payback."

"Of course you are," I replied, petting Hestia when she whimpered. She didn't like something, and I wasn't sure if it was just her complaining about the ribbon or something else. Nothing looked off from what I could see, but it could be something she sensed. "If you did anything else, we'd have to check you for a fever."

"Just warning you." Diarmuid took a deep breath and nodded. "We're at the castle."

So we were. The legendary fortress… the fortress where the Crusaders gathered their forces… where they fought their first 'true' battles of the rebellion… where they accepted the blessings of
the gods… it should've been grand. It should've been a grand, solemn moment. But now, it was just an asshole's castle, a place where he reveled in excess. Or so I guessed by the copious amount of jewelry Bramsel wore when he came out to greet us. Perhaps it was a culture difference I didn't know about, but seriously, he could've provided food for an entire country with the gems he wore so frivolously. Certainly made me understand why Aunt Lachesis insisted that we dress up as much as possible. If we hadn't, we would've looked lesser in comparison. Not a good way to start negotiations, that.

"Prince Seliph, Princess Caitriona, what an honor to meet you!" Bramsel greeted us, taking Seliph's hands to shake them. He then took mine to kiss it and I made myself smile to hide how much I wanted to scrub my hand on stone to scrape it off. My ability to smile through just about anything was certainly going to be tested today. "Thank you again, Lord Diarmuid, for arranging this meeting for me. I have been looking forward to it."

"My prince has been most eager to make your acquaintance, Lord Bramsel," Diarmuid replied with a bow, smiling with every bit of charm he had. Which proved super-effective at least with the servants nearby, based on their blushes. "Still, such company is truly too grand for me. Might I rest with your guards while you talk?"

"Of course, of course!" Bramsel gestured to one, and I noticed that there weren't nearly as many out and about as I would've thought. On the surface, at least. A few of the 'crowd' stood far too stiffly, with their hands dropping to their belts like they were used to wearing a weapon. And based on how Hestia's ears twitched, I knew there were more in the shadows, hidden from view. He truly was trying to trick us, huh? "But come, come! Business is never complete without a banquet, and I have prepared my very best for you!"

I braced myself for whatever tacky or otherwise horrendous decorations would be inside, just because of my last encounter with a castle. However, I was pleasantly surprised to see the interior was actually very beautifully decorated, and the scents were easy on the nose. And the music from the banquet was very pleasant to listen to as we entered the main room, filled with various other guests chatting and gossiping away, and Bramsel led us to the back, where a table had been set up. No chairs, but very soft cushions served instead, though it made me all the more curious about the 'throne' in the back. No doubt he normally sat there, but was pretending to be humbler for the moment. Still, Bramsel put on a good show, waiting until we were settled, even Hestia, who laid down next to me, before clapping to signal the servants to serve food and drink. We made sure to only eat the same dishes he did, and even then, we split who ate from what, though we hid that by sharing a plate. I even fed him, because it was something lovey-dovey and it helped sell that neither of us really had a thought in our head. We were just naive idiots. ...Well, we were, but not in the way these people expected.

Throughout the meal, we made small talk with Bramsel, mostly about how 'wonderful' we found Darna. So, it came to a surprise when there was a sudden hush to the crowded room, to the point that even the music stopped. It was even more confusing when two women, one with black hair and dressed in orange and another with green hair and dressed in pink, stepped into the middle of the room. But all questions fled when the music started up again and they began to dance. In fact, all thoughts fled, because I was completely entranced by the dance. I barely had any presence of mind to even notice that the one in orange did simpler moves than her companion. Probably because it, by no means, detracted from the performance. If anything, it just amplified the intricacy and beauty of it all. Absolutely breathtaking… I was actually saddened when the dance ended. I wanted to see more!

"Prince Seliph, Princess Caitriona, might I introduce Layla and Lene, our court dancers?" Bramsel said, beckoning the two women to come forward. Both did and bowed to us, smiling brightly.
"They are truly the jewels of my banquets."

"I can see why," I breathed, smiling back at the two. The one in pink caught my eye and winked. "Goodness, I've seen many dances, but none as fine as that." I'd danced myself, but I could never compare to them even if I practiced for a million years. "I'm at a loss for words..."

"That you enjoyed it so, Princess Caitriona, is a wonder beyond compare." Bramsel signaled something, and both of the girls bowed again before leaving the room entirely. The music started up again, playing an entirely different piece. "Perhaps you might visit again? They dance nightly here."

"My lord Bramsel, you tempt me too much!"

"I do think we shall visit again, if only for you to smile so brightly again, my love," Seliph murmured, caressing my cheek. I looked down shyly, as if embarrassed. "Ah, but I keep getting distracted. Forgive me, Lord Bramsel."

"Prince Seliph, who can blame you for being distracted by so beautiful a woman?" Bramsel laughed. I reached over to pet Hestia, and discovered that she wasn't there. A quick look around showed she wasn't anywhere in the room. While we'd planned for that, I'd expected to nudge her, not have her seriously go off on her own. "However, if you would like, we can discuss more serious things?"

"Actually, I think I need to find my Hestia," I murmured, standing up to smooth out my dress. Seliph frowned slightly at me, since the original 'plan' had involved me sitting in for serious discussions a bit, but I smiled sheepishly at him and pointed to where Hestia had been. And now there was nothing but some fur and remnants of food in her spot. "It seems she decided to take advantage of my distraction to go wandering."

"Princess Caitriona, there's no need for you to do that." Bramsel gestured to a couple of guards, who stepped up and bowed. "My men can handle getting your dog."

"I appreciate it, Lord Bramsel, but I'm afraid my Hestia is a wolf, not a dog." I smiled my sweetest and most innocent smile, and tried to not laugh when the guards automatically recoiled at the mention of 'wolf'. This was precisely why we tried to sell the impression of her being a 'dog'. "Please, it will be much quicker if I get her myself. She's liable to play with the guards and send them on a merry hunt to have some fun. Or, worse, sneak inside some room and mess things up. She gets horribly playful when she's bored." I leaned down and kissed Seliph's cheek. "I will be back as soon as possible, love."

"Please do," Seliph murmured, doing his best to look forlorn. He even caught my hand and kissed my palm, lingering a bit. I didn't have to pretend to blush at that, and knew this was his revenge for me feeding him. "I am not at my best without you."

"Flatterer." I curtseyed to Lord Bramsel. "I promise I shall be back as soon as possible." Then I skipped out of the room, humming along to some of the music like I was a silly little girl who thought nothing about anything.

As soon as I was out of sight of the main room, though, I dropped the act and began meandering through, pretending to be looking for Hestia while really studying everything. And noticing it was all just a little too neat and empty, especially given the rumors Patty had heard. Sure, rumors exaggerated, but rumors also always had a grain of truth to them. And from what I could see, and from what I noted from the way the servants quickly ducked behind corners and doors to 'prevent' me from seeing them… well, they were clearly hiding. And if some were hiding, it was easy to
guess that there were many more. Bramsel definitely wanted us to think that there were fewer forces here than he actually had. So, his plan might not be to 'trap' Seliph here, but rather to try and catch us in a pincer while we dealt with Melgen. Something we had guessed, but we should put that a little bit higher on the 'possibilities' list. Which was irritating because it meant we'd have to deal with Melgen quickly to prepare a proper defense...

In the middle of categorizing everything, I heard Hestia growling at something and immediately rushed towards the noise. An unsupervised, angry Hestia was a dangerous thing and besides the whole 'threat might not actually be a threat' thing, we were trying to downplay how dangerous we were. And, you know, it wasn't wise to leave an angry wolf free to do whatever she wanted. Or, well, normally. When I actually found her, I noticed that there was a group of men looming and leering over the pink-dressed dancer from earlier, with only Hestia between her and them and... well, all thoughts of that went out the window.

"If this is, by any means, what it looks like, you're lucky she didn't already tear out your throats," I noted dryly, anger threading through every word. The men whirled, and a few tried to leer at me, but I glared and Hestia snarled, causing them to pale and stumble back. "Leave. Now. Or I promise that she will do so. Or I will burn off your balls. Either-or." And that got them running away, though I had to sigh, grimacing. If word of this got to Bramsel, it could make the act less believable, but I just... I just could not hold my temper, damn it!

"Hee... I thought you were paying far more attention than Brams thought you were," the girl giggled, quickly muffling it with her hand. The easy way she shrugged off the whole thing hinted that either she didn't know what they wanted or, more likely, she was far too used to this sort of situation. Which seriously made me want to go after them to set some part of them on fire or something, just as I'd threatened. "Funny how many old men in power see a pretty face and don't think there's a brain underneath, huh?"

"...Yeah, I suppose so," I replied, letting myself relax. There was something familiar about her, and not just because I had just seen her either. "Though I think you give me too much credit, miss dancer." Still, even with that familiarity, I shouldn't fully relax. I had my part to play, after all. "I imagine they were far more afraid of political consequences, though. Or Hestia. Hestia is most of my intimidation factor."

"So you say, but you carry yourself too gracefully to be anything but a highly trained warrior. Or a dancer, but I doubt you're a dancer." She laughed, grinning. "But I'll stop prodding. You did save me, after all. But seriously, if you're setting up Brams for a fall, I'm making snacks to watch."

"Perhaps we'll see." Noticing Hestia was still growling, I reached down to pet her, urging her to calm down. "I do apologize, however, if my Hestia gave you a fright. She's especially prickly about things like this, and she must've been worried."

"Nah, don't worry about it. I'm well aware that sometimes, the scariest looking ones are the sweetest. My lover is like that. Stoic-scowly a lot of the time, but he's incredibly kind." She clasped her hands behind her back and laughed. "Thank you very much for saving me, though. My name is Lene, by the way, since Bramsel didn't really do a proper introduction or anything. You're Princess Caitriona, yes?"

"You can seriously just call me 'Riona'." I continued petting Hestia, thinking about the name. Now that I could actually think again, I knew it was familiar. But I couldn't place why. This was going to bug me for days, which wasn't good. There was far too many things going on. "And, just as seriously, your dance was amazing."

"I could tell you liked it. Your eyes were all lit up and everything." She smiled brightly. "It was
such a relief to dance for someone like you and your love. I'm used to Bramsel and the mercenaries, who pay more attention to how my boobs bounce."

"Well, I guess to be fair, you do have nice breasts?" I grinned and she laughed. "Sorry, probably not a good thing to say, especially right after what just happened. You are very beautiful, though. I didn't notice while you were dancing, but holy wow."

"That's because you paid attention to the art of it. Like I said, it was a relief to dance for someone like that. Layla thought so too." She winked, grinning back now. "However, I am definitely vain enough to appreciate the compliments, especially from an equally pretty girl~!"

"Careful, my ego might swell up!" Noting how tense Hestia still was, I decided it was better to make sure she was completely calm before trying to return to the banquet. "Here, I'll walk you to where you're heading. Hestia will just follow you anyway."

"Well, how can I say 'no' to such a lovely escort?" She giggled, and took my arm. "This way, then!"

She led me through the grounds easily, showing that she'd been living here, or at least working here, for quite a while now. Eventually, we got near what seemed to be the stables, and I was curious because I wouldn't have thought she'd ride or anything. Then I was too busy yelping because Hestia left my side to rush forward, meandering around various buckets and whatnot to nose someone wearing a black hooded cloak, and an equally black outfit to match. And was by a black horse with black leather saddle and reins. Someone clearly had a favorite color.

"Uh… hi there, dog?" the person said, standing there a bit stiffly. Hestia continued nosing him, clearly curious about his scent. "Er…?"

"You know; she kinda reminds me of you!" Lene laughed, skipping over to hug the man. She then beamed at him. "So? Did you get to watch?"

"Yes, I hid behind a pillar to watch." The man turned a bit more to properly smile at her, gently caressing her cheek. This had to be her lover then. "You added a jump towards the end. Right before that turn?"

"I did!" She laughed, clearly delighted. "I have to keep the dance interesting for you, after all! Since you watch so closely!"

"I keep telling you, Lene, that I could never find your dances boring." He laughed softly. I leaned a bit down so that I could see his face under the hood, and caught sight of a handsome man with some sort of brown for his eyes and blonde hair. I half-wondered if this was the 'Black Knight' Patty mentioned. If so, then I definitely didn't want to fight him. He smiled so warmly and gently at Lene, and the way her eyes sparkled when she looked at him showed she adored him as much as he adored her. "But I think you enjoy adding things just to see if I catch them."

"Well, you haven't missed a change yet!" Lene laughed and then gestured at me. "Anyway, I'm sorry that I took so long. Some creeps thought they could be more attractive than you for some reason, but Riona and her Hestia chased them off like the rats they are."

"I knew I should've simply waited for you." He sighed, and turned to look at me, still smiling gently. I kind of thought there was something familiar about the smile, but I wasn't sure. It was much vaguer than the familiarity I felt for Lene, and that was already pretty damn vague. "But thank you for helping her, my lady."

"Meh, I'm glad that I got there before there were too many screams," I replied, shrugging off the
thanks. I tried to beckon Hestia over, but she still continued to sniff the man. "Hestia got there first, and she was quite ready to show off how a wolf’s jaw can easily crush bone."

"Sadly, unless you go for violent threats, they really don't seem to believe they’ll face consequences," he murmured, grimacing. I wondered if he had to ‘violently protect' Lene a few times before, and if he was uncomfortable with having to be so protective. "But thank you. I'm honestly not sure what I'd do if she was hurt." He knelt down to actually pet Hestia, missing Lene's faint blush and silly little smile. "Thank you as well, by the way. I'm afraid all I have to give is pets." Hestia barked and licked his cheek. "I… think that meant 'you're welcome'?"

"It did." Yeah, I definitely didn't want to fight him. If anything, I'd like to fight alongside him, or make sure he was in a safe place. Hestia clearly liked him. "Ah, I should get back to the banquet, though. I've been gone far too long."

"Ah, that's right. You were one of the guests." He stood up and Hestia rushed back to my side, pressing into my leg. She was ready to leave, now that she knew Lene would be safe. "May I… ask a question first?"

"We can see if I've an answer for you, sure." I smiled at him, wishing he'd bring down the hood. But hey, if he was a mercenary, then he was probably under strict orders to hide. Or maybe he just forgot it was up. Gods know I'd done that before. "What is it?"

"What is Seliph like?"

"Seliph?" The question startled me, but Lene didn't seem so surprised at all. In fact, her little smile showed she was actually a bit happy about it. I was so missing something, and I had a feeling I'd kick myself for it later. But for now… "He's…" I wondered what to say. "He's a complete dolt sometimes."

"Pardon?"

"Can't even brush his hair, but insists on having it long to emulate Shanan. Always forgetting where he put his boots. Scared of the dark. Constantly worrying about everything…" Still, I smiled, closing my eyes. "Working himself to the bone trying to make sure everything is running smoothly. Hates one-sided protection… and yet, he is the kindest, gentlest person I know."

"...Is he?"

"Yes. His smile sparks smiles. He plays with the children in the infirmary, so that they will laugh and think the world isn't so bad. Always there with a hug, or willing to lend an ear. Tries diplomacy first because he wants to minimize the deaths on both sides, because nothing about conflict is straightforward. Always keeps his promises, and keeps on going no matter how afraid he is." I opened my eyes, laughing now. "But really, I'm probably the worst person to ask. I love him. I've always loved him. And I always will."

"I see." He had a strange look on his face, but he nodded, accepting my answer. "Sorry for the odd question. You hear the songs, but…"

"I really need to actually hear these songs, as I'm sure they're fantastically incorrect. Most stories are. They simplify things a lot."

"I suppose so." He chuckled. "Got an example, though? Kind of curious."

"Well…" I thought and said the first one I thought of. "Eldigan's death was way more complicated, for one. Or so I have always been told." And I did have that family on the brain, so to speak, since
we had just found Aunt Lachesis. "Ah, but I really need to get back! Stay safe, you two! And Lene, if we can arrange it, I'd love to see another dance!"

It was only much later, when I was back at the banquet with Bramsel, that I realized Lene's lover might have been asking for an incident in one of the songs about us that had been exaggerated. Not an example of how a song twisted a complicated situation into a glorified, and simple, situation. If I saw him again, I'd answer that question properly. That was my quiet little promise.

After the literally hours long banquet, filled with food and talk, Bramse finally agreed to move the blockade back and allow our army to pass. We were absolutely certain he was going to try and get us in a pincer by this point, but we pretended to be unaware and perfectly grateful, even promising to attend another banquet as soon as we were able. However, our minds were whirling, especially once we were back and we all gave our reports. We would have to deal with Melgen quickly if we were going to avoid an attack from behind. And, of course, we wanted to try and talk to Ishtore and see if he'd be willing to compromise or surrender. We'd really rather not fight. We would if we had to, but…

"Ugh… I really can't sleep…" I grumbled, laying on my back after hours of tossing and turning. You would think that I'd be exhausted after everything, but nope. "Maybe it's because of all we learned…"

Our spies inside the city had gotten quite a bit of information, and planted the seeds for rumors that were already bearing fruit. And Diarmuid… well, he'd been his nice and charming self while the guards had been drinking and they babbled out all sorts of information. Now some of it focused on how much they'd like to bed Diarmuid, and a few asked him on dates, but some of it had actually been very useful. What caught my attention the most was how they confirmed the Black Knight was in residence, but that he'd left the city not long after the dance to travel to a nearby oasis. Which fit what I'd seen with Lene and her love. Meaning that if we could time an attack while he was away, or talk to him while he was there, we might be able to get him to not fight…

"Ha… I'm an idiot. Getting so worked up about the two of them when I already know I've killed bunches of people's loves already." Their fiances… their lovers… their spouses… hell, even just their family or their friends! The number of people I'd killed, just by myself, was already too high to count. And it would only get higher. No matter how much we'd wish otherwise, they would. Because not everyone would surrender. Because to some, we were the worst option, not the best. Because some would choose loyalty and duty over morals, because they felt that was the path they had to take for the sake of their people. "Gods, I hate all of this."

I might've continued in that vein for a while, but Hestia, who had been fast asleep next to me, suddenly woke up and lifted her head curiously. So I rolled out of my bed roll and looked outside. And found Inanna standing there awkwardly. Not who I was expecting. At all.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, looking down. She wore a borrowed nightgown, and I made a mental note to try and hem it for her later. Or see if Lana would. Regardless, it was baggy and long on her. "Did I wake you?"

"No, I was still awake," I reassured her, motioning for her to come inside. She did so tentatively, and quickly sat down. "It is very late, though. Is everyone okay? Did someone threaten you?"

"No, this army is much different than that village." She twisted her fingers in her skirt, and I tossed her a pillow to squeeze instead. Which she promptly did. "I won't say everyone was kind. But at worst, they were distant. I think a few wanted to start some sort of fight with us, but some of your other soldiers stopped them. One of them, Niamh, said something like 'hurt the children, and I can
promise you that Lady Riona will have Hestia tear your spine out'."

"Well, I wouldn't order it." I wouldn't stop her, though. ...Well, maybe I would once she bit their back. "Hestia doesn't exactly take orders. We are 'pack' to her, and she particularly loves me, so she will listen to me more than the others. But I've had to stop her from biting someone's face off before." Hestia tilted her head to the side all innocently and scooched closer to wedge her nose under my hand. "So, to be more accurate, we're her dumb humans and she occasionally entertains our 'requests'."

"Hee…" Inanna hesitated a moment but then tentatively petted Hestia's head with a finger. When Hestia wagged her tail, she went with her whole hand. "She's so soft."

"She is indeed." I watched her pet Hestia for a while, before deciding to prompt her. "So, what had you outside my tent? Was it just that you couldn't sleep?"

"Huh? Oh, no, I did… have a question." Inanna tried to pull her hand away, but Hestia tucked her nose under her hand again, insisting on more pets. After a moment, Inanna obliged. "I was… um… I know you all are looking for safe places for us, along with the other five. But I was… I was wondering if we could just… stay with the army? At least my group? I mean; all ten of us are kind of getting close, but they… um…"

"Is this because of what happened at the village?" I closed my eyes when she nodded, thinking about it. "I worry about the younger three. I know that our parents somehow managed babies and toddlers in their army, but even then, they hadn't planned on marching to war. War came to them. But we are going to war, and battles are no place for children." I opened my eyes again to make sure I looked at her. "However, you and Anat? I believe you can stay here. I mean; I do still worry. You're both very young. But you know how to run away from danger, for instance."

"That's true." Inanna nodded. "I know it's very selfish, but I also… I also think I can find some way to reconcile what I was taught with what I am seeing? If that makes sense?"

"I think so. Gods know that I'm still struggling to adapt after being so sheltered." I hesitated before reaching out to gently touch her cheek, smiling at her. "However, if the army is truly the safest place for all five of you? Then of course you can all stay with us. You took a leap of faith when you took my hand back at the shrine, and I will do everything I can to prove worth of that trust. We all will. And that means making sure that you stay as safe as possible."

"Thank you." She smiled back, relaxing now that I've more or less agreed. "I'm going to keep on you for it!"

"Good. You should. We're not always right. People need to remind us of it." My own smile grew, because I was glad she trusted me with this. "And never feel like you can't talk to us about things. I know we are busy, but seriously, I used to have soldiers asking me about things like 'where is the duty roster' when we literally had the lists posted everywhere." I grinned at her. "And yes, they would stop me in the middle of what I was doing to ask that."

"Hee… you all can be silly too." Inanna nodded, giggling a bit. "I will try. I'm a bit overwhelmed still."

"I understand. But I promise; we are here for you." I glanced at Hestia, who wagged her tail and headed outside the tent. "However, it is late, so I'll walk you to your tent."

"But we are in your tent."
"Hestia needs to head out anyway." I pointed to the flap for emphasis. "And, trust me, it's way safer for me to go with her. She's a prankster."

"I… okay. If it's more to keep an eye on her…"

I walked Inanna to her tent, with Hestia darting about excitedly, and I asked her about her day and discussed with her ways that she could help around the camp, since she was very insistent on it. I had a suspicious, and sad, feeling that all of them were going to be like this, and I wondered just what they could even do. I'd definitely have a talk with Oifeye, Aunt Lachesis, and Shanan in the morning. However, for now, I kept on smiling, doing my best to reassure her, and made sure to wish her good night when we made it to the tent she shared with Anat. Afterwards, I let Hestia run a bit and meandered after her, smiling at how peaceful the camp was. It likely wouldn't be like this in a few days, so it was best to enjoy it while I could.

"Thank you again for staying up late to help me with my memorization." However, to my surprise, I wasn't the only one up (who wasn't part of night watches). Yuria and Diarmuid were also up, talking outside of her tent, and I quickly hid nearby to eavesdrop. Because I was super curious, even if I kept my promise about no teasing. "I feel bad taking up so much of your time, though," Yuria mumbled, looking down. "Especially since you had such a long day today."

"Believe me, after literally hours of listening to drunks droning on and on, the lessons were a much needed respite," Diarmuid reassured, laughing gently. However, Yuria didn't smile back, not even a token one. "Hey, what's wrong? Something has been bothering you ever since yesterday when we told you what was going on."

"I just feel so… useless, really. Everyone has been so helpful and kind. I really want to do something…" Yuria sighed, pulling her hair a bit forward to hide her face. "But I can't go on missions, because of who I am. I'm having to learn so much, so I can't give any sort of insight in a tactical meeting. The one I attended in Rivough proved that all too well."

"You've been doing quite a bit, though. I promise."

"Really?"

"Yes, with the infirmary. Riona's mother, Alicia, was the Chief Healer of Sigurd's army, and there are a lot of stories that begin with 'so, we dragged Alicia out'. Part of it is because Alicia apparently was very closed off initially and how much of a workaholic she was, but part of it is also just how much work she had." Diarmuid brushed Yuria's hair behind her ear so that he could look her in the eye. "What you do, Yuria, might seem 'minor' to you, but without you, I'm not sure Lana would be able to take breaks. She would have to work tirelessly, day in and day out. But with you to help her bear that burden, she's able to relax and have fun."

"I see…" She sighed, though. "I wish I could help more…"

"You don't need to 'buy' our affection with help and work, Yuria. You are an important part of our lives, and you always will be." Diarmuid smiled brightly, and poor Yuria blushed. I had to facepalm because wow, that sounded flirty. "But if you are truly so worried, why not talk with my mother?"

"Would she mind? I mean…" Yuria tugged her hair. "Given my heritage and all…"

"Mother would be delighted. I promise. And, if nothing else, she can emphasize what I said about the help you give in the infirmary. Alicia was one of her best friends, meaning Mother had to deal with her workaholic tendencies a lot." He made a face. "Seriously, based on all the stories I've
heard? Freaking miracle Riona and Conall even got conceived, much less born."

"Diarmuid!" Yuria quickly muffled a laugh, and Diarmuid's expression softened, relieved that she was more cheerful. "Is that how you're supposed to talk about a friend's mother?"

"Riona would probably die laughing if I told her that." He had a good point. I did have to bite back a laugh. "But seriously, I'm sure Mother would love talking to you."

"Then I'll try talking to her in the morning, then. Oh, but only after you two are done. You're having breakfast together, yes?"

"We are, yes."

Hestia returned to my side then, bloody muzzle hinting she had found some sort of midnight snack, and I decided it was best for both of us to simply leave the two to their talk, and attempt to sleep. Before we actually went into my tent, though, Hestia whimpered at something. Following her gaze, I saw Darna up on its cliff and I found myself wondering how Lene was. Wondering how her friend, Layla, was. Wondering how her boyfriend, who I rudely didn't get the name of, was. When we were done with Melgen... I wanted to see them again. Not just for a dance, either. I swore there was something I was missing about those two I had met, something that should be obvious, but it was so buried in my head that it would take forever to dig it out. And there was no time for that now.

But we weren't done with Darna. I was sure of that. We'd have to go back to it before we could truly march on Alster and make it to Leonster. I could only hope that it wouldn't be too bloody.

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Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: Fun times, eh? I wanted to highlight some of the 'not so different' vibes a little more, so I went with this for the opening scene. I also wanted to show some parallels, and differences, between Riona and Arvis (Riona's words are the same, more or less, as Arvis's thoughts in... chapter 2 of Memoirs of Velthomer, iirc). But I also wanted to show how hate is so often taught with the little girl who is confused by all the anger. The irrigation techniques briefly described are 'basin irrigation' (used by the Ancient Egyptians) and 'perennial irrigation' (used on the Mesopotamian Plain).

Manfroy surviving such a hunt is something from the Oosawa manga, though how/why it happened is brought up in Memoirs of Velthomer. Shanan's talk in the third scene with Seliph, and his later talk with Larcei are based off of their in-game talks (Seliph's talk gives Seliph +1 skill, while the Larcei talk gives her +2 strength and 100 love points with him).

Jamke and Dew are two others whose fates are left completely ambiguous. So, I chose for them both to have survived, with Jamke having started the orphanage that Febail and Patty take care of in-game, though Jamke died prior to the start of the Gen2. Dew, however, is alive and kicking. Because why not? This is also why Patty has the wind sword in this story, by the way. Dew gave it to her.

Mahnya is the original fan-translation of Annand's name. Sandas is the name the Anatolian lion god, while Anat is a goddess. Maliya is another Hittite goddess, while
Mursili is the name of... at least two kings. The 'wall falling' incident mentioned by Mursili is the same one from Lene's oneshot in *Memoirs of the Lost*.

In-game, neutral Darna soldiers block the path to Melgen until you capture the Yied Shrine, after which, they pull back to guard just Darna (allowing you to finally reach the nearby village being assaulted by bandits). You can actually talk to the guards, but they'll just say some generic "turn back now" or something. The game doesn't hide Bramsel's plan from the player, so I figured the chars could figure it out as well. Lene and Ares make a couple of cameos at this point, fleshing out their connection and their personalities, so I had... slightly different cameos. If you're curious about this 'oasis' mentioned that Ares went to, it's the same one that appeared at the end of Lene's oneshot in *Memoirs of the Lost* (which also details how she and Ares got together).

Next Chapter - Rain
I feel like every day, I become more and more aware of how sheltered I am and how unique my upbringing was. The sight of Inanna, Anat, and the others tied up to be burned... it haunts my nightmares, as does the fact that the people felt justified for it. It makes me very worried for after the war... we'll have to take steps to try and minimize the chances of such things happening again...

But that is for the long distant future. We have to actually make it through the war first, and that's going to be more difficult than anything save reconstruction. After we 'convinced' Darna to move their blockade, we press forward to Melgen. Melgen, where Ishtore of House Friege rules... I know little about him, save for the stories I heard from Conall. Gossips paint him as a kind man, but one who assists his tyrannical father. I'm reminded of Iuchar and Iucharba and wonder... which brother's path will Ishtore follow? Can we convince him? Or would he be another we couldn't convince because we were too weak?

"And with that, the dish is complete!" I laughed, laughing even more when Anat gasped and clapped in fascination. She had wanted to watch me cook, for some reason, and I had to admit that her complete enthralment with the process was terribly endearing. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

"It's like magic, but better!" Anat giggled, still clapping, though she was careful to not drop the doll she was 'borrowing', since she carried it almost everywhere. Quite a few of the other cooks glanced over at the noise, but thankfully, most were amused by her enthusiasm. I was glad, since even after a few days of them being here, I still worried about how everyone would treat the children, especially the Loptyrian ones. But it seemed like our soldiers at least understood why we were taking care of them. And why we found it important. "You can eat it!"

"You can indeed." I snuck a little bit off the plate and passed it to her, and grinned when she gobbled it up. "How's it taste?" She tried to answer with her mouth full, but it was a mushy mess, so she simply squealed. "Good." I leaned down and kissed her head, and she giggled again. "Do you want to see if you can watch some of the others cook?"

"Can I?"

"You can ask, but listen if they say 'no', okay? It could be that they're dealing with something very hot and don't want to risk your safety."

"Okay!" Anat giggled and immediately went to the closest cook, one of our bakers actually, and waited patiently to be acknowledged. "Hello, may I watch you make... what is this?"

"Bread, little one," the baker laughed, wiping their hands on their apron before nudging her forward so that she could see a little better. "Never seen someone make bread before?"

"You make bread?" Anat gasped, eyes wide. Her eyes sparkled. "I thought it just grew out of the ground like a flower! I mean... isn't it a type of flower?"
"Haha! No, no, little one. It's made with flour." They held up their hand to show how 'dusty' it was with flour. "Spelled differently."

"Wow!"

I lingered a bit to make sure that Anat would be fine, and the baker caught my eye and winked, reassuring me. So, I put the food I'd made on a tray, along with some tea and water, and carried it out of the kitchen tent, navigating the camp as carefully as possible so that I didn't drop anything. A few stopped me to ask questions, mostly about how we were proceeding or to discuss potential changes in scheduling, and I did make sure that everyone was still doing well. And that the children hadn't gotten into too much trouble, which thankfully, they hadn't. Yes, they were children, but they were determined to be on their best behavior. Except the babies, but babies would be babies, and thankfully, we had a lot of people in the army who were actually eager to help take care of them. Which meant no diaper duty for me and left me time to do other things.

"Morning, Aunt Lachesis!" I called, stepping into her tent. Aunt Lachesis had been reading some papers, but she set them to the side and sat up in her bed, smiling. And she looked like a person, instead of a pasty corpse like she did last night, so yay! "You're looking better than you did yesterday!" I set the tray down in her lap and helped move things between it and the small table by her bed to keep things balanced. And 'casually' peek at the papers to see it was inventory for the infirmary. The little numbers in the margin hinted she was good at math, probably just as good as Diarmuid. "Do you feel better?"

"Much better, yes," Aunt Lachesis replied, laughing. Yesterday, she had fainted, because she had been pushing herself too hard for her still recovering health. Gave us all a scare, that. "I'm so sorry to have worried you."

"This is why you listen to your body!" I was playfully stern for all of a second before giggling and kissing her cheek. "Anyway, I made you breakfast. Should be easy on your stomach, but let me know if it isn't, okay?"

"Okay." She still continued to laugh, but now there was something sad in it. "Ah, I'm reminded of Alicia. She didn't cook much, mind. She knew how, but she was a healer first and foremost. But whenever I had to be abed, for whatever reason, she was right there, fussing away."

"Oifeye mentioned that Mom had a tendency to hover when she thought someone she loved was hurting." I rearranged her blankets and her pillows, mostly as an excuse to do something and keep on talking. I liked talking with her. It was fun. "That true?"

"Oh, absolutely. Whenever one of us was hurting, be it physically or emotionally, Alicia tended to rush over, especially as the years went by." Aunt Lachesis smiled now, still sad but also very fond. "Think we all ended up burdening her with our emotional stuff, but she always listened with a smile."

"From the stories I've heard, I'm sure Mom was glad to be able to help."

"She was." Her smile fell, so there was only sadness in her face. "I wish I had gotten to see her one more time. Probably not fair to say to you, but..."

"Why would it not be fair?" I shrugged. "You love her too, yeah?"

"Oh, absolutely. And that day was just..." She fell silent, and I quietly rewarmed her tea, noticing it was cold. I must've left it out too long while cooking. "We were welcomed with smiles."
"Pardon?"

"That day, the day of the Massacre, everyone smiled. All of the Velthomer soldiers smiled. They smiled reassuringly, took our horses to be stabled… and we, unsuspecting, set down our weapons and laughed. Relaxed. It was such a relief, really. We thought it was all finally over. I remember talking with Sigurd, saying that we should try to get to Isaach as soon as possible. He agreed, of course, but teased that Alicia was going to throw a fit over how tired we all were. And we were exhausted. We basically went straight from fighting Reptor to Belhalla with minimum breaks."

"...To keep you tired, and..." I sat back down on the bed, not sure what else to do or even think. "Why wasn't Mom there?"

"She and Azel went ahead, actually. To see Arvis. In retrospect, it was to get them out of the trap, and prevent Azel from warning us. But, at the time, it had seemed like a good idea, especially for Alicia. She did her best to be strong for us, but she was taking care of Sigurd and everyone while her own heart bled for Ethlyn and Quan. I know she had at least one horrible breakdown." Aunt Lachesis closed her eyes, remembering it clearly. "Sigurd thought that it would be good for her in particular to rest, and we did have other healers. Like me. I did my best to do her share of the healing. That was why, when they took our horses away, I still had my staff on me. And I held onto my sword, of course. It was from Eldie and I didn't want it out of my sight. Sigurd teased me over it both, but understood."

"So, you had been near the front?"

"At first, yes. But then I ducked to the back to check on Sylvia. Just in time, really." She shuddered and opened her eyes again. But she didn't 'see' the tent. Her eyes were unfocused, 'seeing' the buildings and streets of Belhalla. "I still remember the heat, the smoke, the screams... it had come out of nowhere, really. And I stumbled out of the crowd, looking for a clear space so that I could try and process things. That's how I ended up finding Alicia, cradling Chulainn. He'd been hit by meteors, though, and died in her arms."

"...Oh, Mom..." That had to be... Lana told me that her worst nightmare was us dying while she struggled to heal us. I knew it had to have been Mom's worst nightmare too. "That's..."

"I pulled her up and we ran. Did my best to protect her. It was probably the only time I took care of her instead of the other way around. She just..." Aunt Lachesis closed her eyes again, though there were no tears. The memory was carved too deep in the scars for her to cry anymore. "She was mentally collapsing. I could tell, because she wasn't even trying to be serene or calm like normal. And why would she? The brother she trusted betrayed us. Her love died in her arms. And we both watched Sigurd's last moments. One moment yelling, and the next... nothing but ash. Less than ash. No chance to fight back at all." Her voice caught, but when she opened her eyes again, there were still no tears. "But we kept on running. We found Brigid and Jamke, Sylvia and Claude. And a building collapsed, from a meteor strike, cutting me off from Alicia. Her last words to me urged me to go to Leonster, to warn Finn and make sure he knew what had happened, and that she loved me. And we ran. All of us ran, and made it out. Barely. Still swear it was Brigid's Ulir luck that let us."

"That's..." I still didn't know what to do or say. I had always heard the stories, but never from someone who lived through it before. "I'm..."

"I wish she could've seen you one more time." Now she looked at me. "You and Conall both. I'm sure you've heard the stories, but she loved you both so very much. She was nervous, worried about being a mother, but her smile was so much brighter when you two were born. She was crying when we had to send you away. Well, we were all crying, really. We knew it was best,
but…" She sighed, grimacing. "And it did turn out to be best. Gods, having all of you in Belhalla when that happened…"

"Mom probably would've taken Conall and me with her when she went ahead." So, we would've lived. But the others… "None of the others would've, though."

"I'd be surprised if they did." She smiled sadly. "I still say it was a miracle that L-"

"Lady Riona!" Sandas burst into the tent then, skidding to a stop and nearly falling over. I had to leap up to catch him. "Whoa… slippery!" he laughed, perfectly fine. The laughter cleared up the sad air and replaced it with warmth. "Oh, I'm sorry, Lady Lachesis. I should've knocked first, huh?"

"Normally, yes, but I'll let you get away with it, this time," Aunt Lachesis teased. She beckoned him over and he hugged her with another laugh. "So, you needed Riona for something?"

"Ah, yes!" He turned to face me, doing his best to look serious. It was absolutely adorable, really. "Lord Ulster needs to see you, Lady Riona."

"Does he?" I asked, curious. I didn't normally handle anything with scouting, especially now that Lewyn was around. "I wonder what he needs." I shrugged and smiled, leaning down to kiss Aunt Lachesis's cheek. "Eat as much as you can, okay? And the tea is ginger, for your stomach."

"I will," she promised, beaming at me. She pulled me into a hugged and squeezed me as tightly as she dared. Which was pretty tight since… you know… Hezul. Even weakened, she was strong. I found it inspiring, really. "Sorry for the ramble. Remember, if you need a shoulder, I'm here for you."

"Oh, trust me, we definitely remember that." I kissed her cheek again and then took Sandas's hand. "Okay, lead me to Ulster?"

Sandas held my hand happily, telling me about all the fun people he had been delivering messages to today. All of the children, save the toddler and babies of course, helped out by being messengers. It made me worry, truthfully, about setting a precedent for other children to 'join' and travel with us, but I remembered what Mursili had said. About the army being safer. It really made my heart ache, though I didn't let it show. I kept up my smile and chatted happily with Sandas. I didn't want him to think he did something wrong, after all.

Though, I was very confused when we found Ulster and saw Oifeye near him, easily bouncing and calming down one of the babies. "So… uh… what happened?" I asked, poking Ulster's cheek. Sandas raced off to deliver his next message. "Did you somehow need my help for the baby or something?"

"No, that's happenstance," Oifeye answered for Ulster, tucking the baby against his shoulder. They were fast asleep, gurgling a bit. "Someone forgot that babies crawl and Ulster saved him from being stepped on." He laughed, and Ulster and I shared a smile. Oifeye seemed most at ease when he was taking care of people, and he looked perfectly at peace cradling the baby in his arms. "And then Ulster couldn't get him to stop crying."

"Must be the stoic look. You've got to smile at babies." I poked Ulster's cheek again. "Smile!"

"He's asleep now," Ulster protested, more to play along with the joke than anything. "But thank you, Oifeye. You calmed him quickly."

"I have a lot of practice," Oifeye pointed out. He ruffled Ulster's hair and hugged me. "You all
cried a lot too as babies. But neither here nor there. Can you tell whoever was babysitting that I took over?"

"Of course." Ulster and I both waved as Oifeye walked off to do whatever he was supposed to be doing, and then he turned to me. "Anyway, I got a sudden influx of scout reports."

"Need help organizing?" I asked. I grinned when he nodded. "Not a problem! I can tease you while I'm at it~!"

"Or you could help me?"

"I can do both!"

"No, I mean with personal stuff." Ulster took my hand and we walked through camp towards his tent. Sensing he was even more serious than usual, which was saying something, I kissed his hair and leaned into him. "It's Lana. She's been acting weird again, and it's making me worry."

"Oh?" I frowned, remembering that slightly uncomfortable look Lana had back during the meeting before infiltrating Darna. I hadn't thought anything more of it, since she and Patty got along fantastically, but… "How weird are we talking?"

"I swear she's avoiding me weird?"

"Yikes, okay…" I bit my lip, thinking. I hadn't personally noticed anything, but then again, Lana had a lot of work in the infirmary and while I helped make medicines, I didn't actually spend much time there. "I can talk to her in a few days, if you want. It might just be her fretting over the upcoming potential battle."

"I hope that's all it is." He sighed. "I don't like her being uncomfortable around me."

"Could also be a crush, you know."

"Don't say such weird things."

"Ulster, don't be like Seliph and get it in your head that it's not possible." I giggled and whispered in his ear. "Seliph was sure that I didn't love him romantically, you know?"

"He…” Ulster frowned. "You're going to make me get my hopes up."

"And I think you've been working too much and the uncomfortableness could also just be her wanting to spend time, but aware of how much we have to do and so not having any idea how to ask." I made a face. "Seriously, we practically have to schedule free time."

"That's true…” We made it to his tent and he briefly leaned on me, taking strength from me because he sorely needed it. "Fine, I'll consider all those possibilities, if you promise to talk to Lana for me once we get more of a breather. We have to move fast to take Melgen if we want to avoid a potential pincer from Darna."

"Of course." I twisted so that I could properly hug and hold him, feeling him relax. Some soldiers passed and looked at us worriedly, but nodded and continued on when I smiled reassuringly. "That's a promise." And much as I wanted to tease, we were at a point where things were uneasy, which meant that teasing was off the table. Now was trying to help them through this, especially since they hadn't been able to spend much time together. Definitely needed to fix that for all of us. We simply weren't at our best when we were alone. "Leave keeping things running smoothly to me. Least I can do." And, according to Aideen, it was an important 'job'. So, maybe that was my
"Aw, I'm sorry Hestia chased away your din-dins, sweeties," I cooed, watching three leopard kittens munch on some meat scraps I scavenged from the kitchens. Hestia laid down nearby, not really feeling bad, but determined to at least look guilty while the mama-leopard was nearby, 'glaring' at her. "But you can have all of this instead, okay?" I scratched one behind the ears, giggling when it pressed its head further into my palm and cooing again when it began to purr in contentment. "So cute~!"

"I was wondering why the wind was telling me there was someone outside the camp at this hour." And my good mood declined slightly because here was Lewyn walking up. "Aren't you normally asleep?" he asked, eyeing the leopards warily. I wondered what he was doing awake. It was super late, with the stars sparkling and the moon high in the sky and it darker than a black panther. "You're in your nightclothes and a cloak, so I'm assuming you planned on sleeping."

"Hestia likes midnight snacks, but she stole theirs so I'm rectifying it." I focused on the cute kittens, because kittens made everything better. "And now I'm making sure no one steals from them."

"So, you're feeding cats."

"Leopards, actually. Based on the coloration, I think they're clouded leopards, though I could be wrong. Could be a type I've never seen before." I did, after all, know most animals through books alone. That all said, I was fairly certain they were at least some type of leopard. "Aren't they adorable, though?" I pet another kitten, and giggled when it closed its eyes in contentment. "So, so cute~!"

"And their mama just lets you do this." Lewyn chuckled, distinctly amused. I felt like I was being mocked. "Must be the Holy Blood."

"Huh?" I frowned, looking at him again. He looked rather eerie in the moonlight. Like a ghost or something. "Uh… pretty sure neither flames nor ability to pick out weak-points has anything to do with animals?

"The Holy Blood gives many passives, some of which are not sung of because they are less 'flashy' than, say, the ability to conjure flames with the snap of a fingers or the ability to stop a blade cold with your bare arm." Lewyn approached cautiously, keeping one eye on the leopards and Hestia, and sat down next to me. "Like how you radiate heat."

"Cold then, Lewyn?" I was torn between wanting to be sarcastic and being genuinely curious because this hadn't been in my lessons. "What others are there, then? These hidden passives."

"Well, let's see…" He thought a bit, moving his hand through the air almost like he as flipping through an imaginary book. "Those of Fjalar's blood tolerate temperature differences better, particularly heat. Otherwise, the heat from your flames would scorch you."

"How is that different from 'normal' mages?"

"Part of the reason why you use tomes as a catalyst for practice magic is specifically to avoid damaging yourself, and not just using your blood or something, but from burning your hand off. There's actually runes within the spells' writings to protect the caster." He shrugged. Again, I hadn't known that. I supposed getting a 'proper magic education' taught him that. "But you don't have that role. Maybe. "And that means getting things organized, so you rest for a bit, okay? I'll take care of it."
protection when you call flames without a tome. So, your Holy Blood protects you."

"Oh." I wasn't sure how to reply, especially when one of the kittens climbed into my lap to snooze. Kittens were way more important, even if my curiosity was imitating cats at the moment. "What others are there?"

"Mmm… ah, those of Forseti can withstand lots of pressure and force, lest their own magic knock them off their feet." He moved his hand again, 'flipping a page'. "Dain's blood can breath at higher altitudes, perfect for flying high above everyone else. Neir's descendents have a high pain tolerance to allow themselves to actually endure all the blows…"

"So, how would Od and animals be related?" The other two kittens were in my lap now, the three jostling for the 'best spot'. Hestia whimpered a bit, but remained laying down, acting properly mollified. I thought the mama-leopard would've taken them from me by now, since they were done eating, but the way she lounged and stretched hinted she was enjoying her break! "I mean…"

"That's more tied into what Tiamat represents, like Skadi and Dain's descendents. After all, it was Tiamat of Beasts who blessed Od with her power." He chuckled. "Of course, Od always had a bit of a fondness for animals. There's a story about how he befriended a python, actually."

"Where would he have done that?" I frowned, remembering the books I had read. "Pythons are native to Miletos and the Thracian peninsula, and the stories say that he wasn't among the group that gathered allies there." Though I supposed it could've been someone's pet or something.

"It's the principle of the story, not the details." He still laughed, though, amused by my reaction. "Regardless, though, is that Od often did what you do, especially after receiving the blessing. Befriend random wild animals. It's almost like Tiamat's power allows you to communicate with the animals. Not with words, but in feelings and thoughts."

"...I think it's just being respectful personally." And I wondered where he learned this sort of story. I never heard anything like that in Isaach and… uh… Tiamat was the goddess of Isaach. You'd think I'd hear something about it, at least from the elders. "But sure, Holy Blood is just as good of an explanation. We could test it with Ulster. Not Larcei, though. She's too excitable."

"Now that would be interesting…" Lewyn suddenly stood up. "But you have a visitor."

"Huh?" I leaned forward a bit and saw Inanna running over. "Inanna, is everything okay?"

"Yep!" she replied, hopping to a stop. She nearly fell, but Lewyn caught her. "Fee and Arthur just returned, though, so I was asked to get you."

"At this hour?" I asked, startled. It was well within the night! "I hope it's nothing serious…" I sighed mournfully when I looked at the cute kittens in my lap. "Ugh… I have to move…" Damn it.

It took a bit to convince the kittens to leave, but they did eventually, and their mama nuzzled each of them before leading them away. I petted Hestia to thank her for behaving and then I followed Inanna to the 'war tent', except there was no war meeting or anything. It was just the only tent, besides the infirmary, big enough to hold everyone!

"Welcome back!" I greeted, pushing past everyone to rush over and hug both Fee and Arthur. Both looked tired, but smiled warmly when they saw me. Arthur was a bit awkward returning the hug, but Fee laughed and hugged me back with just as much enthusiasm. "Hestia, no, don't jump on them." I looked down just in time to see her about to pounce, so she quickly sat and did her best to look innocent. "Yeah, yeah, missy."
"Aw, we missed you too, Hestia!" Fee giggled, kneeling so that she could hug her too. Hestia barked happily and licked her face. "Hee~! What a great welcome back!"

"Despite the hour, right?" I glanced around and nearly sighed when I saw Lewyn hadn't followed me. But I was determined to keep up the cheer and not bring attention to stupidly unattentive 'fathers'. "You meet the new people?"

"Yeah, we got the summary of what happened too while Inanna was looking for you." Fee stood back up and smiled brightly. "Got letters! And man, the smiles on their faces when we told them you all were on the way…"

"They are having some trouble, though, because Alster is throwing a lot of their strongest straight at them," Arthur noted. He rolled his wrists a bit, and I thought I saw bandages. They must've done some fighting, then. "It's possible they'll send some refugees or something our way. Be dangerous, but less dangerous if their walls give."

"All the more reason to take Melgen quickly then," I murmured. Refugees… we'd have to plan for that, then. Just in case. "Why are you here this late, though?"

"Thought we were closer than we were, really, and by the time we realized we weren't, we stubbornly decided we wanted to keep going." Arthur shrugged and grinned. I rolled my eyes and pulled him into another hug. "So…"

"People, we do need to try and be a bit quieter," Oifeye suddenly called. He was standing with Shanan, the two of them laughing at something. I wondered where Aunt Lachesis was, and saw she was sitting near Larcei and Yuria, chatting about something. "It's very late, if you'll recall."

"And I already hear talks of battles and the like," Seliph noted. He stood near Iuchar and Ulster, his hair down for once. And in need of a brushing. I'd do that in the morning. "Let's save such things until after we send a messenger to Ishtore. If we can solve this without battle, I'd prefer it."

"We can send someone now, if you want."

"At this hour? No way. Let everyone sleep!"

"That said, you might want to pick a particularly fast one," Fee noted. Though she still smiled, her eyes were serious. "We're going to want to keep an eye and double-check, but I think there's a storm brewing. Wind's all heavy and all. And that means we'll be fighting the weather on top of everything."

"Oh, that'll be fun, especially for the horses," Diarmuid sighed. He and Lester shared a grimace before shrugging. "Well, I suppose that's just another thing to keep in mind while we plan."

"Yep! Also, where can I sleep for the night? I'm exhausted."

Talks quickly shifted to where Fee and Arthur would stay, since we didn't want to put up tents at this hour. However, while everyone was talking about that, Patty wiggled her way away from where she'd been talking to Lana to come over to me. "Hey, quick question, Riona," she began, shyly smiling. She had her hair in braided pigtails for sleep, and it was adorable on her. "Is it okay if I cook every once in a while?"

"Hmm? Of course," I replied, a bit startled. Why was she asking me? "Why?"

"Well, I tried to get onto the duty roster for it, but the person signing people up said that it was… umm…" She frowned. "It was too 'menial' of a job for a 'leader'?”
"...You happen to get that person's name because I'd love to hear them tell the cooks that their job is 'menial.' Cooking was a skill, damn it! An important one! "Oh, whatever. Yes, it's fine, Patty. Hell, you don't even need to be on the roster. Just head in and start cooking."

"They won't get mad?"

"Patty, they're used to us. We sneak in to cook all the time. Well, I do, at least." I grinned and hooked my arm around hers. "Come on. Since we're all up, let's make midnight snacks for everyone. Because no matter what we say, no one is sleeping for a while."

Patty was an excellent cook, actually. I learned a lot just by watching her make snacks, and decided that I needed to cook with her again. It was too much fun.

Sadly, Fee proved right about the weather. Two days after she and Arthur returned, it began to rain. A light rain, for now, but according to Fee (and confirmed by Lewyn), the 'wind' behind it was strong, meaning it was only going to get worse. Glorious.

"Hestia, I need you to hold still," I scolded, doing my best to dry her off. Hestia, of course, loved the 'extra rubs' and tried to lick me and play. "I am not letting you sleep on my blankets while wet!" She barked happily, wagging her tail and slinging water all over the place. "Ugh... Hestia!" Worst part was that while I hated storms, she loved them. Meaning she loooooved running around through the rain and all. "Maybe I should see if one of the others will take you out tonight..." Mmm... tempting, but no, I couldn't do that. Hestia was my wolf, after all. I had promised to be responsible when I got to keep her, and so, I had to keep being responsible. After all, promises were important. Even when she was being a very wiggly brat. "Hestia, I know that you love pets, but seriously, I need you to-"

"Lady Riona!" And I had two 'intruders' suddenly in my tent. A soaking wet Sandas and an even more drenched Anat. I wondered what they were doing awake since they normally fell asleep pretty quickly once the sun had set and dinner was over. "Lady Riona, there's a bunch of meowing!" Anat explained, flailing her arms and dripping water everywhere. I tried to think of why she didn't have a rain-cloak. Did the children not have any? "Meowing!"

"It was outside, and we tried to find the kittens, but we couldn't, and they sound sad and scared!" Sandas added, looking ready to cry. I immediately held out my arms and he rushed in for a hug. He was cold from the rain, but I didn't think he was shaking from it. "Please, can't you help them?"

"...Show me where," I replied, kissing his head and looking at Anat, who beamed at me. I didn't ask why they came to me. I was the animal person, and I knew Sandas, at least, was projecting his own time in the cages onto the meows. And I had been the one who had carried him out of them. "We'll see if I can get them."

I didn't even bother getting a cloak on. I simply took their hands and let them pull me, with Hestia following closely. The rain was falling even harder than before, and within seconds, I was certain I looked like a drowned rat and that I weighed five times as much due to water. But I didn't complain or anything. I simply did my best to reassure the two, with Hestia doing everything she could to be cute and adorable to help out. Before long, I heard the 'meows' too, but I noticed that they didn't sound like 'kitty-cat' meows. And when I let go of Sandas and Anat to go looking, I quickly saw why. The 'meowing' kittens were leopards, three of them being shielded from the rain by their mama. The very same family I had fed a few days ago, but this time... this time, the mama-leopard was bleeding. Badly.

"Easy, strong one," I whispered, reaching out to pet the mama. Her eyes were cloudy and
unfocused, and I had a feeling she wasn't only cold from the rain. There was a lot of blood on her fur, even with the rain. The wound, however, was far too 'clean' and 'even' to be from another animal. This wasn't a case of her defending her babies from predators. At least, not 'normal' predators. "Why don't we get you all out of the rain? It's very cold."

She let me pick up her kittens, but insisting on walking (dragging, really) herself right by my side. Anat and Sandas were waiting patiently, and immediately held open the nearby tent for all of us. It was the one Anat and Inanna shared, but Inanna wasn't in at the moment. Probably why Sandas had been here instead of his own tent. But those were musings for another time. Once inside, I got the kittens on blankets so that they could get warm and dry, showing Anat and Sandas how to do it. They followed my instructions with care, and Hestia hovered near to nose them when they were being too rough. That left me free to have the mama-leopard rest in my lap and pet her. After all, as soon as she made it inside the tent, she had collapsed, all strength gone. Her breathing was labored. The blood flow from the wound was slowing. She was...

I thought of what Lewyn said. About how the blood of Tiamat let me 'communicate' better with animals, not just because of my words, but because of my thoughts and feelings and whatever. I wasn't sure I believed that and all, but as I petted her, I leaned down and rested my head against hers, trying to wordlessly 'convey' that things would be okay. That her babies would be okay. That she could rest, because they would be fine. That was my promise. She licked my cheek, like she truly did understand, and breathed her last. Like she had just been waiting for that confirmation. She would hold on until then, growl and snarl at death until then, but she was just too tired and too pained to hold on any longer.

"Um… what's going on?" And that, of course, was when Inanna returned. She wore a rain cloak, like a smart person, and could only stare at the very odd scene in her tent. Three leopard kittens on her blankets, a dead mama-leopard, and three drenched humans with an equally drenched wolf. "Uh… what happened?" she asked, carefully walking around the edges of the tent to reach the kittens. They were playing tiredly, half-asleep now that they were warm. "Why…?"

"...Their mother passed," I whispered. Inanna immediately winced and looked at the kittens sympathetically. "So, we're going to take care of them."

"But you're super busy…" Inanna bit her lip, looking at Sandas and Anat before looking at me shyly. "Um… but maybe we three can do that? I mean… we'll need help. I've never had a pet before. But… um…"

"Mmm… yes, I think that might be good for you." For a lot of reasons. Taking care of the kittens would keep them busy, and… well, in my opinion, there were few things more comforting than an animal, especially when things were so strange. "Thankfully, they're weaned and everything. Let's get them to Lana for a check-up. Animals can carry parasites and diseases, after all."

"She's in her tent with Yuria at the moment. I was just delivering a message to them."

"Then how about you three take the kittens there. I'll be by momentarily."

"Okay!"

The three carried the kittens carefully, using the blankets to try and keep them dry. I worried and wondered if I should follow, but instead I picked up the mama-leopard, hugging the body and carrying her out of the tent and out of the camp, with Hestia following me closely. More towards the woods. I found a tree with thick branches and enough leaves to keep the rain off, and almost knelt to begin digging. Hestia, however, knew what I wanted and dug the hole herself. Perhaps it was silly, to bury a wild animal, but it felt wrong not to. Because I was very certain that the reason
why she came back to the camp, despite her injuries, was because she 'remembered' that there was food here for her babies. 'Remembered' a crazy person who would be kind to them. And I felt like I just… had to bury her like I would any other mother. It felt wrong to do anything else.

It was a bit difficult for Hestia to dig, because even if the branches shielded us slightly from the rain, water still streamed down and pooled into it. And there was no way to scoop the water out, so sadly, I had to bury the mama-cat in the muddy puddle. It felt wrong, but I had to make due. I did make sure to cover the body carefully with the dirt, with Hestia's help. I could do at least that much for her. And when we were done, Hestia and I just stood in the rain for a while, letting it wash off the worst of the mud, and for the first time in a very long while, I wondered just what happened to Hestia's mama. Hestia's first pack. Why had she been left there? I could believe she was a gift from Dad, a gift from my parents, all I wanted, but unless Hestia just sprang out of the ground, she had to have had a mama, once. A pack, once.

Hestia whimpered and nosed me, no doubt guessing I was thinking troubling thoughts. When I looked at her, she barked and rubbed herself against me, and I had to smile. I supposed it didn't matter, ultimately. I had saved Hestia's life, back then, and Hestia had chosen to remain with me. She had chosen us as her pack, no matter where she came from. And that was far more important.

Equally important was getting out of the rain, especially when it started thundering, so Hestia and I ran back to the camp, navigating the muddy grounds until I made it to Lana's tent. Where Seliph was waiting for me, for some reason. He held his cloak over me, even though I was inventing new words for 'drenched' with how soaked I was, and led me to the infirmary, where Lana and Yuria checked over the kittens with Inanna, Anat, and Sandas watching in rapt fascination. Set up in its own section, curtained off, was a bunch of towels and a change of night-clothes for me. And underwear, which thank the gods because cold!

"So, how is it that we have leopard kittens?" Seliph asked me quietly, stealing one towel to dry off Hestia while I ducked behind the curtain to dry myself off. And change into dry clothes. "All I got was 'Riona saved them' and 'Riona said we could keep them'."

"We can't leave babies to fend for themselves, Seliph," I defended, grimacing at all the mud I was getting on the towels. Worse than I'd thought. But I still got it all off and got into dry underwear quickly. "They are weaned, but I think barely. They probably don't even know how to hunt quite yet."

"I'm not protesting." Seliph leaned around the curtains to smile at me and shifted so that he could better look at me while cleaning up Hestia. "Just wondering the series of events?"

"Right, right." I used a fresh towel to try and get a bit more water out of my hair. "A few days ago, Hestia accidentally chased away the prey their mama was chasing, so I fed them instead. Same day that Arthur and Fee came back, actually."

"And they decided to come back for free food?"

"No…" I sighed and looked at him, draping the towel over my shoulders so that my wet hair wasn't on my back. "Their mama is dead, Seliph. Hestia and I are muddy because we were burying her. She used the last of her strength to get to the camp, likely because she remembered me or something."

"Ah." Seliph leaned over to catch my hand and squeeze it. "What killed her?"

"Based on the wound? A hunter. But most hunters wouldn't go after a mama during this season. Or they'd try not, at least."
"They need to keep the population up for food."

"Right, which makes me think it's not a 'true' hunter, per se…" I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. Exhaustion was starting to creep in now. "Basically, I'm wondering if it was an accident or if we have a case of someone attacking anything that moves."

"And if it's the latter, then how near are they?" Seliph closed his eyes, returning to drying Hestia. "Ah, anyway, since you're awake…"

"Lord Seliph, you can't peek on girls when they're changing!" Sandas's scolding startled all of us, even Hestia, who yelped and barked. "It's not nice!" he continued. I poked my head out from behind the curtain to see him scowling, with his hands on his hips. Inanna and Anat were still with Lana and Yuria, working with the kittens. "That's what my sister says, at least."

"Seliph has seen me in my underwear many times, Sandas," I replied. Poor Seliph was trying to process the whole 'am I getting scolded by an eight-year-old?' thing. "But it is sweet of you to worry about him spying." I ducked back and pulled on the night-clothes before stepping out, back to drying my hair. "But trust me, if I wasn't okay with it, Hestia would've bitten him."

"Mmm… okay…" He still scowled, though, and Seliph held up his hands in surrender because he sure as hell didn't know how to argue this. "Maliya gets mad when Mursili does it, though."

"If she's not comfortable about it, then she should. If it's one of the people I've grown up with, though, I'm fine." I stroked his hair and kissed his forehead. "But if it was someone else? Yelling at them is a very good idea."

"Okay." He smiled, apparently satisfied, and went back to the girls, watching the check-up.

"That… Don't think I've ever been scolding for talking to you while you were in your underwear," Seliph noted, standing up to wrap an arm around my waist. Hestia shook herself a bit and licked Seliph's hand before laying down on the towel. "Not sure why that startled me so much."

"Probably because until we got to Tirnanog, none of us had our own rooms so we had to get used to changing in front of each other fairly quickly," I pointed out. And after Tirnanog, it had just felt silly to get embarrassed about stripping off a shirt after practice or something. "Now, if I didn't have my underwear on, I would've scolded you for getting a tease~" I grinned when he went bright red. "Got you! But anyway, you were say-~" And there was a loud crack of thunder, and I immediately whimpered and clung to him. "Oh, great… don't suppose you were leading into good news?"

"Reason why I'm awake is because the messenger returned." Seliph's expression was grim, even as he shifted to hold me a little more securely. "Ishtore refused negotiations."

"So, what? We're fighting thunder mages in a storm? Sounds like fun." I flinched when I caught a flash of lightning and covered my ears to try and block out the thunder. It was so damn loud, though... "Uuuuggghhh…"

"Want to stay back?"

"No. But I am stealing you until this damn storm disappears." I grumbled a bit under my breath, and he kissed my hair, rubbing my back soothingly. "Seriously. We're moving my stuff to your tent."

"Okay. We'll do that." He chuckled. "Though I fear this is just making me like the rain?"
"Rain is fine. Thunder and lightning-" I squeaked as even more thunder rumbled. I Hated. Storms. So. Freaking. Much. "Though we might need to make sure the tents aren't…" I trailed off as I thought of the rain. The runoff. The way it had pooled in the grave… "Seliph."

"Hmm?"

"There's lots of hills and valleys. We've seen that, and Patty said that the whole area between here and Melgen is like that." I looked at him, and hoped I looked serious. While shivering because it was cold and it was storming. "Depending on where the runoff goes…"

"...Have I mentioned recently how much I love you?" He kissed me soundly, to my embarrassment. Even more so when I heard Lana laugh. "You done with the kittens there, Lana?"

"We are," Lana giggled. Yuria watched us with sparkling eyes, and Anat actually had her hands on her face, smiling happily. Sandas, hilariously, was making faces. Inanna was too busy with the kittens to care. "So, what? Are you calling her adorable for the kittens or something?"

"Not this time," Seliph replied. Though he still smiled, his posture tensed, conveying seriousness. "You up for a war meeting, Lana?"

"Larcei is going to be a pain to wake up, but yeah, I am." Lana's eyes narrowed. "New information?"

"And Riona reminding me of a potential strategy. We'll leave Larcei to Hestia." Seliph turned to Yuria and smiled hesitantly. "Mind coming with us? I have half of an idea, and it would help if…"

"Oh, of course!" Yuria replied instantly, beaming. I knew she was just focused on the 'can help' and not on the 'likely killing people' part, though it wasn't as if she hadn't killed before. "I would love to help! But for now, let's get the rain-cloaks. It's pouring!"

Seliph kissed me again and went to help Yuria and Lana get the cloaks. I turned to go with them, but someone caught my sleeve. Inanna, to be specific. And so, I stayed where I was and waited for her to gather her thoughts.

"Are you going to fight?" she asked quietly. She carried one kitten, and held onto my sleeve with the other. Anat and Sandas were playing with the other two. "Is that what's going on?"

"Seems that way," I replied, reaching over to fix her grip slightly. It helped keep me from focusing on the thunder. "You need to support them. They're like babies."

"Oh, got it." She hugged the kitten a little tighter, half-hiding behind it. "What will we do?"

"You think about what you want to do, and we'll discuss it once we have things planned. There is a chance, after all, that we might be able to convince them." Not a high one, but… but I knew none of us would give up just yet. "But you all will be safe. I promise you that."

"I'm not worried about me." Her eyes wavered a bit, and I remembered what she said about her mother. "I…"

"And we're going to be fine too." I cupped her face between my hands and smiled at her. "A little rain never hurt anyone."

"A lot can kill you, though. This is going to be a huge downpour within a couple of days. That's how storms always are, here."
"And now we know to be extra careful." I continued smiling and, eventually, she smiled back, hesitantly. "I won't boast and say that we'll come back unharmed or anything. But we'll be back, alive and perfectly capable of being healed. And then you and the others can tell me about all the trouble the kittens caused. Sound good?"

"They're going to cause trouble?"

"Animals can be a lot like toddlers, or so I have been told." I laughed when she made a face at that. "Feel a bit better?"

"Yeah…" This time, her smile was warm. Small, but warm. "Thank you."

"Of course. Stay dry, okay." Without thinking about it, I kissed her forehead before getting that rain cloak from Yuria and leaving, only realizing later that I should've asked first.

Ah, I'd need to apologize later. For now, I had my duty.

"Man, the rain is really coming down," Diarmuid murmured as we walked down the road, one muddy step at a time. He and I had gone ahead of the others for one last plea to Ishtore… while the others set up our plan. Just in case. "You okay?"

"I've been better," I grumbled, pulling my hood a little more forward to try and keep the rain off of me. It didn't really work. Wet, cold, and dealing with thunder and lightning. This was not a good day. At all. "I've been so much better, actually." Hestia whimpered and leaned into me to try and comfort me. And getting her wet fur all over my leg, though it wasn't like it mattered. Sort of. Her shed fur stuck and made my leg itch. "Hestia has also smelled better."

"Wet wolf. Only smell worse than wet dog." He reached down to pet Hestia, though, mostly because she had wedged herself between us in an attempt to keep some of the downpour off of her. "Well, I have been meaning to talk to you privately."

"About Aunt Lachesis?"

"No, I'm still in total shock that she's alive, and here, and I can hug her. Larcei and I had a long talk about it, though." And the look in his eyes said he'd take just what they talked about to the grave. Which made perfect sense and thus, I wouldn't pry. "No, it's…" He grimaced and pulled at his hood. "Is there a hole in my cloak? I swear I've got rain dripping down the back of my neck."

"Hmm…" I carefully checked before fixing the clasp. "There's no hole, but I think this cloak might be a bit small for you. At least for a downpour like this."

"Just great…" He groaned and I had to snicker. Just because. "Anyway, no, that's not it. I think I'm falling for Yuria."

"Oh~?" I grinned, all ready to tease, but then I remembered a key problem. One that hit especially close to home. "Her amnesia."

"Exactly." He sighed, and I took his hand to squeeze it reassuringly. The rain continued to fall, and Melgen slowly came into view. Finally freaking made it… "Ignoring the similarities between what happened with Deirdre…"

"It's not the same. There are key differences. Several of them, in fact." Took me a second to think of them, but that was only because rain, thunder, and lightning. Diarmuid was the furthest thing from Arvis. "For one thing, we know of her past, unlike Deirdre, so we already know that she has
"Well... yes..." He grimaced. "But..."

"And if she had an arranged marriage, we would've heard about it, if only from Conall, so we know that on the romantic side of things, things are fine." However, there was one big difference, and it might prove key. "Most importantly, though, is that Yuria has been missing her memory for four years. She has a 'grounding' already, unlike Deirdre when it came to meeting Arvis. And Yuria at least has an idea about her past. Unlike Deirdre."

"But it still feels off, you know?"

"I can see that." I made sure to look at him, though, even stopping to ensure I had his attention. "But still, I think there are enough differences that things should be fine? The main worry would be more on her side of things. Like whether or not she really does return the feelings or if she simply thinks she does because she likes you." And I knew very well that was Yuria's exact problem. I should talk to her when we had a breather and see how that was going. "And that's not stuff you have control of."

"Right..." He sighed again, but this time, he smiled slightly. "That does make me feel a bit better. Now, granted, I'm not sure yet, so don't tell the others? I'll talk to them personally and get their opinions."

"Of course. And if it looks like anyone is about to tease you, I'll stop them." I'd done the same for Yuria, after all. "I'm here for you. Always."

"Of course. We're family." And now we were at the gates of Melgen, so it was time to be serious and do our job. "The things we do for family, huh?"

"And our own morals." I whimpered at a particularly loud crack of thunder. "Seliph owes me soooo many kisses for this."

"Is this the first time we ever had to camp and travel extensively in a storm?"

"No, we did so after Conall was taken." Not wanting to remember that, I squinted to try and see through the rain and waved when I caught sight of a guard. "Hello, there! We wish to see Lord Ishtore!"

"Another messenger?" the guard groaned. I could barely see them through the rain. "Why the hell?"

"Please announce us?" Diarmuid requested, automatically smiling. Was pretty sure no one but Hestia and me could see it. "It'll give you a good excuse to get out of this miserable weather."

"Ha! I suppose so." The guard nodded, a bit of an exaggerated motion to make sure we could see it. "Fine, I'll go do that. Wait here."

Surprisingly, we didn't have to wait long. It felt like we had only waited a few minutes before the gates opened and we were ushered inside the city by the guards, who then escorted us all the way to the castle. Inside, an older man wearing a suit greeted us with a bow. "Please, let us take your cloaks," he insisted, already gesturing to some other servants to do just that. His eyes narrowed at Hestia, who dripped all over the place and trod mud. "Your dog can wait outside." Hestia took one look at him, trotted past, and promptly shook herself, scattering water all over him to convey her annoyance with the suggestion. "Argh!"
"Might I have a towel for my wolf?" I requested, putting emphasis on the last word. I hoped it would tell him that telling Hestia to not do something wasn't going to work. "We can handle drying her, but I assure you… you don't want her unsupervised."

"Very well, miss." He glared at Hestia, who growled in return. She settled down when I gave her a look, though. "I will fetch more towels."

"Thank you."

Hestia thankfully behaved once Diarmuid and I started drying her off, even waiting to shake again until I got a towel wrapped around her. Once she was dry enough to not smell quite so bad, though I wasn't sure how anyone could tell with all the incense and scented candles choking the air, we were shown into a rather lovely parlor. The rain cast a dreary light, but the lightly scented candles helped the room appear warm anyway, and the furniture was remarkably simply. And, sitting in a chair by a glass table, drinking tea, was a young man with the silver hair that characterized most of those of house Friege. Ishtore. This had to be Ishtore.

"Ah, hello," he greeted, standing to face us with some sort of dignity. Which promptly fell apart because he did a double-take upon seeing Hestia walking in with us. I had to bite back a laugh. "That's… ha, and here I thought Conall was the only one crazy enough to keep a wolf as a pet." His eyes fell on me, though, and after a moment, he smiled. "But Fjal-al-reed eyes… you have to be his twin. He always said his twin sister had Fjal-al-reed eyes and blonde hair."

"I'm Riona, yes," I replied, shrugging. "The wolves weren't planned, and Hestia is bigger."

"Is she?" He frowned skeptically. "Both seem equally big to me."

"Well, it's just a guess. Northern wolves tend to be bigger than their southern counterparts. It's a vague pattern you tend to see with animals anyway." I shrugged, glad I had thought of an explanation quickly. I had a feeling Conall didn't exactly tell people he and Ishtar had met us in Isaach. And didn't want anyone to know. "At least, with mammals."

"Careful, she'll rattle off all sorts of animal facts if you'll let her," Diarmuid teased, catching on quickly. I made a face at him, and Ishtore actually relaxed, laughing a little. "Well, you know who she is. I'm Diarmuid, the son of Lady Lachesis of Nordion and Sir Finn of Leonster. A pleasure to meet you."

"The honor is mine. After all, the number of stories I have heard of 'Sir Finn' is frankly astounding," Ishtore commented, gesturing for us to sit at the other two chairs set up. We did so and Hestia laid down at my feet. "Seems he was a popular topic for gossip even before Leonster's fall, and the songs and stories have enjoyed a surge of popularity recently."

"I'm very proud of my father, and my lineage, Lord Ishtore, so I'm glad to hear he is so well regarded." He picked up the teacups to check for anything 'extra' in them, under the pretense of examining their craftsmanship. "This is a beautiful set."

"Isn't it? It's my favorite. My cousin, Tine, bought them for me as a birthday present." He refilled his cup and then filled ours. Nothing smelled off or anything, nor did it taste off when I took a sip. Diarmuid waited to drink his, just in case there was a delayed effect on me. "Now, you are messengers from Seliph?"

"We are, yes." Diarmuid sat a bit straighter, focused on Ishtore. I almost did the same, but I saw Hestia's ears twitch and how she lifted her head to look towards the door. So I glanced over there instead and caught sight of someone hiding behind it. An assassin or a guard? We would see. "We
would prefer to find some way to reach an agreement. We'd rather not fight."

"Really?" Ishtore raised an eyebrow, though he managed to stay just under 'skeptical' as he drank his tea. "Then why start a rebellion? That involves fighting."

"...Do you know what a 'labor camp' is, Ishtore?" I asked softly. Diarmuid took over keeping an eye on the surroundings, noticing where Hestia looked. "They're something Danann set up. He'd kidnapped the able bodied, from the young to the old, and literally work them to death. Minimal food, no treatment for injuries, killed for the most random of whims... the survivors are skin and bone, and there are many in Rivough who have only just began physical therapy. Some will never walk again."

"That's..." Ishtore began. He winced, though, and he couldn't seem to find the words he wanted. I saw conflict in his eyes, conflict and pain, and felt a tiny bit hopeful we might just work something out. "Atrocious."

"I didn't even mention how they were packed together like fish in a barrel, and weren't allowed to bathe or anything. Many died from sickness. And the beatings..." I had to stop and close my eyes, doing my best to keep calm and not start screaming. Hestia whimpered and leaned into my legs to comfort me. "If not for resistances... if not for Shanan being able to liberate some of them, we might have had an outright genocide. As it is, the graveyards and crypts are overfull and there are still so many missing."

"I..."

"Not to mention, of course, what happened to the living. Beatings, rape." Again, I had to fight to keep calm, this time as I remembered all the people we had treated in the infirmary. Dalvin's wounds. Creidne's trauma. Deimne's injuries. Every bit of it. "How can you not fight to stop such a thing?" I opened my eyes and looked right at Ishtore, who looked almost green and was certainly paler. "And we have heard things are worse outside of Isaach. Because Danann didn't have the loyalty of his own people, and they didn't follow his worst orders."

"Is this where you list off my father's crimes?"

"We only know what we've heard," Diarmuid hedged, taking over to give me more time to calm down. He also made sure to look Ishtore in the eyes, hiding that he hadn't had any of the tea. Of course, I still felt fine, so it was likely not poisoned or drugged, but... "We could list those rumors, if you want, but..."

"Ah, but you will spare my ears because of blood ties," Ishtore noted. He then scoffed, rolling his eyes. "You needn't fret about such things. Familial loyalty is complete bullshit, if you pardon the curse."

"That is certainly a strong statement." Diarmuid glanced at me uncomfortably and I could only smile awkwardly in return. For us, who grew up with such close ties, it just felt wrong to hear such things. Though, then again, I certainly wasn't loyal to Arvis, and he was my uncle. "A very strong statement."

"Not strong enough, but I'm afraid I lack the vocabulary to make it strong enough." Ishtore actually downed the rest of his tea before pouring himself another cup. "My mother tortures the civilians of Miletos for fun, laughing as she rips children from their families for the Hunts. And my father? He stood to the side and let my mother beat Aunt Tailtiu to death." He scoffed, but Diarmuid and I exchanged a startled look. Wasn't looking forward to telling Arthur that. But we couldn't hide it, either. That would be worse. "Aunt Ethnia isn't bad, but I barely know her. Same for Linda and
Amid. They're all up in Friege, and I've only left the Thracian Peninsula… twice maybe? One of which was for Aunt Tailtiu's funeral." He shook his head. "I am loyal to only two members of my family. Ishtar and Tine." I almost brought up Arthur, but I bit my tongue. That wasn't something I should reveal. That was for Arthur to say, not for me to blurt because I was startled. "So, you don't need to spare my ears about Father's deeds."

"Duly noted." Diarmuid shrugged, pretending to be calm. I bent down to pet Hestia until I could do the same. "But given that tirade, I would say you know more about his crimes than us. Far more, at that."

"Quite true, but I've been surprised before." Ishfere took a deep breath and settled back in his chair. "So, you've told me what happened in Isaach. Did you continue because of rumors?"

"Well, that depends on how strong of a stomach you have," I answered, sitting back up. Hestia's ears twitched again, hinting that our 'guard' was still there, but I pretended to not notice. Diarmuid would watch for now. "We had to go to the Yied Shrine. Do you want to know what all I saw in there? One of the least troubling things was a child forced to share a cell with a rotting corpse. A child who, for the record, had been Hunted, dragged from his family while his home burned. And is eight years old."

"That's…" Ishfere began. Just like before, though, it seemed that the confirmation of the atrocities made him lose his words. "How is the child?"

"Recovering. Thankfully." I clasped my hands in my lap to keep them from shaking, or from me clenching them into fists. "But that's just one child. We found five Hunted children, and many more dead. Not to mention what you just told us. Your mother tortures people. For fun. And I don't doubt there are others in power like that. There was Danann, after all."

"Raydrick in Manster is another one."

"See?" I shrugged. "You ask why we continue? I ask why haven't you haven't done anything."

"And just what do you plan to do if the Empire falls?" Ishfere's voice became a touch harsh and I tensed, prepared to set his clothes on fire if need be. Diarmuid rested his hand under the table, prepared to use it as a weapon. "Who will keep the people safe? Who will rule and manage the lands?" He shook his head. "Unless you have answers to those questions, then I'm afraid we are at a stalemate."

"I see." Well, I had to admit. I did come close to snapping right then and there. But Diarmuid rested a hand on my shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly. His other hand shook, showing he was just as angry. "Well, I can simply say 'we will', but those will not earn trust and are simply empty words to you. So, sadly, we don't have answers because proper answers require also knowing the damage done, and that is something we don't know. And we won't know until the end of this." I couldn't help but glare at Ishfere, though, and he stilled at it. "But who keeps the people safe now? Because it's not the Empire. And it never was. Isaach can tell you that all too well, as well as those your father sent assassins after. If you care to listen to ghosts, that is."

"But if that is where our stalemate occurs, then I suppose Riona and I will see ourselves out," Diarmuid noted, standing slowly. I waited for Hestia to get up and stretch before pushing myself up. The guard, whoever they were, ducked away to continue 'hiding'. "I thank you for letting us speak with you, Ishfere. If you change your mind, simply send a messenger. We will receive it." Diarmuid led the way to the door, and I made Hestia go in front of me before following, not wanting to risk leaving her behind and her causing trouble.
"Riona." However, Ishtore quietly called my name, and when I turned back, he looked right at me, his expression unreadable. "Your eyes…” he began. I frowned, wondering just what he was getting at. "They're like Arvis's."

"Thank you for the insult," I replied firmly and politely. He cracked a smile at that. "Have a good day." And I strode out of there, doing my best to not stomp.

We got our cloaks from the servants and stepped back out into the rain, leaving without another word. Just out of sight of the gates, we found Larcei sitting in a tree. We weren't surprised to see her. We'd known that someone would have been following us, just in case something went very wrong.

"Any luck?" she asked, in a tone that said she already knew the answer, probably guessing from our expressions. She still sighed when we shook our heads. "Damn." She jumped down from the tree and jumped behind us so that she could throw her arms around both of us. Hestia helpfully moved so that she could. "Let's tell the others, then."

I'm sorry, Conall… I'm sorry, Ishtar… but we… unless something changed, we...

I hated storms. I hated storms. I hated storms. I wanted to be under some blankets, curled up with Hestia, but noooo! No, I was outside, in the rain, with thunder and lightning all over the place, while we all waited to see if the Friege forces that were marching towards us would negotiate or fall for our trap. I hated having morals.

"You know…” Arthur began, tucking himself a little closer to me. We had been assigned to the same group and, in fact, the two of us were set up next to each other, just in case my heavy dislike of storms would interfere with my ability to actually do my job for this mission. Hopefully not, but it was a concern I'd had, so… "For some reason, the fact that you have such a 'normal' fear is surprising."

"Oh, shut up," I growled, scowling. Then I flinched at a particularly loud crack of thunder right above us. Swore it made the rocks in the mud tremble. And the lightning was so bright that I half-thought it would sear itself into my eyes. "You're huddled up too."

"Because it's freezing and you're warm."

"So are you! It's a Fjalar thing." But he was right about it being cold. Any colder, and I swore we'd have hail instead of rain, truthfully. "How are you doing?"

"Just told you it was cold."

"Not that." I hesitated and then shook my head. "No, never mind. We should focus." Though the other soldiers around us were also chatting. The Friege forces were moving slower than the scouts initially anticipated. "Blech, it's really coming down."

"You were talking about how my mother died." Arthur's voice was hollow and I winced. Now was not the time to have brought that up. It had been hard enough a few days ago when I originally told him what we had learned. "You know… out of all the ways I imagined Mother dying… that actually hadn't been one of them. Not sure why," He laughed bitterly. "They were so violent when taking them. So, I really don't know why it's so surprising."

"Guess you had hoped they had a decent enough life."

"Guess so." He sighed and leaned a little more into my side. I did the same, hoping that I could
give him a bit of comfort. Along with warmth. It was seriously freezing. "I hope Tine is okay…"

"I think she is." I ducked my head to smile at him. "Think of how mad Hestia gets when a member of her 'pack' gets hurt, and remember that Conall has Hekate. The way he and Ishtar talked indicated they were both very fond of her. Same with Ishore."

"So, hopefully, she didn't get beaten." He sighed, and I had to nod, acknowledging the point. She still would've had to have lived with the people who killed her mother. Maybe that was why Conall was so fond of her. "I'm being pessimistic. Maybe she doesn't know."

"You? Pessimistic? Perish the thought." I grinned, and snickered when he mimed a blow at my face. "Anyway… oh." I tensed, seeing shapes in the distance. Horses and soldiers, marching through the muddy valley below us. "They're here." I glanced around, catching everyone's eye and mimed for us to get down. The rain shielded us some, as did the hills and peaks where we hid, but it was better to be safe than sorry. "Let's see what they do."

Arthur took my hand as we watched the Friege forces slowly march along the road. I squeezed his hand reassuringly and tensed as we waited for them to get in the 'perfect position'. I didn't look forward to this, but if things became a fight, then we had an obligation to protect the soldiers who trusted us, who fought in our name. That was the charge of leadership, after all. Ultimately, you had to do what was best for your people, especially during a war.

"Soldiers of Friege, I wish to speak with you!" That didn't mean we wouldn't take every chance we could for diplomacy, though. Nothing in this world thrived alone, so thinking of only your people would only harm them in the end. "Please, might we come to an accord?" Seliph continued, his voice carrying on the fierce wind. He stood on one of the hills, with Hestia next to him, as well as 'most' of our forces. With the rain as it is, the enemy wouldn't notice who was missing. Particularly when Oifeye and Shanan were on one side, and Diarmuid and Iuchar were on the other. "For the sake of our soldiers, if nothing else? Fighting will only lead to deaths on both sides."

"Such naivety to expect your enemies to fall simply because you ask," a woman scoffed. I guessed she was the leader, and tried to see her in the rain. It was difficult to make out much, though. "War isn't a negotiation game, boy. And giving up the element of surprise is idiocy."

She threw a thunder spell right at Seliph, clearly expecting him to cower or something. Like he was a child. But Seliph simply raised his arm to block his face and took the spell straight on. As soon as the flash of light faded, it was easy to see it had been a strong spell. His sleeve was tattered and the skin beneath was burned and bleeding. I had no doubts that there was more hiding under his clothes, due to the water conducting the spell. But Seliph didn't show any sign of pain as he brought his arm back down. The wind ripped through the battlefield, nearly jerking his hair out of his ponytail, but he simply looked right at the enemy commander with a look of resigned dignity. No sorrow or rage. No confidence. Yet it made my heart ache...

"If that is your answer, then let us do battle," Seliph declared, voice barely loud enough to hear over the thunder and rain. The Friege forces shifted back slightly, unnerved. "I wish we could've met in better circumstances. But I cannot simply stand by and watch the Empire devour its people any longer. None of us can."

Seliph nudged Hestia, and she howled, loosing the only signal we knew everyone in the army would recognize. And so, my group, and the other across the road (led by Fee and Yuria) rose, spells already at the ready, each of us clutching our tomes (save Fee, who used her thunder sword for this instead). My hands trembled slightly at the lightning dancing at my fingertips. This was the first time I had ever used a tome to cast magic. And, thanks to Arthur's lessons, it was no mere thunder spell. It was an Elthunder spell, the one I had gotten from Aideen's care package, and it
was my first time using it. Combined with the rain and storm, my pulse felt like a thousand horses stampeding through my chest, and I was a bit lightheaded. But Arthur wrapped his arm around my shoulder, steadying me, and so, I managed to loose the spell alongside the others. All of us targeting the same place, the 'puddle' (more like a pond, really) where our enemies stood.

There was a reason we had set up here. While Diarmuid and I had gone to Melgen to negotiate, the rest of the army had watched to see just where the most water pooled after streaming down and around the various hills of the land. And they discovered that it was here, a place more than large enough to hold an army, and with enough hills to hide many, many forces. The perfect place to set up a trap by utilizing one of the basic knowledges of the world: water conducted electricity.

Standing in water when lightning hit was a good way to die. And the Friege soldiers remembered that in their final moments. Though, it wasn't as if that strike had killed all of the soldiers. Regardless of how conductive water was, magic was still magic. People had varying resistance to magic. So, some did survive, and not all of those survivors were writhing and spasming in pain.

"Archers!" But that was why Lester was up in the hills with us, and why behind us thunder-magic-users was every single bow user in the army. "Nock!" he ordered, his voice booming alongside the thunder of the storm. I gestured for my group to get down again, this time to make sure we weren't in the way. Friendly fire wasn't that friendly. "Draw!" Across the road, I saw Yuria and Fee had ordered the same, giving a clear view of the archers who were ready. "Loose!" And arrows arced surprisingly gracefully, especially given the wind, to thud into the Friege soldiers below. I listened for the 'thuds' or whatnot, but I only hears the splashing of bodies as they hit the ground. Hit the 'water', that really was more blood than anything by this point.

By the time the last arrow disappeared into the mud, not a single Friege soldier was standing. Not a single horse was standing either. Of course, none of that meant they were dead. Just that they couldn't stand. And so came the final part of this operation: climbing down to save who we could and mercy-kill who we couldn't. The battle was over, after all. There was no reason to withhold help.

Fee took to the air, to confirm that there weren't more on the way. Yuria, I knew, would head back to the infirmary where Lana was, to report how things went, though I did hope she'd stop by Seliph and tend to him on the way. The rest of us began our grim duty, pulling bodies out of the water so that they could be buried properly later. Killing those too far gone. Tending to those who might make it. I was glad that none of our army really balked at the idea of helping 'enemies'. I think many understood now why it was important to us, and seeing us do the work right beside them showed we truly believed it or something.

Of course, as Inanna had pointed out once, offering your hand sometimes meant you got 'bitten'. In my case, I went to check on a woman with maroon-colored hair (or maybe purple because it was hard to tell with the rain) and she immediately rolled and pinned me, her hands crackling with thunder magic as she tried to strangle me. I coughed and struggled, my vision filling with dots and black threads, but I managed to twist and kick her off of me. She hit the ground hard with a loud splash, but she managed to get on her knees with a tome in hand, ready to strike again. But she didn't get to cast it. Hestia, appearing from nowhere, tackled her instead, throwing her full weight on her, and crushed the arm with the tome with a sickening 'crunch'.

"Hey there, Hestia," I croaked, coughing. My throat stung, burning even, and I tipped my head back to drink a bit of the rain in an effort to soothe it. It only half-worked. "By me, Hestia. By me." I couldn't really yell, but the rasping was enough for her. Instead of tearing the arm off, as she normally would, Hestia immediately rushed back to me, abandoning the woman, and licked my cheek before nuzzling me. "Yeah, I'm okay. Thank you. We'll make sure you get a treat later." I hugged her, smiling a bit. "And a proper bath. You stink."
I stood up shakily, using Hestia as a bit of a crutch, and wobbled when my vision spun. But then things stabilized, so I stumbled over to the woman, who was curled up on her side, crying. I thought it might be pain, but I saw that she was actually staring at something. The very pretty ring she wore. An engagement ring…

"I'm going to roll you over," I told her, doing just that. She hissed in pain, and I didn't blame her. She had bone splinters sticking out from her arm, after all. "Yeah, sorry, wolves are good at biting. Let's see…” I dug through my pack, looking for something I could use as a tourniquet. I found a long strip of cloth, but no stick or anything. "Well, it'll do?" Not really, but it was the best I had for now. "Okay…” I looped it around her arm, above the injury, and began trying to tighten it.

"...I tried to kill you…” she whispered. She looked at me like I was something she couldn't believe existed or something. "Why are you trying to help me?"

"Because I can." Hestia, the sweetheart, found me a stick to use. I inserted it into the loop and used it as a lever to try and tighten the tourniquet faster. Tighter. Though, vaguely, I remembered something about 'dangers' of it being too tight, but... "And because I promised a young girl that I'm going to try and break the cycle of revenge. There's nothing 'evil' about you. You're just fighting for what you think is right. Same as me."

"...Ha…” She chuckled, and blood seeped out of the corner of her mouth. "You use tactics like that, and yet…"

"We have an obligation to keep as many of our people as alive as possible. But when the fighting is over, then why should be not try to save as many as we can?"

"Such foolishness…” Her eyes closed. "But that foolishness beat me, so maybe… maybe you all can do something…” She smiled, but tears slipped down her face too. "Or maybe it's not foolishness. I thought you were naïve, because of the messages. Because of how you and that other boy drank the tea and didn't react."

"Diarmuid checked for poison, and I was the only one who actually sipped it." The stick was straining under the pressure, but it did look like I was stopping the bleeding. Maybe? She could also just be out of blood. "Were you the guard?"

"You did notice, then. You just pretended, because you knew to play into… and that we would…” She laughed softly, and more tears fell. "I'm so sorry, Ishtore… I…”

"Hey, don't talk like that." I froze when there was no response. "Hey…” I reached over and felt no breath from her face. I placed my fingers on her neck and felt no pulse. "Ah…” I sighed, and undid the tourniquet. Wasn't fast enough… though it was possible she had lost too much blood even before I'd made it over to her. "I'm sorry." Hestia whimpered, and I petted her. "No, no, Hestia. You did good." She licked my cheek and I laughed, realizing I misspoke. Hestia wouldn't care about the woman's death. Pack took priority. "I'm not mad." But she did recognize that I had tried to help the woman, and failed. "Come on. Let's see who else we can help." After all, when the battle was over, people were people. We needed to help who we could. At least, when we were dealing with people like this, who were fighting us because they didn't think we were a 'better alternative' or even a viable alternative. "Which way? You pick."

Hestia actually led me to Lester, who was trying to do the same thing I did, put a tourniquet on someone with a ruined limb. I used the makeshift tourniquet I held to take over, and he worked on tending to the soldier's other injuries. They were unconscious, but their face was young. I'd guess maybe fifteen or sixteen, truthfully. I had no idea what the 'minimum' age for Friege's army was.
"How are you doing?" I asked Lester once I got the tourniquet secured. I had no idea if this would even work or not. But we had to at least try. "Having fun?"

"What an amusing joke, that," Lester immediately replied. He tied off his bandage and rubbed at his eyes. I took what he had to better secure the tourniquet. "Ask me that again in a year or so."

"Got it." I leaned into him, the closest to a hug I could give with my hands occupied. He leaned back, doing the same. "I hate war."

"Only bit of sanity any of us have is that."

"Too true." I glanced down, accidentally reminding myself that we were kneeling in a pool of diluted blood. It was nauseating, really. "Far too true." Done with my work, I looked around and hailed a soldier to carry the wounded one to the infirmary. "On to the next one."

"On to the next…" He suddenly frowned, looking at me. "The hell happened to your neck?"

"I thought I'd-" Whatever sarcastic comment I had disappeared for a whimper when thunder boomed. "I hate storms."

"Work with me after we get you bandaged."

"Thank you."

We moved the camp forward, past the 'battlefield' (massacre, really, and gods, we all were keenly aware of it) and then stopped, opting to rest. Since the rain continued to fall, so hard that it was difficult to tell what time of day it was, I just set myself up under lots and lots of blankets in Seliph's tent. And I had been nice and cozy underneath the pillows, with Hestia, but Seliph insisted on extracting me for one big reason. He wanted to check my neck because he'd heard, from someone, that I'd been strangled with a thunder spell.

"It looks like you'll pick up a scar or two from it," Seliph whispered, gently running his fingers over my neck. I held still and tried to not squirm. This was reassuring him, not me reacting because he was tickling me. "I'm sorry."

"For what? You're not the one who choked me. And you better not because that is very not my thing," I replied, grinning at him. It was worth his blush. "Seriously, Seliph, I'm fine. How's your arm?"

"Just fine." He held up his bandaged arm as proof, and held still as I pushed back the sleeve of his night-shirt to see the bandages went all the way up his arm. "Naga's blessing gives me a resistance to magic. It might scar, but that's just because I was stupid and underestimated how far the magic would conduct."

"I see." I kissed his palm and then held his hand to my face, leaning into it. "How's Yuria doing? I didn't get to talk to her before she retired."

"More like you immediately hid from the evil thunder and lightning."

"Thunderbolts and lightning, very very frightening." I sulked and he snickered. "But still."

"She seemed fine to me. We'll see if that changes in the next couple of days. But she had been excited when I asked her to help."
"I'm sure." After all, I remembered that overheard conversation with Diarmuid. "Ah, so many conversations to be had when things settle a bit more."

"Like?"

"Secret." I still had to talk to Lana for Ulster, after all. "But also just… talking like we used to with each other. While doing chores."

"We should try and double-up when we do paperwork and whatnot." His free hand went back to my neck. "...I should've gone to you."

"And do what? It wasn't me freezing or anything. It was me helping someone." I made a face, remembering Inanna's terrified reaction when she'd seen the injury. I'd spent most of my treatment reassuring her that I was just fine. "Seliph, it's fine. I'm fine. Really. Lana wouldn't have let me out of the infirmary if not." Noticing him still looking sad, I decided to try and make him blush instead. "You want to kiss it to make it better?" I smiled teasingly, and had to bite back a yelp when he really did kiss my neck. "Ah…" Right on a sensitive spot too, damn it!

"You know… you made a comment back in Darna…" He spoke very softly, and I felt more than heard the words. He was definitely getting me back for the attempt at teasing. "About talking about cuddling?"

"Think we're both too tired for that sort of 'cuddling'." But I had to admit that I was tempted. Especially right now. "And, you know… tent. Sound. Rain would muffle, sure, but also, there's a Hestia." Who was under the covers apparently asleep.

"True." Still, he kissed me right under the jaw and I tried to not react. And failed miserably, based on his laugh. "Ah, you're right." He abruptly pulled back, leaving me fuming. He couldn't just…! "So-ACK!" So, I did what anyone in my position would do. Pin him to the blankets, while making sure to not jostle my wolf. "Mad?"

"There's a reason they call payback a 'bitch', mister." I smirked at him and he laughed. Which I quickly muffled with a kiss. "So, best way to get you back is…"

Flash of lightning, booming thunder, and I automatically screamed and cowered, curling up on Seliph's chest. Seliph held me, and what should have happened was perfectly normal storm stuff. Instead, I heard even more screaming outside. I blinked slowly and slowly looked at him, wondering if he heard what I did. He looked back, just as confused, but neither of us moved until Hestia bolted out the tent, howling in warning. Then we scrambled up to follow, right in time to see a giant lightning bolt, too large to be natural, hit the middle of the very chaotic camp.

"You know… I didn't think we were in range of a Bolting?" Seliph noted shakily. I could only whimper because here it was, one of my biggest non-death related nightmares. "Riona?"

"Getting everyone," I replied. I made sure to smile at him, and he looked at me sadly before kissing me. "I still intend to get payback, by the way."

"I look forward to it." He kissed me again, lingering a bit. "I love you."

"Love you too."

It was hard, making myself move. I knew I was shaking. But I forced myself anyway, first gathering up the children with Inanna's help before herding them towards the outside of the camp. Niamh met me there, mentioning a nearby church, and I ordered her to take the children and whoever else she could grab there. Even if it wasn't 'out of range', the church was at least more
protection than a bunch of cloth tents, in the mud and rain. Once I saw them off, I went to grab others, to tell them where to go. And I kept an eye out for Hestia, but left her to what she was doing when I saw she was near Larcei, Patty, and Ulster, assisting people who had been caught under fallen tents.

"Riona!" Lana caught me by the hand as I passed and jerked me after her. "Sorry, but I need help in the infirmary," she explained, pulling me along. I stumbled a bit, mostly because the mud made footing difficult, but otherwise kept pace. "I sent the healthier ones off with the medicines and whatnot, but we need to get-"

"Lana, you don't need to explain," I pointed out, leaning down to kiss her hair. Both of us were soaked, because neither of us were wearing rain cloaks. No one was. No time. "Now, if you want to explain things, maybe talk to Ulster about you avoiding him?"

"I'm not… er…" Lana frowned and then sighed. "Later?"

"Of course. Not even the time to bring it up. Sorry, I'm a little rattled and-" I flinched at another crack of thunder. "Ugh… storms. Why did it have to be during a storm?!"

"Love you?"

"Love you too."

We got to the infirmary tent right as another Bolting struck near it. Thankfully, no one had been hit, but the force actually knocked over the support poles of the tent. Aunt Lachesis quickly held it up and I assisted her until Diarmuid took over. Then I helped Iuchar and Lester get the wounded up in saddles (if they could) or onto makeshift sleds for the horses to drag behind them. Fee helped out with her pegasus, working primarily with Yuria to ferry people to and from… wherever she was dropping them off. Of course, we all had a heart attack when, on her way back from one such trip, she got hit by a Bolting. Her pegasus managed to land instead of fall, but Fee tumbled out of the saddle, gasping in pain, and though a few of us ran towards her, another Bolting was heading right for her…!

"What a spoilt child…" Then, suddenly, Lewyn was there and the wind gusted around us. The spell itself was frozen in the air, held in place by the wind. "I hear your pain, but you go too far," he whispered. The words sounded strange, though. They almost… it was like with Mahnya. Like the wind rushing past your ear. "You chose to fight, and this is the consequence of that choice. You chose to defend the Empire which is sending Jugdral into the depths of hell, and you pay the price for not listening to your heart."

The wind surged forward, and it sent the spell with it. Back and back and back… as if it had been a simple beam of light bouncing off a mirror. Not a powerful thunder spell being carried backwards by the wind. In the distance, we heard a 'bang' as loud as thunder, timed perfectly with the storm itself. As if the bolting spell had hit Castle Melgen. Which… which had to be impossible, right? Right?

"Fee!" No time to wonder about probability. Yuria rushed right over to Fee to help her up, and I went to assist, steadying Fee while Yuria healed her. "Hey, are you okay?" Yuria asked desperately. Lewyn, meanwhile, ducked away without a word, using the chaos to hide. "Fee?"

"I'm… k…” Fee groaned. She coughed a bit and looked around. "I thought I saw…"

"Lewyn saved you, but he didn't stick around…” Yuria huffed. "I swear! I'm going to give him a sound scolding!"
"Do it where I can hear. It'll be funny." Fee leaned on me briefly before straightening. "Okay. I can keep going."

"Are you sure?" Yuria frowned worriedly, especially when Fee nodded. "Okay… tell me if things change?"

"Of course." Fee gave me a little hug and I kissed her cheek. "Ready for duty!"

I helped out a bit more before deciding to try and find Lewyn, to thank him for saving Fee and maybe scold him for not making sure she was okay. Depended on how much of a jackass he would be. However, it took a bit to find him, mostly because he had decided to duck under a little rock shelf to get out of the rain and undo his bandages and… uh… I could see bone. I could see bone. And not just that! The flesh of his arm was falling off!

"What the hell?!" I shrieked. He jerked his head up, as if I had startled for the first time since I'd met him. Of course, since his arm was rotting, I probably had! "What the hell did you do!?!" I immediately, but as gently as I could, moved him so that he was a little more shielded from the rain. It was knocking skin off. "Okay, mister, if you've got some… some weird parasite or infection or something, you can't just hide that bullshit! We don't need this spreading around camp, and you don't need to deal with it!"

"That's not it," Lewyn replied. He tried to hide it, and bandage it up again, but I took the bandages from him to do it myself. "It's not communicable."

"Well, that's a relief. But seriously, we are going to Lana and Yuria and-"

"No." He brought his free hand up to grip my chin and make me look up at him. "Not a word to them. Not a word to anyone."

"Not even Fee?" I glared at him, ignoring how bits of his skin sloughed off like a snake's and fell on my foot. "Your arm is rotting in case you haven't noticed. Somehow." That was when I realized something, though. I could see bone. As in there was no muscle. He shouldn't have been able to move his arm! Certainly not so quickly! "What the hell is going on?"

"Later." He let go of my face. "Later. You don't have time. I bought some with that trick, but you will have retaliation. You must defeat Ishtore and quickly. The wind is heavy with his pain, and there's a chance that he will call a Final Strike. I hope not, but you can't trust that hope. The longer he has time to wallow in his misery…"

"Final Strike…" I had heard of it. Aideen had warned Seliph and me about it, since we had 'magical' Holy Blood. It was the last resort, a suicidal assault that used up every speck of magic both in the person and from the environment around. "That's…"

"You don't have time."

"I'm at least finishing this damn bandaging!" I focused back on it. "It's insulting how bad you are at it. But hey, maybe you have limited dexterity due to the rot on your arm." I was so, so out of my depth here. "This 'later' better not take forever because I doubt I can keep quiet on how weird this is for long. Not with my group. They're going to know something is wrong and it can't be blamed on the storm forever."

"I don't plan on it being long, but it might be after Leonster. Depends on how much breathing room we get."

"And Fee gets the explanation too."
"...Yes, she will." Lewyn sighed. "And Mahnya gets her way. She's going to be so smug."

"Good." Though as I bandaged him, I thought I saw a calculating look in his eyes and wondered if this 'explanation' was actually going to be a lie. But I couldn't call him out on it because he was right. There wasn't any time. "Almost done. Can you at least check on Fee personally? Please?"

"You and Yuria were there. Of course she's fine."

"...Thank you for the vote of confidence." Either that or he said the first thing he could think of that he knew I couldn't argue much against. "Oh, whatever. Stop moving. Seriously, the skin is falling off. Did you become part snake or something? Well, no, a snake typically sheds in one pieces and this is falling off in pieces, so that's more like a lizard. A giant overgrown lizard, that's what you've become." He choked on either a yelp or a laugh. I wasn't sure which. Maybe it was both. "Stop moving!"

What the hell did we get caught up in?!

By some miracle, which might've involved Lewyn throwing the Bolting spell back, we managed to get the camp evacuated with minimal injuries with the army and no deaths. After we all rested, though, it was time to go on the offensive, because even if the rain wasn't letting up, it was clear Ishtore wasn't going to let us rest or wait or whatever. What was the plan? Assassination. Sort of. Shanan had suggested going in alone, because of Balmung. Aunt Lachesis scolded him for thinking that, citing 'lone warriors get lonely deaths', apparently an idiom from Agustria or something. Oifeye suggested a strike force, and Patty had volunteered to assist because, surprisingly, she had actually stolen from Melgen Castle before, with Dew. A lesson in why castle stealing was so dangerous, but it also just felt like Ulir luck helping us out again. From there, Larcei and me were volunteered for some reason and, surprisingly, Arthur asked to come along as well. And so, our group snuck ahead of the others, with me leaving Hestia behind to help with playing 'bait'. Distraction. Whatever.

"You doing okay, Riona?" Shanan asked, keeping a supportive arm around me. We were nearing Melgen, but the thunder was loud and the lightning was fierce, so I kept whimpering and covering my ears. "Easy..."

"This is so pathetic..." I whined, ducking my head. Arthur and Patty were in front, completely focused, but Larcei kept glancing back at me worriedly. "We're on a job... a mission..."

"Mission hasn't started yet." Shanan hugged me a little tighter. "Wonder why Seliph volunteered you, though."

"Probably to keep me from hiding under the bed." Truth be told, both Larcei and I wondered why we had been ordered to come along. There hadn't really been time to argue, but it was still very weird. "Or keep me from distracting myself with the cute kittens or-" I bit back a yelp at a particularly loud crack of thunder. "Ugh..."

"Let's see... ah, here." Shanan produced a bit of candy from his pocket and handed it over to me. Candied orange peel... citrus... my favorite. "I know you're older, but sweet things make things better no matter how old you get."

"True." And it did remind me of how, when we were younger, Shanan would give us sweets to help make us feel better. "When we get a proper kitchen, can you make warm milk with honey?"

"Been a bit since I made that for you lot, huh?" He smiled. "Of course."
"And maybe teach us how you make it? Yours always tastes different."

"Hmm? Oh, that's because I use the recipe Aunt Ayra taught me." Now his smile became sheepish. "Didn't mean to keep that a secret or anything. I'll make sure to show you."

"Yay!" And my good mood lasted all of a second before the lightning and thunder scared me again. "Going to be so glad when this storm is over!"

"Well, you've got a bit more energy in you now." He hugged me a little tighter, to reassure me, and nodded to Larcei, who kept glancing back. "Everything okay?"

"I'm allowed to worry about her too, you know." Larcei commented grouchily, grumbling a bit more under her breath. Shanan nodded, acknowledging the point. "Ah, whatever, looks like we're at Melgen." We were. In fact, we were right on the outer walls of the city. "Patty, we got the entrance?"

"Yeah, we do, but…" Patty began. She sighed and pointed to where a tree had fallen by the walls. "That is covering my 'ladder' inside. I told Seliph that I'd use that to open the door."

"...Does it require lockpicking?"

"Nope. Just opens from the inside." Patty frowned when Arthur started snickering, and Larcei and I looked at each other, finally understanding why Seliph sent us along. Shanan pinched the bridge of his nose, getting it a second later. "Uh… am I missing something?"

"Just no telling Oifeye because he'll get mad." Larcei climbed over the fallen tree, and I hugged Shanan before doing the same. "Okay, climbing a stone wall in the rain. Let's go!"

Larcei and I scaled the wall relatively easily, going slower than normal because rain, and then walked along the top so that Patty could direct us to where the door was. From there, we got it open and we snuck inside Melgen. Thanks to the rain, no one was really out, letting us skirt along the wall and up to the castle with ease. When we were there, though, Arthur suddenly jerked his head up and when we looked up too, we saw a shadow on the roof, followed by a Bolting streaking from that shadow. Ishmore. He was on the roof. Of course he'd be on the roof. He had a freaking Bolting. And it was still… fucking… raining…!

And that wasn't our only issue. By now, we were on the castle grounds, and that meant soldiers. As a large number of them approached, Shanan drew Balmung and used its special ability to temporarily disappear, only to reappear in the middle of the group, in a flash of blood. Patty and Arthur quickly darted inside, no doubt to do the smart thing and find a ladder or something up. Me, though…

"You're thinking what I think you're thinking, aren't you?" Larcei noted dryly, studying the outer wall of the castle with me. I thought I saw a black splotch on it, but hoped it was just my imagination. "I think we can…" She trailed off and glanced at Shanan, who was clearing through the enemies with ease. "...If you don't mind, I think I'm going to make sure Shanan doesn't get a knife to the back? He doesn't wear armor and all…" She made a face. "Oh, ugh, that sounds like-"

"I know you're not," I replied, mostly to make sure she didn't accidentally confess before she was ready. Shanan had good hearing, and the rain didn't muffle everything. "If you prioritize the archers, then I should be fine. From there, I just have to wait until Arthur and Patty catch up."

"I'll handle that, then." She kissed my cheek and rested her forehead against mine. "Hey, next breather we get, we are so having a gossip session. I need it."
"I do too."

"And will you be okay climbing? With the storm?"

"...I'll make myself be fine. By imagining Oifeye's reaction to all of this to keep me amused." I grinned and she laughed. "Okay, be careful."

"You too."

Climbing a stone building in the rain, for the record, ranks pretty high on the 'stupidest things to ever do' list, but in my defense, I wasn't in my best frame of mind because of the storm and I never, ever, ever claimed to be sane. Besides, I managed it. Slowly. And carefully. And whispering many of Oifeye's lectures about the dangers of climbing up so high, while imagining his expressions. And guessing Aunt Lachesis's reactions if she saw. Things that sort of distracted me, but really just kept me focused on my goal (climbing) and not that I was getting 'closer' to the giant storm with thunder and lightning. I hated storms. I really, really, really hated storms and the next time we had to battle in a storm, I was refusing and hiding, damn anyone who said otherwise! (No, I wouldn't. I'd do my job. But it was fun to imagine, at least.)

When I made it to the roof, I had to catch my breath and desperately try not to vomit over the side. Which would've been the perfect time to have attacked me, really, but since I had climbed to the roof, I was nowhere near 'expected places' and bought myself that little bit of breathing room. That and Ishtore seemed very focused on his Bolting casting. I wondered if he hit anything. I wondered if he cared.

"Hello again, Ishtore," I called softly. He whirled to face me, his eyes bloodshot and his face blotchy. He'd been crying. Or maybe he was crying. It was hard to tell. "...I wish I knew what to say, but I'm certain no words of mine can reach you." I drew my sword. Dad's silver blade. I left my fire sword back with the supplies, because I knew thunder magic trumped fire magic. And it was raining. Fire and rain typically didn't mix well. And I didn't trust myself to cast magic in this state of mind. Didn't even bring a tome. "However, if you are willing to-" Aaaaand he shot a Thoron spell right at me, tossing his Bolting to the side to do so. I had to roll out of the way, splashing. Water was pooling on the roof. Not good... "Okay. Negotiations terminated. Got it."

He just threw another spell at me. I dodged again, first making my way around the various puddles to the Bolting to 'conveniently' kick it off the side. Then I tried to get close, but it was hard. Thoron was a powerful spell anyway, and with the rain and water, its range and might had increased. So, I had to be very careful about where I dodged, and I had to dodge faster and farther than I normally would. So, it was almost like a puzzle, really. How to get closer, while still dodging. How to get into his guard, and not die. But, in my favor, he was... he was grieving. He was in pain. I thought of the woman who I couldn't save, the one with an engagement ring who had said his name, and knew just why he wasn't at his best. And because he wasn't at his best, I was able to finally get in close and catch him across the face.

He screamed. In pain. In fury. I almost winced, but I held firm. Because I couldn't falter. I just couldn't. Even if this hurt people I knew, it was no different than what I had inflicted on others. The only difference would be that I knew, personally, the people who would be hurt. So, I couldn't falter. It wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't be fair to the people I hurt. If I could find another way, I would, but if this became the only path I knew... then I couldn't hide. Even when he glared at me, blood and tears and rain only twisting his expression further into grief, I wouldn't hide.

He tried to throw another spell at me, but a blast of wind magic stopped it before he could. I glanced to the side and saw Patty and Arthur had arrived at last. Along with some soldiers, who must've been chasing them. But while Patty turned her attention to the soldiers, trembling but
determined, Arthur looked at me, his expression almost neutral. Save for his eyes. His eyes held a request, one I could read easily. 'Let me fight him.' And so, I turned away from Ishtore to assist Patty, while Arthur threw another wind spell at Ishtore to begin their duel.

"Hey, how did you get up here before us?" Patty asked. She whimpered when the soldiers tried to come forward, but I blocked the blow and she used her Wind Sword to send them flying. Literally. Right off the roof. "Oh… that's going to make me sick later. I'm a thief."

"If you want more combat training, there's bunches of us who use swords," I reminded her. Battle-fever flooded me, and it helped make me strangely calm. Not calm enough to invoke Luna, but calm enough to focus on the fight. "As for getting up here? I climbed."

"You… you climbed?" She slashed at a soldier, and I took advantage of their surprise to take their head. "Climbed what? Stairs? A ladder?"

"The wall."

"You climbed the outside of the castle?!" Her surprise startled me, but then I remembered that she hadn't actually seen me do that before, unlike most everyone else. Sure, she saw me climb the side of a house, but there was a big difference there. "In the rain?!"

"I'm very skillful. I'm divinely blessed with skill. But I also highly don't recommend doing that. Ever." I blocked another strike, and twisted to knock them off-balance. I then stomped on their throat and… attempted to set another person's clothes on fire. Sadly, they were a bit too damp. If I used Luna, I might have had more luck, but it was a damn miracle I was as calm as I was. "Here, I'll handle the bulk of the fighting. You take openings where you can, okay?"

"Oh, trust me, I am!"

Thankfully, there weren't actually a lot of soldiers. No doubt the majority was either dealing with our main forces or with Shanan and Larcei. So, before long, Patty and I had dealt with them all, and turned to see if, and how, we could help Arthur. I felt my heart stop when I saw Arthur took the full force of a Thoron spell head on, and I made to rush over when I saw him spit out blood. But before I could take even two steps, I saw Arthur raise his head and his eyes glowed. Thunder crackled down his arms, sparking between his palms, and as he slowly straightened, the magic wrapped around his entire form, arcing across the various puddles.

Ishtore attacked again, far too quickly. But Arthur raised his hands and actually caught the spell, the force rupturing blood vessels up and down his arms. But Arthur didn't care. With a yell, he 'ripped' the Thoron apart and seized the various 'shards'. Each one pulsed with even more power, Arthur pouring his magic into the magic he had seized, and then he threw the magic right back at Ishtore. Ishtore gasped and dropped his tome, bringing up his hands to try and seize the magic. But he couldn't. He couldn't, because Arthur was stronger. The Fjalar blood Arthur had inherited…it meant very few could match him in magic. So, the spell hit Ishtore full force, and soon, a new puddle formed. A bloody one, right under Ishtore after he hit the roof and didn't move.

It wasn't total silence. The rain still fell. The thunder still boomed. But it was as close to silence as it could get. It was only broken when Arthur limped over to Ishtore, one shaking and splashing step at a time, and half-collapsed next to him. To my surprise, he then pulled Ishtore towards him, resting his head in his lap. Ishtore groaned and coughed before slowly opening his eyes and blinking owlishly at Arthur.

"Who… are you?" Ishtore asked after a moment of staring. "You seized the magic… and you've got the hair…" He shakily reached up to grasp the strands of Arthur's hair that fell over his
shoulder. "So, who are you? I thought I knew everyone in the family."

didn't get kidnapped like her and Mother because Father hid me before the soldiers caught up to
us." He smoothed the hair out of Ishtore's face, and smeared blood across it. "You know… I
thought I'd be happier killing one of you all. Your soldiers butchered my father right in front of me.
Kidnapped my family. But maybe it's because you said you loved Tine. Makes me sad. Haven't
seen her in thirteen years, and our meeting is going to start off with 'hey, I killed the cousin you
liked'."

"Tell her I was mad. Tell her I was unreasonable. Afraid. It's all true." Ishtore coughed. Patty and I
held each other, not wanting to risk leaving, just in case, but also not wanting to interrupt this. "I
should've just helped you all. I've questioned so much. But I was afraid to gamble."

"Wish you did." Arthur smiled sardonically. "I think I might've grown to like you."

"I think the same about you."

"Really?" Arthur now raised an eyebrow, perfectly skeptical. "Why?"

"Because you're fighting to protect the people. Fighting to save them. So, I know that you have a
good heart, and that's important…" Ishtore coughed some more. No blood, but I did hear a
'whistling' sound. Lung hit? "Hey… if you can… keep Tine and Ishtar safe? Please?"

"...Yeah. I will. I promise, cousin."

"Good…" Ishtore's eyes closed, and he smiled. "Ah… Liza… you waited for… me…?" He
reached out to something I couldn't see. "Thank you… love…” His hand fell, landing on the roof
with a soft 'splash'. And the rain continued falling, on and on and on.

"Arthur?" I eventually called, my own voice soft. He looked up at me, and said nothing. "Want me
to carry you?"

"...Yeah," he rasped. He moved Ishtore off his lap and struggled to stand. I rushed over to help
him, hugging him tightly. He leaned heavily against me. "I hurt. I'm tired."

"You can nap on my back. I'm told that I'm quite comfortable." I glanced at Patty, a bit worried
suddenly, and she pointed to the trapdoor. With a ladder. Well, this would be fun. "Come on. I've
got you, Arthur."

Patty helped me carry Arthur down the ladder and get Arthur settled on my back. From there, she
led the way through the castle, and Arthur rested his head on my shoulder, dozing already. He
mumbled an apology about the blood, but I simply hummed some songs to 'dismiss' the apology,
and Patty sang a few she knew as well, brightening the all too quiet air inside the dark and gloomy
castle. She kept on singing even as we stepped outside and saw Shanan and Larcei bandaging each
other up in the safety of a nearby gazebo, the paths littered with the bodies of all the soldiers they
had killed.

Well, we had Melgen. Yay. Wish I could be happier about it.

The day after we took Melgen, the day we 'properly' moved in, it finally stopped raining. It was
actually startling to see perfectly clear skies after so many days of rain. The people of Melgen
welcomed us with smiles, though they admitted to being sad over the deaths. Ishtore might've been
a symbol of the Empire, but he had done his best by them, and actively protected Melgen from the
Child Hunts. As such, they made a simple request; they wanted the dead buried, properly, among their own. Since we had planned on burying them anyway, we agreed with a smile. Even sent people to get the soldiers we killed in our trap so that they could all be buried together.

Still, it had taken forever to confirm that the woman was Liza, Ishtore's fiance, mostly because the Friege soldiers had thought I was asking so that I could display her body or something else disgusting. If not for Anat yelling at them about how 'this army is not like that', I wasn't sure I ever would've gotten an answer out of them. I should've just asked the townspeople, but... it had felt 'better' to get it confirmed by people from Friege. And... well, whatever. I supposed it didn't matter. The point was that I had gotten it confirmed, so I was able to bury her next to Ishtore. Only thing I could do for either of them, and it felt empty, but...

"Based on how you described his last moments, I'm truly reminded of Iucharba," Iuchar noted absently. He was helping me bury Ishtore and Liza. Though others had offered to do it in my stead, I felt I needed to. For Conall and for Ishtar. And for Tine. "He blustered and he talked about killing people with hope, but the more I think back on it, the more I think he was scared. Scared and all too aware of what might happen should this army lose, should we all fail."

"I imagine there are many who are afraid, and their anxiety causes them to freeze," I whispered. My arms, shoulders, and back all ached horribly. I half-wished Hestia was with me so that she could take over, but she was helping with physical therapy. Seriously thought we should get more animals for that purpose. It seemed to work out well. Ish. "We are a bunch of fools who have decided to fight back because we couldn't stand to see people hurt any longer. The only difference between us and others who have risen is that we have names and titles that people flock to."

"And the ability to keep them together. That's always important."

"That too. By some miracle." Though, I was sure it had more to do to those titles. Still, we did do our best by our people. I hoped that helped. It seemed to, especially after we took steps to make ourselves more accessible. "Did you know much about them?"

"Liza? Just that she was a general of Friege, and a skilled tactician. Her main downfall was assuming that you all were straightforward and 'above' traps." Iuchar shrugged and shifted his footing to make shoveling easier. "As for Ishtore... not much about him either. He rarely left the Thracian peninsula, apparently for health reasons. Quieter than his sister, Ishtar. But many rumors painted him as a much happier person, especially in recent years."

"I see." I closed my eyes, and thought of Liza's last words. Of Ishtore's last words. "I hope, in another life, these two can find each other again, and have their happy ending."

"I hope so too." Iuchar smiled bitterly. I knew he was thinking of his little brother, and I wondered if he hoped that, in another life, he and Iucharba would be brothers again. "I hope so too."

We silently finished burying Ishtore and Liza, and Iuchar said some Grannvelian prayers for them while I set up the marker and tied ribbons onto it. Later, we'd light incense for them as well, as was custom to Grannvale, but for now, it was just the ribbons. Fee would likely set up lanterns, because that was Silesse's custom, and I had little doubts that the people of Melgen would pay their respects as well. But all that was for 'later'. For 'now', there was still work to be done, so I walked Iuchar to his next job and attempted to go assist in the infirmary. But Yuria caught me and asked if I'd look for Arthur, since no one seemed to know where he was. I wandered through the town for a while, wondering just where he would be, before I realized the obvious and made my way to the roof. By the conventional ladder. Funny as it would've been to make Oifeye squawk, it didn't feel right today.
"Seems I was right," I noted as I climbed out from the trapdoor and found Arthur on the roof. He was heavily bandaged from his fight with Ishtore, but otherwise, he seemed fine when he glanced over at me. "Yuria was worried about you."

"I'll reassure her later," he replied, looking back over the town. It was busy thanks to our army, and the townspeople who welcomed us gladly. "I was feeling overwhelmed by all the people."

"I can understand that." I walked to his side and brushed the hair out of his face to study him. He looked pale, and exhausted. "You didn't sleep, did you? How are you doing?"

"I don't know." Arthur looked up at the clouds, watching them pass. "Ishtore… he thought I was doing this for the 'greater good'. What an idiotic phrase, really. Isn't someone doing things for the 'greater good' what got us in this mess?"

"I think it's more of the inability to realize they might not know best, but I can see why you'd think that. I'm sure others do as well."

"Well, regardless, he… he really thought that. But that's not why I…" He fell silent, gathering his thoughts. I waited for him. "I only joined to pay back Fee. To help you all out while I traveled, since you were making it safer for me to reach Alster. To find Tine. I'm only here for selfish reasons."

"Nothing wrong with that."

"Logically, I know that. And yet…" He growled in frustration, running a hand through his hair and tugging on it. "Argh… I didn't even know he existed until a few weeks ago! Why are his words bothering me!?"

"Maybe because you've been having such doubts anyway?" I smiled brightly at him and he scowled. "I imagine the people in Leonster thought similar things."

"...Mmrgh..." That was a very interesting sound there. "Blech. I like not being held to expectations. But you all have dealt with that your whole lives, huh?" He chuckled, shaking his head. "No wonder you're all absolutely insane."

"Oh, there are many reasons for that one." I giggled and he rolled his eyes. "I'm sure you'll learn more over the next few weeks."

"We'll see." He looked up and smiled slightly. "Oh, hey, that's…"

"Arthur, you sick or something?" Fee suddenly landed on the roof and hopped off Annand to join us, resting her hand on Arthur's forehead. I hadn't even noticed her approach. "Mmm… bit clammy maybe…" she murmured. Arthur batted her hand away. "But seriously, you're looking too serious. Don't do things you're not used to."

"Hey!" Arthur snapped, glowering. I had to laugh, though. "Give me a break! I'm recovering!"

"Yeah, I know. That's why I came to find you. I was worried and I couldn't find you. So, I went up in the air to look." She shrugged, and Arthur softened slightly. I looked between the two curiously, noticing a nice little air between them. "Anything I can do to help?"

"Uh…" Arthur glanced at me, and I grinned, waving him on. I wasn't insulted or anything. I just wanted him to do what he wanted, and needed, to do. "Actually, do you mind taking me for a ride? I think I need the wind on my face."
"Hmm? Oh, yeah, sure!" Fee beamed, bouncing a little. I knew it was because she was glad she could do something. She and Yuria were a lot alike, sometimes. "Climb on!"

I had to help Arthur due to his injuries, but once he was on, and Fee gave me a hug, the two were off into the skies. I watched them with a smile, watching the feathers trail off Annand's wings. Then I turned my attention to the horizons. North for Darna. East for Alster. No doubt our next two locations for battle, and places we would have to deal with before we finally made it to Leonster. But we were a step closer. Just a step closer…

"Riona?" Oifeye climbed out of the trapdoor and walked over to me. "There you are," he murmured, hugging me. He must've been trying to check on me, and then panicked a bit when I wasn't around. "Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine, Oifeye," I replied, smiling reassuringly. The wind blew, tugging at my hair and skirt, and I looked out over the town. "I mean… I'm sad things ended up like this. I think Ishtore was a good person who was just frozen with indecision. And I know that his death will hurt Conall and Ishtar. So, I'm sad." I looked back to him, and saw him smiling softly at me. "But I won't let it shake me. I won't let it shake any of us. We all walk this path together, and if we failed to convince him, then we just need to figure out a better argument for the next one."

"True." He ruffled my hair and nudged me to the ladder. "But that's for the far future. In the present, I think Hestia is pulling pranks because she misses you."

"Yikes, definitely need to deal with that!" And when that was done, if no one needed me, I'd go see if I could find flowers for the graves. It was the least I could do, after all. "Show me the way to my little brat of a wolf!"

Oifeye walked with me as we hunted for Hestia, and while we did, I looked around, gauging reactions and the mood of our army. Most seemed happy, but tired, which was understandable. More than understandable, even. However, just as I told Oifeye, we would keep moving. We wouldn't falter. So that, one day, I could actually answer the questions Ishtore had, the questions that had immobilized him with fear. And maybe, just maybe, I could ease the worries of the next person who asked me them, and they would join us instead of fighting.

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Oifeye

Class: Paladin; Skills: Pursuit, Critical

Cousin to Sigurd and Ethlyn, who lost his parents when he was small. Sigurd, however, took him in and raised him, serving as simultaneously a 'father' and a 'brother' to him. He was absolutely devastated to hear of the Massacre, but his promise to Sigurd and the others kept him going, as did the children he raised.

Has the Holy Mark of Baldr on his right wrist, a set of interlocking squares that almost resemble a shield. Its blessings gives him a boost to his stamina and ability to endure pain, as well as boosts to his strength, skill, and luck. His sight is quite keen due to these blessings, and he frequently surprises people with the amount he can carry.

A fierce warrior, trained personally by Sigurd and his knights, training that he managed to keep up even after the Belhalla Massacre. He has devoted most of his life to protecting the children, and it shows both in his skill... and the amount of stress his body has endured over the years. Though he does his best to hide it, he is starting to feel aches in his joints and the like from the wear and tear of battle.
Most comfortable in a supporting role, such as tactician or advisor. Or 'father', which is a role he has enjoyed a great deal, to his surprise. But this comfort is why he served as Sigurd's tactician, even after coming of age, and why he works so hard handling the paperwork and the like for the army. It's just soothing to him, especially since it helps him remember some fond memories from Sigurd's army, memories he had thought he had lost to the years.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Ha… well, certainly went on a tangent with this one, huh? Now, in-game, you're really going to want to go after Ishtore with like… Shanan or something because he hits hard with that Thoron and that Bolting. But I thought it more… fitting, I suppose, if Arthur and him dueled, so that's why I went with that. For clarification, Arthur activated Wrath, meaning he got an auto-crit on Isthore.

Next Chapter - Sister
Chapter 38) Sister

We have taken Melgen, gaining a foothold in the Thracian Peninsula. The deaths of the soldiers, however, weigh heavily on us. I didn't think these soldiers were like Danann's. I think most of them were actually good people doing what they thought was right for the people they swore to protect. Just like us. The difference is that we survived, and they died. Well, that and them fighting for a tyrannical empire who is killing its very people, but when a few random kids were the only alternative... what were you supposed to do? What choices did you really have? So, we fought and now, we keep going because we can't stand what is happening in the present, but the future is ambiguous...

I hate war.

That cloud was definitely a bunny. A bunny-rabbit hopping along the grass. And that cloud nearby was... mmm... looked like a hawk. So, it was a hawk, watching the rabbit and wondering if it was worth the meal or not. It drifted faster than the rabbit-cloud, though, so...

"I can't believe you scaled this in the rain." So Aunt Lachesis could throw off my rather-morbid mental-story thing apparently. It took me a bit to adjust to being 'out of my head' and 'laying on the roof', but I pushed myself up to see her by the edge, looking down. "Seriously, I can hear Alicia fretting, and I think Chulainn would as well," she continued, looking a bit ill. Still, she smiled when she saw me sitting up. "Where did you all learn to climb like that?"

"Truthfully, I think it started with us trying to find additional places to hide," I answered after a moment. Was still a little dazed, and I was trying to figure out why she was on the roof. Or if she was even healthy enough to have climbed the ladder to here. She looked fine, but I knew by now that she was good at hiding pain. "When the soldiers came after us, I mean. If there was more room, we were less likely to make noise." I shrugged, unbothered by the memory, though Aunt Lachesis looked saddened by it. "I, at least, kept it up after we reached Tirnanog because Oifeye makes funny noises."

"That trickster streak is from Chulainn for sure." She sat down next to me, and giggled. "You wouldn't think it, based on how stoic he was, but he often pulled little pranks. Ayra's stories about their childhood hinted he was far worse as a kid."

"Really?" I hadn't know that! And I was tempted to ask more, but there were other worries. Sadly. "Did you come up here to share stories?"

"No, but I was looking for you. When I couldn't find you, I decided to look for Hestia and found her sitting below, whining as she sadly looked up at the roof." She shrugged. "So, I guessed you were here and, look, I was right."

"You were, but Hestia is supposed to be hunting with Lester?" I looked back up at the sky, though, and actually noticed the sun's position. "Or it could be later than I thought."

"Quite so." She smiled, but I saw the worry in her eyes. She must've started looking for me because
of how late in the morning it was. "What has you so contemplative?"

"Well, truthfully, you caught me making up stories about the clouds, but..." I hesitated before sighing and laying down again, this time in her lap. She was startled for a moment, but relaxed quickly and began stroking my hair. "I came up here hoping that I could find an answer here."

"An answer to what?"

"Ishtore's questions." I had wondered if I came up here, where he had died, I could maybe 'hear' a whisper from his spirit or something. Something that would give me a hint to how I answered the next person who asked. "Who will protect the people if the Empire falls? Who will rule? Who will govern? What happens to the people after the war ends?"

"Did you find any answers?"

"No, not really..." I sighed and closed my eyes. She was comfy. Made me wish I had grown up with her, because I knew I would've taken all of my naps by her. She also had a really nice perfume that I needed to steal. Er, 'borrow'. "I mean; I know what people expect. They expect Seliph to rule, since he's the eldest grandchild of Kurth."

"Legally, the throne is his, so yes, I imagine people expect that."

"From there, there's who can inherit legally. Conall and I have claim to Velthomer, for instance." As did, of course, Julia and Julius. Julia also had claim to the throne itself due to being the Naga Major, but being the daughter of Arvis might dampen that possibility. "Arthur, Tine, Ishtar... and those other cousins Ishtore mentioned, Linde and Amid... they all have claim to Friege. Dozel can be ruled by Iuchar, Ulster, Larcei... and I think Iuchar's older brother is still alive, so perhaps it goes to him instead." Chalphy would probably go to Oifeye if Seliph didn't inherit it. No clue about Edda. I remembered the stories saying that Claude and Sylvia had a daughter, but who the hell knew if she was alive or not? "Jungby has Lester, Patty, Lana... and technically Febail, Patty's brother, but..."

"But there's Verdane's inheritance to consider."

"Exactly. Febail is Jamke's son, so he's rightfully the king of Verdane. Providing, of course, that we can prove that." Which was a whole different set of problems right then and there. Sure, Holy Blood helped mitigate some of that, but not all. Especially in Verdane's case, since Verdane had never been ruled by a Crusader. "Which, of course, leads into the other countries. Now, some are easy. Shanan will rule Isaach. Fee's brother, Ced, will rule Silesse since Lewyn's got his head shoved too far up his ass."

"Now where did you learn such crassness?" Aunt Lachesis laughed, genuinely amused. Since I had heard many stories about her unexpected knowledge of rude gestures and ruder language, I just rolled my eyes. Even as I thought of Lewyn's arms rotting... he'd taken to avoiding me once we had moved into Melgen. Probably to avoid giving me that explanation he had promised. "Those two are the only 'easy' ones though, huh?"

"Yeah. I doubt I need to talk about Agustria." She would know those issues far better than me. Far, far better. "Leonster has Leif, but the Manster District never really had a ruler over everything really. Sure, Leonster, but the rest? Just local lords. So, Darna, Melgen, Alster, Conote, Manster..." Unless they had surviving heirs, then there was no one to legally inherit them. "Thracia will likely keep to its line, which could cause potential problems due to what happened prior to all of this." Yied Massacre... the decades long war between Leonster and Thracia... "Miletos has also never had a 'ruler', just lords." So, again, unless heirs of the previous ones survived, then... "And that's
just the *legal* aspects."

"The legal and expected."

"Right…" I absently began tracing patterns on the stone of the roof. Everyone had scrubbed it thoroughly to make sure all the blood had been washed off. "But then you have *ability*. I know people expect us to take charge and whatnot, but we're flailing about while trying to run an army, so how the hell are we supposed to run a *country*? Plus, there's..." I struggled for the words I wanted. "I know we will be involved with reconstructing. For one thing, we helped make the mess. For another, there are things that we... that *I* want to happen, and that can't just be left to someone else." I sighed. "But it feels wrong to simply answer his question with 'we will'." Yes, of course, we would protect the people as best as we could, but saying 'we will' to the ruling part? Felt so, so wrong.

"Because you do not seek out power." Aunt Lachesis switched from stroking my hair to braiding it. "You started this war because you were tired of seeing people suffer."

"And just look at what happened with Arvis. *He* tried the whole 'eliminate all the enemies' thing and *he* tried to usher Jugdral into a new age, and... well, he did, but in the worst way possible."

"Plus, whenever there is an empty spot for power, the position is always filled before long and there are only three outcomes. Better, same, or worse." She finished one braid and began another. "And with things as they are, it feels like 'worse' has a higher chance of happening."

"Yeah…" I closed my eyes, thinking. No wonder Ishtore's anxiety had frozen him up. All these thoughts bouncing in my head were enough to make me nauseous. "Then I think that it really is just too soon to find those answers anyway. We don't know who lives and all. We don't know who the people will accept."

"I think that last sentence is key for how you answer, Riona." Aunt Lachesis tapped my nose and I opened my eyes to see her smiling. "Who will the people accept? They who have suffered so much... they should choose."

"They picked Arvis." I closed my eyes again. "But, then again, Arvis was actually a good ruler for the people overall. He just got too ambitious and..."

"Too ambitious, and too convinced that he was correct, and not willing to trust more people. That's why he made an empire, so that only *he* ruled." Because he didn't trust anyone else to do what he wanted done, and because he believed he knew best. "Not really a problem with you lot, if you're what the people choose. And even if you're not, all that means that you all will help in other ways. That's how you are."

"I suppose that's true." I kept my eyes closed, until she tapped my nose again. Then I opened my eyes and made a face at her. "Am I being silly?"

"No, but I think you're putting too much energy in it. Keep it in the back of your head, but ultimately, Riona, I think you're right. It is too soon. You've gained victories, but there is still quite a long way to go. Too long." She smiled warmly at me. "If you think too far ahead, then you'll trip over your own feet. You don't have to see the end of your destination to know that you're heading there."

"Like how we can't see Leonster, but know we're going there." And how Ishtore's own feet froze on the path because he couldn't see what laid beyond. "Thanks, Aunt Lachesis."
"Of course." She giggled. "Now, that all said and done, I actually was looking for you to ask how things were going with Seliph."

"Well…" ...Oh, right. Aunt Lachesis was married. "Actually, I think things are going well, but if you don't mind a bit of a ramble…"

"Ramble away." She grinned and started putting another braid in my hair. "I'm here to listen."

I did end up rambling a lot, and not just about my relationship with Seliph. It went from how I was frustrated with how we had to basically schedule time together with everyone, to how I wasn't really sure about my role but I was trying to keep things running smoothly. To how worried I was about the children, and the new kittens. Then it switched back to relationships, basically just how to keep it going under stress and how to make time for more… private things. Aunt Lachesis listened closely and offered advice and examples as she could, while teasing me silly. It was… it was a different sort of conversation than I'd have with Aideen. A sort of conversation I should've had growing up, but didn't. But that was fine. I could make up for lost time. When Aunt Lachesis wasn't killing me with laughter, that is!

So, due to a combination of stress, weather, and forced closed quarters because of said weather, a lot of soldiers ended up sick from colds. This meant that soups were always cooking in the kitchen, teas were always brewing, and the entire duty/chore roster had to be fixed to account for the sick people. Which is wasn't as hard as it sounded, since we had seven very eager children wanting to help out (and a toddler that also wanted to help out, but was really too little, but Oifeye and Shanay found all sorts of things to make them think they were helping). Sure, we worried about the babies, since they really couldn't be around sick people, but Oifeye and Aunt Lachesis took care of them with ease, and there was always at least one person willing to babysit or take over the dreaded diaper duty. All in all, it was a relatively painless experience, though it did mean extra work. Not that I minded, truthfully. All the chores reminded me of Tirnanog and there was something very soothing about that.

"Wow, these numbers are so off…" Lana whimpered. While I made medicines at the table, she was doing inventory. Hestia was asleep at my feet. On my feet, rather, and not inclined to move one bit. "Ugh… we are definitely buying out the apothecary here. I'm so low on bunches of herbs."

"We should also learn the medicinal herbs native to these parts," I pointed out absently, more focused on my mixing than anything. It was rare for the infirmary to be so quiet, but with so many either sick (meaning they were in their own rooms) or working (meaning they were away from here), the place was empty save for Lana, Hestia, and me. Yuria was helping Arthur teach magic to some willing soldiers. "I highly doubt the Isaachian plants grow in these parts."

"Some of them, at least. Now, granted, Mother did make sure to teach us medicines that didn't use exclusive herbs, but…" She sighed and then frowned. "Ugh… who did inventory last time?"

"I'd have to look it up." I knew Aunt Lachesis had done it a couple of times, but someone else had handled it when we moved into Melgen. "Why?"

"Because these numbers are way off, and I know we didn't use that much after the battles and all." She frowned heavily. "Did we lose some when we had to dash out of the camp?"

"Could be, but let me see?" I finished my measurements and wiped my hands on a cloth before holding out my hand. She happily passed it over and I glanced through curiously. And frowned when I noticed something almost immediately. "Say, Lana?"
"Yeah?"

"Did it occur to you that the person just has messy as hell handwriting?" I looked up at her with a smirk and saw her pointedly looking away, blushing. Nope. She hadn't considered that at all. "I think that's the problem, given the way the little calculations in the margins look." It took some squinting to differentiate, for instance, the 'eights' and the 'threes'. But those calculations did help with puzzling out what was what, because whoever it was had at least been relatively consistent with it and was good at math. "I'll find out who it is to make sure their writing lessons are going well." We were, after all, still teaching people to read and write in the army. I wondered if we should set up self-defense classes again, as we had in Isaach. They had been fun, and it might help us build a better relationship with the people. I mean; we did market walks for that reason as well, but... "You're overworking, though. Sit down and rest. I have to have things sit anyway, so I'll 'translate' for you."

"I know I should protest, but I won't." Lana groaned and all-but-collapsed in the chair across from me. Hestia's ear twitched and she yawned and lifted her head, blinking sleepily. She then moved over to Lana and laid down at her feet. "Aw, you're so sweet, Hestia." Lana leaned down to scratch Hestia behind the ear. "Ugh... I'm exhausted."

"Like I said, you're overworking." With my feet free, I got up briefly to move things to the side and to fetch paper and pen. Then I sat back down to 'copy and translate'. "Give Yuria more duties. She's feeling useless."

"But she and Diarmuid have had this nice little atmosphere thing going on and I want to see what happens!" Lana sat up in her seat before resting her arms on the table, and her chin on her arms. The words reminded me of what Diarmuid had said. Seemed like he hadn't gotten around to asking the others yet, due to all the chaos. "I like giving her time so that I can watch! It's super cute!"

"Reminder that Yuria will no doubt have complexes due to her amnesia." Best to put that innow, because I had little doubts that we'd probably need to help Yuria through that. I honestly wondered if I should give Aunt Lachesis a head's up on it, though I'd have to word it carefully. I didn't want to betray secrets, even if it was to people I thought might be better at giving advice than me. "But if we want to talk relationships..."

"Why do I have a bad feeling suddenly?"

"You and Ulster." I looked up just in time for her to whimper and look away. "Normally, I wouldn't push, but he's noticed you avoiding him and it's bothering him." I frowned when she only whimpered again. "Now, if you want to talk about it with someone else, I'll change jobs with them. But, since this is starting to be awkward and uncomfortable..."

"It needs to get addressed before it becomes a huge problem." She groaned and hid her face in her arms. "Let me gather my thoughts?"

"Of course."

We sat in silence, the only sound being the distant sounds of laughter and chatter from the various soldiers. I worked on 'translating' the inventory list, and when I was done, finished up the medicines I had sitting. Then I started checking the inventory myself, noting that the lists weren't that off now. Granted, one or two were, but they were things like headache remedies, which we never had enough of. It was pretty funny how many headaches everyone seemed to get actually. But, all in all, it matched up well enough.

"Some of it is work," Lana finally began. I glanced back at her and saw that while she still had her
face in her arms on the table, Hestia had sat up to rest her head in her lap. "It feels like everyone is always getting injured."

"So, the first order of business is definitely reevaluating the distribution of labor in the infirmary," I replied, checking the last few bits of the inventory. When that was done, I set the list on the table and rested a hand on her back. "Second order is going to be training more people to take over for you."

"Yeah, we had more, but that Fenrir assault…" Lana's voice caught and I kissed her head. Due to leaving to deal with the Shrine, I never did hear the final death toll of the Fenrir Assault. Clearly, it was worse than I could've thought. "So, that's part of it. I really am super busy. If not for Yuria, I'd probably have gone mad. Another reason why I like seeing her be cute with Diarmuid."

"Well, in addition to my first point, I think Yuria would also like to see you 'be cute' and having fun. She adores you as well." And those two needed to have a proper talk about this clearly. I'd nudge them in that direction a bit later. "You taking the work instead might make her think that she's not good enough." No 'might' about it, but...

"Yikes, that's the farthest thing from the truth." Lana pushed herself up to lean back in her chair, and I ran my hands through her hair soothingly. "Another part of it is… well, me being a bit jealous?"

"Of Patty?"

"Yeah, which I know is stupid on so many levels." She sighed and closed her eyes. Hestia pressed herself a little closer and Lana absently began petting her. "For one thing, it's not like we're not both equally helpful and all. Patty's an amazing scout."

"But her job as scout and thief means that she has many excuses to spend time with Ulster."

"Yeah, which my idiotic emotions wants to be like 'threat, threat, threat!', except I know she's super not interested." She made a face. "For one thing, if Patty is interested in anyone, it's Shanan, but even then, I think it's less 'romance' and more 'hero worship'. For another, something like that shouldn't stop me from spending time with him, but…"

"You feel awkward, know he'll pick up on it, then become more awkward…"

"Lather, rinse, repeat." She opened her eyes again and looked at me. "That's the basics, at least. The rest is just us juggling our schedules."

"We really do need to figure out ways to double-up or something. Clearly, we're all going mad because we're not spending enough time with each other." I smiled at her and she smiled back. "Now, with that said, I think the best way to go forward is actually to confess. Since that's causing have of the trouble."

"Now?!" Lana really did have the most adorable squeaky voice. It was all high and cute, like a little mouse. "We're in the middle of a war!"

"Mild reminder that we're alive because our parents got together during wars?" I also smirked, unable to help it. She immediately facepalmed. "And that I'm in a very happy relationship. During a war."

"Right, of all the excuses I could come up with, that's the dumbest one I probably could've ever said." She groaned and half-sprawled on the table. "Okay. Idea."
"Yes?"

"I confess. I run and hide with you."

"You talk with Ulster later, after you're a bit calmer?"

"Yep."

"So long as there's a later talk, I don't see the problem." I leaned down to rub her back. "We'll actually set it up where you're meeting or doing something with me, so that the excuse of 'she is working' is true. And we'll have Hestia with us to cuddle with." Hestia barked to emphasize my words. "See? You just tell me when."

"Today. Or tomorrow. If I don't do it soon, I'll keep finding excuses."

"You got it." But since we were being much too serious, I decided to start tickling her, making her shriek with laughter. Hestia barked and jumped about, eager to play as well. "Now, let's see a smile!"

"Mercy, mercy!" Lana laughed and laughed, though she also almost fell out of her chair. Hestia kept her balanced, though, and Lana hugged her. "Whoo… I think I did need that laugh and to get all that out of my head." She looked up at me and smiled. "Thanks, Riona."

"What else are big sisters for?" I grinned. "Besides teasing you silly."

"Speaking of teasing…" Lana smirked and immediately rushed into the back room before returning to set down some medicines. "I got these for the army, but you might want to go ahead and get used to taking them."

"What are they?" I picked up one of the vials curiously, trying to find a label. "Something new?"

"Contraceptives. I'm not dealing with any birthings, thank you very much."

"Lana!" I pretended to be scandalized, but I ended up laughing far too hard to pretend for long. "For crying out loud! We barely even get to spend ten minutes together! So not enough time."

"That's why I said get used to taking them!" She giggled. "Come on! Let me have fun! For the time being, I only get to have this conversation with you and Seliph!"

"Fine, fine." I sat down again and beckoned Hestia to come to my side so that I could pet her. Which, of course, she did. "Just for you."

"Because you love me so~"

"Because I love you so, yes."

"Seems like you're doing a good job so far, Sandas," I praised, petting his leopard-kitten and carefully checking said kitten over. It took a moment to remember Sandas had named him 'Mursi', after Mursili, mostly because Sandas was the only one to come up with a name so far for his kitten. "Aw, but he's a sleepy one, isn't he~?" Mursi yawned and blinked slowly at me before trying to curl up. "No, no, sleepyhead. I've still got to poke you a bit."

Since I had been the one who let Inanna, Anat, and Sandas have the leopards, I decided to also be the one making sure the three were taking care of them properly. Not all that hard, since I liked animals and I did try to keep a close eye on all ten of the children, even if I interacted primarily
with those three. So, since Sandas had a break from his messenger duties, we were in my room
while I checked Mursi on my table, with Sandas watching in fascination with how I pulled open
Mursi's mouth to check his teeth and poked about to make sure there were no lumps or anything.

"He makes this word sort of snort sound sometimes," Sandas told me, drinking some warm milk
with honey. I had noticed him shaking a little when he brought Mursi in, and made him some since
it always comforted me. Thankfully, he seemed to like it. "Er... weird. Not word."

"I knew what you meant," I reassured, smiling briefly at him before returning to my checkover. A
snort, though... ah, I remembered reading something about that. "I think that sound is a chuffle."

"Chuffle?"

"Yep. Animals make all sorts of noises to communicate. Chuffles are used for greetings, or to
express excitement." And courting, but I was fairly certain Mursi was still too young for that.
Hopefully. Didn't want more baby-kittens about, no matter how cute they were. "He's just saying
he's glad you're here."

"I'm glad he's here too!" Sandas beamed, though I had to bite back a laugh at the little milk-
mustache he had. "He's soft and cuddly! Makes me feel better when the nightmares come."

"Animals are very comforting, aren't they?" I reached over to ruffle Sandas's hair and then picked
up Mursi to smile at him. "Well, near as I can tell, he's a healthy, sleepy boy. With a very round
tummy from all the yummies he's been eating." I kissed his nose and then set him back down on
the table, where he promptly curled up to sleep. "Hee... someone wants a nap!"

"Wish I could go to sleep that fast." Sandas poked Mursi, who pawed at his hand, and then he
smiled up at me. "Thank you for letting us keep them."

"Of course." I rubbed his back and took his mug from him, noticing it was empty. "Ah, do you
want more milk or-"

"Well, this looks lively." The door burst open and Hestia rushed over and jumped up to brace
herself on my arm to lick my face. Then she went to lick Sandas's face, to his laughter. "Sorry, to
interrupt, but she was whimpering and whining, so I knew she missed you," Seliph continued from
the door, grinning. It took me a moment to remember that she had been with Seliph, since he had
gone to visit the people of Melgen and needed a 'guard'. Who better than Hestia? "Next time, you
should come with me."

"Is that your way of asking me out on a date?" I teased, giggling. Since Hestia was playing with
Sandas, I skipped over to Seliph and kissed him. "Our last 'date' did get rudely interrupted." I
frowned as I studied his face, though, and touched his cheek. He was paler than normal, and I
thought I saw bags under his eyes. "Bad rumors in town?"

"Surprisingly, no. Seems like everything is still well."

"Then you didn't sleep last night. Too much work?"

"No, I kept tossing and turning." He smiled bitterly now, and reached up to hold my hand on his
face. "I keep thinking of General Liza and Ishtore. I know I didn't interact at all with Ishtore,
but..."

"Reminds you of Iucharba."

"Sort of. Iucharba didn't join us because he was afraid of what would happen if we failed. Ishtore
didn't join us because he was afraid of what would happen if we succeeded." He glanced over to where Sandas was happily distracted with Hestia, before continuing quietly. "I really just want to run. I know I can't, that we can't, but…"

"You never were one for fighting." I leaned forward to rest my forehead against his, smiling gently at him. "And it's hard, having to fight knowing that you're killing good people."

"I really feel like we should've had a better plan or something before we started this. But, at the same time, if we didn't…" Would there have even been a Jugdral to save? So much was going on. So much pain and suffering. "I stand by my words. We can't simply stand by and let so many people suffer. But I still wish…"

"We will find answers for the next one. You'll see." I continued smiling, and he slowly smiled back, relieved. "And we'll keep going. We'll make a world Ishtore and Liza would've wanted. A world Iucharba would've wanted. It'll be hard, and it might take a long time, but we'll do it."

"One of these days, I'm going to figure out how you know what to say to lighten my spirit."

"Maybe you're just easy to read~?" I grinned now and he laughed. "Or it could simply be because I love you very much. Always have, and always will."

"And I, you. Always and forever."

"Are you two going to going to try and bite each other's faces off or something?" Sandas asked dryly. We both looked to see he was hugging Hestia, looking very unamused at both of us. Hestia, of course, was panting happily, her tail wagging away. "Like Mursili and Maliya. I don't know why they try. Why would you want to bite someone you love?"

"...So many answers to that, and none of them appropriate for an eight year old," Seliph noted. I had to hide my smile and laugh by leaning on his shoulder. "I'm assuming you mean something different from kissing?"

"Is it kissing when tongues and teeth get involved?" Sandas shrugged and I really had to struggle to not laugh. Seliph wrapped an arm around me to help me better hide said struggle because oh dear gods. "They get mad when I ask. Maybe because I interrupt them first on accident."

"I think that's a conversation to have when you're older. Like… fourteen or fifteen or something."

"That's so long!"

"Yes, well…"

"My lady!" Niamh slid to a stop by my door, and her dark expression showed she wasn't here to joke around. In fact, the worried light in her eyes made me go to my closet and get my armor. "Ah, and your highness! Good, I was trying to find you as well," she continued. I quickly changed into more battle-ready clothes and Seliph helped me get my armor on. "There's a group of what appears to be refugees heading towards us, but they're under assault from soldiers wearing Friege colors."

"And Fee is out checking Darna and all the cavaliers are out to practice riding," Seliph groaned, facepalming. I kissed his cheek and went to get my swords. Hestia helpfully grabbed one with her teeth and dragged it to me. "Need to let Lana know, and get patrols and the like set as well…” He closed his eyes briefly and then looked at me. "Rounds of reinforcement?"

"That sounds good to me," I replied. I made a point to ruffle Sandas's hair before going over to kiss Seliph. "I'll take Niamh and whoever else can move out this instance."
"Yes, that'll work." He sighed and smiled. "Never a dull day with an army, huh?"

"You know it!" I winked and headed out the door where Niamh waited. "Don't keep me waiting! I'll have Hestia sit on you if you do~!"

Hestia and I followed Niamh at a run, recruiting other soldiers along the way. Then we were out of the castle and out of the city, heading to the eastern woods. The refugees thankfully weren't too far, and we quickly came up on the battle taking place, with Friege soldiers fighting noticeably tired guards doing their best to keep the rest safe. As soon as we were within range, I stopped, rocking back on my heels to move with the momentum, and drew my Fire Sword to burn the ones closest to the group. Now, since these were Friege soldiers, and therefore wielding thunder magic, I quickly sheathed it again to use Dad's silver blade for the rest of this fight, but for an opening attack, it was pretty good, in my opinion. Certainly shocked the enemy soldiers, and left them wide open for the other long-ranged soldiers in my little group. And Hestia. Hestia leapt on one very close to a young girl with long silver hair and tore their throat out before snarling at the rest. And that was when the rest fell on them.

"Keep them away from the refugees," I ordered, dodging a thunder spell. A soldier came close, but I whirled and cut through their neck. A second one tried to stab me in the back, but Hestia snapped up their leg and I gutted them. "Hold their attention!" There weren't really enough of us to form a defensive line, sadly, but we could at least confuse the enemy and give the guards a breather. "And don't be reckless, got it? Just keep them busy!"

'Keep them busy' was far too accurate. Despite this being a refugee group, there were a lot of soldiers, hinting that some Very Important People were among these refugees. Or that Bloom was such an uptight asshole that he wanted to make sure no one ran. Or both. Really, it could be anything, and it wasn't as if I had time to really think about it. I was too busy trying to not lose some limbs. And keeping track of Hestia as best as I could because this was definitely not fun. Even less so than typical battles.

"Down!" At the voice, I dropped to a knee instinctively and felt someone use my shoulder-back area as a stepping stone to launch themselves into the air. Took me a moment to realize it was Ulster and I watched him bring down his axe on a heavily armored soldier, right where the armor didn't quite cover the neck and collarbone. The result was a spray of blood and a half-decapitated soldier. I almost called out the dramatics, but saw another heavily armored soldier aiming a javelin at Ulster's back, so I instead I focused on them instead. And invoked Luna because why not? Had to match the drama and all (and it was an accident anyway because I was still learning how to properly use it). While that soldier fell apart in a rain of blood and metal shards, a mage tried to attack me. But the mage soon fell apart in ten pieces because Larcei used Astra to announce her arrival.

"What?" she asked, smirking when she saw me looking. I rolled my eyes and shook my head, desperately trying to not grin. "Fall in love with me again or something?"

"Always, Larcei," I deadpanned, glancing over my shoulder to where Ulster was. He was looking around, being serious. As always. "What made you want to jump off my back, Ulster?"

"I keep saying he's got the dramatic streak of us two. He's just quiet about it."

"I can believe it."

"I actually planned on jumping over you, but miscalculated by jump," Ulster answered, smiling sheepishly. I had to laugh at that because that made almost too much sense. "How's your shoulder? Back? What did I even step on?"
"I'm fine for now, but I'll get checked," I promised him. He walked over to give me a quick hug and a kiss to the temple. "Okay, so you're my first round of reinforcements? Good, because there's a lot of soldiers for one group of refugees."

"Think there's something more to it?"

"Isn't there always?" Larcei pointed out dryly. She turned to look over the field, and Ulster and I did the same, backs to each other. Hestia barked and wiggled her way between us to get to my side, fur matted with blood. I petted her head with my free hand. "And there's our favorite wolf. Three, two, one… let's rip them apart!"

The three of us split off, shouting orders and coordinating a bit better so that the refugees were more protected. A bit difficult, since we were still outnumbered and there were still a lot of enemy soldiers. And then there were even more, because for some damn reason, these soldiers had reinforcements. However, that bit of panic-worry didn't last all that long. Why? Well, in the blink of an eye, the soldiers' reinforcements were corpses, blood spraying from multiple lacerations as they fell. And, in the middle of the soldiers was Shanann. For a moment. Then he disappeared again, confusing the enemy until he appeared again to slice them apart, a phantom dancing on the battlefield. I couldn't help but stare, startled and entranced, and I saw Larcei had done the same. Hestia, by my side as always, licked my hand to help me remember that there was a lot of things going on. A lot of things. Like more reinforcements for us.

"Set up a defensive line around the civilians!" Seliph's order rang over the chaos easily, and I saw him cut down one mage effortlessly, before briefly switching to his Lightning tome to deal a critical blow to an armored soldier for someone else to finish off. "I want some scouts in the forest in case there are more reinforcements hiding there," he continued ordering. "Magic users, prioritize the heavily armored ones. And someone keep an eye on Shanann. He didn't put on armor. Again."

"I swear; next time we have a battle, we're sitting him down and forcing armor on him," Larcei grumbled, scowling. Absently petting Hestia, I looked around for any archers, but thankfully, it seemed they relied on their mages for long-range support. And there were less of them. "I'll tie him up if I have to." She froze, and I desperately had to bite back laughter. Best part was that Seliph was close enough to overhear that and his 'I am totally a dignified leader' mask cracked instantly as he muffled his own laughter. "You know what I meant!"

"Sure." Seliph did try to stop laughing, but he really couldn't. "Of course I did."

"Seliph!" Larcei growled and pushed his head. "Oh, whatever! I'm helping Ulster."

"Have at it, murder twins."

"Are all of you going to call us that?!"

With a bit of laughter that didn't suit the battle at all, we jumped into the fray, now focused on eliminating the enemy now that there were enough of our soldiers to actually protect the refugees. I blocked and dodged as needed, working in tandem with Hestia to bring down the enemy. I thought about switching to my Fire Sword again, but decided against it when I saw the thunder mages still about. I would need to start carrying a tome for those sorts of battles, but for now, Dad's silver blade held up very nicely. And it wasn't like we had to hold out for long. The sound of hooves hitting the ground announced that all too clearly. I couldn't help but grin as the cavalry arrived, literally, and Hestia even howled a greeting for them. Led by Diarmuid and Iuchar, with Lester and his archers providing covering fire, the cavalry circled around to limit the ranges of the battlefield and herding the soldiers into much closer quarters. Leaving them wide open for the rest of us. So, it wasn't long at all until the last of the enemies fell, and all that was left was tending to the wounded,
mercy-killing those who wouldn't make it, and dealing with any stragglers. Which meant, for me, checking on the refugees. Or, specifically, their guards, since one or two were actually on the ground from everything.

"Sorry to just appear out of nowhere like that," I half-joked, helping one up from where she had fallen. And did a bit of a double-take because she was gorgeous, though thankfully, I quickly found something that I could use to excuse the reaction. "Ah, this is falling out, though." I fixed the feather ornament tucked behind her ear and smiled. "You okay?"

"Y-yes, I'm fine," the girl replied. She returned her rather unusual sword to its sheath and breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you for coming when you did. We've been fighting off Friege soldiers for days and healing magic doesn't cure exhaustion."

"Nope, it doesn't." I smiled reassuringly at her and almost directed her to just… sit down or something. However, that was when I noticed something. She had shortish blonde hair, the same shade as Diarmuid's, and her features resembled Aunt Lachesis. Her eyes, however, were a very beautiful blue, and I knew Uncle Finn… had blue eyes… "What's your name?"

"Oh, pardon my rudeness!" She smoothed out her skirt and bowed. "My name is Nanna. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise." I had to grin, because I was right. On multiple levels, actually. "Hey, Diarmuid!" I twisted to find him, eventually spotting him dismounted and by his horse, talking to Iuchar about something or another. "Your little sister is just as adorable as I thought she'd be!"

"Yeah, yeah, gloat about being right all you like," Diarmuid immediately replied, barely paying attention to what I'd said. Then he froze and whirled to look at me. "Wait, what?!"

"Little sister," I repeated, pointing to Nanna for emphasis. Her eyes were wide from shock, and she covered her mouth to muffle a gasp. "Right here. Super adorable. Totally going to spoil her silly."

"I… huh?" Diarmuid, of course, looked like I had Hestia tackle him from behind. Which was hilarious. "Um…"

"Get your fine ass over here and hug your little sister, will you?" I winked at him. "Before I steal the first hug." I actually had to jump back to avoid getting trampled because Diarmuid rushed over, sweeping Nanna up in a crushing hug and actually spinning her. Not that Nanna seemed to mind. She hugged him just as tightly, crying and smiling at the same time.

"Finally… Finally!" Nanna managed through her tears. Diarmuid set her down and he used his sleeve to wipe the worst of the tears away. "Ah, I'm sorry… I've just… I've wanted to meet you since I was little! And I…"

"Easy, there's no reason to apologize for crying," Diarmuid reassured, smiling and wiping more of the tears away. I stepped a little further back, hovering near just in case. "If I wasn't still flooded with battle-fever, I'd probably be bawling too." Diarmuid caught my eye and nodded, subtly telling me that he was fine. I nodded back and winked again before turning away to let them have their meeting.

Instead, I walked to the other guard who was close by, a boy with brown hair who wore white armor and carried another unusual sword. And was staring in wonder at Seliph, who was giving orders to the soldiers. "You keep looking longingly at him like that, and I'm going to have to eliminate my competition," I teased, grinning. He promptly yelped and stumbled back, startled.

"Relax, I'm joking." I steadied him and bit back a laugh. It wouldn't be nice, since I'd surprised him...
so. "I'm Riona. You are?"

"Um… Leif," he answered softly. He smiled shyly, but there was something charming about it as well. Reminded me of Seliph, though the smiles were by no means the same. "Leif, of Leonster."

"Seliph's cousin, right? Nice to meet you." I took his hand and tugged him along, pausing when he stumbled again. "Would you like me to carry you? You're obviously exhausted."

"N-no, I'm fine." He looked down and I thought he was blushing from embarrassment under the dirt and sweat. "Just… um…"

"Exhausted. And why wouldn't you be? Leonster is quite the distance from here, and you've been protecting them all this time. That's amazing, but even the strongest shields need to be tended to." I smiled warmly at him, and he hesitantly smiled back. "But here, I'm sure Seliph can explain that better than me." I waved at Seliph to catch his attention, and saw him excuse himself from whatever conversation he had been having. "My dearest love, I've brought you a present!"

"As always, you're the sweetest, darling," Seliph immediately replied, drawing the words out to make them dry. I laughed and noticed the nearby soldiers also laughing and being amused. I was glad our antics lifted their spirits. Gave us more excuse to keep them up! "Is this the leader of the guards? You did an amazing job."

"He is, or so I assume, but there's something more important about him, Seliph," I explained, stepping back to nudge Leif forward. He was back to being shocked, probably because he'd made it to the end of such a long journey. "Meet Leif."

"Leif? You're Leif?" Seliph stared for a moment, startled, before smiling brightly and hugging Leif tightly. "Welcome, cousin! I'm so glad to finally meet you!"

"Likewise…" Leif replied. Slowly, he hugged Seliph back and rested his head on Seliph's shoulder. "Ha… I really can't believe it. I'm meeting family. I didn't think I ever would."

"I wish we had gotten here sooner to help you," Seliph murmured. Sensing how tired Leif was, he loosened his hug slightly so that it was more supportive and rubbed Leif's back. "I'm really impressed by everything I've heard. Lasting for so long..."

"We might not have had to endure if not for my own weakness."

"Hey, now… don't talk like that. It was your strength that held your people together."

I decided to leave the two then, and skipped over to where Larcei and Ulster were squabbling about something in the middle of everything. "Should I ask or should I distract?" I asked them. Both of them just pointed to Shanan, who was bleeding and, no doubt, had refused treatment. Instead, he helped Iuchar with moving the dead. "Do we have to gang up on him or something?"

"I think we just need to figure out how Aideen made him behave," Ulster grumbled, while Larcei just sighed gustily. I hugged him to reassure him and glanced around curiously for Hestia, since she normally handled reassuring people or nudging us into being smart about our health. However, I soon saw her with Lester, getting treats and, of course, treats took all the priority. "Well, we'll take care of that later, I suppose. Lana, Yuria, and Lachesis were setting up an outdoor infirmary when we left, so I'm sure we can snatch some bandages or something."

"Sounds like a plan." I took Larcei's hand and leaned into her and she leaned back. "What are the others doing?"
"Patty and Arthur were helping, since Arthur is still recovering from the fight with Ishtore and Patty didn't feel like she'd be much help out here. Oifeye is fortifying Melgen's defenses."

"Fee not back yet?"

"Not quite yet, but she's due back soon." Ulster frowned suddenly. "Diarmuid is…" Larcei and I turned to look at where Diarmuid wasl, and saw he was still with his adorable little sister, but was also glancing over at us, silently asking for help. We wondered for what, since it seemed like the conversation was going well, but then Diarmuid mouthed 'mother' and we realized what was going on. He wanted Nanna to know about Aunt Lachesis, but he had no idea how to bring it up."

"Is she still apologizing for crying, Diarmuid?" Larcei asked as soon as we realized what was going on. Lester glanced over at us, frowning because it seemed like she was 'interrupting', but relaxed and went back to spoiling Hestia when Ulster smiled to reassure him. I caught Seliph's eye over Leif's head to wink, just to let him know, and Seliph smiled back, more focused on Leif but grateful nonetheless. "Seriously, Nanna, Diarmuid was crying a river when he saw Lachesis. You're fine!"

"Wait, Mother?" Nanna asked, stilling again. I saw Shanan frown and immediately head over us, no doubt to scold for tactlessness, but I moved to be in the way and Ulster covered Shanan's mouth to make sure he didn't say anything. "Mother is… but wait…"

"Yeah, we rescued her from the Yied Shrine, sadly after we sent back reply letters." Larcei grinned, laughing. "And, again, Diarmuid was bawling like a baby!"

"I wasn't that bad!" Diarmuid protested, scowling briefly. He smiled and winked at her, though, quietly thanking her. Ulster uncovered Shanan's mouth now that things were going smoothly and all. "But yeah, Mother is here too, Nanna."

"Oh, now I really wish I had convinced Father to come with us!" Nanna complained, stomping her foot. I glanced around and noticed that Uncle Finn really wasn't among them. That was a bit disappointing. "Argh!"

"Relax, Nanna. We just have to wait a little longer to see Mother faint. Or Father. Or both. Both would be hilarious." Diarmuid grinned, laughing. "Though, why did he remain behind? You and Leif are both here."

"Well…"

"Knowing Finn, he remained behind because he knows Leonster Castle well, so he can assist in making the defenses as efficient as possible, and because he's known for being Leif's protector, so if he remains, then people think that Leif is still there," Shanan rattled off with ease. He laughed when Nanna gawked, and I saw Leif had lifted his head up from Seliph's shoulder to do the same. "He hasn't changed much over the years, it seems."

"And… um…" Nanna began. She tentatively took Diarmuid's sleeve. Diarmuid moved to take her hand instead. "Who are you?"

"Shanan."

"...You're Shanan?!"

"And now I worry about what stories Finn has told."

Shaking my head, I decided to leave my group entirely and go back to checking on the refugees, as
I probably should've done earlier. I spoke to the closest ones, asking about how they were doing and reassuring them that Melgen wasn't far, until someone took my hand. A young girl, fifteen or so, with very long silver hair and matching eyes that seemed to see much more than they should.

"Hello, lady wolfy-wolf," she greeted, her voice lilting a bit almost like she was singing. Or had read a lot of poems or something. "You're Conall's twin sister, aren't you?" She smiled sweetly, and I automatically smiled back. "You're much prettier than I thought."

"Considering the messy state I'm in, that is definitely a compliment," I joked, laughing. After all, I was all sweaty and bloody from the fight. "But yes, I'm Riona, Conall's elder twin. You are?"

"Sara." She continued studying me, still smiling. "Hee… you burn and shine, brighter than him. Dawn to his dusk, perhaps? That might be more accurate. Though I'm not sure I like the implication of him falling into darkness, but then again, without the night, we wouldn't have rest. Hmm… maybe more like the moon? Or a star? Always there, but always changing?"

"That so?" I was very confused by what she was saying, but hey, I'd dealt with weirder. And there were all sorts of magics in the word, so for all I knew, this was related to something like that. "I guess we're the twilight twins, then?"

"Oh, that's a fun phrase!" She tugged me along, pulling me towards the center of the refugee group. "But I'm distracted. Here, let's talk with Linoan." She pointed to a pink-haired girl who was calming a couple of crying children with a calm and gentle smile. "She and I have been doing what we could to keep everyone healthy, but the staves were breaking…"

"No worries. We've still got plenty." I waved when 'Linoan' looked up, and she smiled with relief. "Let's hear what's been going on, then." From there, we'll make a plan. Ha… it actually wasn't much different from treating the people from the labor camps. Except these people were much healthier, thankfully. Gods showed some mercy, at least. Sort of. Maybe.

Ah, whatever. Didn't matter. There were people to help, and that was more important.

Getting everyone to Melgen was a bit difficult. So many were tired and aching that we did our best to get as many on the horses as we could, and we carried others still. Adorably, Diarmuid actually carried Nanna on his back and the two talked quietly as we led everyone inside. Some refused to ride or be carried, so instead, they leaned on others. Leif, for instance, leaned on Seliph while Seliph led Diarmuid's horse. A few used Hestia as a crutch, just as she did for those from the camps. I actually ended up helping Sara and Linoan, keeping them up and balanced while they babbled about this and that. I worried about the other walkers, but I saw Shanan had it in order. He had a lot of practice with this, after all.

"Hi! Welcome!" However, there was one big surprise when we made it into Melgen and to the castle grounds. All eight of the non-baby children were waiting for us with bright smiles and brighter greetings. "Here, we'll show you where to go!" Anat continued, carrying her borrowed-doll in one hand and bracing her sleeping leopard-kitten against her shoulder with the other. "Come on, come on!"

"Well, certainly didn't expect that," I murmured, helping Sara and Linoan inside. I thought about following them, but then I saw Inanna, who had her leopard-kitten draped over her shoulders, almost like a shawl or scarf. As I walked over to her, I wondered how comfortable it was, but the kitten was perfectly pleased. "That was a warm greeting."

"We were trying to figure out how we could help, and thought that maybe seeing some people their
age would at least help the children feel a bit more comfortable," Inanna explained shyly, looking
down. She smiled, though. "I suggested it to Oifeye and Lachesis, and they thought it would be a
good idea, so…"

"I think it worked." It certainly did. I just had to glance over to see the renewed energy in the
group. Especially the children. "Ah, but I'm sure I'm keeping you from doing that. Let me know if
a problem comes up, okay?"

"Of course." Inanna grinned and immediately went to help some children her age, reassuring them
and the like. I smiled, watching all of them, and half-wondered if this was also a way to try and
mitigate any 'burn the Loptyrians!' reactions. I hoped we wouldn't have problems like that, but if
they showed up… well, we were putting our foot down for sure.

But that was for the future. Since things were running smoothly, I decided there was a
conversation I needed to eavesdrop on and that was Diarmuid bringing Nanna over to where Aunt
Lachesis was tending to someone's wounded arm. Even better, I saw that Seliph was helping Leif
limp over as well, so I, of course, went to watch. I wasn't the only one. Larcei, Ulster, and Lester all
decided to share my hiding place. To be fair, it had a good view.

"Mother!" Nanna called, waving. Aunt Lachesis looked up from her work and nearly dropped the
bandages she held. She quickly finished up, making sure to check her patient, and then rushed over
just as Seliph helped Nanna down off Diarmuid's back. "Oh, Mother! I'm so glad to see you!"
Nanna and Aunt Lachesis hugged each other tightly, with Nanna crying again and Aunt Lachesis
kissing her hair and rocking her. "You're so thin…"

"It happens when you're a captive, but I'll be fine. Especially now that I can see that my baby girl is
well," Aunt Lachesis murmured, fighting back her own tears. She let go of Nanna, so that Nanna
could wipe her eyes, and gathered up Leif in a hug too. "And look at you, Leif! You're so tall now!"

"Father says he's about the same height as Quan."

"Mmm… yes, I can see that. Certainly taller than Ethlyn." Aunt Lachesis pulled away to study
Leif's face, and Leif was definitely struggling to not cry. "Ha… you look a lot like a younger Quan.
I can definitely see Ethlyn in you, but you definitely took more after him." She kissed his forehead
and then pulled both Leif and Nanna into hugs. "Ah, I'm so relieved. I knew you two would be
fine, especially with Finn around, but it's so good to actually see that."

"And we're relieved to see you, Mother. Leif's so relieved that he can't even speak!" Nanna grinned
and Leif rolled his eyes. "Father isn't with us, though."

"Of course he's not. In a situation like this, he can protect you better by being in Leonster and
making the enemy think you're still there, so that's exactly what he's going to do." Aunt Lachesis
shrugged and Nanna and Leif both laughed, with Nanna beaming. I knew I was smiling too,
since… well, she'd been separated for so long, yet she still knew her husband so very well. I found
it adorable. Super adorable, actually. "Ah, but here I am getting weepy and we need to check you
over." Aunt Lachesis reached around Nanna and Leif to snag Diarmuid and Seliph, who were
attempting to sneak away. "Nope, you two are getting check-ups too. Come on."

Since the reunion was over, we eavesdroppers scattered to ensure everything kept going smoothly.
Ulster and Lester, for instance, focused on keeping everyone organized, while Larcei worked with
Iuchar to get names and medical history. I walked around to make sure everyone was comfortable,
teaming up with Patty since she was doing the same, though she focused more on passing out food.
I was curious about where Hestia was, but a quick look showed her near Arthur, keeping him calm
as he interacted with multiple people and clearly trying to keep from being sarcastic. Shanan and
Oifeye talked for a while in the corner, probably discussing how best to defend the place and where everyone would stay, before splitting off to help where he could.

"Riona, get over here!" Of course, once the initial wave calmed, Lana snagged my hand and pulled me over to her area to get my own check-up. "Seliph and Diarmuid are the only ones who were good and got checked immediately," she grumbled, carefully checking me over while I sat very still. I decided against telling her that the two had tried to escape initial healing as well. Aunt Lachesis was just too quick. "What did you do to your shoulder and back?" She prodded around an area and I winced at the pain. Bruised for sure. "Did you get kicked or something?"

"Eh, something like that, I suppose," I replied. I knew that if I said 'Ulster used me as a stepping stone', she would freak out. "Anything bad?"

"No, not really. That's a bad bruise, but everything else seems fine," Lana got her staff and began tending to it. "I'll want to check on you in the morning, but I think you're good."

"Awesome." I held still to let her finish up and then I turned to hug her. "Though, it does seem like our 'plan' will have to wait until tomorrow." I kissed her cheek and smiled hopefully. "There are a couple of healers in this group, though. Sara and Linoan. Make sure you meet them."

"Oh, yay, good!" Lana beamed. "And yes, tomorrow. I'll be busy all day with this. But if I don't do it tomorrow, scold me."

"Of course." I kissed her cheek again and stood up. "Get Hestia or me if someone tries to flirt with you instead of letting you do your job."

"I think you'll tell because I'll be hitting them in the head with my staff." Still, Lana giggled. "But I will. It's always fun seeing people's reactions to Hestia."

"I know, right?"

I left her to her next patient and wandered through, making sure no one was overwhelmed. A few of the refugees were crying, because they were safe after so many days on the run, and I did my best to comfort each one I found. The children helped a lot here, as did Hestia (who got a quick bath at some point so that she wasn't quite as bloody). Inanna even did what I often did with Hestia and let people pet her leopard-kitten to help them calm down. I ran into Patty and Arthur a lot while comforting refugees, with Arthur using the fact that he'd been there recently to help reassure them and Patty doing little sleight of hand tricks to make them laugh and focus on other things. However, in the middle of it all, I noticed that I couldn't see Larcei or Shanan. Everyone else was clearly visible, but not them. So, I decided to look for them, because Shanan had been hurt. And I eventually found them in one corner of the courtyard with Larcei tending to Shanan's injuries. And promptly made sure to hide so that I could eavesdrop properly. Because fun.

"Shanan, seriously, we already know you're not invincible, so you don't have to pretend," Larcei groused, tying bandages around the wounds on his arm. Shanan, perhaps wisely, kept silent and let her work. They were both sitting down on the ground, like most of the others in our impromptu courtyard-infirmary thing. "Don't care if you have a fancy-smancy sword now-"

"Did you just call Balmung a 'fancy-smancy sword'?" Shanan repeated incredulously. He smiled slightly, mostly in disbelief. "Really?"

"What? It is!" She scowled. "Anyway, seriously, it will kill you if you don't get things treated."

"Ha… sorry. It's not…" Shanan fell quiet, clearly thinking about his answer. "I remember Alicia."
"Huh?"

"Whenever I get bandaged, whenever I get healed, I remember Alicia. I remember Claude as well, but Alicia was my primary healer, from the very start." He smiled sadly, watching Larcei continue to bandage. "And it hurts. I miss her. I miss all of them. And I'm afraid that I'll breakdown, and that's not needed on the field. That can't be afforded on the field."

"...Shanan…"

"That's all. It's not a feeling of invincibility per se. It's a 'I have to keep moving' sort of thing. Which I'm sure Alicia would've scolded me over." Now his smile was bitter. "Of course, I'd give just about anything to hear her scold me even now. Or Uncle Lex teasing me. Or Sigurd's laugh." He shook his head and sighed. "But such things are impossible now. I should've tried to explain that to you all sooner, huh? I'm sorry."

"Well, it's nice to know it's not you being stupid." Larcei smiled slightly. "Never thought it might be tied to them, though. So, I should probably apologize for grousing. If you promise to at least get checked…"

"I will. Promise."

"Then we're all good." Larcei smiled warmly at him now. "We just don't want you to die. So, if you promise to not die, then we're fine. We all love you, you know?"

"Well, now I feel guilty." Shanan made a face and Larcei laughed. And blushed, but I didn't think Shanan noticed. "Ah, but I should I should apologize as well." He smiled wryly when she looked confused. "When you told Nanna about Lachesis, I was ready to scold you. But Diarmuid actually asked for help, didn't he?"

"He did, but it's not like you could've seen it." She shrugged, unbothered. "Besides, I normally am the tactless one. Might as well take advantage of it. Not many opportunities for that. There's a reason we send Diarmuid and Riona off to do the talking, after all."

Though I was tempted to continue eavesdropping, a feather fell on my shoulder right then, and I looked up to see Fee had returned at last. No doubt noticing how busy everything was, she landed in the far corner of the courtyard, and looked very flabbergasted when I ran over to greet her.

"Wow, I missed a lot," she noted. I could only smile and shrug. "Anyway, Darna is still not moving, but…" She hesitated before whispering. "I thought I saw a group leave Alster. Not enough to be an army, but…" She shrugged. "You'll want to get Fa… to get it double-checked, of course."

"Yes, that is interesting," I murmured, tugging Fee into a hug. Fee tucked herself under my chin, so I made sure to hold her. "Okay, I'll let Seliph know. You should submit to health checks."

"Wow, 'submit'. You'd think the healers ruled around here. Oh, wait." She laughed and I grinned. "I'll get checked as soon as I get Annand all settled in."

"Got it!" I kissed her cheek and winked before darting back to the main group, searching for Seliph.

However, Seliph found me first, and took my hand to pull me towards him. "Saw Fee land," he whispered in my ear. A couple of the soldiers gave us indulgent looks. "Anything?"

"Might have a group coming from Alster, and Darna is still playing the 'waiting game',' I replied. Since we took Melgen so quickly, it was likely that they were waiting for us to let down our guard or get caught up with fighting Alster before moving. Damn it. "Lewyn should check on the wind."
"Whenever he decides to show up. I wonder where he is." Seliph shrugged and kissed me softly. However, we were both startled by sudden yelps and turned to see Leif and Nanna nearby, both blushing badly and not looking at us. They had been eating the soup Patty had made, but now, they seemed determined to not look at anything, actually. "Everything okay over there?"

Leif and Nanna both insisted they were fine, and it took a bit of questioning to learn it was simply because they were startled by how 'bold' Seliph and I were for kissing in public. Which... well, that made us laugh and laugh, and also make sure that the two were aware that our group, especially us Tirnanog kids, were very affectionate people with little qualms about showing that affection. Even in public.

Things were going to be even livelier, it seemed. Not a bad thing at all.

Seliph quietly found and asked Lewyn about what Fee had seen, and confirmed that there were soldiers heading this way. A small group. Seliph decided to keep that information quiet for now, kept within War Meeting people, just in case people became too tense and on-guard around our own refugees. No one needed that right now, especially them. They had enough to deal with, recovering as they were. It took a few days for them to stop flinching at sudden noises and even longer before they felt comfortable enough to talk to anyone outside of their group for anything more than a polite conversation.

But that wasn't my task for the moment. Though I worked closely with the soldiers in making sure everyone was getting what they needed, right now, I was hunting for Leif. Seliph asked if I'd deliver a message to him, and since I was 'on break', I had agreed. Though it took longer than I thought it would, and I half-thought about reclaiming Hestia from helping in the infirmary so that she could track him. But, eventually, I caught sight of him on the roof and I climbed up the side of the castle to meet him there. Which, of course, resulted in an absolutely hilarious reaction.

"What the hell?!" he yelped, flailing and nearly falling over. And thankfully not dropping whatever he was holding in his hand, since he was sitting on the edge. "Did you just scale the wall?!

"You know; that reaction is almost as great as your reaction to learning Hestia is a wolf," I teased, standing and brushing myself off. We needed to give the castle a good cleaning. You'd think the rain would've done it, but apparently not. "But yes, I did. You'll get used to it. Diarmuid, Ulster, Larcei, and I do it all the time." I rolled my shoulders and wrists to ease them and then sat down next to him, kicking my feet a little against the stone. "About time I found you. Seliph has an unexpected meeting, so he's not going to make dinner today."

"Ah, I see." Leif slowly relaxed and nodded. "No problem. Breakfast might be better anyway."

"Possibly, yes. Unexpected things rarely happen in the morning." I peered curiously at what he was holding, a piece of paper that was a bit tattered along the edges. "What's that?" I pointed to it and he immediately hid it. "Secret thing? Got it."

"...Wait, that's it?" He frowned. "You're not…?"

"If you're not comfortable talking about it, then pushing you isn't going to help. Or, well, me pushing you isn't going to help. There are better people for that." I shrugged and patted his shoulder. "Now, if you want someone to listen to whatever thoughts brought you up to the roof, I can definitely do that. All of us would be glad to. Whenever you feel comfortable. But that's your choice, and your choice alone."

He didn't reply to that, so I looked out over the town, smiling at how lively and lovely it was.
People running this way and that... the smells of cooking meats and pastries drifting on the wind... the sounds of people singing and laughing or calling out to attract customers... this was what a town was supposed to look like, more or less, and I couldn't wait for Isaach to heal enough so that its cities became like this. That all cities in Jugdral could be so happy. Now, I had no illusions there weren't things to fix even here, no matter what they told us when we walked through the market, but...

Leif suddenly, and silently, handed me the paper and I held it carefully to study. To my surprise, it was a child's drawing. Colorful, with stick figures and smiley faces all over the place. But the central part had five 'people' of various sizes, with arrows pointing to each one to label them. 'Daddy', 'Mommy', 'Finn', 'Me', and 'Leif'. Off to the right, there was 'Unca Sigurd', 'Auntie Deirdre', and 'Seliph'. Off to the left was 'Unca Eldie', 'Auntie Grahnye', and 'Ares'. The 'Me' figure, the 'Seliph' figure, and the 'Ares' figure also had little blobs next to them that looked almost like bears. And, at the very top, scrawled haphazardly, was 'My Family!'.

"My sister drew this," Leif explained softly. I passed it back to him and he smoothed it out carefully on his knee with a shaking hand. "When Leonster fell, Finn decided to grab one of Father's favorite books. Something that I could read and know he liked. Tucked in the pages was this drawing."

"He must've wanted to keep his favorite things together," I whispered, looking at the drawing. Everyone was smiling in the picture, and I wondered just when it was drawn. Obviously before she died, but was it before Eldigan's death? After? Doubt I'd ever learn. It was probably before she learned of Uncle Finn and Aunt Lachesis being married, though, since she wasn't in the picture. "That's a lucky find."

"It is, especially since we really couldn't carry a lot of sentimental things. Being on the run and all."

"I definitely understand that." I fiddled with my dangling earring and thought of my stuffed-dog, tucked safely in my things as always. Sentimental things had cost me Conall, after all... "It's good you held onto it."

"Yeah. Normally, I wouldn't bring it outside. Scared to lose it. But..." He pointed to the north, to the horizon where you could just see Darna, and Yied Desert beyond. "Finn and Lachesis told me that I've visited Darna before, with Ares, but I don't really remember it. By my memories, this is the first time I've seen Yied. Seen the desert where..." Where his family died in a brutal assault. "It was supposed to be safer."

"Pardon?"

"That's what Finn told me. Why they took Altena with them. It was supposed to be safer." He spoke very softly, focused on those distant sands. "Their information indicated that Thracia was about to launch an assault on the castle, and Altena was very energetic. Sneaking away, wiggling out of hugs, deciding to randomly play hide and seek... As a baby, I could be easily carried away, but she was just so rambunctious that they thought it would be safer, over all, if she stayed with my parents."

"Is that so?" I had to wonder if that really was the reason, or if that was just something Finn had told Leif. Or if it was something that Finn had been told. Or maybe it was the actual truth and I was just thinking too hard and being judgemental because I knew what had happened afterwards. "But then Thracia attacked them."

"Yeah. Somehow, they'd known Father was in the desert right at that moment." Leif's voice cracked and he ducked his head in an attempt to hide his tears. But they fell on his hands anyway.
"Why… why did that have to happen to them? Why did my sister have to…?"

"...I wish I knew. If I did, then maybe we could somehow limit deaths to just the 'bad people'. Whatever the hell that means." I carefully removed the picture from him and folded it up along the well-worn creases before tucking it under my leg. "Here." Then I nudged Leif until he was laying in my lap. "You go ahead and cry, though. Let it out."

"I really shouldn't…"

"Says who? Keeping it all in is just going to hurt more." I stroked his hair, smiling. "Seriously, I'm the only other person here and, trust me, I'm the last person you need to look dignified around. I purposely tease the others to make sure they don't stand on dignity. So, you just rest and cry, okay? I'm told I'm quite comfortable."

I wasn't sure if he actually cried or not. Certainly my skirts got wet, but it could've just been from that first bout of tears. But he did lay there, relaxing, and I continued stroking his hair, just as I would for any of the others. In my eyes, it was very simple comfort, something that family just did for each other. It took me a while to realize that it might not have been so simple for him. After all, I was a near-stranger. That might've been more of what he had meant when he said that he shouldn't. But he did relax, and I thought that was more important for now. Later, I would apologize for crossing any boundaries and strive to do better.

"You remind me of Eyvel a bit," Leif mumbled after a moment. He sounded tired. Not sleepy, but tired. "Well, the army reminds me of Fiana in general, so maybe it's just me 'assigning' roles and whatnot. But you fuss like Eyvel and say similar things."

"Who's Eyvel?"

"Eyvel is the best warrior of Fiana, and she founded a militia to keep the nearby villages safe from pirates and bandits and whatnot. Skilled with a sword and bow." He laughed sadly. "But I know her more as 'person who prods me into eating vegetables'. She took care of Nanna and me, helped Finn raise us for a few years. And never treated Nanna or me any differently than her own daughters."

"She sounds kind." And the way he spoke of her implied she was dead. I wondered how many 'parents' Leif had lost over the years. "Where's Fiana exactly?"

"It's a village to the south. Might actually be in Thracia, but it's a border village for certain. Not too far from the sea." There was a ghost of a smile on his face. I could see it clearly, even at this angle. "It's filled with warm people. When we first arrived there… well, Finn was feverish from an infected arrow wound. That alone screamed how much trouble we were, how much danger we brought. I tried to 'pay' for help with my Light Brand, something I inherited from Mother, in order to balance it out."

"Her Light Brand?" I vaguely remembered that from Aideen's stories, actually. "She didn't carry it?"

"No, she hadn't expected to fight, so she hadn't brought her best weapons with her. Finn made sure to keep it, just for me."

"But the people of Fiana didn't take it. Or any sort of payment."

"No, Eyvel just smiled and brought us into her home. Got Finn treated. Got Nanna and me set up with baths and clean clothes." He snorted, choking on a laugh. "Well, more like Eleri and Mareeta
got us bathed and clothes. They're Eyvel's daughters. Eleri was bossing us around, but was very gentle and careful. Mareeta was full of energy and laughter, and occasionally crashed into things in her excitement."

"Sounds like a fun little family."

"They are. Though, I hope Eleri and Mareeta are okay. They're in Leonster still."

"I'm sure they're fine. They've got to reunite with you two, after all." Of course, it was probably empty words. But I wanted to say them anyway. "Take it from a big sister. We survive a lot to make sure we can see the younger siblings."

"Mareeta is younger than me, but I see your point." This time, he simply laughed, not choked or sad or anything. "But yeah… they are my very annoying, very kind sisters."

"See? They'll be just fine." Unable to think of anything more to say on that, I switched the subject slightly. "So, a welcoming place, huh? That was Fiana?"

"Yeah, it was great. No one questioned anything. They just…"

"Sounds like Tirnanog. That's where we grew up. It's way to the north, the northernmost city in Isaach." Though it had been so long, I did remember those first days clearly. Of how warmly they had welcomed us, and how everyone had helped get the house set up for us. Creidne had befriended us during then… "I'm glad the army reminds you of such a happy place. We do try to keep things comfortable in the army. Hard to fight if you're not comfortable with the people around you, right?" I laughed softly. "And, you know… these people have decided to risk their lives and take a chance that we can do what no one else has done. The least we can do is make sure they are well."

"Makes sense." He sat up again, and I handed him back the drawing. There were some tear stains on his face, but he wiped them away quickly. "Ha… sorry. I shouldn't have babbled like that."

"I did offer, silly. Though, I probably should've directed you to Aunt Lachesis or something, since I'm sure you would've been more comfortable." I caught his eye and smiled warmly at him. "But still. We're family. Ignoring how close my mother was with your parents, which was very close if the stories are true, I'm dating your cousin."

"That is true." He laughed, and I noticed how tired he was. Holding out a siege for so long… he was quite strong. But he was definitely feeling the strain. I hoped we could lighten that burden for him. "Say, so that I can just be nosy, how did that come about?"

"Seliph and me? Now that's a bit of a story…" I trailed off as I noticed a commotion at the gates of Melgen. "So, how about I steal you for that dinner Seliph canceled on you and tell you then?"

"Sounds good." Leif stood up and offered me his hand. I took it and let him pull me up. "So, soldiers?"

"Not enough panic for that, so I'd guess more refugees." Or perhaps our Alster soldiers hiding among refugees. No way to know, though, so we'd take care of them. "Let's head down."

"Yeah, I'm taking the ladder. I don't get how you don't break your neck, climbing the side like that."

"Oifeye makes funny noises."
"That doesn't actually answer the question, you know!"

We both climbed down, and while he went to ask what he could do to help, I actually headed to the kitchens to help whip up a quick meal for the new arrivals. Once the first batch was done, I helped carry out the bowls and plates to distribute them, making sure to smile as reassuringly as possible to each one of the new arrivals.

"Here," I murmured, passing a bowl of soup to a girl who wore her hood up, despite everyone else bringing theirs down. It must help her feel safer. "Is the soup too cold?"

"Oh, no, it's a good temperature," the girl murmured. She kept her head down, but I still saw her shy smile. "Um… thank you for the food."

"Of course." I made sure to smile back, as warmly as I could. She seemed surprised by it, for some reason. "I hope you will eventually feel safe here, miss. Let us know if you need anything, okay? And that includes seconds."

I patted her back and then went to give food to the next person, checking in on them and making conversation. I did my best to not be overbearing. You had to be careful, after all. But I did want them to feel comfortable. All of us did.

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Taking care of the new arrivals took up most of my day, especially since everyone else among the 'leaders' had to keep up their own duties. So, when it was time to sleep, I decided to indulge a little and read a bit before bed. A new book that one of the soldiers recommended to me and I had to admit that it was already very interesting. I'd definitely have to ask for another recommendation when I was done with this one.

Hestia, laying down on the floor by my bed, lifted her head suddenly and I tensed, expecting trouble. However, her tail began wagging and when I pushed myself up and twisted, I saw Lana open the door without knocking, already in her nightgown and carrying a change of clothes and a staff. She set her clothes and staff to the side and shut the door behind her before jumping into the bed with me, squirming under the covers with an exhilarated, frightened, yet proud smile on her face.

"Did you confess?" I asked, marking my place in the book and laying down on my side so that I could better pull her into a hug. She giggled and nodded, humming a bit even. "What was the reaction?"

"He stared like Hestia just ran him over, so I ran to my room, changed and grabbed clothes, and came straight here." She burrowed a little more into my hug and I laughed and kissed her hair. "I know the plan was like… during work, but the arrivals threw me way off. But I didn't want to keep putting it off."

"It's fine. Now you've got the whole night to get your thoughts in order." I was really curious, truthfully, on Ulster's reaction afterwards, but I'd find that out later. I was Lana's conspirator in this, after all. "How do you feel?"

"Like I had to tend to refugees all day and then confessed to my crush?" She laughed and I had to giggle too, conceding that point. "More specifically, I feel like… you know those heart-hammering seconds when you jump into a lake? The ones between the actual jump and hitting the water?"

"Yep, I know exactly what you mean." I kissed her head again, thinking of what might be the best way to help her calm down to at least sleep. And came up on something almost immediately,
something we used to do back in Tirnanog. "Here, I just started this new book, and I think you'll like it. How about we take turns reading aloud until we're tired?"

"Oh, that sounds like fun!" She grinned at me, and wiggled out of the hug slightly so that she could lay down on her stomach. "This one here?"

"Yep!" I removed my marker so that we could start from the beginning. It wasn't like I'd gotten very far anyway. "So, do you want to start or me?"

"You!"

"Okay, then… oh, really, Hestia?" I had to groan because Hestia took advantage of my distraction to hop onto the bed and lay down on our legs. "Brat. Maybe I should just share rooms with Seliph. You behave for him."

"That reminds me…" Lana raised an eyebrow and I rolled my eyes and playfully pushed her head down. "Look, if you make me have to deliver a baby, I'm going to be mad!"

"Miscarriage teas are a thing too." But I was making sure to take the medicine she gave me because the teas just seemed like more trouble than I wanted. "Anyway, book?"

"Yes!"

We went back and forth for a while, eagerly wondering what would happen next. The story dropped you in the middle of a conflict, with even the protagonist wondering what was going on, and you had to actually piece it together like a puzzle as you read along. Though we were supposed to read until we were tired, we both got super into the story, taking turns reading aloud (while making up voices for each character, of course). So, it wasn't until we were halfway through that we even got a little sleepy and, even then, we only stopped because Hestia started growling. Both of us tensed, especially when Hestia jumped off the bed to snarl at the door. I rolled off the bed and went to the corner to pick up Dad's silver blade, and Lana tiptoed to where her staff was. She had just gotten to it when the door slowly creeped open to reveal a hooded woman carrying a green tome. The hooded woman's eyes widened when she saw us awake, and me armed, but before she could scream or gasp or anything, Hestia lunged forward viciously and tore out her throat.

"Well, that's one dead," I noted dryly, pushing my door a little more open to study the dead woman. I didn't recognize her, but I did recognize the clothes. One of the 'refugees' from earlier. "You'd think the girl with a wolf would not be one of the primary targets." And speaking of my wolf, Hestia howled loudly, giving her own warning to everyone else. "Ah, well." I looked over at Lana, who looked so exasperated. "We were just getting to a really good part too."

"I know!" she huffed, stomping her foot and pouting. But then she shrugged. "I guess we can read later. Who to first?"

"The children." I petted Hestia as she howled again. The others would be fine. I knew they would be. "Ready?"

"Let's go."

We both jumped over the corpse and ran down the hall, Hestia continuing to howl until we saw people leaving their rooms, armed and ready because they knew Hestia wouldn't be howling at this hour. Though most went to check the other halls and areas of the castle, a few followed me and I was glad for the help. Because there were, in fact, enemy soldiers trying to get into one of the rooms that the children slept in. Quickly, we dispatched them, and I knocked on the door. And,
terrifyingly, got no answer.

"...Hestia?" I whispered. Hestia sniffed the area and loped down the hall, to another of the rooms the children used. I really hoped... "Okay..." I knocked on this one, and this time, heard some sort of movement from within. Thank goodness... "Hey, it's Riona. Can you open up?"

"Ah, hang on!" Inanna's voice filtered through the door and I breathed a sigh of relief. "And... there!" The door opened and she stepped out of the way so that I could see that all of them were in the same room. Even the babies. "I know we're supposed to be asleep..." she began sheepishly. "But the kittens were awake and causing trouble, and the others wanted to play, so we were... um..." She peered out curiously, frowning. "Okay, we did hear fighting." She frowned more. "Those are some of the..." She scowled. "Ugh... they took advantage of you."

"Some of them did, yes." I ruffled her hair and she softened a bit. "I'm leaving guards here for you. Everyone okay?"

"We're fine. No one got in, and the babies are actually sleeping. For once." Inanna stepped out carefully and half-shut the door behind her before bowing to everyone. I looked around and saw Lana was tending to some of the few injured. "Thank you very much for keeping us safe, everyone!"

I lingered both to make sure the children really were okay and so that I could help Lana if she needed it. Hestia went ahead, no doubt going to check on the rest of her pack, and as soon as Lana was done, we followed, with most of the soldiers staying to make sure the children were safe. We found a couple more pockets of enemies, but it seemed like this was definitely an assassination group, meant for an ambush and not outright battle. I was admittedly worried when we found her in the main hall, because of all the blood spilling out on the floor, but all worry disappeared when I saw Aunt Lachesis cut down a soldier, back to back with Oifeye as he killed the last one standing, and Shanan absently clapping as he watched it all, like it had been a show.

"Maybe I should've just stayed asleep," Shanan joked. Behind him were a few more of the enemy soldiers, perfectly subdued. One or two seemed ready to try and jump him, but he simply glanced back and they cowered. The hell did he do to frighten them like that? "Thing of beauty, watching you two fight."

"Glad you enjoyed the show because my body is definitely reminding me that I'm not recovered," Aunt Lachesis replied shakily. Oifeye supported her, and I absently counted bodies. A good fourteen... and seeing that Aunt Lachesis, Oifeye, and Shanan were the only fighters here, and that Shanan wasn't splattered with blood... wow, I wondered what a terror Aunt Lachesis was when at first strength. "Ack!" Of course, one of the presumed dead bodies tried to push themselves up to get one last strike on either her or Oifeye, but Hestia took care of them with ease, by crushing their spine via the back of the neck. "...I am reminded as to why Alicia always panicked when wild animals were discussed. And why I thought Chulainn was a liiiiiittle insane for petting them."

"Hestia doesn't bite us." Shanan looked over to where Lana and I were and waved. "Thanks for the howling, by the way. Woke me right up."

"Look, they are the rude ones who attacked at a completely unholy hour," I retorted, walking over to him. Lana rushed to Aunt Lachesis to check her over, while Oifeye helped her over to a wall to lean on. "Are Lana and I the first ones here? We made a detour to check the children."

"Diarmuid was here actually, but he went to check on Nanna and Yuria."

"Got it." I looked over the ones who were 'captured' or whatever, noticing something. "Huh. Not all
of them." There had been at least fifty.

"Nope." He shrugged. "What's the order?"

"Seliph is the leader, you know." Still, I knew what needed to be done. "All of the people who
arrived then should be brought here..." I sighed. I hated this. "I'll go get that done, then."

It didn't take long at all, really. I found some soldiers almost immediately, and they obeyed without
question, probably anticipating that would be the order. Meanwhile, the others trickled in, some
yawning and others wide-awake. Most of the Tirnanog group were the former; the others were the
latter, including Leif and Nanna.

"Couldn't you all have chosen a better hour to try and kill us?" Seliph sighed as he joined us, the
last of us 'leaders' and one of the last of the army. His silver sword dripped blood while he walked
and his hair, face, and night-clothes were splattered. "I'm tired, and I know most everyone else is as
well." Seliph looked around curiously and most of us grouped up near him. Leif stayed near
Shanan, helping to guard the 'prisoners', while Nanna, Lana, and Yuria were treating various
injured. "Why do we have three groups sitting around?"

"The ones near Shanan were subdued while fighting," Ulster explained, yawning mid-sentence.
Iuchar gave him a weird look. Actually, most of the non-Tirnanog group was giving us weird
looks. For some reason. "The rest were brought out of their rooms."

"And I'm guessing some of them fought, and the rest came willingly, and that's why it's three and
not two?" Seliph rubbed at his eyes. "Damn it... I had just fallen asleep when one broke into my
room. Then I heard Hestia's howl. Where is she, by the way?"

"With Lachesis. She strained herself."

"I see." Selph glanced at Diarmuid, who shook his head. He had already checked on his mother, so
he was going to stay with us. "Well, have we determined who the leader of the attack is?"

"Glarey-glare over there," Larcei answered. The more I looked, the more I noticed Iuchar, Patty,
and Fee looked worriedly at us. Arthur didn't, but that was because his attention was more on the
enemy. Like a smart person. "Behind Shanan."

"Oh, her?" Seliph asked, waving lazily at the girl. She just glared more. "She looks like the one
sent after me."

"And I'm assuming is very dead?"

"Decapitation does do that." Seliph's eyes narrowed when the girl's glare dropped for horror. "I
don't know what you expected. I'm right here, so I'm clearly not dead."

"Guess she thought you subdued or something?" Lester noted absently. He yawned and rubbed at
his eyes too. "Damn it... and I need to be up soon for hunting."

"You all are really casual for people who just got taken advantage of," Patty pointed out. She
fidgeted a bit when we looked at her. "And, you know, nearly got assassinated."

"We knew Alster soldiers were on the way, remember?"

"Well, yeah, but you guys just..."

"We don't know who among them was truly a refugee and who was a soldier," I told her softly. I
noticed the soldiers were listening closely, no doubt wondering what our response here would be. "And we don't know who among the soldiers wholeheartedly support the Empire and who among them find their resolve faltering, for whatever reason. We already know that there are people who fight us because they are afraid. Afraid of what will happen if we lose, afraid of what will happen if we succeed, and afraid for loved ones they leave behind." I shrugged. "It's impossible to know any of that at a glance. So, we offered our hands and waited to see what actions they took. What choice they made."

"And now, we simply make sure that those who survived do remember that there is, in fact, a choice here," Diarmuid added, shrugging. To us, this was just... natural. "Or did you expect a little more shock with 'oh, hey, assassins'. Because that's not abnormal. People have been trying to kill us since we were babies. Sure, there's always the initial panic and all, but afterwards? Death is normal." Diarmuid looked at the enemy soldiers, and I noticed that Fee looked a bit horrified, for some reason. Patty immediately hugged Lester, surprising him. Definitely missing something here. Was it how casual we were, like Patty brought up? Was that really so strange? I supposed it didn't matter, especially right now. "So, if you want to surrender, we'll accept it. But if you want a fight..."

"We'll give you one." Right then, Hestia appeared at my side and leaned into my leg, bloody fur just highlighting my words. My wolf was a dramatic sometimes. "So, what do you choose? We'll oblige, whichever you pick."

"Of course, if you want time to think, we can do that as well," Seliph added quietly. He rubbed the worst of the blood off of his face before smiling at them. "I'm sure that things are quite confusing for you, at the moment."

"I'm certain me and mine would not mind talking to them as well," Iuchar mused. He stayed close to Larcei and Ulster, but was very thoughtful. "It might take them a while to realize that you all are not only gods of war, but gods of mercy as well."

"Do you have to go with the 'god' descriptor?"

"You all are so wondrous that I fear my vocabulary has shrunk in sheer awe," He grinned and we did have to laugh at that. Fee tiptoed around everyone to hold my hand, and I squeezed back reassuringly, even as I gave her a curious look. I also worried about Arthur, whose eyes were narrowed. He was still injured, so I hoped it was just him being suspicious and not from pain. "But, regardless, it might-"

"Tine, why the hell are you over there?!" the former glaring girl, now crying girl, snapped suddenly. She looked right at the one person in the 'came cooperatively' group who wore her hood. However, we all stiffened at the name. Because that name was... "You were supposed to-"

"It... it wasn't right, though!" Tine protested. She stood up and brought down her hood, revealing the Friege-silver hair tied back and held together with red ribbons. "None of this is! G-going after leaders is one thing, but you had wanted me to take the children hostage! And that...!"

"Are you really so dumb?!!" Leader-girl was back to glaring and Tine flinched, half-covering her ears. "This is war! You do what you have to!"

"I..."

"And they killed Lord Ishtore, damn it! Or did you somehow forget, you stupid-!!" And leader-girl was cut off by Leif oh-so-casually elbowing the back of her head. "Urgh..."
An awkward bit of silence fell then, as we all tried to figure out what to do. My gaze turned to Arthur, thinking that he had the best 'say' in it, and I saw him looking back at me with a question in his eyes. I smiled, unable to think of anything else to do, and he smiled slightly in return before turning his attention to Fee, also with a silent question. Fee smiled as well and gestured for him to go for it. So, Arthur took a deep breath, hesitated... but when Luch ar squeezed his shoulder, he nodded and began walking towards Tine, pulling out the necklace he always wore.

"Your name is Tine, right?" he asked her softly. Tine glanced over hesitantly and froze, no doubt noticing his coloring. "My name is Arthur."

"Nice to meet..." she began automatically. But her eyes fell on his necklace and the words died. "Wait, how do you have...?" She pulled out a matching necklace from underneath her collar, and I thought of the pictures where Uncle Azel and Aunt Tailtiu both wore those necklaces. "I don't...?"

"It's been a bit of a day, so do you want to rest? If you're worried about your fellows, don't." He gestured at the rest of us. "As you probably guessed by what they said earlier, they really do mean what they say. They're weirdos who give their trust freely, and you have to prove unworthy of it." Ha... Inanna also said that. "So..."

"This... you... you don't make sense!" Her voice cracked and she began to cry suddenly. Overwhelmed, no doubt. "You all are so nice! You take care of everyone with smiles and gentleness! The people look to you as liberators!" With each word, more and more tears fell until she was just under hysterical. "So why? Why did you kill Ishtore?! Why did you kill Liza?! Why?!"

"...To answer the first question..." Arthur finally reached Tine and he wrapped an arm around her and gently pulled her forward so that she could cry into his shoulder. "I have the necklace because I'm your brother, Tine. Your older brother. The necklaces were our parents' version of wedding rings, or so I've been told. Father gave me his before he died. I imagine you got yours from Mother."

"I... I did. She always wore it. And she was always so sad..." Tine continued sobbing. "But why did you all kill Ishtore and Liza? If you're family, then why?!"

"The answer to that is... difficult to really parse. The shortest version is simply because war is stupid and war is worse than hell." Arthur stroked Tine's hair, letting her sob. "The slightly longer version is that Ishtore was angry at us and was afraid to take a gamble, because he was all too aware of all the potential possibilities the future held. And so, he chose to oppose us. The full version is much longer and will take time to actually answer." Arthur sighed and brought his other arm up to properly hug her. "Tine, why don't you stay here with the army for now? You don't have to fight. No one here will force you to. But it will give me, give us, time to actually answer that question." Tine nodded, still crying. "Okay. Thank you, Tine."

We left Tine to Arthur, and dealt with the rest of the soldiers. Those that surrendered were put on watch, but otherwise were encouraged to go about their daily lives. Those that tried to fight were killed. Those that wanted to think were taken to the prisons below the palace. It wasn't exactly the best of solutions, in my opinion, and I wished Tine and Arthur had a better 'first meeting'. But she had been willing to give him, and us, a chance. That felt like enough of a miracle.

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Once we all woke up the next morning, I decided to go around and make sure everyone was okay, from our 'prisoners' to our 'watched guests' to our army to the refugees and the children. Making sure everyone was healthy, was being treated well, felt safe, knew what was going on, etc. I knew everyone else would be busy gathering information and the like, and our soldiers came to me for their questions anyway. So, I figured I'd just do all of that. And make sure my family ate because
hectic nights often led to hectic meal schedule. But I didn't need to worry about that. Others kept a good eye on us, after all.

"Ah, sorry if I overstepped, but I noticed Lana and Yuria didn't eat breakfast, so I thought I'd just make a big breakfast for everyone?" Patty explained sheepishly, making some sort of pastry or something while something else boiled on the fire. I could only laugh, amused. "I hope that's a good laugh?"

"Of course it is," I replied, smiling at her. Thank goodness that Hestia was with Aunt Lachesis and Diarmuid, though. She would've been jumping all over the place to try and steal some of the delicious-smelling food. "I'm not quite sure why you'd feel like you're overstepping, though?"

"Um…" Patty just smiled sheepishly. "Well, I know I'm one of the new ones?"

"You're family. We try to take care of each other. If anything, I'm glad, because I was busy answering questions." I snuck behind her and stole a piece of fruit she was using for the pastry. An apple or something, based on the taste. "Now I get to steal a bit of food instead~!"

"Hey, you should wait and build up a proper appetite!" She pretended to be mad for all of a second before laughing. "Sorry. You all are pretty close-knit, so…"

"I promise you can hit us over the head if we're ignoring you. Or kick our knees if our heads are too high." I kissed her cheek and winked. "I know we're close-knit. We all know that. So, we really don't mind being told 'hey, I am feeling left out'. If anything, we encourage it because we want everyone to be comfortable." And, really, we felt bad for making people feel like they were alone or 'extra'. "So, just run up and jump on our backs or something. I can't think of anyone who will mind. We're used to each others' antics, after all."

"Hee… okay, I'll try that." She smiled a little more warmly. "I've just been worried about overstepping…"

"If you do, we'll tell you. Just as I hope you'll tell us if we overstep." And I'd definitely need to make sure Leif and Nanna knew that as well. "And if you want more parental-like advice, Oifeye is basically our father and is very used to that. Aunt Lachesis is a mom. Shanan is probably more for older-brother-esque advice, but ignore like… half of what he says. He's got a lot of bad habits."

"Ha!" She grinned now and I giggled. "Okay. I'll do that."

"Good." This time I hugged her, and resisted the urge to steal more food. Didn't want her to think this had ulterior motives. "Now, unless you need help, I'm going to continue my checking on everyone."

"I think I'm good. But thank you." She quickly wiped her hands off and hugged me back. "I'd like to cook together again, though. That was fun."

"It was! We'll definitely do that soon." I kissed her cheek again and headed for the door. "See you later!"

I left the kitchens in a cheerful mood and went to check on Aunt Lachesis, since I knew she was resting today. However, on the way, I ran into Tine. Almost literally, since she had been turning a corner. Which was… a tad awkward, mostly because I wasn't sure how to react. I wanted her to feel comfortable here, but we were the people who killed her cousin and his fiance. It honestly might be too much to ask. But…

"Um… you're Riona, right?" she asked softly, after staring at me. She looked down and fiddled
with her hands. "Or do you want to be called 'Caitriona'?'"

"Riona is just fine," I reassured, making sure to smile. In this situation, it was definitely better to
wait for her. She had to move at her own pace if there was going to be any chance of her being
comfortable. "How are you feeling, Tine?"

"Very confused still. But… um…" She bit her lip and fidgeted in place. "Arthur and I… we talked
a lot last night. And this morning. And he showed me his Mark, to… you know… add weight to
his declaration that he's my older brother." Holy Marks were very good for that sort of thing. "And
I do feel like… Mother would want me to be here. She hated being in Alster. But the pictures
Arthur showed me had her so happy, and she was with… well…"

"You're welcome to stay with us for as long as you want." Pictures… that was right. Arthur had
borrowed my pictures of Aunt Tailtiu and Uncle Azel. "If you want stories about your mother,
Oifeye, Shanan, and Aunt Lachesis no doubt have a lot."

"That's what Arthur said. I think I'll… um… wait, though…" She still didn't look up at me and she
curled into herself slightly, trying to make herself smaller. "I… um…"

"Did you have something to ask me?" A prompt would probably help here. "It's fine if not, since I
certainly don't mind talking with you, but you're definitely fidgeting like you do. That or a cat has
squirmed up your shirt or something."

"Hee… Conall used that analogy, once." She finally looked up tentatively. "You buried Ishtore and
Liza…"

"Yes, we did." I got it after a moment. "Ah, of course. I should've guessed you'd want to visit." I
offered her my hand and she took it hesitantly. "Here, I'll show you."

"Thank you…" She studied me for a second and then tightened her grip on my hand. "I appreciate
it."

We walked quietly, hand in hand, and she asked hesitant questions about names and whatnot. I did
my best to answer, and to not laugh at her descriptions of people (though I was definitely going to
tease Diarmuid with 'the princely one that can also snap your spine on accident'). I did wish Hestia
was here, since I was sure she'd would've been more comfortable, but Tine did slowly relax around
me and that was enough. She gasped when we finally made it to the graveyard, probably because
she had expected something lonely and small, not that they were buried in Melgen's graveyard
alongside all of the other soldiers.

"Here's Ishtore and Liza," I whispered, gesturing to their shared grave. Fresh flowers were there,
showing that someone had been by this morning. Probably Seliph, while out of a morning walk. Or
Lester, after his hunting. "Iuchar and I made sure they were buried together."

"Oh, thank you for that…" Tine breathed. She let go of my hand and sank to her knees in front of
the grave, looking at all someone had been by this morning. Probably Seliph, while out of a morning walk. Or
Lester, after his hunting. "Iuchar and I made sure they were buried together."

"We do." I smiled, unable to help it. I was glad Conall remembered why the ribbons were
important, and not just remembered they were. "After all, even when a person dies, the bonds they
held do not simply disappear. The memories of their loved ones are not gone. So, the ribbons are a
representation of those bonds, a reminder to the lingering spirits and ghosts, so that they do not
become twisted." That was why burial rites were important to Isaachians, as well as having a body left behind for said burial. "Different colors can convey slightly different meanings, and those meanings differ depending on if a person is wearing the ribbon or if it's tied to the grave. I'd ask Larcei for more information about that." She remembered each one like a freaking book! "We wanted to remind Ishtore and Liza's ghosts of their bonds with people here."

"I'm glad…" She hesitated a moment before untying one of her ribbons and looping it around the marker. It was just long enough to tie, and I noticed the edges were actually a bit faded, showing that the ribbon was actually rather old. "Conall bought these for me."

"Did he?"

"Yeah. He came to visit Alster after Mother died. Ishtar thought it would be a good distraction for me. And while he was telling me about how Isaachians leave ribbons, he had me pick out three. One to leave at Mother's grave, and two for me to wear." She untied the ribbon to retie it, making the bow a little neater. "Ishtore was the one who thought I should loop them around my pigtails. And he liked Mother. So…"

"It's a bond with all of you."

"Yeah…" She sat back on her heels and closed her eyes, like she was willing back tears. When she opened them again, she pointed to the candles set up by the grave, tucked carefully in small little 'houses' that would protect the flame even during rain. "Why are there candles?"

"That's a Silessean thing, actually. Arthur and Fee insisted." Arthur grew up in Silesse, after all. He personally picked out the candles for this grave, insisting on it. "It's considered bad luck to leave the dead in the dark there. They fear that the ghosts will become lost and then can't find their way to peaceful rest."

"Oh, I see." Tine then turned her attention to the temporary marker with Ishtore and Liza's names. "This…"

"We're getting more permanent ones done, but that takes time. Took forever to get the Friege soldiers to help us with names for everyone…" I shrugged at her confused look. "There's some in the infirmary, resting. Battles are battles, but once the battle is over, you really should try to help everyone you can. This isn't some righteous war between 'good' and 'evil'. It's a bunch of people trying desperately to do what they think is right. Or, at least, not do what they know is wrong, if that makes sense."

"You all are just so strange." But she smiled slightly. I considered that a victory. "Arthur told me that he was the one who killed Ishtore. Said that I could hate him for that, if I wanted."

"Do you?"

"Part of me wants to. But Arthur is covered in bandages from that fight, isn't he? So, Ishtore tried to kill him too." She traced his name on the marker, back to being melancholic. I made a mental note to make sure Tine's ribbon was set up in a 'place of prominence' or whatever when the permanent markers were done. "Who killed Liza? Do you know?"

"Er… technically, Hestia, actually?" Well, this was awkward. But if she wanted to hear, then she deserved to know. "Liza was strangling me, so Hestia crushed her arm."

"Like how Hekate bites people who threaten Conall."

"There's a reason wolves are often considered symbols of loyalty." Packs were family, after all.
"But she bled out. I couldn't get the tourniquet tight enough in time."

"I see..." She hesitated like she wanted to say more, but simply shook her head and began arranging the flowers. "Um... Arthur mentioned that you and I are cousins?"

"Yep, we are. Your dad and my mom were siblings." I rested a hand on her shoulder, though I quickly pulled away when she flinched. No sudden touching. Got it. "But don't force yourself, okay? You've been hit with a lot recently. Take your time, for all of it. If anyone tries to push you, please tell us. We'll set them straight." Or Hestia would.

"Thank you..."

"And I want to repeat something Arthur said." I crouched down so that I could look her in the eyes. "You don't have to fight. We don't force anyone to fight for us. Might ask for help with chores, but no one will force you to fight. If they try, then, again, we'll deal with them." I hoped I conveyed how serious and sincere I was. I did make sure to hold her gaze. "This war is crazy enough without forcing people."

"...Thank you..." She smiled slightly, though she looked down. "I didn't... really want to fight. Everything is so confusing. But..."

"Like I said, you don't have to with us. You never will." I looked up and around, mostly for a change of topic, and saw Fee standing back a bit, near one of the other graves. "Ah, Fee!"

"Hey, sorry if I'm bothering," Fee noted, skipping over. She knelt by the grave and checked that the candles were still burning. "Wanted to make sure none had gone out. I know that's become part of the chores, but it reassures me if I check myself."

"No problem," I replied before looking back at Tine. "Tine, this is Fee, by the way. Our pegasus knight, and the princess of Silesse."

"Nice to meet you properly!" Fee smiled and held out her hand to Tine. After a moment, Tine took it for the offered shake. "Hey, want to go for a flight?"

"A... a flight?" Tine repeated, startled. She glanced at me like she was making sure she'd heard right. "Um..."

"Yeah, on my pegasus," Fee explained, still smiling. I knew she wanted to laugh by how her eyes danced, but she didn't want Tine to think she was laughing at her. "I thought I'd offer since it's super fun."

"Um... sure..." Tine gestured vaguely at the flowers. "But... um..."

"You don't have to rush." Fee looked up at me and winked, silently saying that she could take over. I nodded, deciding it was probably better for now. I was sure I'd overstepped a bit. "I still have some graves to check the candles for."

"Ah, okay..."

I did linger for a bit, mostly to make sure Tine would be fine with Fee. Once I was a little more certain, I left to go continue my self-appointed task of checking on everyone. And immediately got accosted by Lester, who dragged me off. Maybe I should switch to a different thing to do or something. Clearly, I was just going to continue being interrupted.

"Okay, what the hell did Lana do?" he half-demanded, dragging me through the town and back
towards the castle. I gave him a 'what the hell' look. "Ulster is looking for her."

"And why would you think I know?" I asked dryly. I did have to bite back a laugh at how 'done' he looked. "If it's got something to do with Lana?"

"Because it's you."

"Hey!"

"Ah, there's the yelp I was listening for." And Diarmuid appeared from behind us to sling his arms over our shoulders. Wonder why he'd been out. "So, unlike Lester, I actually prodded and tickled Ulster until he told me what was going on, instead of immediately trying to find answers from others," he began. Lester rolled his eyes and I snickered. "So, Riona, totally not-related question, but what was that book you and Lana really liked?"

"There's a few?" I replied, frowning slightly. Lana and I were both fairly big readers, and had similar tastes in fiction. "Why would you…?" I trailed off as I remembered a conversation Seliph and I had. Right before the Fenrir attack. "Say, is the book part of your scheme or Seliph's?"

"Mine, but something tells me Seliph came up with something similar." He grinned and I had to laugh. Lester frowned, very done with us now. "So?"

"The Assassin's Bride is the most recent one. It's in my room." Oh, this was too good. "Who else have you recruited for this little scheme?"

"For right now? Iuchar."

"Oh dear gods!" This was going to be great! "Okay, okay, I'll pull you in because Lana's side of things was something she and I came up with together, and I don't actually want to mess her up?"

"Sounds good to me. And on Ulster's side, we're getting everyone we can!" Diarmuid laughed, and laughed harder as Lester finally realized what had to have happened. "Come on, protective brother. You should help, if only to make Ulster squirm and go along with what we're plotting!"

"And we need to bring in others. Like Patty. I know she's been feeling a bit left out."

"Oh, yikes, yeah, bring her in," Lester immediately agreed. Wanting to make sure people were comfortable was far more important than him pretending to be overprotective. "Yuria, of course. Fee?"

"Fee is with Tine right now, but we'll definitely get her in on the scheme later," I replied. I wondered if Tine would want, and decided it would be better for… say… Arthur to ask. "Arthur should know, at least. And… you know what? All of us. Save Lana, of course. You let us girls handle Lana unless she chooses otherwise."

"Sounds good." He sighed. "Oh, the things I do to make sure my sister is thoroughly embarrassed. I mean, 'happy'."

"And Ulster. Don't forget that you're helping him as well."

"Oh, I'm helping with Ulster just to see his face at Iuchar's lines because that is going to be absolutely glorious." Lester grinned. "Okay, recruiting time?"

"Onward!"
"Ulster's face was so priceless!" Yuria laughed, the sound bouncing off the trees. She and I were in the woods, foraging for herbs. We needed extra since Aunt Lachesis used her bedrest to make us bunches of medicine, so off we went. I'd thought about bringing Hestia, but she'd opted to stay with Ulster, who was extremely flustered by everything. Which was hilarious, but I wouldn't tell him that. Yet. "I almost feel bad, since we know Lana's side of things!"

"I just can't wait until Lana works up the courage and calm to talk to him again, because..." I began. But then I dissolved into a mess of giggles, unable to help it. "Gods, one of us has to witness that. If not all of us."

"Oh, yes, for certain!" Yuria kept on laughing, even as she pointed up to some fruit in the trees. "Ah, there's..."

"That one of the things we need to grab?" I set my basket on the ground and climbed the tree with ease. "How many?"

"Oh, not many. It's mainly the seeds, if I recall correctly, and they are filled with them." She smiled up at me. "So, let's go with five?"

"Five it is!" I carefully began picking them, doing my best to keep them balanced and not dropping them. "I know that the others are going to do something to try and get Seliph and me, though. This whole thing will remind them that they didn't get to pull shenanigans for us."

"That is true." Yuria hummed a bit, her eyes lighting up with mischief. "I wonder what we should do..."

"Look at that! We're seriously corrupting you!" I climbed down and set the fruit in my basket before picking it up again and wrapping my free arm around Yuria's shoulders. "I'm so proud~!"

"You're so silly!" She giggled, though. "I hope things get resolved soon. With Lana and Ulster. I know it's been weighing on her."

"Hopefully, it will. Knowing our group, probably a couple of more days at most, and that's only because of unexpected things." I kissed her cheek and decided to actually be serious for a moment. "Speaking of romance and things weighing, how have you been?"

"About those feelings for Diarmuid?" She sighed and whimpered a bit, leaning into me. "It's more or less the same. That warmth and bubbliness... they're greater, but otherwise, I'm still quite confused. Is it truly romantic love? It's certainly different from the love I feel for you, Seliph, Fee, Arthur, and... well, everyone else really. But at the same time..."

"It's hard to be certain." This time, I kissed her head and rubbed her arm while still hugging her. "I imagine Lewyn wasn't exactly the best to ask about such things."

"I also very rarely interacted with anyone besides him, so..."

"Yeah." Freaking hell, Lewyn. Glad you saved her and all, but... "Well, how about you ask Aunt Lachesis?"

"W-wouldn't that be weird?!" Her voice went super squeaky and adorable, and she also went bright red. "I-I mean... Diarmuid is her son!"

"I think you can talk about it without mentioning his name. After all, your main concern is trying to recognize what the feelings are." Though I suppose I did have to acknowledge that talking to the parent of your crush was probably a tad awkward? I mean... I never had that trouble, but that didn't
mean others didn't. "I'm more suggesting her because she's actually talked to me about my relationship with Seliph, giving advice and whatnot." And she talked to Seliph as well, or so he told me. "Oifeye's had crushes as well, though, so you can ask him." I thought about Shanan and wondered if he had ever had a crush. I knew lots of people in Tirnanog's resistance group had crushes on him, but I never noticed him dating or anything. I'd have to ask, just to see his reaction. "I do think talking to a proper adult will help with detangling the mess."

"Proper adult?"

"Technically, you and I are adults."

"...Who decided that?!" She scowled and I had to snicker. "Oh, whatever. I'll... consider it. It's probably a good idea, just..."

"Awkward, I know." I made sure to smile at her. "If you want, I can sit in with you. Any of us would. Might be helpful to at least get the conversation started."

"I'll definitely think about it." She breathed a little sigh of relief. Having the option of morale support was a good thing for her. "So..." She suddenly froze. Just up and stopped on the path, still as a statue. "I..."

"Yuria?" I stepped in front of her and cupped her face. Her eyes were wide and she was suddenly clammy. "Yuria, hey, I'm right here. What do you need?"

"I..." She gripped my hands, trembling now. "I'm sorry. I just... I have a bad feeling suddenly. Some sort of terror..."

"That so?" I pulled her into a hug and glanced around for anything suspicious. And I soon noticed something that made my blood run cold. The local wildlife, from the squirrels to the hawks to whatever else was there hiding... they were all fleeing the area. And when predators and prey both fled... "Back to Melgen. Now."

I took her hand and both of us began running down the path, back towards Melgen. Problem was, we were pretty far into the woods, meaning it would take some time before we were within sight of the guards in Melgen. And I swore, swore, I heard the distant echoes of shouting behind us. Meaning that we likely had soldiers, and I... I remembered what Conall had said, about Belhalla being especially dangerous for Yuria. I thought of that horrible scar she had, the scar she had gotten when Deirdre died...

"Yuria, go on ahead of me," I ordered, pushing her ahead. I passed her my basket and nudged her along the path when she didn't move. "I promise that I will meet you there, okay? But I want you to go ahead."

"I... no!" Yuria refused, shaking her head almost violently. She gripped my arm tightly, almost digging her nails in. "N-no! We'll go together!"

"Come now, I'll be fine!" I winked at her, faking a confidence that I didn't feel. I was scared. I was really scared. I wondered if Creidne had felt this when she... "I want to try and get a bit more information on what is going on, but if you can head back ahead, then everyone can get prepared for the worst. And Fee can be sent out." The shouting was becoming more distinct. Not my imagination, then. Damn it. "I'm also worried the children are out and about. So, please?"

"I... but..." Her expression crumpled, looking ready to cry. Despite my 'reasonable' explanation, she definitely knew what was going on. How could she not? "Riona...!"
"I'll be fine." I cupped her cheek and kissed her forehead. She began crying. "Go on. I'll be there as soon as I can. I promise."

"I..." The shouting was even louder now. You could start to make out words. "You promise that you'll come back to Melgen? Alive?"

"Yes, I promise."

"...Okay..." She hugged me tightly, trembling. She was still crying. "I'll be waiting, okay? We all be waiting. So, please...!"

"I promise." I hugged her back and then nudged her again down the path. "Go on."

She ran. She ran without looking back, and I was so thankful and proud of her for it. It helped me gather my own courage, and I closed my eyes to dredge up every speck of courage I had. Then I turned, looking down the path, just as the first of the people, dressed in the clothing and armor of Friege soldiers, appeared. They slowed briefly, no doubt surprised by the random stupid girl in the middle of the path, but then continued rushing for me. I took a deep breath, focused on them, and set their clothes on fire. While they screamed, I lunged forward to close the distance and took advantage of their dropped guards to knock them down. Axe-kicks to the shoulder. Punches to the abdomen. Knees to the groin. And a couple of stomps for good measure. Then, making sure they were still watching, I ran through the woods, hoping they'd follow me. The yelled curses and snapping of branches hinted I won that 'gamble'.

I ran as fast as I could, going for speed over stealth. After all, I wanted them to know where I was. I wanted to make sure Yuria had as much time as possible to get to the safety of Melgen. I wouldn't let them get her. I wouldn't let them get to Melgen without Melgen knowing what was going on. I had a duty as family to keep Yuria safe, and I had a duty as leader to keep the army safe. No matter how terrified I was.

Just as I cleared the forest, a sudden thunderbolt streaked past me and I rolled to the side on instinct because it had been far, far too close. But then I had to roll again because there was a second strike, far too close to the first. I stared, startled, and a man wearing a crisp, black uniform strode out from the trees, carrying a tome. He gestured sharply and another thunderbolt headed for me, followed far too closely by a second. I barely dodged both, wondering just what the hell was going on. I knew there were those who could cast spells quickly, but this seemed beyond that! Especially when it happened a third damn time. Desperately, I threw fire at the man, and I caught his sleeve, forcing him to drop the tome. But before I could even blink, he drew his sword and caught me across the arm. When I stumbled back, he kicked my leg out from under me to send me on my ass and held the blade at my throat. Despite my fear, and despite wondering just who the hell this man was, I glared at him defiantly, refusing to let him see how much I was rattled. Only Oifeye and Shanan had whipped my ass so easily before. I didn't like that there was someone just as skilled on the enemy side.

"General Reinhardt, all logic points to her being among the rebels," one soldier reported. I kept on glaring, despite my shock at the name. Reinhardt... Ishtar's personal guard and who Ichitar had warned us about... "Should we execute her?"

"...No," the man replied, confirming that this was, in fact, Reinhardt. This was just great. "No, we will take her to Alster. Gather ropes and medicinal supplies. I don't want her escaping or dying before we make it there."

The others were never going to let me live this down. Never.
Yuria (Julia)

Class: Shaman; Skills:

The 17 year old ward of Lewyn, and in fact, the amnesiac princess of Grannvale, inheritor of Naga's power. Though at first quiet and shy, she has grown a little bolder thanks to the kindness of the people around her. She looks to Riona and Larcei as role models, due to admiring their boldness.

Bears the Mark of Naga on her left side, curving from the back of her shoulder to the front of her hip, the swirls almost resembling flowers. Also bears the Mark of Fjalar on the same side, curling from the middle of her ribs and around her side to reach the middle of her back, resembling a 'ribbon' to match the 'bouquet'. Their blessings give her a boost to her stamina and ability to endure pain, as well as her magic and resistance. Though she is still learning, their blessings also let her conjure light and fire without tomes.

Though she functions primarily as a healer for the army, she is a powerful magic user and has defending the field-infirmary on more than one occasion with her wind and Nosferatu tomes. However, the immense magical power does have its downfalls, as it is harder for her to control, making her less accurate and slower than some of the other magic users in the army.

She studies hard both because she likes learning and because she really wants to be helpful to her 'family'. Not even just to pay them back, but because she wants them to be able to rest and enjoy themselves, because she loves seeing their smiles more than anything else in the world.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: So, amusingly, everyone did guess Tine would show up, but no one guessed Nanna would. xD We're hitting the point where FE5 and FE4's timelines intersect, which does lead to some oddities of trying to merge the two timelines (since there are some contradictions between the two). But in FE4, what happens is that Leif, Nanna, and Finn are over at Leonster Castle with constant, or near constant, waves of enemies heading for them. And bandits destroying villages. While Fee, being a flier, can make it over there, no one else in the army can because of blockades and enemies and whatnot. So, it's only after capturing Melgen that you can actually have Leif, Nanna, and Finn interact with the people in your army (though Finn doesn't actually have any conversations with anyone save his daughters if his daughter is Lana/Nanna/Larcei). For those who know FE5, this is after the whole 'protect Leonster Castle' chapter, but with the ending changed to account for Fe4's stuff (instead of it being them hearing of Seliph's army conquering Alster). Sara and Linoan are two FE5 chars, and Sara's meeting with Conall is shown in her oneshot in Memoirs of the Lost.

Also when you capture Melgen, Tine appears on the field, along with a trio of mage minibosses who can use a Triangle Attack if they surround you (in FE4, the triangle attack is only available to two enemy trios; unless you're playing a patch or something, you're not going to have that). Which direction they go kind of depends on AI, but I can most often manipulate said AI to have them go after Melgen (I've had them go up to Leonster before, though, and that was so much fun… not). Tine is recruited via Arthur talking to her, but I decided to show Tine being much more conflicted and confused by everything (though the reference to her mother wanting her there is
because, in game, she quietly asks her mother what she should do when she appears on
the field). Technically speaking, the trio of mages live to be fought in the next game-
chapter, but I went with this instead.

And surprise Reinhardt because why not? We know he's in the area thanks to FE5,
after all. Thanks to her Holy Blood bonuses, Yuria/Julia actually has a 100% magic
growth, however her skill and speed can be… shaky depending on how lucky/unlucky
you get. At least until she promotes, thanks to getting a massive +8 promotion bonus
to speed.

Next Chapter - Sunshine
I've been captured. Of all the things... it was so damn frustrating! Doesn't help that I'm dating Seliph, so I just knew the stories about this would be all twisted so that I was a damsel in distress or something. Instead of playing bait to make sure a friend didn't get caught. But focusing on frustration was better than focusing on my guilt. I knew everyone was going to be frantic, because of how Conall had been kidnapped too. Because of what happened to Creidne (though my rank and relation should be some protection... hopefully). And the frustration and guilt only grew as I thought of different ways I could've gone. Different choices I could've made.

Gods damn all of this. I hated being alone.

You know... aside from the fact that my hands were tied behind my back and I was constantly watched, I was actually treated fairly well. Reinhardt didn't make me walk, or drag me from behind his horse, but instead had me ride with him. He made sure it was female soldiers who guarded me. Though the whole hands behind me thing meant I had to be fed, I was given the same food as the soldiers. Wasn't forced into bad conditions. And, really, my hands had been tied in front of me, but I undid the ropes during my first, and only, escape attempt. Of course, I could still get out of the ropes no matter where they were tied, but since Reinhardt had captured me and recaptured me with ease? Best to pretend to cooperate until he wasn't paying attention. If I had a weapon, this would be a little more even, maybe, but nope! Went out without a weapon because I'm an idiot like that. No wonder I got freaking captured. Ugh. At least Alster was fairly pretty. I guess.

"Wow, this place looks better than I thought it would," I noted softly, peering around as we rode through the market. It actually resembled a market, with people around. But I could see how a few glared at the soldiers. A few even made rude gestures, but quickly darted away to avoid being seen. "Everyone is skittish like an abused cat, instead of dead. That's an improvement from Rivough, at least. Way worse than Melgen, though." These people weren't happy at all. They wanted Bloom gone.

"Those are not the sort of words a prisoner normally makes in the presence of her captors," Reinhardt chided, more focused on making sure no child rushed in front of his horse. Sad that I was sitting in front of him because otherwise, I could slip off and disappear into the crowd. But nope, trapped by his arms. Damn it. "Might make them more inclined to hurt her."

"But at least I get the satisfaction of knowing I annoyed and frustrated you. And then I can come back and drive you mad as a spirit or something." Not that I'd want to be a ghost-ghost, all twisted and everything. But maybe something like with Uncle Lex and Danann. If, you know, Danann had actually seen Uncle Lex's ghost. "That would be fun."

"If you say so."

Thus died the conversation, though to be fair, I hadn't really expected him to reply or anything. He had been stoic and quiet for most of the journey east, speaking only when issuing orders. Still, he was polite enough, I suppose. Either that or super cautious. When we arrived at the castle, and the
courtyard, he helped me dismount and escorted me through the halls. The inside of the castle was… severe in its coloring. Not gaudy or tacky, but it was a place that emphasized function over form. So there were very few actual decorations, like flowers or paintings that weren't portraits. Smelled badly of scented candles, though, and there was one scent that 'tickled' my nose and gave me that uncomfortable 'going to sneeze, but not really' feeling. It was freaking annoying!

"This is exactly why I told you to not let Ishtar hang around with such uncouth people!" And someone was shrieking, threatening to break the glass and shatter my ears. "And why I told you to not let Ishtore go off on his own! Now he's dead!"

"I fail to see how the first statement has anything to do with Ishtore's demise!" And that was someone else, someone trying to keep calm and failing. Both voices bounced off the walls of the hall, and I glanced at Reinhardt, curious. He remained stoic, hinting this was somewhat normal. "If you're only going to use his death as a means of throwing barbs, then leave! I want to mourn my son in peace!"

"And let his murderers simply waltz about?! My son needs to be avenged!"

"As if you didn't discard him at the first opportunity!"

"So, Bloom and Hilda?" I murmured, glancing at Reinhardt. This time, he nodded slightly, though he did keep stoic. "Neither are good parents if they're treating Ishtore as a toy they were forced to share. No wonder he didn't speak highly of either of them."

"You spoke to him?" Reinhardt asked softly. The yelling was getting louder, and more incoherent. This was going to be so much fun to walk into. "Truly?"

"We hoped to find common ground and not fight." I sighed, remembering that conversation and remembering Ishtore's death. "Sadly, he had very good questions, and we didn't have good answers. So, we couldn't allay his fears." And then we killed his fiance, and stole his dreams of the future. Just as Arvis had… "I wish otherwise. I would've liked to have gotten to know him better."

"...He probably would've gotten along quite well with your army." He looked ahead, to a set of doors. "We're here." He opened the door right as someone started cursing rather creatively, and another person yelled similar curses right on back.

"I'm not impressed with your lord and lady." I couldn't help but be blunt, mostly because now I could see Bloom and Hilda, both red in the face from how much they were yelling. Nearby, a noticeably younger man, probably late twenties, was pinching the bridge of his nose, like he was warding off a headache. I didn't blame him. "Sorry, but…"

"I have one liege lady, and that is Lady Ishtar, and Lady Ishtar alone." He spoke quietly, with a calm fierceness, and I just nodded, accepting the correction. Certainly couldn't blame him when these two acted like this. Though, to be fair, they had been in private. Sort of. "Lord Bloom?" And no reaction from the two arguers. The other man, however, heard him and smiled softly before walking over to join us. "Ah, Cyas. Much preferable."

"Welcome back, Reinhardt," the man greeted. I noticed he had Fjalar-red hair and matching eyes. Velthomer descent, then? "Who is this?" This 'Cyas' peered at me curiously, but I looked down to prevent him from getting a good look at me. "A prisoner?"

"Sort of," Reinhardt replied. I was tempted to glower at him because I didn't see how this was being 'sort of' a prisoner. My hands were bound, damn it! "How long has this been going on?"
"Since Lady Hilda arrived twenty minutes ago."

"Only interesting thing since I was sent out?"

"Thankfully, yes." Cyas smiled faintly. "Ah, I did find a lovely history book in the market that you'll like. Swing by my room later, and I'll lend it to you."

"Of course." Reinhardt also smiled slightly. I noticed his expression was much softer, and was surprised because I thought he was just permanently stoic. "Ah, but I fear I'm still on duty. Where is-?"

"Now who is this?" And now I had Hilda in my face. Terrific. I supposed she'd been beautiful, once, but the cruel smirk and glint in her eyes took all that beauty away. "Oh, Reinhardt, did you bring me someone to play with?" she asked, speaking surprisingly softly considering how loudly she had been yelling earlier. "I've been quite bored. You might be as fun as Tailtiu was, actually."

"Wow, I think you're the first malevolent banshee I've ever heard of," I deadpanned, unable to help it. Speaking of Aunt Tailtiu like that...! "Fascinating."

"...That is the second time I've been called this 'banshee'." Her eyes narrowed, not quite a glare. "What are they?"

"They're the ghosts of women who are twisted by their violent death, and improper burial rites. They can take many forms, but the ones I've heard about the most have a ghastly appearance and a keening, piercing shriek as-" She slapped me then. She slapped me hard and really dug her nails into it, so not only did my neck nearly snap from the force, but I felt blood trickle down my cheek. Tears pricked my eyes, automatic reaction, but I willed them away. Because if there was something I knew, it was how to smile through pain and hide my tears. So, I looked back at her with a cool expression, and a soft smile. "Ah, my apologies. I wasn't aware that was a proper greeting in Grannvale. You'll have to forgive me for not returning the favor."

"You little...!" She glared, irritated. "Do you know who I am?"

"The lady who slapped me for answering your question?"

"Tch...!" She grabbed my collar and dragged me towards her, actually pulling me behind her as she tried to leave the room. "You're coming with me."

"No, she is not." And someone jerked me out of her grip, pushing me behind them. It took a couple of blinks to realize it was actually Bloom. "Reinhardt brought her to Alster, so she is a prisoner of Alster," he informed Hilda coldly. I frowned, now feeling like I was the toy being fought over, and held still as Cyas inspected my injury. "I have not released her to you."

"Lord Bloom, Lady Hilda, please!" Reinhardt said, stepping in between the two before Hilda could snap back. Cyas stepped away from me, mumbling something about medicine. But that didn't matter to me. "Might I give my report before you-?" Because Reinhardt was distracted, and there was no way I was missing my chance.

I looked at Hilda's sleeve and willed it to burn. I grinned when it caught fire instantly, and I quickly set a few more spots on her dress on fire. Not quite a kick to the face like Conall requested, but I doubted he'd mind this. Besides, everyone was freaking out, leaving me free to run down the hall as fast as I could. Though I couldn't see the ropes behind me, I could feel them, so I used my fire magic to burn them so that I was completely free. Burned myself a bit, but nothing bad. Just a shiny patch of pink skin, no big deal. My face hurt more. And a little bit of pain wasn't going to
stop me from trying to escape!

Knowing that I had to at least get out of the hallway, I quickly found a window and opened it to climb out. Bit awkward to close from the outside, but I managed and then looked up and around, cursing when I realized there wasn't a good way up here. So, down I went, picking a direction to try and find a good way up. However, I ended up in some gardens and heard the whispers of people talking, so instead, I found a nearby tree and scrambled up before remaining as still as possible. If I could wait up here long enough, then the people would leave and I could continue finding my way out.

"Forgive me, but I fear that I must insist on this," someone was saying. I couldn't see them from here, leaves and all, and I didn't really care. I just wanted them to leave. "You must be aware that-"

"You're being idiotic," another voice snapped. It sounded much younger, and there was a coldness to it that chilled me for some reason. "You dragged me away for this?"

"Let it serve as an example of how serious I am." The first voice seemed rather impassioned about… whatever it was. "The gossips have picked up on it, so surely you are aware of the closeness between Prince Conall and Lady Ishtar." And now I suddenly cared. What was this person talking about? "Yes, they have always been close, but people have noticed a change between them!" The air felt heavy. The skin around my Mark burned. That… that had never happened before. Marks were just supposed to be there, not… "And there are talks and rumors that the two might elope and-"

A snap of fingers. A spike of magic. And suddenly there was red everywhere. Though I couldn't see well through the leaves of the tree, I still saw all the red. All the blood, really. Because it was definitely blood. I smelled death with it.

"Idiot. He should've known that was a warning." The second voice again. So, they had killed the first one… "Conall… Conall would never hurt me." But there was something wrong with the voice this time. Though the first few words had been cold, the last ones were strangely fragile and pained. "That's… that's part of the problem…"

Footsteps, partially through blood based on the 'squelching' sound I heard. I pressed myself against the tree, keeping myself as still as possible. As the footsteps approached, I even held my breath, not wanting to do anything that might attract attention to myself. But I might as well have not bothered. Because just two seconds later, I was falling. I was falling because the branches I had been on collapsed under me, and the rest snapped while I plummeted. I hit the ground hard, sprawled out with withered leaves and splinters falling all around me, and I wondered what the hell happened. Then I had to stare because the tree I had been hiding in, the very strong and definitely alive tree I had climbed… it was now nothing more than a rotted husk.

"Well, you're a bit big for a squirrel." My attention turned to the speaker, a boy probably a bit younger than me, wearing black. He had long red hair that was worn loose and he had pale, almost delicate features that were completely at odds with the blood splattering his face. "Yet you're scurrying about almost like a rodent," he continued absenty, looming over me. He casually wiped some of the blood off, and brushed his hair out of his face, drawing my focus to the dark red mark on his forehead. "So, are you a spy?" His eyes, however, were what held my attention the most. But not the color or anything. Red eyes were just… red eyes. But there was a strange duality to them, something older than time and something younger than me simultaneously existing. Almost like they were fighting, which was ridiculous, but… "Well?"

"If I were a spy, do you think this would be the point I'd admitted it?" I asked dryly, because of course right now was when I was sarcastic. After all, it was so smart to sass someone who
basically killed someone for spreading rumors. "I imagine this would be the point I committed suicide or something."

"I suppose that is true." He frowned, wiping the rest of the blood off his face. My eyes darted around for some avenue of escape, and I saw a pile of mush seeping out of dark robes behind him. Took me a moment to realize those were the remains of the first person. What the hell did he do?! "Quite the fire you have in your eyes, though."

"Fire is my blood. Well, some of it, at least."

"Oh?" He tilted his head curiously, and then his eyes sharpened. "Wait… red eyes and blonde hair?" He suddenly crouched, so that he was level with me. "Hey, is your name 'Caitriona'?"

"Yes, though I go by 'Riona'." I wondered how he'd guessed before realizing the obvious. In my defense, the whole 'tree rotted out from under me' and 'overheard a murder so brutal that the corpse didn't resemble anything but mud and mush' thing had me very distracted. But the red of his eyes and hair were Fjalar-red and he had a Mark on his forehead, so he could only be… "So… uh… hi, Julius?"

"Hello!" He then tackled me with a hug, nearly knocking me over. "Yay! I finally get to meet you! I've always wanted to!" He pulled away quickly and gently touched my cheek. The bleeding one. "Oh, but you're hurt… is it from the fall? Wait, these look too even. Did someone scratch you?"

"They didn't give me their name." Which wasn't a lie. Now, I wasn't quite sure why I was 'protecting' Hilda of all people… except there was some sort of quiet, yet urgent, instinct that I had to make sure Julius kept calm. "But it's fine. I've done worse to myself. Once busted my lip because I climbed a tree too fast chasing after a cat."

"That's silly!" He smiled sweetly, and I noticed it was the same smile that Yuria and Seliph had. This was… actually a little creepy, because he smiled that same smile so shortly after brutally killing someone on a whim. "Here, we'll get you to Cyas! Have you met him? He's an amazing healer. Aunt Alicia taught him, so you know he has to be good." Julius suddenly looked behind me and waved. I simply wondered why he only mentioned Mom when, given the years, Cyas's main training had to have been done by someone else. Was it just to reassure me or something? "Oh, Ishtar, look! It's Riona!" And I glanced back to see Ishtar really was right there, staring with her jaw dropped. "She's here! She's here!"

Oh, this was going to be so awkward.

"Well, your escape attempt certainly chased Lady Hilda away," Cyas noted. He was very carefully cleaning the scratches on my face since, apparently, Hilda had slapped me hard enough to break her own nails. I'd say that was her problem, except that meant they were in my scratches. Which was icky and meant Cyas had to pick them out. Not to mention any potential splinters and leaf debris. Blech. "You also made it much farther than we thought."

"It feels like I'm being damned by faint praise," I complained, doing my best to talk without moving too much. I didn't want to make the work difficult for him. "Why are we in a fancy room and not the infirmary?"

"Infirmary is filled with injured soldiers returning from Leonster."

"Ah, of course." That should've been obvious. To be fair, I was still kind of reeling from the past hour or so. "Is this stupidly fancy room supposed to be where I'm staying? If it is, we need to get
rid of these scents and all these blankets." And maybe change the mattress. There was a difference
between 'bouncy' and 'swallow you whole' in terms of softness and the bed I was sitting on was the
latter. It was actually a level or two past the latter.

"You are definitely Conall's twin." He smiled and laughed softly. "Julius will get them changed
over for you." Along with everything else apparently. Because that just seemed to be what he did.
Whatever he wanted and damn anyone else's thoughts.

After meeting Julius, I had been promptly dragged back into the castle, where Julius happily
introduced me to Bloom as if I hadn't just seen him. Ishtar had followed before snagging Reinhardt
and pulling him away, along with Cyas. Meanwhile, Julius got me measured for new clothes,
rambling about this and that, and got the servants to set up a room. Servants who all fussed over
this and that and… well, basically, I was being treated like a pampered princess and while I knew
there were many who'd kill for such treatment, it just irritated me. Maybe it was because I wasn't
'home'. I was a prisoner, after all. Just one with much better treatment than usual, which I was
grateful for, but…

"Not sure why I didn't guess who you were sooner, since you look like Aunt Alicia," Cyas
whispered. I got the impression he was thinking aloud. "And you've got the same defiant fire
Conall does."

"Aunt Alicia?" I asked curiously. Julius did mention that Mom had taught him. "You were close
then?"

"Well..." Cyas glanced over at the closed door before sighing. "Well, I'm sure it'll come out. Julius
forgets it's supposed to be secret." He took a cloth and blotted the extra blood off my cheek before
switching to rubbing balm on it. "You and I are cousins."

"Oh?" I frowned then, doing some mental 'calculations', and I glanced at him skeptically. He
turned my face back forward so that he could work. "So, was Arvis married before or something
and I just never heard about it?"

"My mother is Aida, Arvis's best friend..."

"And the woman who tricked Mom and her friends, and kidnapped Conall. Right?"

"You are definitely Conall's twin." He sighed, but I noticed some pain in his eyes despite the
'healer mask'. That sort of pain... I knew it. I knew it well.

"Did she die? I'm sorry." I looked up at him again. I wouldn't necessarily say the dead were 'free' of
criticism or hatred or anything, but... "I'm sure it still pains you."

"It does. I miss her everyday." He gently turned my face back forward. "Regardless, she and Arvis
were best friends and decided to have a simple one-night stand."

"And contraceptives failed."

"Precisely, and Grandfather and Mother determined that trying to induce a miscarriage would be
dangerous for her, since she was allergic to components of the 'safe' methods." Ick... that sucked.
"So, here I am. It's not the most conventional familial tale, but I'm fine with it. I like my relative
quiet."

"Relative?"

"I am the High Priest of Velthomer, leader of the healers and clergy." He smiled faintly. "I also
work as a tactician for the army on a case by case basis."

"Tactician?"

"I hate to see movement wasted, and like my efficiency. It... ah... there was a battle where I got annoyed? And I always did like reading Mother's books." He shook his head. "Regardless, though, that's why I call her 'Aunt Alicia'."

"How old are you?"

"Me?" He was silent for a bit, like he was trying to remember. "Twenty-seven, a few months ago."

"Wow, you're the firstborn by a lot." I held still while he applied a bandage to my face. "Fjalar's major of our generation, then?"

"...No." He said it softly, and I glanced at him again. But he wasn't looking at me. "No, I..."

"Must be nice, being able to hide." I smiled at him, not meaning anything by the words. It was just an absent comment, really. "I wonder what that's like."

"You did hide, though?"

"From my heritage? No, none of us ever did." I shrugged. "People died protecting us because of our heritage. Since we were toddlers, we knew people expected us to save them."

"...That is too heavy a burden, especially on children." He looked at me again, his eyes strangely sad. "Far too heavy, and far too painful."

"Pain is normal. Well, that sort of pain, anyway." Just like the pain of having family ripped away. It was all normal. "Besides, it's not like I'm alone with the burden or anything." I had all my friends, after all. Together, we were strong enough to bear it. "So..."

"So many things that confused me about Conall when we were younger now make too much sense and I hate it." He sighed, and I frowned, confused. "Well, regardless, I'm finally done tending to those scratches. I just want to check for deep bruising and internal bleeding from the fall you had."

"Sure, that's fine." I didn't feel too bad, but I knew well how things could be worse than they were. "So..." I paused when I heard rapid footsteps approaching. "Ah, that must be..."

"Back!" Just as I did, Julius burst into the room, carrying a set of clothes. "I'm not sure how Isaachian women dress, so I told the tailors to make these first ones simple until you could weigh in on what you liked," he rattled off, setting the clothes on the bed next to me. I noticed they were various shades of blue. "How are you, Riona? Are you in pain?"

"No, Cyas is taking very good care of me," I reassured him, smiling slightly. He was... surprisingly eager. I could see the relation between him and Yuria, actually. Eager to help out and all. "He's just giving me a checkup to make sure there's nothing unexpected."

"That's good." He pointed to the bandage on my face and looked to Cyas. "Why not use a staff for that?"

"A couple of reasons, Julius," Cyas answered, carefully pressing along my back to check for bruising. I'd landed on it, after all. "One, this will reduce the chances of a scar and two, though I did my best, there is still a chance something was left in the wound."
"And if something is caught underneath, my wound will get infected, and then he'll have to peel off the scab and drain the puss and all that," I added. I had to help Aideen deal with that a few times in the infirmary. "Not fun."

"Very not fun, and since it would be on your face, the infection could spread rapidly to very important areas."

"Oh, that makes sense," Julius murmured. He smiled, satisfied by the answer, and focused on me again. "So, Riona, are you a healer too?"

"Me? No, but I helped out in the infirmary a lot, growing up," I answered. I laughed, remembering those lessons. "I could probably make medicines in my sleep at this point."

"Why would you want to make them in your sleep?" He looked genuinely confused for a moment, and I wondered if Grannvale didn't have that idiom or something? Except Cyas seemed to know what I meant. "Ah, whatever. I can't wait to show you Belhalla. It's prettier earlier in the year, but it's still nice."

"I can't go to Belhalla." I said the words without thinking, but almost immediately, there was a heaviness to the air. Cyas tensed next to me, and slowly brought an arm in front of me, as if to shield me. I thought I sensed power, but… "I'm sorry, but I can't."

"Why not?" Julius sulked. Except there was something… there was something dark about the expression. My instincts were screaming, and it was a 'scream' I knew well. The 'scream' that only sounded when you were looking death in the face. "You're my cousin."

"Yes, I am, and I've been your cousin all of your life, even though we have been separated. Separations do not sever the bonds between people. No matter how far you go, or what you do, you are my family."

"I took his hand in both of mine and did my best to smile. "However, I made a promise. I've actually made many promises. And I can only keep them while here, in the Thracian Peninsula. Going to Belhalla might lead to me breaking them."

"...And promises are important. That's what Conall always says." He sighed gustily and the tense air lightened almost immediately. Cyas subtly shifted back to his check, and I realized he really had been shielding me. From Julius. "After all, people who keep their promises are people you can always trust." He pouted a bit. "Will you at least stay in Alster for as long as I'm here?"

"Yes, I promise." Not only did I want to get to know him, and Cyas, but with luck, after he left, everyone's guard would be down and I could escape. Just needed to wait for the weakness, like how Hestia watched herds of deer and went after the weakest. Though I did worry about how Ishtar would feel about this. And Bloom for that matter. Enemy he might be, he still lost his son to the army I helped lead. "But no changing plans just for me, okay? I'll be very cross if you put off important things."

"Mmm… okay, agreed." He smiled sweetly and then crawled onto the bed to lay down on my lap. "You're warm… like sunshine..."

"I've been told I'm quite comfortable." I stroked his hair, absently undoing some tangles. Cyas, meanwhile, only sighed, hinting that this wasn't 'proper' behavior in Grannvale. "You want to sleep?"

"No…" Though he did already seem to be dozing. "Talk."

"You sure? You're napping like a cat." I giggled, though, amused. "Talk, hmm? Let's see… well,
do you want to hear about Hestia?"
"Hestia?"
"She's my wolf. One of the reasons why I can't leave. I simply can't leave her behind."
"A wolf?" Though he was still sleepy, his eyes lit up. Cyas facepalmed briefly before continuing his check. "Yes, please?"
"Well, I found her two years ago…"

While Cyas finished his check-up, I told Julius not just about Hestia, but about various people I had met. I was careful to avoid names, both of people and places, but it was still quite fun. Julius seemed to like it, at least, and Cyas was fascinated by the folklores I'd picked up over the years. It was… strangely enjoyable.

"So… um… does Julius normally have such a glary-glare reaction to Reinhardt?" I asked Cyas awkwardly as we trailed after Julius and Ishtar in the market. Julius had decided we should go, to see if anything caught our eyes, but he had made a point to say that Reinhardt couldn't come. Even glared at him. "That seemed a bit much. Isn't he Ishtar's guard?"

"And Julius is convinced that Reinhardt guards Ishtar so vigilantly out of romantic love," Cyas murmured. He kept 'calm', and I remembered how Aideen would default to the 'healer mask' when she felt stressed. And the stories of how Mom would do the same when things were hectic to be the 'beacon of calm'. I wondered if this was the same. "Which is ridiculous. Reinhardt has guarded Ishtar ever since they were both children. So, they are certainly close, and friends no matter what Reinhardt says, but they also have clear 'roles'."

"Lady and knight, and never does that falter." Still, to have that sort of reaction… "He must be insecure about his relationship with Ishtar. Should really talk to her about it, though. Communication is important."

"Have you never been jealous?"

"Er… my romantic life is highly atypical and a bit arrogant, actually." I still felt horrible about all of that. "But we all do our best to talk to each other. All of our little family, not just any romantic things. It's a learning process to be certain, but we like addressing things before they become issues, if we can."

"Riona, Cyas, you're falling behind!" Ishtar called then, waving at us. Her smile was much thinner than it had been in Sophara and Rivough. Fainter and sadder. Of course, given that her little brother died just weeks ago… and Tine… she didn't… oh dear. "Come on now, before we lose you in the crowd!"

"Ah, sorry!" I called, rushing to catch up. I took her arm as soon as I did, mostly to keep her attention. "Hey, Tine is okay."

"She is?" Almost immediately, life and light just breathed into her or something, putting a little more color to her face and a bit more warmth to her smile. Cyas glanced over curiously when he joined us, but then moved ahead to talk to Julius. "Truly?"

"Yes." I made sure to smile. "Whatever plan they had involved something she couldn't tolerate, morally speaking, so she surrendered. Last I saw her, she was talking to Fee about riding on Fee's pegasus."
"She's not imprisoned?"

"Er… no?" Now I felt a little awkward. "I won't say there aren't some Friege soldiers imprisoned and all, but typically speaking, we just keep them on guard and let them walk around. Well, when they're not in the infirmary."

"…You healed them?"

"The ones that were alive and could be saved?" I winced as I thought of Liza. "Um… we also make sure to bury them. Er… the dead ones, I mean. The ones we couldn't save." I hesitated before continuing. "Istore and Liza are buried in Melgen, together. I made sure of that personally. And we burn incense for all of the dead."

"Oh…" She breathed a sigh of relief, though I saw the tears in her eyes. "That is a relief. I… um… I remember seeing Danann's body… so…"

"Yeah, I'm not proud of that." I'd forgotten. Ulster and I had met Conall afterwards, which meant that Ishtar had been waiting for him to get back with Hekate. Meaning that she could've been looking out the window and… "Danann was… personal. In a lot of ways." I winced, just thinking about him. "Labor camps, rapes, murder, assault, hostages… and he also killed Aunt Ayra and Uncle Lex. By taking children hostage to make them stand down. Neither Ulster nor I could check our anger." I sighed, shaking my head. "In retrospect, I'm really not proud of it. I won't say that there aren't messy kills because, let's be honest, all kills are messy. But what we did with Danann… isn't something I ever want to do again."

"I see." Ishtar nodded, relaxing a bit. "That does make me feel better." No doubt about that! Gods, the pain and nausea from wondering if her brother's suffered something similar had to be overwhelming! The thought itself nearly overwhelmed me, at least. "Ah, but before I forget, I should apologize to you."

"...For what?" If anything, I needed to apologize. Our army killed her little brother! And his fiance!

"I sent Reinhardt that way to gather information on Tine, and on Istore and Liza. So…” She shrugged, smiling sheepishly. "I'm afraid it's my fault you were captured, ultimately."

"So, you're apologizing for worrying about your family? That's a silly thing to be apologizing for, you know." How could I blame her for such a thing? Especially since she had just told me her worries! "Besides, it looks like he did his job admirably."

"That's true. First time he completed a job in an unexpected way, but still, I did get information on them." She actually laughed, though it was much softer and sadder than the one I had heard before, back in Isaach. "So silly."

"It really is, huh?" And I supposed I could stand getting captured if it meant being able to reassure her. "Ah, so…"

"Hey, what are you talking about?" Julius was in front of us now, sulking. Behind him, Cyas sighed, like he'd been trying to keep Julius distracted. "You've been quiet and falling behind," he explained a little sulkily. "So?"

"Well, we were…" I began. However, Ishtar flinched and I remembered what Cyas had told me earlier. So, I had to leave Reinhardt out of the explanation or… "I was just telling her that Tine was safe. And then commenting on how sweet she is."

"Oh." Julius smiled, appeased. "You didn't have to be secretive about it."
"You looked like you were having fun with Cyas." Thinking fast... thinking fast... Wait, why was I lying? I had no idea. Just my instincts screaming that I needed to. "I didn't want to interrupt."

"It would be more fun with everyone." Despite the words, he shrugged and ran ahead to join Cyas, deciding the explanation was enough. Still, not wanting to chance things again, I made to follow, so that we didn't have him coming back to get us, but I noticed Ishtar hadn't moved from where she was. Instead, she just stood there in the middle of the market, the crowd of people pushing past us.

"He's been more like his old self ever since Riona arrived," she whispered, voice so soft and absent that I was certain she was simply thinking aloud. Her expression was worn, too tired to emote. I remembered seeing similar expressions on Aideen, Oifeye, and Shanan's faces when we were all young. When they had learned about the Massacre and we had to be on the run to escape capture and death. "But I wonder how long that'll stay? It never lasts long, anymore." What the hell was she talking about, though? I almost asked.

But then, it didn't matter, because I was soon distracted by gasps, shouts, and what sounded like desperate pleas, of all things. I pushed my way through the crowd, wondering if someone had gotten injured, and I thought I heard Cyas trying to say something. I almost called out to him. But then I caught sight of Julius and I saw him bring his hand up, dark flames dancing around his fingers. Magic. Power. And I remembered what he'd done to that person. That person in the robes, who became nothing more than mush and blood. So, I moved without thinking and snatched his wrist, bringing his arm down to his side in the hopes of directing any launched spell harmlessly to the ground. Julius looked at me in shock, as did the people around us, everything silent like the sound had been ripped away by a Silence Staff. But I didn't care.

"Just what do you think you're doing, Julius?" I scolded, my voice the only sound in the market now. Though the 'flames' burned and cut my palm, I curled my hand over his to block the magic further. "Unless I'm missing something, like invisible blood or whatever, nothing happened here that requires such violence." My hand was numb. The cuts were actually crawling up my arm, like they were a living creature. "I'm going to keep holding on until you dismiss the spell, Julius." And the spell moved fast. It was already almost to my shoulder. Wonder where it would go once it reached there. Up? Down? Or a diagonal, towards my heart? "So?"

"Ah!" Julius gasped and pulled his hand from mine. The magic was gone. My arm was totally numb. "You... you're bleeding..." he whispered, eyes wavering. "I..."

"Yes, I'm aware I'm bleeding." I looked around curiously, and seriously didn't see anything that would've warranted that sort of reaction. The only thing out of the ordinary, besides the fear and shock on everyone's faces, was the child sobbing into... well, based on looks, I'd say they were sobbing into their older sister's chest. "Hey, is everything okay? Is my arm the worst thing? Please tell me it is."

"That needs to get treated! Cyas? Cyas, where are you?" Julius grabbed my uninjured arm and tried to tug me away, but I dug in my heels. "Riona...!"

"Is everything okay?" I continued focusing on the two, ignoring him. "Do you need help?"

"No, that was help enough, my... your highness," the sister murmured. She scooped up her crying sibling and bowed. "Thank you... thank you...!" Then she ran, and I saw how quickly the crowd hid her escape. Protecting her as much as they could.

"Seriously, what the hell?" I whispered. Now I let Julius pull me to Cyas, who... somehow had medical supplies. I wondered how, but then Ishtar appeared with more, so I figured they'd just been grabbing some. "What happened?"
"The little brat threw a ball at me," Julius grumbled. I could only stare. That… that was it? "It is-

"A child who probably threw their ball too hard? Seriously, not something that requires such a reaction. Threatening them like that…” I sighed heavily, shaking my head. Julius's eyes darkened and after he got me to Cyas, he made to leave, heading the same way the child and sister did. "Oh no, you don't." I snagged him by the arm to keep him near me. "Nope. You're stuck with me."

"But because of them, you were hurt!"

"I am hurt because I chose that."

"And you shouldn't grab my hand like that," Julius scowled. "If I'd had the fully spell ready, it would've killed you!" ...Wait, that kind of implied that he was going to kill the child for… but surely that wasn't… um… "And I don't want to kill you. You're my cousin." What was with the emphasis on 'my'?!

"Julius, can you come with me?" Ishtar called, interrupting the conversation with a sweet smile and light tone. I was still a little too caught up in my thoughts. And how numb and bleeding my arm was. "I just saw this lovely necklace that I think would look good on Riona."

And just like that, the situation was resolved. Julius was properly distracted by the idea of getting me a present, and slowly, normality returned to the market. Except now I noticed the people keeping one eye on Julius, and ushering their children inside. For 'safety'. Rather like how Ganeishire hid all the women when General Richard went walking...

"Cyas?" I asked quietly. He made an acknowledgement noise, more focused on making sure I didn't bleed out. "Would… would he have really killed a child for…?"

"Be a better reason than some of his other murders," Cyas answered absently. I felt sick. "He would actually have a reason for it besides whim."

"Ah…” That was all I could say, because I was reeling. That was… I…

Conall, when I next saw you, we were having a discussion on what the word 'little' meant! This was not 'a little' broken!

Alster had a really good library. At least, it was really good by my standards, save for one tiny little thing. I couldn't figure out the organizational system at all. I had tried to figure it out on my own, not wanting to disturb anyone for something like this, and then gave up and decided to just pull a random book off the shelf. Which resulted in some books falling on my head. For some reason. I was still trying to figure that out.

"Are you all right?" Best part? Someone saw, namely Bloom of all people. Person I wasn't really in a hurry to talk to since he let Hilda beat Aunt Tailltiu to death and I was involved in the death of his son. But here we were. "I am afraid that the library has fallen to neglect in recent months due to the war effort," he explained, helping me up. He then, almost absently, checked my head for any bumps. "A shame, really."

"I'm just grateful the entire bookcase didn't fall on me, because that would just be my luck," I sighed, holding still. This was so awkward. "I probably should've just contented myself with looking at the covers."

"With that book hunger in your eyes? Surprised you only grabbed one. Glad, since that might've sent more on your head, but surprised." He stepped back and crossed his arms, shifting from
'worried mildly-paternal' to 'stern lord' in less than a second. "What were you looking for?"

"Something interesting."

"...Not sure why I asked. Prince Conall always has the same answer."

"Well, we are twins." Still, I decided to smile. I could at least pretend this wasn't awkward. "I think I would like recent history. Post-Crusaders. Though if you have anything older than them, I wouldn't mind taking a look."

"I think Conall removed most of those for his own perusal. But recent? We have quite a bit of that." He gestured for me to follow him. "Those would be in this section over here."

He hadn't been joking. There were a lot. So many that I could spend an entire week doing nothing but read and probably not get through them all. I grabbed as many as I could carry, rushed to a nearby parlor with bunches of sunlight and a table right by the window, and then returned to grab even more. Bloom actually laughed, and then left me to my reading. I made one last 'stop' to ask someone for pen and paper before going to the books. Because it wasn't just whim that led me to this topic. I wanted to do research. I wanted to see the politics and history after the Crusaders died, the events that led up to the Belhalla Massacre. And I wanted notes so that I could talk with the others. Because hopefully, it would help with trying to find those answers. And I was starting with the most recent. I'd look more into the reigns of the Crusaders, and the Holy War, afterwards. Might as well use this... very unexpected and unwanted... free time to get some work done!

I wasn't sure how long I spent reading and taking notes. Quite a while, since I made it through half of the books and had to request more paper. But if you asked me to put an actual time to it, I wouldn't have. But I knew that it was past lunch, at least. Why? Well, while I was taking a break to rub my wrists, I overheard Ishtar and Bloom talking. Or, rather, Ishtar scolding her father because, apparently, he hadn't eaten anything today. Or yesterday.

"Father, despite what you think, you do have a body that occasionally requires food," Ishtar snapped. I stood up and leaned against the table to peer out into the hallway, where I saw her and Bloom. Unlike before, Bloom looked exhausted. "And starving yourself won't bring the dead back."

"I know my limits, Ishtar," Bloom replied softly. He wouldn't quite look at her, though. "I'm old enough to know that."

"And I'm old enough to know when to call out bullshit!" Ishtar stomped her foot and glared at him. "I'm not a child, Father! I'm nineteen! And Ishtore was going to be..." All at once, Ishtar's expression crumpled and she looked down, twisting her fingers into her skirt. "Please? Father, won't you please eat at least a little? For me? I can't... Ishtore is dead... I can't... I couldn't anything for him, so..."

"Oh, Ishtar..." Bloom hugged her and Ishtar began crying. "Ishtore's death isn't your fault."

"I should've been there! I should've gone there as soon as we heard the army was marching south! I could've saved him! I know I could've! Why did I let him be alone there?! Why wasn't I there?!

Ishtar was outright bawling now. "This isn't right! Why him?! He was seventeen! He and Liza were going to be married! And I'm the older one! If one of us had to die, it should've been...! I should've been...!"

From there it was a mess of syllables all more or less saying the same thing. Bloom didn't say anything, just continued holding her while silently crying himself. And it broke my heart. No
matter how… whatever… he was and no matter how he had let Hilda kill Tailtiu... he was still a father mourning his son, who died too soon. His son and the woman his son was to marry… so, really, a daughter too. A son and a daughter… and trying desperately to comfort another daughter while she blamed herself and wished she had died instead. While his own heart bled.

Ishtar continued sobbing for a while, and eventually, I heard the two slowly leave. I even got up and peeked out to check. Then I leaned against the doorway, thinking. Now, I knew what I should do is probably just leave it all be. Go back to my books and notes, that sort of thing. After all, I was responsible for their grief. Yet, at the same time, it just felt wrong to not at least check in on them, especially since it was my fault. So, I mentally debated for a while, shifting my weight from side to side to 'mirror' me weighing out my options, and I eventually sighed and headed to the kitchens. The cooks and kitchen staff all descended on me to ask what I wanted, but I reassured them that I simply wanted to make a quick thing. A quick drink. One for me, which I had a servant take back to that parlor for me, and two for Ishtar and Bloom, which I carried out on a tray myself after asking someone where the two were.

Thankfully, sort of, the two were together, in a parlor room where they were both eating. Or, rather, both were trying to eat. Made a good effort at it too, but it was easy to see how grief had killed their appetites and turned the food to ash.

"Ah, Riona!" Still, Ishtar noticed me quickly, before I could decide how best to knock and not stand there in the doorway awkwardly. "I… thought we had gotten everything?" she continued, actually counting the things on the table. Bloom just tried to continue eating. "Yes, so…"

"This is me being a worrywart busybody, actually," I replied, walking over. Then, carefully, I set the two mugs on the table. "I thought both of you could use a little treat, and in Isaach, this is something we drink for comfort."

"Oh, warm milk with honey…" Ishtar smiled at it, and Bloom looked at it curiously. "Conall will make it for me when I'm down." She took a sip without hesitation and her smile grew. "Tastes just about the same."

"I'm not surprised. It's just the basic recipe. Families have their own little tricks to personalize them." And I still needed to learn that trick from Shanan. He did make it after the battle with Ishatore, like I'd requested, but we'd both been too busy for 'cooking lessons'. And I didn't want him to just tell me. That wouldn't be fun. "I probably put in a bit more honey than him."

"Yes, I think that is the difference."

"So, this is that drink Conall insists on?" Bloom asked. He was sipping it slowly, looking at it oddly. "I can see why he likes it. How did it become a comfort drink, though?"

"In Isaach? It being something comforting actually comes from before the Holy War," I explained. Whenever you heard old stories, you would hear of the heroes having some to calm down from battle and tragedy. More than you'd hear of alcohol, at least. "In fact, it comes before the Empire, but it probably stuck around because honey and milk are so plentiful in Isaach." Though what kind of milk was most common depended on the area. Not all parts of Isaach supported cows, after all. "Honey is used in a lot of Isaachian dishes, actually. Beekeeping is an important job in the community, as important as… say… a blacksmith or a butcher."

"Bee… keeping?" Bloom frowned a bit, but Ishtar actually continued smiling. Both kept drinking the milk, which I was glad for. I hoped it at least helped them a little. Made the pain just a little easier to bear for the day. "How does one 'keep' bees?"
"Hmm? Ah, well…"

"Excuse me." A servant appeared in the doorway, and bowed to us. "There is a visitor, Lord Bloom," they murmured, keeping their head down. Bloom sighed, and got up slowly. I winced at how slow, since it was like his very bones pained him. "This way, my lord."

Bloom followed them out the door and down the hall, and Ishtar quickly followed. I did what I could to cover up the remaining food and drink and let someone know so that they could do the rest. Then I decided to see who had arrived, being curious. Of course, when I arrived in the main room where everyone else was, I wished I hadn't. I really wished I hadn't.

"Father!" Because even if I hadn't seen the long Fjalar-red and matching eyes on the older man who was our visitor, Julius rushing over and calling him 'Father' would've told me just who this was. "Welcome, welcome!" he greeted, hugging Arvis. Arvis seemed startled by it, for some reason. "Something wrong?"

"I simply wasn't expecting such a warm greeting," Arvis replied. Slowly, he hugged Julius back, stroking his hair. "But I'm glad for it." He sounded awkward, and at first, I thought it was just Arvis not knowing how to be a dad or something. Except I saw the startled look on Ishtar's face and, perhaps more tellingly, on Cyas's face when he came in. Both things hinted this scene wasn't common. That Julius didn't typically greet Arvis so warmly. So, why now? What made a difference? "You're looking better. More color to your face."

"Cyas takes good care of me, just as always." Julius smiled warmly, and Arvis smiled back, softly yet sadly. "Ah, but what are you doing here? There's a festival soon, isn't there? That you were overseeing?"

"Yes, I'm quite curious as well," Bloom murmured, stepping up to greet Arvis. Julius rushed over to Ishtar and Cyas and pulled them out of the room. "You don't typically leave the capital anymore and-

"I heard about Ishtore," Arvis answered softly. Without any of the earlier hesitation, he hugged Bloom and Bloom immediately rested his head on his shoulder. "I wanted to see how you were holding up. How Ishtar was holding up. Tine."

"Tine's been captured. Probably in the dungeons in Melgen."

"I'm."

"She is not!" I snapped, bristling. I knew I had no right to say anything, especially since clearly this was supposed to be a private moment, but damn it, I wasn't going to let him believe such a lie. "Tine surrendered, and so, we took her in. She's under watch like all the other Friege soldiers who surrendered, but she's got her own room and everything! Gods know you could fit two entire cities in that damned castle!"

"That is quite courteous, but how do you…?" Arvis began, stepping away from Bloom to face me. Then he froze, no doubt noticing the similarities between Mom and me. I mean; if everyone else commented on it, I'd hope he notice them. "You… are you…?"

"I'm Riona, Conall's elder twin." I crossed my arms and glowered. This was not a good day and so, I defaulted to dry sarcasm. "And to my utter and complete joy, I'm also your niece. One of them, anyway."

"One of them?"
"Well, yeah? I mean; Tine's your niece too, you know." The sudden and awkward silence that fell over the room screamed, even better than their stunned expressions, that no, they hadn't known. They hadn't known at all. I supposed Aunt Tailtiu had meant for it to be secret or something then… I'm sorry, Aunt Tailtiu…

"I…" Arvis looked at Bloom, who found a spot on the ground interesting. Hard to tell if it was shame that he hadn't known or… if he had known or… oh, whatever. Not mentally equipped for dealing with that. "When did they even court?"

"Uncle Azel and Aunt Tailtiu started courting… I think Aideen told me it was after the Silissean Civil War? Certainly the two were together during the massacre. Guess they wanted it to be a surprise or something? Or, you know, thought there would be a lot more time to tell before meteors tried to crush their friends." I was rambling. Speaking as I thought. "They had two kids, up in Silesse. Arthur and Tine. Both are with us in Melgen now. Arthur's been living in Silesse ever since Uncle Azel was killed. Right in front of him too and…" But even as I babbled out those thoughts, I saw Arvis wince and instantly, guilt flooded me. Then annoyance at me feeling guilty because it was freaking Arvis, but… even though I hated him so much… "I'm rambling. Sorry." He still deserved to learn of all that in a better way than me blurting it out. "I really thought you all knew."

Especially when he was just standing there, wincing and being shocked. Just taking all the barbed words. "I'll take my leave."

I made sure to walk until I was down the hall, but then I ran all the way back to 'my' parlor and returned to my books. Books made sense and books didn't make me feel awkward. Well, these ones, at least. Whoo boy… next few days were going to be oh-so-much fun. Especially with that as the first meeting. Ugh...

Over the next few days, things were… interesting. And not just me being very awkward around Arvis. Julius apparently couldn't decide if he loved his dad or hated him. One minute, he was laughing and fretting over Arvis, dragging him around to the market and everything. The next? Mocking, patronizing… it was just plain uncomfortable. Especially for me, since I had such strong familial bonds. Though the constant changing just made me feel like I was constantly having to be on edge, watching and waiting. And though it was most noticeable with Arvis, I had started to notice it happened elsewhere. One second, he was polite to servants. Then he'd turn around and threaten to kill them for something as simple as 'walking too fast'. It was tiring, and so, I started finding excuses to be 'conveniently not around'. I felt horrible about it. Absolutely horrible. But at the same time, it was such a relief…

"It's funny how easy Alster's castle is to climb," I whispered, letting myself relax and doze on the roof. All stretched out like a cat. Like Mursi… gods, I hoped the children were okay. I hoped Inanna, Anat, and Sandas weren't overwhelmed with their leopard-kittens. I hoped Hestia was behaving for everyone. "I'll have to remember that." Lots of things I'd have to remember, truthfully. Layout, defensible positions, where patrols typical were… well, maybe not that last one. That might change. The layout and defenses, though? Not a lot you could change about either. Especially the former. "Might as well use this all to my advantage." But I hoped Julius left soon. I wanted to return to everyone. "Ugh…"

Sighing, I pushed myself up so that I was sitting and I used the sun to guess where 'west' was. Then I looked over that way, like I could see everyone if I looked hard enough. Ridiculous, of course. I hoped they were okay. I wished there was a way I could tell them that I was fine. That the worst thing was dealing with Julius's mood swings. That the only thing keeping me away was a promise. I hoped Yuria was okay, and that she knew I would be there as soon as I could. I had promised, after all.
The wind gusted, and kicked some leaves into my face. One directly into my mouth, in fact. I coughed and sputtered, glaring at the offending things as the wind carried the pieces away. Then I turned to 'face' where the wind blew from. The north. Leonster, Leif's home, and our current 'goal' for the journey. If I squinted, I thought I could even see it on the horizon, set up on an elevated cliff. Supposedly, it was one of the most defensible castles in all of Jugdral, with its primary weakness being attacks from above. And, of course, needing enough soldiers to man all of the defenses. I wondered if they had enough now. People fighting for their lives… fighting for their freedom… and somewhere there, Uncle Finn was leading them. I hoped he was okay. I hoped I'd get to see him soon. Meet him soon, rather. Had he even been there when I was born? I couldn't remember what I'd been told.

"Uncle Finn… you'd better be okay," I murmured, letting the wind catch the words. Maybe he'd hear them or something. "You and everyone else who is fighting there. We'll help as soon as we can. I promise." Promises… promises… I had to be careful not to make too many. Too many promises and oaths were what killed Eldigan, after all.

I stayed there on the roof for a while longer, before deciding that I did need to head back inside. So, I climbed down, but not to the ground. This path wasn't good for that. Instead, I climbed into a window I had left open specifically for this and swung inside. And… uh… nearly kicked Arvis in the face because he'd apparently been by the window. Oops.

"Are you all right?!" I yelped, panicking automatically. Sure, we were probably going to kill him if this war kept on going but there was a distinct difference between 'killing in battle' and 'almost broke his nose because I came in through a window'. "I'm sorry! I didn't think there would be someone near!"

"I'm fine," he reassured. After another moment of recovery, he walked around me to close the window. "I managed to get out of the way in time. Probably should've looked before I tried to close it." He then frowned, his hands moving like he was sketching out what just happened to try and make sense of things. "Were you climbing down?"

"I've been on the roof." I crossed my arms and tried to not fidget. This was the first time I'd ever been alone with him. I tried to avoid him, for my own sake. "So, yes, I was climbing down. Castle is easy."

"Maybe it is something in the blood." He chuckled, amused. "Conall is quite good at climbing and whenever we had to find him, we knew that to be one of the first places to look." I wasn't surprised he was good. He and I had learned together, after all. "I'm also good at scaling up walls, though I didn't do it nearly as often."

"You are?" That was surprising. He was a mage, after all, and mages didn't normally have the strength for that. "Really?"

"I locked myself out of my study often, and Aida never did teach me how to pick locks. Taught Cyas, though, who taught Conall and Ishtar." He chuckled again, smiling at some memory or other. I resolved to have Patty teach me, just so that Conall wouldn't be ahead! "Was it not too cold up there?"

"No, the sun keeps everything warm. Sunshine does that, after all." That sounded so incredibly stupid. Just what I needed. "Well, I…"

"I keep expecting some sort of brutally honest comment." He continued smiling. "Not attempts at keeping polite."
"Er… because of that first meeting?" I still felt bad about that. "Did I apologize? You really should've learned better than… um… wait, word order." I scowled when he laughed, though he was quick to muffle it. "I'm trying to apologize for bluntly telling you that your little brother was killed in front of his son. And that you had a nephew and niece you never knew about."

"You must've taken Conall's tact." He kept on laughing, softly. There was a tiredness to him, though. "But no, I simply find myself anticipating it because of Conall."

"Conall has always been the tactless one." I shrugged. "I think Shanan once theorized it was because he was so shy when we were little, so he didn't pick up on social cues as quickly as me. I think it's just him being him, though. Larcei is as rambunctious as I am, and she's almost as tactless. Sometimes."

"I see." He nodded, accepting the explanation. "I must apologize for thinking that, though. You two are two completely different people. It's not fair to expect the same behavior from you."

"From what I've heard, the two of us ended up being quite similar. Right down to having wolves."

"You have a wolf?"

"She's in Melgen, but yes. Hestia." I shrugged. "Pretty funny, really. But do you want me to be brutally honest or something?"

"I think it might be healthier than you constantly biting your tongue." He had noticed, then. "I don't know why you would worry about hurting my feelings, considering everything, but…"

"Well, since you're encouraging it…" Who was I to refuse the chance to…? "Well, to be blunt, I hate you. I hate you so much that becoming like you is one of my worst nightmares, right up there to seeing all my friends and family die. Which, by the way, you inflicted on Mom, despite your claims of loving her and despite the trust she had in you. Way to go there, betraying her like that. Rendering her best skill useless to the people who mattered most to her."

Arvis didn't say anything to that. He remained quiet and… well, not quite impassive. I did see him narrow his eyes slightly in pain. But he didn't say anything. He… he really meant it. He wanted me to stop biting my tongue and…

"You took so much from me." So, I kept on going. "I should've had more time with my parents. I should've had more time with the people they called family. I should've grown up not just with the ones I did. I should've grown up with Leif. With Nanna. With Arthur. With Tine. With Patty. With Febail. With Fee. With Ced. And not only did you steal all that from me, but you stole Conall from me. Thirteen years ago, you ripped away my twin!" I couldn't help but scream that last sentence. I really couldn't. Because even though I knew he was alive now, doing okay now, that pain was still there. It probably always would. "I should've grown up with Conall! I should've been able to tease him, to hug him! I shouldn't have the barest of memories of him, though at least it's more than my parents! I should've been able to know what my parents looked like from my memories, not pictures! I should've been able to remember more about my mom than how she smelled and her laugh! I should've been able to remember more about my dad than the oil he used to tend to his swords and the lullabies he sung! I should've… I should've…!"

I was about to start crying. I really was. I saw Arvis move forward, like he was going to wipe away the tears I hadn't shed yet, but he checked himself in time. Good. If he had, I probably would've slapped him. Or set him on fire. I looked down at the floor to make sure I didn't give into temptation. I needed either touch or line of sight, after all.
"But, you want to know something? You want to know the worst part of my life right now?" I pointed sharply towards the window. Towards outside and the world around us. "There's a whole bunch of children who are saying the same damn things, and it's *my* fault! Because just as you slaughtered Dad, broke Mom… I've done the same! And not even just to so-called 'enemies' either! But our allies! Our allies who trust us! We stole them from their children who should've had so much more time! Who deserved more than a broken world and a lifetime of tears!"

Now I was actually crying, the tears hitting the stone floor, overwhelmed by everything I was feeling. Not helped, of course, by remembering that poor girl in Ganeishire, the one who threw mud at Seliph because she was so angry at having lost her entire family, lost them because they had followed our orders and had died. I'd remember that little girl until I died. I wondered if Arvis could say the same. He didn't let on one way or the other. Just continued to listen. Continued to let me scream.

"This is no storybook war! It's not a war between angels and demons! It's a war between people, with all their messy complicated intricacies of good and evil turning it into a pile of blood and muck! Which means that every single fucking battle, people die! Good people! People who deserved far better ends, and deserved far better lives! Like Iucharba! Like Ishtore and Liza! Like every other person who I'll never learn the names of! Doesn't matter what supposed side they're on, because every person in this war is just trying to do what they think is best! Meaning there are hundreds of families shattered just the same way mine is, and there will be hundreds more! Just like you, I *sacrifice* them for what I hope is a better world for all! And will it? *Will* it be better? Because your supposed better world certainly wasn't better for some, even before all this hell with the Loptyrians!"

Now that one got a wince. Like he was all too aware, especially now, how much he'd messed up. And not doing anything about it. Or couldn't do anything, if Conall was correct. I was still in the dark about a lot, I knew. So, I'd just focus on what was right now. What was right in front of me. And that was… that was…!

"So, I hate you! I hate you, I hate you, I hate you! And I hate that I'm anything like you! If I could somehow tear our shared blood out of my veins without tearing out the blood I inherited from Mom, I would!" I was breathing heavily. My throat hurt. My eyes burned. But I kept on going because I had to say it felt *really* good to finally say all of this to him. "But I'm going to make sure that I don't follow your path. Because unlike you, I'm not alone. Unlike you, I don't think I know best. Unlike you, I am well aware that I am a sheltered brat, with pretty ideals. So, I do my best to *listen*. I might not always understand, and I might not always put the pieces together right away, but I do my best. Even now, I try to think of answers to the questions that froze Ishtore so that I can help the next person with those same fears. Even now, I try to think of how to convince people to give us a chance, since we failed so miserably with Iucharba." Even now, I agonized over not taking Inanna's words as seriously as I should've when I first met her, and almost got five children killed because I was naive. "And I will cling to those differences with everything I have!"

Still no answer. I did catch a couple of winces, but he remained silent. So silent that I caught echoes of my words. That was okay, though. The words were drying up, and the emotions were calming from the raging fire that burned through me. I just had… I just had a few more things to say.

"But the reason I bit my tongue is because none of what I just said, screamed… whatever… none of that justifies throwing barbs just because I can. I want to be *better*. It's hard, but I don't want to contribute to the cycle of revenge that's been plaguing Jugdral ever since the Loptyrian Empire fell. There's a thousand and one things I could say, but I bite my tongue because it's purposely gouging old scars just to get a reaction. And that's not right. That's not fair. My own pain doesn't justify me
inflicting pain on others." Now, granted, Arvis was either directly responsible for so many things that had gone wrong in my life, or indirectly. I probably could get away with it. But if I could bite my tongue with him, then I could bite my tongue with just about anyone. Sort of. Hilda might get barbs still. "And this ramble doesn't really have a conclusion, so if you're going to actually say something, now is probably a good time."

I waited. I waited for what felt like a long time. And then he whispered, "you have been raised well." The words were soft and gentle and when I jerked my head up, I saw he was smiling in what seemed to be relief. "Very well, in fact. Alicia would be glad."

"Wish I could've heard that from her." I rubbed harshly at my eyes, getting rid of the tears. No more crying. Not in public, at least. "Well, this has been an absolutely lovely talk. So glad we had it. Have a good rest of the day!"

I began to storm off then, and I heard him turn away, making sure to walk the opposite direction. But I stopped because I remembered something Oifeye had said. About how he understood why Arvis wouldn't do anything because of how Julia had gone 'missing' and how Conall's disappearance had torn his own heart. And I ground my teeth because even if it felt great to finally scream at him, I also felt bad for being so brutal about it. And I felt bad because no matter how much I hated him, he was still a father who had no idea where his daughter was, and based on Conall, it seemed like Arvis had at least tried to do a good job. Or something. Really, I wondered why I had to have a conscience, but I sighed, shaking my head. Because I couldn't really be selective about when my conscience decided to speak. So, I turned right back around and jogged to catch up to him, snagging him by the sleeve to make sure I had his attention.

"Did you think of more you wanted to say?" he asked. And the expression on his face said that he would gladly listen, so that I wasn't stuck with the thoughts anymore. "What is it?"

"It's not related to earlier," I mumbled, making sure to keep quiet. This was stupid. This was so stupid. But I… "Julia is fine. She's safe. I've seen her." I glared at him before he could react, though. "And if you use that knowledge to hurt her, I will tear out your spine and beat you to death with it. And that's a promise."

Now I stomped off, feeling a bit better. I was sure that after I calmed down, I'd probably feel lighter as well. Which was actually a bit annoying, but you know what? Whatever. I could deal. Though it was a tad awkward when I turned a corner and saw Ishtar leaning against the wall. Clearly been listening in, though her sheepish smile hinted that it was less because of wanting to eavesdrop and more because we had been in the hallway and I'd been loud.

"So, I was actually looking for you," she began slowly. I tilted my head curiously, surprised. "I was wondering if you might want to have tea with me. There's this delightful citrus tea that's from Agustria that I was about to try."

"Yeah, that sounds good," I replied. Then, I winced at how croaky I sounded. "Wow, I sound like a little mouse. Squeak, squeak."

That actually made Ishtar laugh, surprisingly enough, and we ended up having a pleasant conversation over tea. Turned out that she had read The Assassin's Bride as well, and we spiritedly debated over the characters and plot. I… honestly, I didn't think I would have such a fun time with her again. Because of what I had done. I was glad, though. I did like her, after all.

Thankfully for my comfort, Arvis left a couple days later, returning to Belhalla to continue preparing for that festival or whatever. The morning after that, though, I noticed Ishtar wasn't in her
typical morning places and none of the servants had seen her. So, I went to her room to check in. When a knock only got a mumbled groan, I opened the door to see she was just waking up, having slept in for the first time since I'd been here. But I couldn't help but giggle a bit when she looked over at me groggily. After all, her hair...

"I'm sorry," I managed through the giggles. This was so rude, and yet… "Your hair is making it look like you have cat ears. It's cute."

"Conall says the same thing," she yawned, sitting up. She leaned forward and rested her head in her face, like she had a headache. "Don't know what I do to cause that."

"Sometimes, hair is weird." I shut the door behind me and walked over to rest my hand on her forehead, checking for fever. "You're clammy…"

"I didn't sleep well. Bad dreams." She sighed, but smiled wanly at me. "But neither here nor there. I'll get ready…"

"Here, why don't I brush your hair and you rest a bit more?" I kept up the smile, but really, I was worried. She was unusually pale. "There's no emergency or anything. No meetings and whatnot."

"Mmm… yeah, sure, that sounds good." She grabbed a bit of her hair and frowned at it. "I can't remember when I last brushed it."

"Then I'm definitely brushing it. It's always a pain to brush it by yourself when you haven't done it in a while." I rested a hand on her shoulder. "So, let's get comfy, shall we?"

Ishtar did insist on changing out of her nightgown, as she'd woken up with a cold sweat and it clung awkwardly. I got a bowl of water to help with detangling and found her brush, and before long, we were set up on her bed, with her wearing a much simpler dress than I was used to seeing on her and me carefully brushing her hair to minimize the damage. She hadn't been joking when she said it had been a while, based on how many I found. I wondered if it was just bothersome, since it was so long, but that didn't fit her personality. It did, however, remind me of those first few years after the Belhalla Massacre. The memories were vague, for obvious reasons, but I remembered Shanan having to help Aideen with her hair often, because she was too tired to brush it herself.

"Thanks for doing this," Ishtar murmured. She sat differently than normal, more slumped and relaxed. "I was just going to pull it into a ponytail again."

"Braid might hide the tangles a little easier," I replied absently, more focused on the tangles. I didn't want to just tear them apart, after all. "Then again, when it's this long, it can be a pain to braid it. Unless you doing an over the shoulder braid."

"Quite true. I think it once took Ishtore an entire afternoon to…" She trailed off and I saw her clench her fists in her lap. No tears or anything. Just that very subtle gesture, like she was grasping her emotions and pulling them back. "Hey… um…"

"Hmm?"

"How did they die?" Her voice was very, very soft. "Liza and Ishtore. How did they die?"

"You sure you want to know?" I waited for her to nod before even thinking about continuing. I wanted to be sure. "Let's see… Liza died first." I focused on dealing with a particularly bad tangle, mostly to keep myself from freezing at the memory. "She had been sent out with Melgen's soldiers, to meet our army in battle."
"And fell to someone's arrow or something?"

"Might've been a bit quicker. Then again, might've been slower." This was so awkward. But if she did want to know, then she deserved to. "No, she had been strangling me, and after I managed to kick her off, Hestia… well, she'd been near."

"Throat torn out by angry wolf? Wait, no, you mentioned an arrow might be quicker."

"Yeah, Hestia crushed her arm to disable her first. Though, she might've been aiming for the throat, and I shifted the target when I kicked her off." I moved to a different section of her hair, moving slowly to make sure I had her hair tangle-free. "Regardless, her arm was crushed, and I didn't get the tourniquet on in time." That reminded me. When I got back, I was going to make sure I had multiple things needed for makeshift tourniquets in my medicinal pack from now on. "I'm sorry."

"You tried to save her? For some reason, I'm not surprised." She looked over her shoulder briefly to smile wanly at me. She was paler than before. "And Ishtore?"

"Ishtore went a little mad after Liza's death. Understandably so." After all, we killed his love, and destroyed both his dreams and hers. "I fought him for a bit, but then he and Arthur dueled. Arthur won." I laughed bitterly, remembering his final words. "He asked that we try to keep you and Tine safe, by the way."

"Of course he did." She sounded so very tired now. Unsurprised, and tired. "He was always like that. Told him not to joke about dying. Gives death ideas." She took a very deep breath, noticeably trying to keep calm. "You told me they were buried together. And there's incense?"

"Incense, ribbons, flowers, candles… probably more things." I finished brushing her hair and began to braid it back, so that she wouldn't have to worry so much about brushing it again today. I had a feeling she'd be too tired, again, for it. "Though the people of Melgen didn't like why he was in charge, they did like him. So all of the Friege soldiers are buried in their own graveyard, and they've left their own offerings, though I couldn't tell you what they were off the top of my head."

"Let's see…" Ishtar brought her hand up to begin counting things off. "Flowers are universal… incense is Grannvale… ribbons are Isaachian…" She twisted to look at me curiously. "What are candles for? I don't think that's something from the Manster District, and I know it's not Thracian. They set up little memorials and don't bother with graves. The ground is too hard there."

"It's a Silessian thing." Though, I had to admit being curious about what she meant by Thracians not bothering with graves. But that was for later. "In Silesse, they keep lights shining or burning for the dead. Bad luck to leave them in the dark." I hesitated before continuing. "Since Arthur spent most of his life in Silesse, he believes in that practice the most and insisted Ishtore and Liza, at least, have some. Picked the candles himself."

"I see." She brought her hand back down to her lap and smiled wanly again. She was still quite pale and tired. "Thank you. For telling me, and for burying them properly."

"Of course." I finished her braid and smiled at her. "In Isaach, we believe that those who are not properly buried have a higher chance of becoming vengeful ghosts. It's not something I'd wish on anyone." I was, admittedly, unnerved enough that I'd seen so many already. No matter how glad I was that I could tell Mom that I loved her, I worried their appearances meant they hadn't been able to properly rest...

"Well, I can think of a few. Like Manfroy." Her eyes suddenly became very dark with fierce and bitter hatred. I frantically tried to recall the name and eventually remembered that I'd heard it
twice. Inanna and Conall's letter both said he was the leader of the Loptyrians. The Archbishop. "Manfroy deserves something worse than that."

"So, anything in particular he's done? Besides being the leader of the Loptyrians?"

"Well, he's why-

"Ishtar?" Julius's voice meandered through the door, stopping Ishtar cold. "Ishtar, where are you?"
And I was ready to let him know, but I saw Ishtar flinch, wince, and curl into herself in quick succession. Making herself smaller, less of a target. "Ishtar!" And she flinched again, grimacing and even covering her ears. That… that told me something was just plain wrong here. That shouldn't be the reaction to the person you love calling your name. "Ishtar!"

"Lay back down," I whispered quickly, moving everything off the bed to the nightstand and pulling the covers back. Looking confused, she did just that and I covered her up. "Hide your face a bit." I waited for her to do that, and then I went to her door and opened it slightly, just in time to see Julius about to knock. "Oh, good timing, Julius." I made sure I kept the door open just enough so that I could block Julius from coming in, or even really see inside. So that the only bits of Ishtar he could see was of her laying under the covers. "Ishtar isn't feeling well. I've been helping her this morning."

"She's not?" Julius asked, with a strange look in his eye. It almost seemed like annoyance instead of concern. "I'll get Cyas, then." And he was gone before I could stop him.

I shut the door and listened for any footsteps approaching before turning to Ishtar, who was sitting up again. "So, do I need to come up with symptoms?" I asked her. I could already think of a few. One of the many benefits of living with a healer. "We might be able to fake some flushing or what not." Which… sounded way worse than I meant, and if I'd been home, the others would've died from laughter. But this was far too serious. "And maybe..."

Ishtar, however, simply shook her head. "No, Cyas has done this for me before," she explained. That only made me frown. "He'll know what to say."

"I see..." I sat on the bed and saw how relieved she was. And that just made my thoughts tumble out before I could bite my tongue. "Okay, what the hell is going on? You haven't laughed and your smile is way stiffer and sadder, and I thought it was because of Istore and Tine, but what you just said, and the flinching before and..." I sighed and shook my head. Caught myself a bit late, but... "No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't be making demands or anything."

"You're worried about me, though."

"I am. I've been worried about you, and Conall. Diarmuid has as well." I gently touched her cheek, feeling again how clammy she was. "Hard not to be, especially now."

"I'm sorry..." She sighed, looking down. "You've probably already seen it, but things are... complicated." She grimaced. "And I..."

"If that's all you want to tell me, that's fine." I made sure my voice was as firm as possible. "I don't want to push. Me pushing isn't going to help, especially when I don't know what's going on. For all I know, I'll end up pushing you off a cliff." I made a face, feeling helpless. I hated feeling helpless. "I'm just worried, as I said. You were much happier when you were with Conall in Isaach than..." I trailed off as I remembered something. The fear in both Ishtar's eyes and Conall's when I had implied... And I remembered what Julius had done to the person who... but even if I was right, it wasn't my business. Not unless she made it mine. Because it was her story to tell. "Sorry, I'm
"It's fine." She smiled bitterly. "You must think me ridiculous."

"I think you conflicted, and in pain." I took her hand and squeezed it reassuringly. Or, at least, I hoped it was reassuring. "Hey, there's something Oifeye said to Conall, and I want to make sure you know it too. It might not be a comfort, considering everything, but if you ever want to escape, if you ever want to turn from your current path, you will always be welcome with us."

"And what if it's too late to turn?"

"For someone as kind and moral as you are? I highly doubt you'll do anything that would make it 'too late'. And if you find that hard to believe, then remember that the Crusader Hezul once served Emperor Galle as a knight." Or so I'd learned through my various talks with older people in Isaach. "But neither here nor there. Just remember that I mean it, Ishtar. You can always find safety with us."

"I…" She sighed, and smiled sadly. And slightly in disbelief. Like she wasn't sure if she could turn from the path, no matter what I said. "I'll try."

Sadly, I sensed that was all I was going to get from her, so instead, I focused on getting her as comfortable as possible until Cyas entered with barely a knock and with a wry smile that hinted that this was actually a fairly common thing. I did wait for Ishtar to reassure me before I left, and made a point to hug her before I did. And I made sure to shut the door behind me, so that no one would spy or anything. Seriously, this just seemed wrong. 'Complicated'... that seemed like an understatement.

A quiet scream and quieter sob caught my attention and I ran towards it, wondering what was going on. I nearly panicked when I saw blood spilling over the tiles, so much that it was difficult to not step in any. But all thoughts froze when I found the source of the blood. A very dead servant, based on the gaping gash on her chest. One that… reminded me of Yuria's scar...

"Ah, I feel better now." Standing in front of the dead servant was Julius, completely splattered with blood. He smiled sweetly, yet coldly, when he saw me. "Oh, did Cyas get to Ishtar, Riona?" he asked me. I could only nod. "Good. He's very good at tending to people." He tilted his head curiously, still smiling sweetly yet coldly. Like the frigid cold of the desert nights. "Hey, would you like to go to the market with me?"

"You… you might want to change clothes and clean up a bit first, Julius," I replied, keeping my voice even as possible. Some instinct screamed that I should just go along with this. That I shouldn't call attention to how demented this was. "You're going to ruin your shirt."

"I suppose that's true." He sighed gustily, glaring at the corpse. "I told her to not move. Made it far messier." He shrugged, uncaring, and smiled at me again. "Afterwards?"

"Of course." Okay, what the hell? What the hell? "Let's get something for Ishtar. Being sick sucks."

This was definitely more than 'complicated', damn it!

I made a point after that day to not avoid Julius, to give Ishtar and Cyas some breathing room. And I learned very quickly that such sights weren't at all uncommon. One second, he'd be giggling and laughing, insisting we 'crush the bugs eating the flowers' like a little kid. The next second, he was killing a gardener for 'not weeding properly'. Then he'd be genuinely confused why I'd not be
happy about it. Just as confused as why I didn't find the screaming of dying people as funny and enjoyable as him. And I thanked my ability to keep a smile on at all times because I quickly learned that if there was even a hint of me being sad, Julius would try and eliminate the 'cause', which would typically be some random servant. It was utter madness. Complete and utter madness. And, again, I began wondering just when Julius would be leaving, not just because I wanted to return to the others, but so that I didn't have to deal with this anymore.

"Here, you should drink this." A mug of tea appeared in my vision, and though I took it automatically, it took a moment for me to process I was holding it. Took another for me to think to look up and see the person who gave it to me was Cyas. "You've been staring at the same page for a good while," he explained softly. I blinked slowly and remembered that I was in the library, attempting to read. Not research or anything, just a book Ishtar had recommended. "I figured you must be tired, since you normally read books as quickly as a starving person might devour food."

"You shouldn't gorge yourself after starving for so long because you'll just throw it all up," I rattled off automatically. I'd said those words to many people over the years, mostly those who survived the labor camps. "Er… I mean…"

"You're right. You shouldn't. But if someone doesn't tell them, they'll likely try to eat it all, damn the consequences." Cyas sat across from me with his own book, smiling sadly at me. "That mix is something Aunt Alicia would make me, when I was tired but trying to study anyway. She wrote down the recipe for me, since I liked it so much."

"Oh?" I took a sip and smiled. It was a good tea, and it made me feel warm. Not just because… you know… drinking something hot. But because this was something Mom would make, so… "I can see why you like it."

"Not just the taste, but how it helped me focus without making me jittery." He flipped open his book, moving quickly to a page. "But I've been meaning to ask. How are you holding up? You've been distracting Julius a lot these past few days."

"If you all have to deal with him like that every day, I am seriously surprised you're not dead from exhaustion." I felt horrible about it, since he was my cousin and I loved him, but I felt like I was balancing on a knife's edge, and if I slipped, I'd cut myself in half. Never thought I'd be in a situation where I'd preferred a battle, but here we were. "I'm sorry, but…"

"Ha… you can tell you have only a little bit of experience with it because you can be so honest about it." Cyas ran his fingers of the page, and I saw there was a diagram of lungs. He must be looking up some sort of medicine or condition, then. "But I completely understand. I have dealt with the same, and Arvis and I have long worried about Conall and Ishtar because they bear the brunt of it. Julius prefers their company above all else." And something told me that if I didn't have a 'convenient' excuse, I'd be joining them in Belhalla to join that 'special' little group. "Honestly, no matter what Julius says, I think another reason why he hates Reinhardt is because Reinhardt will protect the two of them."

"I see..." Speaking of Reinhardt, I hadn't seen him since that day in the market, where Julius almost killed a child. I wondered where he was, besides clearly away. Leonster? Melgen? Gods, I hoped he wasn't really at either, just for the soldiers' sakes. "So, can I just kidnap Ishtar? And Conall, when I next see him?"

"Depends. You want Julius to annihilate you?" He said the words seriously, and I thought of what I had overheard, about Conall mentioning to Ishtar 'what would Julius do' if he had stayed in Isaach with us. I… "I'm just glad Julius still lets Conall go to Thracia. That's where he is now, actually. Helping Arion out with a project."
"Let's him?" This was wrong. You couldn't cage people. "Oh dear gods, what the hell is wrong with him?" I shut the book I'd been trying to read and leaned back in my chair, sipping more of the tea. "Did he really just go insane or something after what happened to Deirdre? Because this seems less like insanity and more like using insanity as an excuse, but hell if I know. So, what could it be?"

"I don't know." The words were soft, and unimaginably sad. "I don't. I'm certain Arvis does, as well as Conall and Ishtar. But they don't say. They can't say. Trauma, denial, or some combination. But for now, they can't choke out the words. So, I don't know what it is. I only know what it isn't."

"Well, what have you ruled out?"

"Both I and my grandfather have checked his health numerous times. He's always been prone to illnesses, but they have gotten worse over the years. So, that gives us the opportunity to check for… other things." He sighed and pushed his book away to give me, and the answer, his full attention. "But there are no signs of any known mental sickness, or any signs that his numerous illnesses have damaged his brain in any way. I've ruled out every single poison or drug that I have been able to find in the encyclopedias."

"Dark magic?"

"Only guess I have, but…" He pinched the bridge of his nose, like he was trying to ward off a headache. "I've done literally years of research and I purposely specialized in breaking curses so that I could try and fix this. But I've found nothing. If this is a curse, then perhaps it is one only a god can break. If it can be broken at all…"

"Conall mentioned he was trying to help Julius…"

"Ruining his own health in the process." He smiled bitterly at me. "I want to believe otherwise, but I'm moving into the 'acceptance' stage of things. And it is that Julius might not ever return to how he used to be. Go back to the sweet, shy child who only wanted to do what was best for his people."

"So, it's like he's got… I don't know… rabies or something?" Aggression, paranoia, terror, confusion, paralysis… the worst part, though, was that most of the time, when the symptoms appeared, you were already dead. Skilled healers could treat it if caught early, but… "Maybe some kind of new disease that's like it?" Now that I thought about it, the Loptyrians had been horribly isolated. Wasn't it possible that they got diseases the rest of us wouldn't know much about? Especially with all the close quarter cramping and lack of sunlight and mold and all of that? Ah, but that being said… "Oh, wait, you mentioned there wasn't a sign of illness?"

"No sign of illness that had any effect on the brain. No inflammation of the spinal cord or brain." He flipped to his book to show me a diagram, just to make sure I knew what he was talking about. Which I did, but only because of Aideen. "No sign of anything, as I said."

"That's why you don't know." I sighed and set my now empty mug on the table before laying my head on it. Conall had tried to tell me, but he couldn't choke it out. Trauma and pain… and I had focused on reassuring him instead of waiting for him to try and find the courage. I should've done the latter. But he had been hurting so much… "I suppose…"

"He'll be leaving soon. He has to attend that festival." He smiled faintly. "You'll be free soon."

"That sounds so wrong." Worse, though, was that others would be trapped. "Ugh…"

"I know." Even that faint smile disappeared for sadness. "Believe me, I know."
There was really nothing more to say to that, so I went back to attempting to read, and he continued whatever research he'd been doing. When he was done, he left, taking the empty mug with him. I tried to read one more page before sighing and giving up, deciding to try and take a nap or something. That seemed like a better use of my time than staring blankly at words that all blurred together. I could try and read again afterwards.

However, as I headed down the hall, I noticed something odd. Up ahead, there was a man with short blue hair and dressed primarily in white, with a blue cape. At first, I thought he was just a visitor or something, but whoever it was caught my eye and beckoned me to follow him. And… well… curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought it back. So, with a shrug, I jogged to catch up, only for him to continue ahead, clearly leading me somewhere. And when he glanced back to see if I was still following, I nearly tripped over my own feet because I knew him. I knew him in an instance. There were so many pictures of him, and quite a few were with Mom, because they were such close friends.

"Sigurd, I really hope you all are just bouncing between the realms of life and death and that you haven't been trapped as ghosts on this side." I muttered, using sarcasm and annoyance to hide my shock. He smiled slightly, like he caught my real meaning. "So many of you have appeared lately as well. Is it because we're actually fighting and the like? Well, we always did say that you were watching over us. Though, I do hope you've at least been looking away when I make-out with your son. Awkward otherwise." This time, Sigurd's ghost grinned, his eyes still somehow dancing with the good humor I heard so much about. "Wish you could talk. Got a feeling I'd love to hear your remark to that. But hey, if you are popping about, please go see Seliph or something."

He didn't really react to that, or at least, react in a way that I could tell. Instead, he kept on leading me until we were at an out-of-the-way and disused hallway, one that was even a bit dusty to highlight how abandoned it was. It looked like it led to a room that was just as dusty as the hall, though the plush bed and lace curtains hinted that it had once been a comfortable room. Curious despite myself, I walked around and found some items on the nightstand. Trinkets, mostly, but there were a few pictures. I picked up one and blew off the dust. To my surprise, it was a picture from Sigurd's army. Uncle Lex, Uncle Azel, and Aunt Tailtiu all laughing at something. And the other pictures were similar. I even found one with Mom.

"Was this Aunt Tailtiu's room or something?" I whispered. I set the pictures down and looked back at the door, seeing Sigurd's ghost still there. Seeing me looking, he pointed to a back corner, one I couldn't quite see from where I was. The bed and curtains hid it. "Over here?" I walked over cautiously, wondering what he would want me to see. Then I gasped and ran over because Julius was there, curled up in a ball. "Julius?!" I fell to my hands and knees by him and leaned down until I could see his face. Well, as much as I could. He was clutching his head, so his arm blocked a lot. But I could hear him wheezing now, whimpering, and I could see him crying from pain. "Julius, hey, can you hear me?"

"R-Riona…?" he whimpered. He tried to look at me, but hissed and coughed violently. So violently that his body jerked. "I…"

"I'm right here, and I'm only going to leave if you tell me to." Curiously, I glanced back at the door and saw Sigurd's ghost was no longer there. He had… he had wanted to make sure someone found Julius. The stories were right about his kindness. "Whatever you need or want."

"...Hug?"

"Of course." Carefully, I gathered him up in my arms and actually leaned back against the dusty, musty bed so that I could cradle him against my chest. Right now, he felt so small, like a child.
"There we are..." I pulled him as close as I could and rubbed his back. When he coughed again, again violently enough to jerk, I kept him as still as I could, ignoring how he accidentally elbowed me. Not like he could help it. "It's okay. It's going to be okay."

Julius clung to me until... whatever this was... subsided enough for him to relax. But he didn't pull away. He continued rested against me, so I continued holding him. I saw him clutch his chest briefly, and wondered if he was why Cyas had been looking up something with lungs earlier. But I supposed it didn't matter. I just had to focus on the here and now, which was that Julius wanted someone to hold him while his lungs were trying to kill him.

"Thank you, Riona..." he croaked eventually. He shakily clung to my shirt. "I..."

"Easy, Julius," I murmured, still rubbing his back. I kissed his head and pulled him a little closer. "Your throat probably hurts."

"It does..." His breathing was a little shaky too. "Um... I've been meaning to ask something, though."

"Oh?"

"Can you tell me about Seliph?"

"Seliph?" I couldn't help but smile. Seliph had that effect on me. "Well, I'm probably a bad person to ask. Heavily biased, you see. I love him."

"That already tells me he's a good person." He laughed softly. "So?"

"Yes, he's a very good person. One of the kindest people I know. Always willing to listen and to learn. Frets over all the fighting. Stubborn. A relentless teaser." I giggled, though I did wonder how he was. How everyone was. "Always forgets to brush his hair. Can never remember where he put his boots."

"He sounds silly."

"He's very silly. Very silly, and very kind." I looked down at Julius and kissed his head again before drawing him close. "He loves you. Seliph, I mean. He loves you very much."

"He does?" He sounded surprised by that. Surprised, but happy. "So, he'll save me?"

"If you need saving, then of course he will."

"What about you?" He looked up at me then, and I was struck by how... different he seemed. Sad, sweet, kind... nothing like what I was used to. "Will you?"

"Of course." I smiled at him. "I promise."

"Good." He smiled back, a smile much sweeter and sadder than any other one I had seen him wear. It softened his expression and made him look so young. It was like I was looking at an entirely different person. "I tried to ask Conall, but I didn't say it right, so he ended up trapped. Him and Ishitar and Cyas and everyone else." He leaned into me again. "But I knew that Seliph would. You and Seliph and your friends... you'll make everything fine. I knew you would."

"Julius?" I peered down at his face, and saw he was dozing. "What do you mean by that?"

"You'll save me, and so, you'll save Jugdral. I knew I could believe in that. I just have to hold on, as
long as I can. Thank you for reassuring me." His words were drawn out from sleep and exhaustion. "You're warm. Like sunshine. Aunt Alicia was like that too."

"Was she now?" I had… absolutely no idea why he was saying any of that. "Well, if it comforts you, then I'm glad. I love you dearly."

"And I love you." He smiled in his sleep. "I'm glad I could say that."

He fully fell asleep then, before I could try and get more clarification. So, I just continued holding him, feeling like no matter how tightly I hugged him, before long, he'd somehow slip away. Which made no sense at all. Nor did how different he had looked or acted. It just… what the hell was going on? Seriously, what the hell?

Gods, did I ever need an adult.

The next few days were surprisingly quiet. Julius was more even-tempered. No extreme mood swings. No random murders. Honestly, that should've been my first warning sign that something weird was going to happen, and happen all too soon.

"Princess Caitriona?" A maid's tired, yet polite, voice slowly drew me out of my reading. I was back to my research and notes, so it took a moment to look up, but when I did, I smiled. And vowed to never let myself be called 'princess' again. I was sick of it. "You are requested, your highness," she explained, bowing. "I will lead you."

"Do you know why I'm requested?" I asked, carefully setting my things to the side and standing up. My back and legs protested the movement, as did my neck. "I purposely stay away from important things."

"I am not sure, your highness." She kept looking down. "I only know it was Prince Julius who asked for you and…"

"I understand." I quickly headed for the door, and her. "Well, lead the way then. I'd rather give him no reason to kill you."

"Thank you, your highness." She glanced up briefly, and smiled. "It is easy to see how you are Prince Conall's twin. You are both very kind."

"I find it sad that such a simple thing is considered a kindness." But I did make sure to smile back. "I hope… well, never mind that. Please, show me."

She bowed again and led me to the main hall. There I saw a few things. One, there was a group of soldiers with a bleeding and heavily bruised prisoner hidden behind their legs. Two, Reinhardt was finally back, and stood with Ishtar and Cyas on the other side of the room. I wondered if the two things were related, but decided that he wasn't. I didn't know much about Reinhardt, besides the short time I 'traveled' with him and what I had heard from Conall, but the fact that Conall genuinely liked him told me that Reinhardt would've had whoever this was treated and tended to immediately. No, Reinhardt being here was a coincidence, and one that I didn't care to think on. Mostly because as soon as I arrived, Julius took my hand and pulled me up front with him, by where Bloom was standing with rigid, ramrod posture. I briefly debated asking why Julius wanted me up here, but everything froze because I saw the prisoner and… and even with the blood and dirt and bruising, I… I recognized Uncle Finn. Especially since he glared defiantly at Bloom and held his head high, with all the dignity in the world… the exact same way Diarmuid would glare at someone.
"Well, well… and here I thought I would have to request Reinhardt's assistance to see you captured," Bloom began formally. He had a slight smirk on his face. "Legendary Lancer, Duke Knight, and one of the few survivors of the traitor Sigurd's army..."

"Do you mind getting on with it?" Uncle Finn asked dryly. His glare faded for a droll look, another expression that was eerily like Diarmuid's. "Unless your intention is to kill me by droning on and on until I bleed out."

"No, such a thing would be too simple a death for you." Bloom was definitely smirking now. I hated it. I wanted to slap it off his face. "A public execution would be better. A show of what happens to those who rebel."

"We can even put his body on display!" Julius laughed, apparently delighted by the thought. I looked at him, completely horrified. "String him up until he falls apart!"

"No, don't do that!" The words were out before I could stop them, and all eyes turned to me. Uncle Finn's droll look fell for confusion. "Ignoring how that's just beyond wrong, don't kill him!" I pleaded. I focused on Julius, instead of Bloom. "Please?"

"Huh? Why?" Julius frowned heavily, clearly annoyed. "I think it would be a good way to help the people despair and all. They should know the price of resisting."

"The only reason people are resisting is because you do shit like that!" And this was stupid. This was so incredibly stupid. I'd seen him kill people for lesser things than yelling at him. Yet, here I was. "Don't you know what happens when you push someone into a corner? The same damn thing an animal does! Bite back! Because if you make it so that they don't have anything to lose, then you have enemies with nothing to lose and everything to gain!"

"Are you… arguing with me?"

"And hoping there's some speck of logic behind all the need for blood and mayhem!" I glared, my temper flaring even more. "Or at least some speck of intelligence!"

"What did you say?!” Julius growled, and brought his hand up, dark flames burning around it. There were shouts, protests, but he stopped just short of actually touching me. And he stayed in that position, as if he was frozen. Or as if he expected a different reaction than the one I had. "No flinching?"

"I have spent my entire life being hunted by people who declared my parents and their chosen family traitors." I spoke slowly and clearly and made sure to look him in the eye. "I have spent my entire life watching people die. Death is normal. Pain is normal. Always has been." I snatched his wrist and pulled his hand closer to my face, so that the magic actually touched my skin and made me bleed. And so that I had a good grip on him, just in case I needed to set him on fire. "So, go on. If you want a life so badly, then take mine. If you want people to despair, string me up. Won't make you different from every other person who has tried to kill me, from the pegasus knights in Silesse's Civil War to the Loptyrian Priests and the Deadlords to the Friege soldiers. It's no special thing, but if you're so hungry for bloodshed, then take mine."

"Are you not afraid?"

"No." I held myself with every bit of poise I could, and tightened my grip on his wrist. I also focused a bit on the hair by his face, to have another target. Just in case. "I am Caitriona, the eldest daughter of Alicia of Velthomer and Chulainn of Sophara. The eldest daughter of a healer who fought death at every turn and a warrior who courted death with every step." The left side of my
face was numb, and the trickle of blood from whatever wounds were there made my neck itch and
my collar stick to my skin. But I refused to let myself falter. "And dying has never frightened me."
We stood there for a long while before his magic dissipated. When it did, I let go of him. "So, no
killing me?"

"No, I love you. And you're like Conall. You're not afraid of me. That's too precious to destroy over
something so silly." He smiled with all the sweetness of poisoned honey. "What would you like to
do with the prisoner then, Riona?"

"I'd like it if he was treated, truthfully."

"Very well." Julius turned to Bloom, who seemed startled by everything. Didn't blame him. Even I
couldn't believe that had worked. "Get a room prepared for him. Cyas?" And then he turned his
attention to Cyas, like he had no doubts Bloom would listen without question. "Get someone
trusted to tend to our new guest. I want you to heal Riona. Without a scar."

The next hour or so felt more than a little unreal. Cyas tended to my face. Ishtar helped me change
into a clean dress. Reinhardt stood guard while I headed to the kitchens and made up something
quick and light to eat. And he carried the tray for me as he led me to where Uncle Finn was resting.
And continued to stand guard when I took the tray and headed in. Got a feeling Ishtar ordered it.
Just in case Julius decided that he did want to kill me for yelling at him.

Uncle Finn, for his part, was in a very nice guest room, and while he hadn't been treated with
healing staves, it was clear that he'd been treated well with medicines and what not. And they had
some very good bruise balm since the bruising on his face was already healing some. He had been
sitting up, leaning against pillows with his eyes closed, but he opened them as soon as I walked in,
watching me closely as I set the tray down.

"Um… I'm not sure how hungry you are, but I made you something light to eat," I explained, even
though it was probably obvious because of… you know… the tray. Well, not that I had made it. "I
also made you some ginger tea, and brought you some water."

"What were you thinking, offering your life for mine?" Uncle Finn asked softly. I still winced,
though, because this wasn't anything like how I had imagined, and hoped, my first meeting with
him would be. I expected to watch his reunion with his family, watch his first meeting with his son,
and only then be able to hug him. Not… this… "Risking your life for mine?"

"You're family." I didn't look at him, though. I could easily imagine what Oifeye's reaction would
be. Gods, if the others found out... "And I might've panicked."

"You panic and offer your life?"

"If it meant that Diarmuid got to meet you like he's been looking forward to ever since we learned
you were still alive? If it meant you got to see Nanna again, who prays for your safe return? If it
meant that you got to reunite with Aunt Lachesis, who is nervous but excited about seeing you
again? If it meant Oifeye and Shanan would see you again after so long? Then yes!" Now I
glowered at him. "Yes, I'd offer my life!"

"As if you don't have people waiting for you!" He scowled right on back before his expression
blanked. "Wait, Lachesis?"

"Yeah, she's with us." I found a chair in the corner of the room and dragged it over. "Besides, I was
in less danger than you think." I snapped my fingers to conjure up a little bit of fire. "Fjalar blood.
Fire. If I can see it or touch it, I can set it on fire. Might've still gotten badly hurt, but I would've
prevented a second strike long enough to run." I tossed the flame up and absentely swirled it in the air before using it to warm the tea back up. "Yes, it was still stupid, but I can be smart about being stupid." I waited for a reply, but only got silence. "Well?"

"Sorry, I just got hit with bunches of things at once and now have no idea what thought to try and follow." Uncle Finn sighed and leaned back against the pillows. "Tea?"

"Ginger tea. Here." I passed it too him, softening a bit. "I'm sorry, though. It probably was pretty horrible to see the daughter of a friend offer her life for yours."

"My niece, practically. Which makes it even better." He sipped the tea slowly, and I couldn't help but beam at the words. "Ah, I suppose I should ask-

"Oh, I've called you 'Uncle Finn' my whole life. Oifeye and Aideen and Shanan told me all sorts of stories, and I have lots of pictures with you and Mom." I grinned, barely keeping from bouncing in my seat now. "So, I'm extra sorry?"

"You have the same grin Chulainn wore whenever he was trying to get out of trouble with Alicia." He continued sipping the tea, but at least he smiled now. "Now, you mentioned Lachesis."

"I... er... did, huh?" That could've been done better. Damn it. "We got attacked by Loptyrian priests and afterwards, we were looking through the dungeons. Mom's ghost, though, led me to a hidden set, and we found Aunt Lachesis there."

"I see." His smile softened and he briefly touched the ring on his hand. His wedding ring, still worn. "I knew she was alive."

"And she's likely going to make a full recovery! Though, it's going to be a lengthy one." I stood up then, smoothing out my skirt. "I'll tell you more about how later, and some stories. I'm sure you're exhausted. By breakfast, I should also not have a guard, so he and I could talk about the best way to escape from here. I didn't know if he wanted to head to Leonster or Melgen, but either way, I was certain he wanted to get out of Alster as quickly as I did."

"That does sound good." He hesitated a moment before reaching up and ruffling my hair. "It is good to see you again, Riona. You were barely a few weeks old when I last saw you."

"Ah, that's right. You all left Silesse soon after Lester was born." The last time Quan and Ethlyn saw anyone in the army and the last time Uncle Finn saw most of them. "Think I got bigger?"

"Only a trifle." He laughed at the joke. "In the morning, then."

"Yep~!" I leaned down and kissed his cheek before skipping out the door, making sure to close it behind me. When I walked down the hall, though, Reinhardt continued to follow me. "I suppose what I did was exceptionally stupid if you're guarding me this closely."

"And yet, I cannot be surprised, since Prince Conall does much of the same thing," Reinhardt replied, keeping perfectly polite. Yet I swore I heard the sarcasm and exasperation in the voice too. "Cyas and Lady Ishtar are arranging things for a nightly guard for Sir Finn."

"I'm glad to hear that." I looked at him curiously. "So, where have you been anyway? Or is that classified?"

"My lady was having me check on the Hunted children in the area." He spoke very carefully, and I frowned a bit. "Sadly, soon after I arrived, someone arranged their escape. I'm sure they're far out
...I see." And I had to smile, but knowing Ishtar, and knowing how Reinhardt acted, I saw in between the words. Ishtar had Reinhardt free some children, while we kept Julius busy here in Alster. "So, am I to expect you as my shadow the entire day?"

"At least for the rest of the afternoon. He's likely to have forgotten by evening."

"Well, I hope you don't mind standing around and watching people read, because I was planning on going back to my books."

"I have had to stand guard through a full formal dinner. I doubt anything could be more boring than that."

"I've heard so many horror stories about formal dinners. Are they really that bad?"

"Worse."

Reinhardt actually told me a few stories of some of the formal dinners he had to stand through, and it fascinated me just how many rules there were about it. Not even basic manner rules, but things like 'you could only talk to the person on your right during one course, and the next course required you to talk to the person on your left'. So weird! And terrifying. Glad no one cared here about such things.

The day after Uncle Finn 'arrived', if you can call it such a polite term, I learned that Julius would be leaving soon to attend that festival. Ishtar would be leaving with him, though not Cyas or Reinhardt. Cyas was meeting his grandfather to the south, and Reinhardt was escorting him there, so both would linger here in Alster a while longer. But that didn't matter. My promise to stay was only to Julius, after all. So, all I had to do was wait those last few days...

"I do wish you were coming with us, Riona," Julius grumbled. The last few days, he'd been his normal self. Sweet, with the feeling that you had to work to keep him that way. "Do you have to stay here?"

"I made a promise," I replied, smiling. I kissed his forehead, right on his Mark. "You make sure that Ishtar has fun at that festival, okay?"

"I will." He smiled at me and gave me a big hug. "Promise that you won't die?"

"Yes, I promise." Probably both the easiest and hardest promise I had ever made. "Be good now, okay?"

"Okay." He smiled and headed into some room. It had a Warp Circle or something? I didn't really pay attention. I just made a note of where it was, for my 'mental map'.

"We'll be off then." Besides, Ishtar was also saying goodbye. "Please try to minimize the trouble you get into?" she requested with a little smile. "Conall is going to have a heart attack when I tell him about this."

"I'm his twin, so he should know trouble likes to cling," I replied. I hugged her and, after a moment, she hugged me back. "Remember what I said. And I'll make sure Tine stays safe."

"Thank you." She smiled sadly as she stepped away and, after glancing around, slipped a piece of paper into my hand. "A letter for her."
"I'll make sure she gets it." I already knew where I could hide it. "Stay safe."

"I'll try."

She left then as well, disappearing into the room, and I quickly returned to mine, shutting the door behind me before pulling out the pack I'd been preparing. Clothes, medicines, food, books from the library that I was 'borrowing'... I tucked Ishtar's letter to Tine in one of those books and then shoved the pack back into the closet. Then I had planned to go to Uncle Finn and talk to him about the best way to escape. However, as I was heading out the door, I noticed a small note on the nightstand on the desk. At first, I thought it was the note I'd written to say goodbye to Cyas, but then I remembered that I'd put that note with my pack, so that I wouldn't forget. So, frowning, I picked up the note on the nightstand, wondering what the hell, but I smiled as soon as I saw the words: 'Where we always talk in Tirnanog.' After all, there was only one person who could've written this.

So, instead, I snagged a book and headed outside, scaling up the wall to the roof. Sure, I could have just climbed up the ladder or stairs or whatever, but this was more fun. Besides, when I got there, I used the chuckle I heard to figure out where Shanan was hiding. He found the trick amusing, after all, but he was invisible to the eye.

"You even brought a book." Shanan flickered into view, sitting down on the roof, Balmung briefly shimmering at his hip, even through the sheathe. "Hey there, little wolf," he greeted. I sat down beside him and hugged him tightly. "You look well. Mostly. There's some scabbing."

"I'm fine," I reassured, grinning at him. I was so glad to see someone from the family. "Few instances aside, I've been pampered."

"And have all your memories?"

"Yes?" I frowned briefly before groaning and facepalming. "Didn't even think about that." And now that I thought about it… "How's Arthur?"

"Furious and worried. Ultimately, despite us making connections, it did most resemble his trauma, where Friege soldiers captured family." Yep, should've thought of that sooner. Oops. I'd have to make it up to him. "Everyone else, by the way, is worried sick, but otherwise fine. I think we've drained Melgen of all its milk and honey, though. And Hestia has been incredibly despondent. And probably looking for a way to sneak off to find you."

"I am never going without a weapon again." I sighed and flopped onto my back, looking up at the clouds. And prayed that Hestia was behaving for everyone. "How has the fighting been going? I haven't heard anything here."

"That's because there's been no fighting." Shanan shrugged and laid down too, probably more to hide better than actually relax. "After Yuria told us what happened, we sent a group to try and find you and fortified the defenses. With Alster having its hands full with Leonster, and Darna apparently deciding to play the waiting game…"

"Fortified defenses mean they can't strike from behind as easily." I still sighed in relief, though. I was glad our soldiers got a chance to breathe. "Speaking of Leonster, Uncle Finn is here."

"He's what?"

"Here. Wounded."

"He is?" Shanan frowned. "I didn't see anyone when I checked the dungeons, though."
"Have you been touring around the place while sneaking notes into my room?" I glowered at him, not happy he took that big of a risk. "You better have told someone you were coming here, by the way."

"I left a note." He smiled innocently and I facepalmed again. If anyone ever asked where I learned recklessness from, I was blaming Shanan. "But why is Finn here?"

"He got caught. I didn't really ask how it happened or anything." There had been many other things to talk about. "He wants to come to Melgen with me, though."

"Really?"

"Yeah, Bloom figured out the ruse, and there's still bunches of fighting around Leonster, so it would be suicide to try and enter, especially alone." I was also sure that me accidentally blurring that Aunt Lachesis, Diarmuid, and Nanna were all in Melgen proved too tempting for him. "How long have you actually been here, Shanan?"

"I got to Alster late last night, and I spent it watching patrols. Balmung hides me from sight, but I'm still physical. Imagine bumping into something."

"Oh, I don't know. We could use that to mimic a poltergeist." Actually, that could be an interesting tactic. "Ah, whatever. So, can we leave tonight? If Uncle Finn is able to? I miss everyone."

"Well, my original plan had been to grab you tonight, but when I got inside, I saw you were able to walk around and everything." He laughed. "But yes, we should be able to. Providing Finn can. We're definitely not leaving him behind."

"Sounds good to me." I sat up and then hopped to my feet. "I'll go let him know. Do you think you can sneak into the armory?"

"Weapons for you and him?"

"Well, at least his. They took his lance and he says it was special."

"The one Quan gave him. Yeah, I'll prioritize that one." Shanan sat up now too and tugged me down so that he could hug me and kiss my forehead. "Sorry it took me so long to get here to help."

"It's fine. Me staying so long meant I was here when Uncle Finn was captured." Which… was a very good thing, for multiple reasons. "I'll climb back up here in an hour or so to let you know what Uncle Finn thinks, okay?"

"In an hour then."

Leaving the book behind (because I knew Shanan would put it with his things), I made sure to reenter the castle through a window, and then made my way to Uncle Finn's room. We had to talk quietly because there were still some guards, but he agreed that the sooner we left, the better. Just in case. So, I sent the guards on a menial task to get them away while I helped Uncle Finn pack a few things, and, after letting Shanan know and working out a meeting place, spent the day pretending that I wasn't trying anything. I noticed Bloom keeping an eye on me, but my smile seemed to trick him into thinking I'd wait a little longer before attempting an escape. At the least, there hadn't been any guards when I snuck out of my room later that night, and only one by Uncle Finn's room, who he easily knocked out. And tied up and shoved into the closet.

"How did you learn to tie things so quickly?" I asked curiously, helping Uncle Finn walk to the far wall of the castle. Shanan had found a hidden door there, apparently. "It's impressive."
"Dew taught me, actually, since he had to sometimes use ropes to climb out of trouble," Uncle Finn explained, laughing a little. I wondered how and why that would happen, and decided I'd ask Patty when I got back. "Is this the door?"

"Looks like it…" It was covered in vines. Vines that… moved in the opposite direction of the wind. "Hi, Shanan."

"Hey there," Shanan replied, his form flickering into view. He grinned at Uncle Finn, who only raised an eyebrow. "Aw, come on, at least pretend to be startled."

"Riona was a very nice niece and warned me," Uncle Finn replied with great dignity. I could only snicker. "Looks like you got that growth spurt you were convinced was coming."

"I did, indeed." Shanan's grin softened to a smile. "Ah, I feel like I'm going to cry. So, let's get moving quickly before I waste time with that. I'll hug you later. Just a warning."

"Just be careful. I'm still injured."

"Boys, boys, shall we be off?" I joked, making my voice as haughty as possible. Shanan rolled his eyes and pushed open the door, snagging a very beautiful, and unusual, lance and tossing it to Uncle Finn. "Yay, you did get it!"

"Yes, though it took so long that I didn't get a chance to secure you a sword, Riona," Shanan murmured, smiling apologetically. I just shrugged, since I hadn't expected that. Bloom was really meticulous about his armory; it was why I hadn't stolen one for myself. "But you're right. Let's be off. I'm sure they'll send pursuers quickly."

"This might've been easier if someone didn't come ahead alone, you know."

"Are you scolding me?"

"You're the idiot who decided to come rescue me alone, so yes!"

Shanan and I continued to bicker all the way out of the city and down the road, to Uncle Finn's intense amusement. At least, I hoped he was amused, since he was smiling and chuckling in equal measure. He could have just decided to ignore the two crazies and imagine being with his family, his whole family, for the very first time. I could totally understand that. Sadly, though, the good mood couldn't last long. As expected, Bloom did send pursuers quickly, and so, we had to head off the road and into the woods, weaving through to mask our trail. At least, that had been the theory. The thunder magic that nearly hit us when we emerged from the trees showed that someone had anticipated that. I knew it was Reinhardt even before I saw him.

Reinhardt tried to say something, no doubt a call to surrender. But none of us even gave him the chance. I set his sleeve on fire as soon as I caught sight of him and Shanan and Uncle Finn both struck. Of course, I couldn't say this was easy. It should've been. But Uncle Finn was still injured, and Shanan prioritized protecting me. And, you know… magic. With that stupid ability he had to cast two thunder spells far too quickly. So, it wasn't as simple as it should've been. Because I was a liability, and damn it, I hated that. Worst part, though, was that I couldn't really escape, because Reinhardt had ambushed us on the forest's edge. All I could do was use my fire to try and keep Reinhardt unbalanced, hoping that it would be enough…

A growl. A snarl. Both sounds achingly familiar. Automatically, I pushed past Shanan and Uncle Finn, despite their yells and rushed for Reinhardt, my focus on the sword he had on his belt. Reinhardt, startled, aiming a thunder spell towards me, but that was when Hestia leapt out of the
woods and bit Reinhardt's arm. Not hard enough to crush the bone, but enough to mangle it and
distract him enough for me to steal his sword and crack him over the head with the pommel. Then I
jumped back, to get some distance, and Hestia went to my side, snarling and growling. Because of
of course she was.

"Someone didn't behave for the others," I whispered. Still, I was glad to see her. We were a 'set',
after all. "Might want to get that arm treated, Reinhardt."

"More than 'might'," Reinhardt sighed. He set his tome in his holster and pulled out some bandages
from his small pack. "Well, I was losing anyway. Good enough excuse to retreat."

"Keeping the sword, by the way." It had a good weight to it. "Now then…” I glanced at Shanan
and Uncle Finn, who both nodded. "Hestia?" Hestia growled at Reinhardt again, but led the way
into the woods, with me following closely. Uncle Finn was right behind me, and Shanan brought
up the rear.

I didn't try to even think about how that whole thing went, from being mildly helpless to Hestia's
convenient appearance, until we were a good distance away from Alster and had settled down for
camping. Even then, I attempted to figure it out for all of five seconds before shrugging and just
deciding to go with it. Far be it for me to be thankful for some good luck. Besides, there were other
things to do. Like start the campfire or try to not drown in Hestia-fur because she was very insistent
on getting as much of it on me as possible! Not that I minded. I had missed her too.

"Aw, who's the sweetest wolf?" I cooed, giving Hestia a good rub all over. She barked and panted
happily, her tail wagging fast enough to kick up dirt. "Who's the sweetest wolf who really shouldn't
be out here? You are!" I kissed her muzzle and got a lick in return. "Oh, I'm going to hurt the others
for letting you get so far from them. Yes, I am!"

"Must've snuck out shortly after I did, given that timing," Shanan noted. Now that we were
camping, he was tending to Uncle Finn's injuries, which had reopened thanks to the fight.
Reopened and bled for a while. "She was definitely still in Melgen when I left."

"Probably snuck out in everyone's panic when someone left without telling anyone." I gave him a
look, and he pretended to not see. Uncle Finn covered his mouth to hide smile. "You're going to get
such a lecture from Oifeye."

"I've gone out on my own before."

"And you're getting one from Aunt Lachesis. She was already quoting Agustrian idioms at you."

"That's how you know you're in trouble," Uncle Finn joked. Shanan rolled his eyes, but got the last
of Uncle Finn's injuries bandaged. "Besides, can't you hear Lord Sigurd scolding?"

"A warrior's true strength is in the bonds with their comrades, not their ability to kill or crush the
enemy," Shanan sighed. He helped Uncle Finn get his shirt back on and then rested his head on
Uncle Finn's shoulder. "He would say that every time we got new recruits."

"He did." Uncle Finn smiled softly before looking over to where I was across the fire, still rubbing
Hestia. "That is?"

"Hestia, my wolf," I answered, pulling off lots of shed fur. No one had brushed her properly while
I'd been gone, it seemed. "Is this the part where you say that Mom would've had a heart attack?"

"No, I think Alicia would've killed the person who let you have it," Uncle Finn replied without a
second's hesitation. Shanan snorted, hinting Uncle Finn had a point. "Or threaten to until Chulainn
sweetened her mood. That one is more likely."

"Was it?"

"Chulainn knew exactly how to get away with things. Or how to get you two get away with things."

"I see..." That made me smile. I wished I had seen that, though. "Ah, well, should we set up watches or something?"

"I'll take first watch." Uncle Finn looked down at Shanan who... was actually already asleep. I had never seen him fall asleep so quickly. "I think he'd gone without sleep a couple of days."

"I wouldn't be surprised. He still feels guilty about Deirdre's kidnapping. And Conall's." I sighed and hugged Hestia. Truthfully, I was most annoyed at him coming alone because I knew it was because he thought it was all his fault. "I'll take second watch. Hestia will likely wake me up around then anyway."

"If you're certain."

"Yep." I laid down on Hestia, using her as a pillow, and tucked my stolen sword close to me. I'd have to figure out a sheathe or something for it later. "I'm just as stubborn as my parents, so no trying to talk me out of it."

"Of course." Uncle Finn chuckled, and looked up at the sky. "Melgen is still quite a few days away. Get some rest while you can."

"I will..." Actually, I was already dozing off. "Love you, Uncle Finn. Wake us up if something weird happens..."

"I will."

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Surprisingly, the rest of the trip to Melgen was surprisingly peaceful. I mean... I still didn't relax until we were right at the front gates of Melgen, but still. The worst worry was Uncle Finn's injuries, and even then, thanks to medicine, they were slowly healing. Needed proper healer treatment, but he wasn't on the edge of death or anything.

So, it was with a bright smile that I waved to the guards standing above the gates. The night-guards, since the sun had long set. "Hello!" I called, jumping up and down to make sure I had their attention (as well as I could since Hestia was pressed into me). Of course, I immediately felt bad when the two closest ones were startled so badly that they nearly fell! "Ah, I'm sorry! Are you okay?"

"Lady Riona, you're back!" one of them replied, not answering my question. They quickly bowed and saluted, and their fellow followed suit. "And King Shanan and Hestia have returned as well! Everyone has been worried." Their posture stiffened when they saw Shanan was supporting Uncle Finn. We had decided to push through to Melgen, which unfortunately had pushed Uncle Finn a little past his current limits. "Who is this one, my lady?"

"Uncle Finn, Diarmuid's dad. And Nanna's." I grinned, and I was even giddier when they instantly relaxed. "So, do you mind opening the gates? I'll climb up if I have to, but I think Hestia will protest separating herself from my leg!" Hestia barked right then, confirming the words. "Pretty please?"
"Of course, my lady!" They signaled someone, and I thought I saw someone else rush away, possibly to the castle. "Welcome home, my lady! You have been missed."

"Good to be home."

The gates opened easily, and we walked through the streets, waving at the people who peeked out of their windows. All of them waved back, and a few even laughed and smiled. I wasn't sure how much people liked it when Hestia howled a greeting at the castle gates, but I'd run around apologizing for that in the morning, because it did get the gates open quickly. Of course, I was almost immediately bombarded by people, since it seemed like I'd been right. That third guard I'd seen leaving the town walls had been someone informing the castle that we had returned. And practically every single soldier seemed ready to greet us!

"My lady, are you well?" Niamh asked when she pushed through the crowd to reach me. She actually rubbed at her eyes, fighting back tears. "We had been praying that your rank and relations have kept you safe, but…"

"They kept me as safe as possible, and I promise, I am just fine," I reassured, hugging her. She hugged me back, sighing in relief. I had a feeling quite a few of those from Isaach would have to be extra-reassured, considering the typical fate for females who were captured by the enemy. "I'm sorry to have worried you. Has everything been well here?"

"It has been." She pulled away, still rubbing at her eyes. "Ah, but here's-"

"Lady Riona!" And I got tackled off my feet by most of the children, with Anat and Sandas reaching me first. "We missed you!" Anat declared, clinging to me tightly. Her leopard-kitten hopped onto my shoulder and nuzzled my cheek. Mursi nuzzled my neck, via climbing onto my chest and thus being half on me and half on Sandas's head. Not that Sandas seemed to care. "Don't leave for so long again!"

"I won't," I reassured, doing my best to hug… all of them. Seriously, they swarmed me. I only didn't have the babies here! And Inanna, for some reason. "Oh, I'm so sorry…"

"I told you all to be orderly with this!" And there was Inanna, with her leopard-kitten around her shoulders again. "Goodness, there are others who want to hug her," she scolded, cradling one of the babies in her arms. "At least let her stand up. Don't know how you all are even getting hugs when you're in a mass like that."

"It's nice to know I'm liked!" I couldn't help but laugh and slowly got myself up, with the children still clinging to me. And the leopard-kittens attempting to balance on me before they decided to return to their owners. "I'm back. Has everything been okay?"

"Yes, though we did have a bit of illness sweep through. That's why only one of the babies is out here." Inanna handed me him and I bounced him a bit, feeling a tad awkward. But he smiled and gurgled, so he at least seemed happy. "But no, we've been fine. All of us, and all of the refugees… if anything, we've just been wondering when someone is going to ambush Melgen."

"I see." I handed the baby back to her and hugged her, kissing her forehead. Then I glanced around, wondering how Shanan and Uncle Finn were doing. I saw that they were similarly swarmed, but Hestia was near Uncle Finn, helping to keep people from crowding him. "I'm glad to hear that. I was worried."

"You were worried? You're the one who got captured!" She scowled. "Don't do that again."
"I will certainly do my best!" I noticed the crowd actually parting for some reason, and smiled when I saw it was because Oifeye was making his way through. "Oifeye!" Inanna helped me extract myself from the hugs, and I made a point of giving them individual hugs and the like. But as soon as I did, I ran for Oifeye, hugging him as tightly as I could. "I'm home."

"Welcome home…” Oifeye breathed. His voice was thick, and he sounded a bit choked up. I felt tears hit my head. "Welcome home. Are you all right?"

"I'm just fine," I reassured. I had a feeling I'd be saying that for days upon days. "I'm sorry. I just knew Yuria couldn't-"

"Given the circumstances, I know you made the best decision. However, we are going to take steps so that you never have to make that decision again." He kissed my head and held me tightly. "But you are okay."

"Yep. And I got some information, and I stole some books from their library. Including a couple of history ones I think you'll like." I felt more relaxed than I had in days. Weeks, even. Hugging Oifeye really proved to me that I was back home. "Oh, Uncle Finn is here. Bit of a story. But he's with Shanan, and Shanan needs to be scolded for coming after me on his own."

"Lachesis and I have been crafting a lecture just for that." He let go of me, and kissed my forehead. "Still, I'm not the only one who has been worried, as I'm sure you know."

"Damn right!" And Ulster appeared from nowhere and actually picked me up, kissing my cheek and hugging me tightly. "The crowd is making it impossible to get through, so I'm stealing her," he explained with a grin. Oifeye simply laughed. "Think I saw Shanan, so I'll hug him later."

"And I shall go greet him now, and passive-aggressively remind him that we are an army," Oifeye sighed. He continued smiling, though. "Until later."

"Until later!" Ulster continued carrying me, to my intense amusement, all the way out of the crowd. "Seriously, they parted for Oifeye, but when we tried to get through…"

"I missed you too," I murmured, hugging him around the neck. I half-felt like crying because I was just so glad to be home. "So, am I about to be bombarded again?"

"Well, of course." We cleared the crowd and he set me down. "It's us. But I'll let the others take that over, since I got you to myself."

"Riona!" To my surprise, the first person to run over was actually Arthur. And he hugged me without hesitation, unlike every other time. "Hey, you okay?" he asked. I hugged him back, smiling. "They didn't…"

"I'm just fine," I reassured. Yep, I was definitely going to be saying this for a while. "Sorry to worry you. How have you been?" I pulled away to look him over. "No bandages… good, you've healed. How's Tine been?"

"Tine is fine, and I'm fine, and seriously, you are the one who got captured." He rolled his eyes, but smiled. "You so owe us treats or something."

"Pick a favorite. I'll make it for you." I looked over and saw the others (save Seliph, for some reason) standing a bit away, smiling at me. In the middle of the group was Yuria, who was crying yet smiling. "Hey! So, I'm a bit late, but I kept my promise!"

"You did…" Yuria agreed. She rushed over and hugged me. "I never doubted it!"
It seemed like everyone else had just been waiting for Yuria to get her moment, because the others rushed me. Lana clung to me and demanded to give me a check-up later. Larcei jumped on my back and refused to let go until Diarmuid pulled her off so that he could hug me. Lester clung to my arm like he was afraid I'd vanish if he let go, and Fee swung over his shoulder so that she could reach me and give me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. Iuchar only briefly hugged me, but declared he had written a poem to mark the 'momentous occasion that was my safe return'. No Leif or Nanna, which could be expected, and no Tine, which was a bit sad but more than understandable. Nor could I see Patty, which was a trifle disappointing, but I did remember how awkward she'd felt about 'intruding' before all this.

I was about to ask where Seliph was, but then Larcei, with a giant smirk, shoved me right into someone, and I knew even before I looked up that it was Seliph. "Well, hello there, handsome," I greeted, teasing. He simply stared at me, not saying a word. "Bewitched by my beauty?"

"Always," he whispered, smiling before kissing me fiercely. I heard the others whistle, laugh, and holler, but I didn't care. "Missed you."

"Sorry to take so long." I kissed him again and then leaned up to whisper in his ear. "I met Julius, and got some information."

"Something tells me that'll be serious and not fun." He ran a hand through my hair, absently playing with the strands. "Can you tell me tomorrow?"

"War Council tomorrow."

"That bad, huh? Got it." He kissed me again, and smiled slightly. "You were captured and you went information hunting."

"Well of course. Got a bunch of notes on the political situation in the past, and from the reigns of the Crusaders. To help us for planning for afterwards. I had to do something to soothe my pride." I grinned and stepped away, glancing over at where Uncle Finn was. And I saw Leif and Nanna pushing their way towards him. "Oh, there's those two."

"Leif thought a hike might help me, so we were out. Nanna came to get us." Seliph frowned a bit. "Who are they heading for?"

"Uncle Finn." And now I looked at Diarmuid, who had frozen in shock. Ulster and Lester actually had to support him. "Come on! You should meet him! He's been looking forward to it!"

"And in light of the good mood, I promise to not trip you," Larcei laughed, taking his arm. Giggling, Lana took his other one. "But we'll help you get through!"

"Allow me!" Iuchar laughed, already forging ahead. The rest of us followed, because like hell we were missing this! "Might as well use my bulk for something!"

"Perfect!"

By the time we made it over, Leif and Nanna had already gotten to Uncle Finn and were hugging him, laughing about something. Though Oifeye wasn't near, as I would've expected, Shanar and Hestia were. Hestia, however, immediately came over to lick Diarmuid's hand, no doubt sensing his nerves. Shanar glanced over curiously, but smiled. After a moment, he quietly got Uncle Finn's attention and pointed to Diarmuid. Uncle Finn frowned a bit in confusion before his jaw dropped, his eyes going wide. Recognizing Diarmuid, even though they had never met...

"Hey, Father..." Diarmuid managed shakily. Tears slipped down his face and he ran over to hug
"Glad to meet you…"

"I'm glad to finally meet you too, Diarmuid," Uncle Finn replied. He hugged Diarmuid back, and I thought he was crying. "Finally… finally…"

The two fell silent, having no more words to express how they felt. Nearby, Nanna hesitated a bit, but Diarmuid quickly pulled her into a hug, the first time Uncle Finn got to hug both of his children. Leif grinned and escaped, running over to join us, though our group took turns running over to Shanan to greet and scold him.

"Glad you're back," he greeted me, smiling. I smiled back, beaming. "Seliph was so despondent. Took a lot of effort to get him to smile."

"Did it now?" I asked, a tad amused. Seliph just shrugged when I smiled at him, but he did quickly escape to join the group around Shanan. "Well, I'm glad to be back. You and yours been okay?"

"We've been okay. Recovering." Leif reached down to pet Hestia's head. "Oh, Patty is cooking for you, by the way. That's what Nanna said, at least. Something about it being a better way to say 'welcome back' than getting crushed."

"I'm surprised by the warm greeting!" Not really. While I'd love for it to be a good sign of the rapport we were building with our soldiers, I knew no small part of it was simply them being glad that one of their Scions of Light was out of enemy hands. Though, I knew there were some who were simply genuinely glad to see me. "Thank you for watching out for Seliph."

"We're cousins, and I can't really do much. But I can at least take a bit of the burden." He smiled warmly, and I smiled back. "And… ah! There she is!"

I almost asked what he meant, but then I saw who had joined us in our little corner. Aunt Lachesis, who smiled so happily at the sight of Uncle Finn hugging Diarmuid and Nanna. It was obvious that she didn't want to intrude, but Diarmuid noticed her and looked up, beaming through the tears. Nanna picked up on it then and made sure to move out of the way, taking Diarmuid's hand as Uncle Finn looked over and smiled so warmly and so sweetly at Aunt Lachesis.

"Sorry that I decided to take fashionably late too far?" Aunt Lachesis joked, skipping over to him. Despite the words, I saw her hands shake as she clasped them behind her back. "I'll admit, though, that I had hoped I'd heal a bit more before I saw you." She made a face. "I look horrible. Still too bony and everything."

"What are you talking about?" Uncle Finn asked, cupping her cheek. He then rested his forehead against hers. "You're beautiful, just as always."

"Finn…" She smiled a bit shakily and reached up to hold the hand on her face, keeping it there. "Seems like you've still got that silver-tongue of yours."

"It is, as always, complete and utter truth. Selfina would scold me if it wasn't."

At that point, I decided to take Hestia and do some more rounds through the courtyard crowd, to talk to people, reassure them, and answer any questions. I had seen enough, and it seemed like there were quite a few people I still needed to reassure. Not that I minded. I liked talking to people, and I was home. What a relief…

"Wow, I'm gone for a few days, and your hair is a mess," I teased, brushing Seliph's hair. It was very late, truthfully late enough that one might call it 'early'. But we had all stayed up so long to
talk to everyone and enjoy the delicious treats Patty had made for me. However, I did notice that Seliph clung to my hand throughout the 'celebration', so when it was time to try to rest, I only went to my room to grab some things and moved them to his room. So now, I was sitting on the bed while he sat on the floor at my feet, brushing his hair while Hestia lay in his lap. "How did you even get it so tangled?"


"Did you get checked for it?"

"Well, it was either a hallucination or a ghost. Either-or." He scratched Hestia briefly behind the ear before resuming petting her. "But it was of Father. He was sitting on the bed next to me, and stroking my hair as if to reassure me. Swore I felt a cold spot there, but it was soothing nonetheless."

"Did you now?" I had to smile at that. It seemed to suit the man I'd heard so many stories about. "Still, not sleeping. Tsk, tsk."

"I believe I've told you many times. I'm not at my best when you're not near." He tilted his head back and smiled wanly at me. "Your presence has always given me strength. They call me the 'prince of light' and whatnot, but you've always been my sunshine."

"That's..." I went very red, very fast. He chuckled. "You said that on purpose!"

"Of course. Every word of it is true." He grinned. "But it is fun seeing you get so embarrassed."

"So mean to your love after she's returned from such a trying experience!" I rolled my eyes and set the brush to the side before sliding down to sit next to him. "And how bitterly my heart has keened at our separation!"

"You're being silly to make me laugh." He kissed my cheek and then my nose. "I really should be focused on comforting you, not the other way around."

"I was literally treated like a princess there and was in no more danger than anyone else." Of course, that was actually quite a bit of danger, but that would be something to tell later. "They even changed what scented candles they used so that I wouldn't be sneezing all the time." I wrapped my arm around his and curled into his side, resting my head on his shoulder. "I was being spoiled. It sucked."

"You're complaining about being pampered?"

"Because it wasn't you pampering me?" I smirked at him and he glanced away, blushing. "But, seriously, I'm fine. Save for the far-too-serious-for-the-occasion stuff."

"Right..." He kissed me softly and took my hand. "It is good to have you back. I was scared. There were so many ways it could've gone."

"Very much so. But I'm back. You're not getting rid of me that easily."

"Good." A knock of the door made both of us smile. "Surprised you lot even knocked."

"We were going to burst right on in, but some of us actually have manners," Larcei joked as she opened the door. Lana followed with a tray of mugs, though Lester had another tray with even more mugs. Ulster came in with a bunch of blankets, and, very hesitantly, Patty and Iuchar brought
up the rear. "Look, I know how in the stories, after a long separation, the couple is supposed to have a long night of extremely passionate sex and all, but you can do that tomorrow or something. We missed her too."

"Kind of surprised you all didn't show up sooner," I noted, standing up to help with the trays and mugs. Warm milk with honey, all of them. "Diarmuid with his family?"

"Yep." Larcei helped Ulster toss around the blankets. "Anyway, it took a while to convince Iuchar and Patty that you two really wouldn't care."

"Patty, I can understand, but Iuchar, you've been with us long enough!"

"But who am I to interrupt such a glorious reunion?" Iuchar immediately countered, making his voice and tone as dramatic as possible. To my intense amusement. "More seriously, I thought there would be more flower petals. Shouldn't there have been rose petals on the bed?"

"Please no," Seliph deadpanned. He made to stand up and help, but Lester snagged him with a blanket and kept him sitting, so he instead rested his head on Lester's shoulder. "And to distract from the idea, Fee and Arthur?"

"Fee wanted to do a patrol, just in case there were pursuers still. I think Arthur was checking in on Tine."

"Makes sense." Seliph and Lester shifted so that Hestia could escape the blanket, and then they both happily accepted the mug from Lana. "Fee will likely be by soon, then. Yuria?"

"She's watching the infirmary, so that Lachesis can spend time with her family and Lana can be here. Says she'll steal Riona in the morning for breakfast."

"Which I certainly don't mind, so instead, let me ask something," I began, debating where I would sit now. Larcei snagged me and dragged me down, and Lana snuck in between us just as Hestia laid down behind us. Just like how we'd cuddle together back in Tirnanog, though the boys didn't join in and we had a blanket draped over our legs instead. "So, did Shanan really just leave a note?"

"He did, the jerk!" Patty grumbled, scowling. She ended up sharing a blanket with Iuchar and Ulster, with Ulster in the middle. "We wanted to come get you too! We were just making sure the defenses would hold in our absence. I was even planning things based off of the last couple of times I'd been in Alster."

"Good, that's what you should've done." I made a face. Shanan, you were in so much trouble for that. Worse, though, was because I knew the reckless action was because of his guilt complex. "Oh, whatever. Happy times, happy things. Happy stories!"

"Hmm… oh! I've got one!" But just as she was about to tell us, there was a knock on the door. After looking at us, she hesitantly answered. "Come in?"

"See? I told you they'd be here," Fee commented, as Arthur opened the door for her. She was carrying a tray piled with all sorts of snacks and, to my surprise, Tine trailed in after her, smiling awkwardly at us. "Hi! I brought food!"

"Um… we didn't mean to interrupt or anything," Tine whispered. She lingered by the door, even after Arthur closed it and joined us. "So, if…"

"Sit down and enjoy the food!" Lana insisted, waving her over. Tine hesitantly did so, and squeaked when Lester threw a blanket around her, Fee, and Arthur. "Healer's orders!"
"I'm not sure a healer can order that?"

"Sure I can. Relaxing is important for your health, after all!"

While everyone got settled again, I realized something and poked Lana's cheek before leaning down to whisper in her ear. "Hey, did you talk to Ulster?" I asked, making sure to be as soft as possible. Larcei would hear, of course, but no one else. "No one said anything."

"No, I haven't," Lana replied, sulking a bit at me. She then rested her head on my shoulder. "I was too worried about you."

"I'm sorry. I'll make you something." But I was glad I didn't miss that show. And based on Larcei's wink and grin when I caught her eye, the plan with Ulster was still going. Excellent. "I promise."

"I'll make my request in the morning."

"Of course." A burst of laughter from the others confused me, but I joined in as soon as I saw why. Arthur was suddenly wearing a headband. With cat ears. "Oh my gods, Fee!"

"I told you that I'd finish it up!" Fee joked, laughing. Arthur rolled his eyes and attempted to ignore it, sitting as dignifiedly as possible. While wearing fake cat ears. Yeah, it didn't work at all; even Tine laughed. "Good, it matches well enough too. I was worried!"

"Well, sounds like the party has started here!" Diarmuid opened the door without even bothering to knock, though Nanna and Leif both yelped at the 'rudeness'. "Before you ask, Father's injury started bleeding through, and Mother wanted to treat it, so we thought we'd just leave so that they could talk serious stuff and rest," he explained. Without looking, he took the mug Seliph offered and sat down next to him, sharing the blanket with him and Lester. "And we have snacks. What a proper party! So, what exactly did we walk into?"

"Arthur is turning into a cat. Even got the ears."

"Excellent. He's always been a little catty anyway."

That sparked another round of laughter, and another bit of jostling as we tried to fit everyone in the circle and make sure no one was alone with the blankets. Then we had to do the same thing because Yuria did end up joining us, sheepishly noting that Sara chased her out to have fun with them. It didn't escape me that the other Tirnanog kids made sure Diarmuid and Yuria ended up sharing a blanket, but that was for another time. For now, it was just fun stories, starting with Patty's.

I had the weirdest family. But I wouldn't have them any other way.

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Fee

Class: Pegasus Knight; Skills: Pursuit, Adept, Critical

The 16-year-old princess of Silesse, who dreams of being a strong pegasus knight like her mother. She's always been very close with her family, enjoying a warm and loving childhood despite the trials of being in exile. It's the memory of that closeness that makes Lewyn's harshness so hard to deal with.

Bears the mark of Forseti on her lower right leg, swirls of green wrapping around her ankle almost like bracelets. Its blessing grants her increased stamina, ability to endure pain and take damage,
and an increase in speed. It also blesses her with the ability to hear the wind, allowing her to catch snippets of conversation spoken by far off people or read the weather.

Equally skilled in both weapons and magic, she switches freely between her lance and the thunder sword she inherited from her mother. Her greatest asset is her speed, her ability to quickly read the battlefield by listening to the wind, and her ability to fly, giving her a unique viewpoint of the battles.

Though she's annoyed with her father, she is delighted in having another 'sister' in Yuria, and she loves how warm and welcoming the army is. It reminds her of home, but without the shadows left behind by her mother's death, allowing her to feel like she can finally breathe for the first time in years.

Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: So, Arvis shows up up here because otherwise, he doesn't show up until like… Game-Chapter 10. Same with Hilda. Also lets me bring in Cyas, who is an FE5 exclusive char. And more Ishtar. And bringing in Julius properly.

Speaking of FE5, FE5 had the unique 'capture' mechanic which was like a reverse rescue sort of thing. Normally, you have to do battle (at like… half-stats or something like that), but you automatically succeed in capturing an unarmed person (and a sleeping person).

Next Chapter - Bonds
Chapter 40) Bonds

I ended up sleeping away the next three days, just absolutely exhausted by everything. From the second day onwards, I just moved in permanently with Seliph for a few reasons. Mostly because it was reassuring. Sleeping next to him, and waking up beside him, reminded me that I really was home. And also, it was getting cold and he was warm. Not like it was any different from taking naps together.

But despite my ordeal, the war continues. Now it's just a matter of figuring out who would move first: Alster or Darna. And where we needed to strike.

The sword I… ah… stole from Reinhardt while he was busy having his arm torn up by Hestia… well, it was a nice sword. Good weight and practically sang through the air as I finished up my pre-dawn training with the traditional 'dance' out in the practice yards. What caught my eye was the reinforcement between the blade and hilt, designed to look like a green gem, mostly because that reinforcement was something I'd seen on Killing Edges. Well, not so prettily done before. This was definitely a masterwork sword, something someone had spent quite a bit of time perfecting. I kind of felt bad for stealing it from him, but… well… such thoughts weren't suited for the dance, so I let them flow out of my mind as I focused on the wind playing with my hair. The crunch of the dirt under my feet. Making sure each movement was precise, without a trace of excess.

"Pretty…" Just as I finished, a soft voice caught my attention and I turned to see Patty nearby, watching. "Ah, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," she mumbled, smiling sheepishly. "But seriously, those dances or whatever are pretty. I've seen them a lot. Among the soldiers, I mean."

"In Isaach, it's tradition to begin and end practices with one," I explained, walking to the edge of the yard to towel myself off. I noticed there was an extra towel, and more water than I'd set out. "Different ones, of course. What's suitable for warming up isn't necessarily suitable for cooling down."

"That's pretty neat, actually! I wonder why that came to be."

"Well, Isaachian festivals have sword dances. As in, sharp blades are used as props, like ribbons." But, then again, how did those start? They were unique to Isaach, so it likely had some sort of story with it? I'd have to bug Shanan about it. "Anyway, I don't normally see you outside at this hour. You're in the kitchens, making food for the hunters."

"Yep, and I delivered them!" She giggled, proud of herself. She really did love cooking and she was damn amazing at it. "I even made sure Hestia had treats. Since she has to work so hard to help out."

"She's used to helping out her dumb humans." I took note again of the extra towel and water and finally put the pieces together. "Oh, wait, duh. You're out here to train."

"Close?" She put her hands together in front of her, half-like she was praying. "I was actually hoping you could teach me? I asked Lester about who would be good for that, and he said that you
already teach Arthur."

"Honestly, we all teach each other bunches of things." And this reminded me of something I had wanted to request of her. "So, let's trade lessons. I'm curious about picking locks."

"Ooo, that'll be fun to teach!" She grinned. "But yay! Lessons! I mostly learned from Uncle Dew, but he's more of an ambush-assassin sort of thing and the like. Not the best for the straight up combat we've been doing and... umm..." Her grin fell and she looked down. "I've always been just a thief. I've killed and fought a couple of times, but... well, my reaction at the shrine probably shows it's not something I'm used to."

"Seliph and I threw up after our first real battle. And our second. Maybe our third." I touched her cheek and gently tilted her head up so that I could look her in the eye. "But you want more options for guarding, so that you can survive, yes?"

"Yes. Or dodging. I mean..." She gestured at her rather small and thin frame. "Armor and I don't get along very well."

"Oh, I know the feeling. It just looks heavy. Can't imagine wearing it." I grinned and she smiled back. "Okay, well, first things first. Warming up, so that you can safely practice."

After warming up, with her showing me a couple of tricks to stretch out the wrists and me showing her some stretches for the legs, we began the lesson. I could see Patty's base easily, because the way she held herself was already perfect for quick and easy movement. It was how she held the rest of her, like her arms, that showed her weakness. So, I focused on that, specifically helping her with holding her sword out in a way that would actually protect her, instead of just dampen a blow. She was an eager student, determined to become stronger and I did my best, while mentally promising to ask Shanan for tips. After all, Shanan had taught me, when he could.

"Well, this looks convenient." Speaking of 'students', Arthur sounded amused, and he looked it when he walked up, with Tine, both dressed in practice clothes. "Riona, Tine was curious about learning swords," he explained to me. She ducked behind Arthur, but smiled shyly and nodded to confirm the words. I noticed then that she had her long red ribbon tied about her arm, and no ribbons around her pigtails. A way to hold onto that 'bond', huh? "Apparently, Conall once told her that Isaachian swordsmanship would suit her more than what they tried to teach her in Alster."

"Did he now?" I asked, curious. A quick glance over Tine showed why that might be. "Ah, slimmer figure and probably better suited for dodging and deflecting."

"That's what I figured. So, do you mind teaching her?"

"Of course I don't mind, if she doesn't." I made sure to smile, just to emphasize how little I minded. I saw Tine relax. "You've lessons with Aunt Lachesis today, right?"

"Yeah, she's helping me learn how to ride." For once, his smile was shy. He'd learned from Oifeye that Uncle Azel had been a mage knight, and had become fascinated by the idea. "I get to have my head kicked in by a horse. Yippee."

"Oh, don't fret so much. You're more likely to get trampled because you fell out of the saddle or something." I kept up the smile, and he just laughed. Poor Tine squeaked, and Patty took advantage of the break to wipe some of the sweat off and get some water. "Doesn't look like any of the others are out yet, so get some stretches done. And can you help out Patty while I get Tine started? You're skilled enough for that."
"Yeah, of course." He hesitated a bit before patting my shoulder. I beamed and gave him a quick hug. Then I skipped over to Tine and Arthur went over to Patty.

"Thank you very much for this," Tine murmured, more at the ground than me. She fussed with the ribbon on her arm. "I truly appreciate it."

"No need to be so formal," I chided, smiling. I leaned down, though, to catch her eye. "Just to confirm, you want to learn swords?"

"Yes, I do." Despite her timidity, the light in her eyes was determined. "I do know some basics, but it's mostly just the standard taught to Friege soldiers and it just…"

"It can be hard to use a style you're not suited for." I smiled and nodded. "Okay, did you warm up already?"

"No, not yet." She ducked her head and fiddled with one of her pigtails. "I wanted to be sure you didn't mind…"

"Excuse to spend time with you? Why would I mind?" I winked and giggled. She tentatively glanced up and smiled. "Okay, let's start with warm ups."

Though I kept one eye on Arthur and Patty initially, my focus was primarily on Tine, making sure she stretched properly. Then it was actually teaching her, and it was easy to see she had some training. It was differently than with Patty, though, and you could just tell she was uncomfortable with her initial stances. Personally wondered why no one had taught her a different style before deciding it could've been a pride or stubbornness thing. It wouldn't surprise me.

"Okay, Tine?" I began, stepping near her. I noticed her tense and shifted back a bit. "Would you prefer me to tell you where to shift your hands and feet or move them myself?"

"Hmm? Ah…" she began, before trailing off. Like I'd surprised her by asking for her choice or something. Maybe I had. "You can move them."

"Okay." Carefully, I did so, moving her hands on the hilt and then gently nudging her feet until she was in the proper stance. "A lot of Isaachian defenses will involve dodging and, more importantly, deflecting. The grip you had is good if you plan to block, but there's an even-odd chance that you'll twist or break something if you try to deflect with it like that."

"And the stance is for moving more quickly?"

"Precisely. The first stance is good for holding your ground, but Isaachians are always on the move."

"I've noticed." She smiled hesitantly. "You never seem to stay still ever."

"You should've seen me when I was younger. Apparently, they had to pair me up with someone for naps in order to keep me from running off, once I started walking!" So Aideen had told me, at least. I wished I could remember who it was. It hadn't been one of the Tirnanog kids. Maybe Ced? We had been in Silesse. "So…"

"Well, this is a fun looking scene!" Larcei joined us with a laugh, bouncing on her toes. I looked around and saw that the others had joined us outside. Arthur had actually left, meeting Aunt Lachesis to start his own lessons. "You're out here early, Riona," she continued. She fixed Patty's stance, since Patty continued to practice like a good student, and absently kissed her cheek. "Catching up?"
"That and I wanted to get a feel for the sword I'm 'borrowing'," I replied with my own laugh. Then I shrugged and went back to helping Tine. "You go ahead and get your training done."

"Sounds good." Larcei hugged me around the neck and kissed my cheek too. "I'll help out when I'm done! Shanan and I had some lessons last night, so I'll be taking it easy."

"Oh~?"

"Hush, you." She made a face, and I snickered. Tine and Patty looked very confused. "Ignore her. She's just being mean."

"The meanest, yes."

By the time Larcei finished up, and the two of us started helping Patty and Tine with cooling down, everyone else was firmly in their training (save Lester who was hunting and would practice later). Not far from us, Iuchar and Nanna were getting lessons from Oifeye, with Iuchar learning swords in general and Nanna learning different ways to guard and protect herself. Not far away, Diarmuid was also getting lessons, learning lances from his father, and Uncle Finn smiled so proudly at him while Diarmuid did his best to follow instructions. A noticeable distance from them, Aunt Lachesis was helping Seliph and Leif learn how to fight while mounted, while also helping Arthur learn how to ride. When she reached up to her throat, no doubt dry from all the shouting she had to do, Uncle Finn left Diarmuid briefly to pass her some water and absently kissed her hand before returning to Diarmuid's side, no big deal made of the actions (save for Aunt Lachesis's silly-sweet smile and Oifeye's indulgent look).

"I wonder if Mom and Dad had been like that," I whispered to myself. Was it something born from long years together? Even when accounting for the years of separations, Aunt Lachesis and Uncle Finn had more time together than Mom and Dad. After all, Mom and Dad only had… what? Three years with each other? Three and a half? Still more than Sigurd and Deirdre, who had been together for only around two years before she'd been kidnapped. "I wish..." I was so happy to meet Aunt Lachesis and Uncle Finn, and was absolutely ecstatic for Diarmuid and Nanna, but it reminded me of what I'd never have. And of the ache in my heart.

Sighing, I shook my head and tried to make myself focus on Patty and Tine, making sure they didn't accidentally skimp or anything. However, I noticed a very strange sight. Someone with silver hair walking aimlessly towards the decorative pond that helped mark one of the boundaries of the practice yard. I thought it was Yuria at first, but the hair was wavy, not straight. So, I realized it had to be Sara, who… I didn't think would be up at this hour. And who was heading straight for the pond.

Without thinking about it, I ran over to her and caught her by the arm just before she stepped into the water. "If you're looking for a swim, there's better places than the pond," I half-joked, pulling her back. She blinked slowly at me, like she was trying to figure out why I was there. Though I did just grab her out of nowhere. "And wearing better clothes. You're likely to drown with all that. Even with how shallow it is."

"Oh, I'm outside," she murmured, looking around curiously. She then put a finger on her cheek and hummed in thought. "When did that happen?"

"Were you sleepwalking?"

"No, there was someone calling for help. 'Someone, please, help me.' But in a tone that says they're not actually expecting help. It's so sad, so I was trying to figure out where it was coming from." She sighed gustily, and scowled. I frowned because I hadn't heard anything, and no one else had
either, since they hadn't reacted. "But it's hard. There's so many voices to filter through. All the dead crying and crying. Makes it hard to discern that voice, but I think the person is still alive."

"So, basically, you were very focused?" There were… so many things to ask about there. So many. "Also, you hear the dead?"

"Only their last thoughts, last words. They linger and linger, even after the spirits have passed on. The world carries them, remembering even when others forget." She suddenly focused on me, her eyes bright and strangely old for her face. "Your mama's last thoughts were about how she wished she and seen you and Conall one more time. She loved you two very, very much."

"Oh?" That was… okay, total honesty? That was a little creepy. But it was also touching, to hear that. And the combination led to only one thing: curiosity. "That's an interesting power, but I can imagine the trouble it causes. Like how I'll accidentally set things on fire or something."

"I've learned how to block them out, but sometimes, they get loud." She closed her eyes and brought her hands up by her ears. "The cries for help tend to be the loudest. This one was particularly loud. I'm worried."

"As am I." I took her hand and tugged her along, back towards the castle. I glanced over at Larcei on the way, and she caught my eye and nodded. She'd finish up the lesson, so that I could make sure Sara didn't walk into something. "Here, we can head to the roof and you can figure out the direction from there. Will that work?"

"I think so? I normally wander until I figure out the direction, but this isn't a temple, so it's more dangerous." She squeezed my hand, opening her eyes to look at me again. "Conall is fine."

"Hmm?"

"For now, Conall is fine. I can sense it." She smiled sweetly. "Your bond with him is very strong, so it's an easy 'read'. He's towards the south, and misses you lots."

"Does he?" South… I recalled Cyas telling me Conall was in Thracia… "Well, all the more reason to find him."

"And keep him. Wolves are lonely and weaker without their packs."

"They certainly are less effective at hunting." And I was definitely having one of the oddest conversations I ever had. Which was saying something since I sort of had a conversation with Lewyn about his arms rotting. "I am definitely looking into some folklore over what this ability could be." Her hair was a particular shade silver, which I had only seen on Yuria and Deirdre (sort of, via pictures). Maybe there was something in Verdanite stories? "In the infinite free time that I have."

"Thank you."

"...For?" I glanced at her curiously as we finally entered the castle. "Wanting to research?"

"For not being afraid." She giggled. "Most people are. Because the power is so strange."

"I can summon sparkles that allow me to cut through the thickest of armors as if they were nothing but air, Shan an can turn invisible, arrows with literally bounce off of Ulster's bare skin, Diarmuid can punch a reinforced door down, and we won't even go into the weirdness that is Ulir luck." I laughed, amused now. "Seriously, you're in good company."
"Yes, I am in good company. All of you are very nice." She beamed at me. "I'm so glad I followed Leif's voice out of the temple."

"Good." I smiled back at her, even as I wondered what the hell she was talking about. "Now then…"

"That way." She pointed out a window, towards the north. "It's that way, some distance away."

"The voice?" My eyes immediately fell on Darna in the distance. I had a feeling… "Hopefully, we can help them."

"Me too." Her expression became sad, and very tired. "Me too…"

I ended up having breakfast with her so that I could try and cheer her up again, a task Yuria helped with since she and I now tended to eat breakfast together. It just… felt like the right thing to do.

After breakfast, I cleaned up and changed and walked the halls in what was my typical 'patrol' of making sure everyone was okay and answering whatever questions there were. As had happened the past few days since I'd returned, I had quite a few soldiers simply walk up to say 'hello' and how glad they were that I had returned safely. A few asked about if I had seen people in the dungeons, and though I hadn't, I told them about how Shanan hadn't seen anyone. The number of people who asked that particular question, though, made me worry. I knew Child Hunts occurred, and Bloom wanted to publicly execute Uncle Finn as an 'example' to discourage more rebellion. How many others were captured? How many others had been killed? Made examples of? All I knew about him, as a ruler, was that he took over the Manster District, he sent assassins, and the people of the Manster District hated him. I also knew he was someone who let his wife beat his little sister to death, but also held his daughter as she sobbed and was utterly heartbroken at the death of his son and daughter-in-law-to-be.

"Some days, I wish things were as simple as a children's story," I sighed, walking down the hall. Hestia, walking next to me, made a 'mro?' noise and I petted her head. "Oh, don't mind me. Just your dumb human making things complicated." She tilted her head and then promptly jumped up and braced her paws against my chest to lick my face. "Yes, yes! I'm fine, Hestia!" She just licked me more insistently. "You're just getting me back for disappearing on you!" She barked and went back to licking my face, her tail wagging up a storm. "Little brat."

Eventually, I got her to get back down on the ground and we continued on to my planned destination: the 'children's' room where the younger children stayed, played, and learned. And napped, as I soon learned, because they were settled down for naptime. I leaned against the doorway, keeping Hestia with me, and waited until I could catch the eye of someone, specifically the one I'd known would be here.

"Ah, Lady Riona!" Inanna greeted me warmly. She picked her way over towards me, cuddling her leopard-kitten against her chest. Said kitten was all-but-hugging her back, showing they felt safe. "Did you need something?"

"Just checking in, now that I'm well enough to walk about," I explained, smiling proudly at her. Then I looked over the room again, this time noticing just how many young children were in here. Far more than I would've thought. Far more. "I heard we got some more refugees while I was gone." However, the number of children here implied more than 'some'. The entire room was filled with sleeping little kids, toddlers, and babies, with slightly older children (like Inanna) watching over them. Many of the caretakers looked very tired, very thin, and very sad. The oldest looked the same age as Inanna. The youngest… probably about eleven. "Wanted to make sure everything is
okay and all. You know; same old, same old."

"You're the fretter, after all." Inanna giggled and glanced over the room, mentally debating something. "I can ask around and get you a list, if you'd like. I think they're so grateful to have shelter that... well..."

"Yes, I'd definitely appreciate that." I might've said more, but I saw one little girl, barely five if that, had woken up crying, though she was trying to keep quiet. "Oh, poor dear..." I immediately went to her, carefully weaving my way around all the nappers before sitting next to her. "Do you want a hug?"

"I want my mommy..." she whimpered. I caught one caretaker, a young boy somewhere around twelve, wince and realized that her mom had probably died. "I miss my mommy."

"I'm sorry, sweetie," I murmured. Very carefully, I stroked her hair and after a moment, she climbed into my lap so that I could hug her. "I wish I could just wave my hand and make your mom appear, but I can't. But I'm sure she's thinking of you right now."

"Really?"

"Yes. I miss my mom too, but I know she loves me and watches over me, even though I don't get to see her." I kissed her hair and began rocking her. Absently, I noticed Hestia head over to one of the caretakers to lick their hand and generally be cute and comforting. The child (because, really, they were all children) immediately hugged her and buried their face in her fur. "So, when you're feeling better, you should do lots of fun things. Then you can tell her all about the wonderful things you've done and the nice people you've met."

"...I miss her..."

"I know, sweetie. I know."

I continued doing what I could to reassure her, and when she fell back asleep, tended to the next one who woke up, this time from nightmares. Giving what comfort I could and letting their caretakers take their own little breather. At Innana's urging, many of them actually shyly walked up for hugs, which I gave freely. It was the least I could do, and I had to admit that I was glad that Inanna put so much trust in me now. I'd definitely keeping working hard to be worthy of it.

"Thank you so much for the help," Inanna told me once the last of the children had settled back for their naps. And a few of the babysitters joining them in slumberland, though off in the corner to be out of the way. "A lot of them don't sleep because of their own nightmares, I've noticed."

"I'm definitely adjusting duty rosters, because you all shouldn't have to shoulder this all on your own," I whispered. I wondered who came up with it? There needed to be at least one adult around. What if there was an emergency? "I can try to get that done today, but more likely, the switch will happen tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is fine." She giggled when her leopard-kitten nosed her cheek, but then became sad for some reason. "So, Anat has a name for her leopard."

"She does, yes." I didn't know it yet. Anat said she'd tell me when she was done with her messages for the morning. "Have you named yours?"

"No..." She sighed and cuddled with her leopard-kitten. Who adored the attention and playfully batted at her. "I think of some, but..." She looked down briefly before returning her attention to me. "How did you pick Hestia's name?"
"Hestia's?" At her name, Hestia appeared at my side, pressing herself into my leg in an effort to get pets. Which worked, of course. "Well, 'Hestia' is actually from many Isaachian stories."

"Really?"

"Yes. It's the name of a fairy of flames, who kept a warm home. In the stories, she granted sanctuary to the lost and weary, and tended to them while they healed." Now that I thought about it... 'Hekate' was the name of another fairy in the stories. When one had to purify and ghost, it was her name that was invoked, for she was a being who lived in the liminal space between the realms of the living and dead, and thus, one who could assist the wandering souls of the lost. I wondered why Conall picked that name. "Since she was such a comfort, I went with that. Well, that and the fact that she liked it."

"I see." She became thoughtful. "Maybe I should just say names and see if she reacts."

"You'll figure it out. I promise." I ruffled her hair and she giggled, chipper again. "Seems like everyone is napping peacefully now. You'll get that list for me?"

"Either by the end of today or tomorrow."

"Go for tomorrow. Some might have to think a bit." I kissed her forehead and headed for the door, Hestia faithfully keeping at my side. "Until later."

I ended up delaying a little bit, mostly because the babysitter-caretakers wanted a little more advice, hugs, and Hestia's comfort. So, I lingered, doing my best to answer questions and be as reassuring as possible. Only when the last one went back to work (or their own nap) did I leave, with Hestia following after a moment to give a couple one last lick. Then I headed down the hall, mentally noting what I'd need to do and who I'd need to talk to. Most of it would have to be later today, sadly, but I could at least make my plan and...

"I figured I'd find you around here." Lester caught me in a hug as I turned a corner and I laughed and returned it. "So, how are the children?" he asked, gesturing for me to follow him. Hestia ran ahead a bit, mostly just to run. "Napping okay?"

"They miss their parents, have nightmares, and seriously, who the hell thought it was a good idea to force their care onto a bunch of barely older children?" I sighed, leaning briefly into his side. Almost all of them had... "Dare I ask why they're 'refugees'? And why there's so many children?"

"Apparently, Bloom is completely focused on 'dealing with the rebels', meaning taking Leonster, and as a result, bandits get to run amok." He grimaced. "That's assuming, of course, that they're... you know... bandit-bandits. Not just people who turned to banditry because Bloom keeps the taxes too freaking high."

"I suppose in theory it's an effective way to reduce the chances of rebellion?" If you taxed the people until they could barely afford the cost of living, then... again, in theory, it left them will little time to plan and act on rebelling. "In practice, if you give someone nothing to lose..."

"Then they have everything to gain." Lester sighed. "That's basically what's happened. We started because we were tired of watching people die or worse. People join us because what do they have to lose? Their lives? What lives?"

"Yeah..." And while you could argue 'the lives of the children', they were already traumatized and scarred. And with the Child Hunts, you would likely lose them anyway. "If we go to Miletos, I'm deeply afraid of what we'll find."
"Why?"

"Hilda supposedly rules there. She's the one who beat Tailtiu to death, for fun. And tortures civilians. For fun."

"...I swear to the gods that if we see entrails strewn about the place like ribbons..."

"Oh, ew, gross!" I shoved him (lightly), and shuddered. "Ugh! I didn't need that mental image!"

"Haven't you seen worse with Hestia's kills?"

"Hestia doesn't try to decorate cities!" And I froze when I realized something. "Wait, where is Hestia?" Because while she had been just in front of us, she... ah... wasn't now. Nor was she in sight. "Oh, gods damn it."

"Really?" Lester sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Sometimes, I swear she does it on purpose because she thinks we're being too serious or something."

"Or she decided she didn't like that glorious mental image!" I glared and he held up his hands in a pacifying/surrendering gesture. "Seriously, where did that even come from?" I held up a hand to stop him when he opened his mouth. "That was rhetorical. Rhetorical. Let's just find my wolf before she breaks or steals something."

"Fine, fine." Lester paused though, thinking. "Wait, isn't the kitchen on this hall?"

"...Shit."

We thankfully caught Hestia before she stole anything from the cooks, but it was a near thing. Most of the kitchen assistants today were actually refugees, meaning they didn't know anything about Hestia or her cleverness. Which meant that Hestia had pretended to be cute and all while sneakily creeping towards the nice big roast that was cooling. And I'd caught her just seconds before she bit the thing to steal it.

"I am so sorry about her," I sighed, keeping a firm grip on Hestia while I apologized to the head cook, whose name escaped me for the moment because damn it, names. Lester had been with me to help with damage control, but he had to go drop something important off with Iuchar. Sooner the better. "I think she's trying to get revenge on me for being gone for so long."

"Lady Riona, believe it or not, it actually cheers my little old heart to see her back to her tricks," the head cook laughed. She was a charming older lady with hair as white as snow frizzing up around her face. She'd joined us in Rivough, if I remembered correctly. The beaded necklace she wore was the last present she ever got from her son, who died in the labor camps, while the scarf in her hair was made by her eldest granddaughter. Could remember all of that, and not her name. "Hestia was just so despondent without you. If she wasn't with one of the Scions, she was laying in your room, clearly waiting for your return."

"Until she saw the opportunity to sneak out, at least." Still, I did scratch Hestia behind the ear and Hestia pressed against my side so that I could really get in there through her fur. "Still, she should at least try to not steal one of the centerpieces of the meal!"

"Now that, I will agree with." She leaned down and wagged her finger at Hestia. "You need to also not scare my assistants. They're all lovely, but timid. And you are very big."

"That she is." And I noticed quite a few of the new ones eyeing Hestia warily. Those who had been here for a while did their best to reassure, but that would take a few more meetings. Not helped by
how 'out of control' she likely seemed with this little trick. "Anyway, did Oifeye eat breakfast?"

"He did! Ever since Lady Lachesis joined us, she's been quite keen on making sure he gets all his meals. Same with King Shanan and, now, Lord Finn." She sighed happily, chuckling. "I must say that Lady Lachesis and Lord Finn are so sweet. Reminds me of when my husband was alive, gods bless his memory."

"I'm just glad they seem to be doing well." I grabbed Hestia's fur when I saw her eyeing some fresh bread. "You'd think you never eat with how you go after food!" I rolled my eyes and began dragging her out. "I look forward to the meal!"

My plan had been to take Hestia outside, so that she could run off this excess energy and go hunting. However, to my surprise, Yuria was just a short distance away, apparently waiting for me. "War Council has been called for that information you wanted to give," she informed me softly. I nodded, only a little surprise. While I'd meant to report it all immediately, my exhaustion led to that being deferred. I'd instead written down things that were priority, and then everything else would wait. "Here, I'll walk with you to there. It's in a different room than before."

"Thanks, Yuria," I whispered. However, I studied her, mentally debating something. What I had wanted to tell everyone… warn everyone about… "Yuria, would you like to listen in?"

"Me?" She pointed to herself, confused. "Why me?"

"The information… I believe you have a right to know. But…" I sighed and petted Hestia just to have something to do. "It might send you into a panic."

"...You found out something about the incident that led to me losing my memories?"

"Maybe." I sighed, already kind of regretting even bringing this up to her. But shielding her might just be worse? Maybe? "Big maybe."

"But it's at least related to someone from…" She fell silent, and I waited for her. Waited for her to come to a decision. And, eventually, she did. "I… I want to try. Because I think it's important." She shakily took my hand, but her eyes were resolute. "Linoan is already watching the infirmary, so…"

"Got it." I squeezed her hand reassuringly, and nudged Hestia to stand at her side. Gods, please let this be okay… "Then, let's go."

Yuria wasn't the only 'odd addition' to the War Council. Leif and Nanna were at the table next to each other, in between Seliph and Diarmuid, and they looked around curiously, like they were comparing it to something. Uncle Finn was in the back part with Oifeye, Shanan, and Aunt Lachesis, leaning on Aunt Lachesis's chair while the four chatted about something quietly. Tine was also here, hiding a bit behind Arthur and Fee while Fee and Larcei had an animated talk about some strategy that I was sure would work more 'in theory' than reality, and Arthur actually talked with Lester about horses, instead of being silent as he normally was. Took a second to find Lana, Lester, and Patty, mostly because they were in the back corner for some reason, but their smiles hinted they were having a fun talk anyway. Iuchar and Ulster were much closer, discussing axes and techniques, and I noticed that we might need a bigger table if we were going to have this many people in the War Council.

Seliph had been silent, probably thinking about something, but he smiled when he saw me. He looked a little confused at Yuria, but gestured for her to join everyone at the table. Yuria shook her head, though, and actually darted to the back where the adults were. Specifically where Oifeye was,
and he immediately gave her a hug, sensing something was off. I thought it was all smart, personally. If she did panic, Oifeye was probably best suited to help her.

"Sorry to be late," I commented, taking my place by Seliph, with Hestia sitting in between him and me. Ulster moved so that he was standing next to me and kissed my head when he noticed I was a bit off. I wasn't looking forward to this. "Am I the last one?"

"No, Lewyn's not here," Iuchar pointed out. I looked around the room again and saw he was right. Lewyn wasn't here. Where the hell was he? I hadn't seen him at all since my return. "So, are we waiting for him or waiting for him to slip in and make a dramatic entrance?"

"Well, I'd like to get this started, since I'm sure everyone here has better things to do than stand in a cramped room all smushed together by a table." I smiled slightly. "I take it that size is why the room was moved?"

"And we might need to move it again."

"Glorious." I sighed and ran a hand through my hair, pulling apart a couple of tangles in the process. "Well, whatever. I'm certainly not waiting for Lewyn. Mostly because I'm sure he already knows more than half of it, and is just being 'mysterious' for stupid reasons." I made sure to look at everyone, gauging reactions and moods. Most seemed to agree with me, thankfully. "So, I mentioned things like Reinhardt being in the area, and Cyas likely being south by this point, yes?"

"Cyas?" Leif repeated, sounding surprised. He glanced down at Uncle Finn for something, and he nodded. "I know the name. We have difficulty getting into Leonster thanks to his strategies. Thankfully, he left abruptly, for some reason." I had a feeling the reason was 'Julius, Ishtar, Reinhardt, or Conall needed him'. That just seemed how he was. "Though, he's… we also owe him a debt."

"A dear friend of ours, Mareeta, fell prey to a terrible curse," Nanna explained softly. She fiddled with her hands a bit, but Diarmuid took one to squeeze it reassuringly. "It sent her into a berserking rage, wanting nothing more than to kill. She did her best to fight it, to the point of crying, but it held her spirit tightly. Bishop Cyas was the one who cured her of it, and also made sure she was in a safe place before leaving to continue on his own journey."

"Still, if he's south, then we might meet him when we try to take Manster…" Leif and Nanna exchanged a dark and pained look, hinting there was something deeply personal about Manster. Then again, it was the largest city of the Manster District. "That won't be easy. He's a very skilled tactician, plus the morale boost for having him…"

"One step at a time, Leif," Lester chided, sliding between Diarmuid and Larcei to join the crowd at the table. Larcei shifted down to make room and casually leaned her head on Fee's shoulder briefly. "Also, seriously, next meeting is involving a bigger room."

"I hear that, and I'm used to scrunching up all small," Patty sighed. She and Lana found a place between Arthur and Iuchar, but it was a very tight fit. I had Hestia move to sit more 'behind' Seliph and me, so that I could move down and help make a little more room. Not much, but still. "Oh, whatever. Your note also mentioned meeting Arvis."

"Who is apparently unburnt?"

"I yelled at him instead and it was fantastic," I declared brightly, making sure my smile matched my tone. There was more than a little snickering at that. "Okay, so that means the main thing is-"
"Julius." Tine's quiet voice was surprising, mostly because it was the first time I'd heard her interrupt anyone. "Ishtar was also in Alster, but you wouldn't need report on that like this," she continued softly, hiding behind Arthur. I could still see her eyes, though, and they were sad and knowing. "So, you want to tell them about Julius."

"You're so clever, Tine~!" I made sure to grin at her and she tentatively smiled back. "But yes, Julius. We're going to talk about Julius because Conall doesn't know the proper meaning of words like 'little' and 'complicated.'" I sighed, tired from just thinking about all of it. Ulster wrapped a supportive arm around my shoulder. "Though, I can understand the use of 'complicated' because it's not like I've got words for it."

"So, are we starting with how Julius nearly killed you?" Uncle Finn asked softly. The entire room stilled at that. Hestia whimpered and Ulster held me just a little tighter. "Seems like a good place, at least."

"Yes, but we're not going into the full story. I'm tired enough, thank you." I sighed, rubbing my temple. I caught Tine smiling sympathetically, even as she gripped the back of Arthur's shirt. Of course she understood. She was Ishtar's cousin. She had far more experience with Julius than me. "So, basically, Bloom wanted to kill Uncle Finn via public execution. Big surprise, right?" Across the table, I saw Diarmuid pull Nanna into a one-armed hug and she leaned into his side. Aunt Lachesis grabbed Uncle Finn's hand and held on tightly. "Julius suggested putting the body on display."

"He did what now?" Larcei asked, her jaw dropping. No big surprise on that one either since… well… that was probably the one thing Danann didn't do. "That's… nauseating…" She even covered her mouth, and I didn't blame her. We Isaachian raised ones… we believed that bodies had to be properly tended to. Put on display didn't match that. At all. "And you said Julius suggested this?"

"Yes, Seliph's little brother." I briefly glanced at Seliph and saw that he'd gone stoic, trying to hide everything. Leif looked at him worriedly and, after a moment, hesitantly rested his hand on Seliph's shoulder. Seliph lifted his own to briefly touch Leif's hand, a silent recognition and 'thank you'. "I, being me, spoke up-"

"Of all the times to emulate me!"

"Yes, I know. I panicked, okay?" I grimaced, remember that bit of excuse. Uncle Finn still gave me a skeptical look there, but I more focused on Yuria. She was hugging herself, trembling slightly, and Oifeye had his arm around her, talking quietly to no doubt reassure her. Shanan was rubbing her back, and I saw Aunt Lachesis looking at her worriedly. However, Yuria caught my eye and nodded, silentlly telling me to continue. "So, I spoke up and Julius wanted to know why. Had a bit of an argument."

"Seriously?!" Larcei facepalmed and hid her face in Fee's shoulder. "You argued with him?"

"Yeah, and he nearly killed me. Well, probably more for the insult, but still." I sighed, rubbing my temple again. And my touch lingered on my cheek, remembering that numbness. "He only didn't kill me because, and I more or less quote from here on, he loves me and because, like Conall, I am not afraid of him. That last trait was so 'precious' to him that he didn't want to kill me over 'something so silly'."

"And, to reiterate, the silly thing was the execution of Finn and the desecration of his corpse, right?" Fee asked softly. She looked so… it was hard to describe her expression. Sadness, disgust, pain… "So, the death of his mother turned him into a… um…"
"Trying to remember the difference between 'psychopath' and 'sociopath' so that I could finish that sentence," Iuchar murmured. He didn't look quite as sickened as the rest of us, but then again, he grew up with Danann as a father. "I had heard that Prince Julius was whimsical, but that seems a little…"

"Most people's whims don't involve murder."

"Yes."

"I have heard of people displaying bodies, but Bloom actually cracks down on that," Patty chimed in. She held Lana's hand, while Lana leaned heavily on her. Lester rubbed her back, whispering something I couldn't hear. "Something about it attracting rats, flies, and other things that could help spread disease? And the… ah… pieces potentially falling into people's water and food, depending on the place?"

"Nice to know he's pragmatic," Arthur instantly deadpanned. For some reason, that actually made most of us burst into laughter. I did see Hestia move closer to Seliph, though. "Wonder of freaking wonders."

"If he were really pragmatic, he'd rule well. Not tyrannically, with an longing of wringing the District dry of every drop of resources." Patty grumbled a couple words under her breath, probably some creative cursing based on Lana's impressed look. "Worse in recent years because he's so focused on dealing with 'threats'."

"Meaning us and Leonster," Leif whispered. He looked down sadly briefly before shaking his head and then nodding. "All the more reason to oust him. But we have to time it. I…" He hesitated, but Uncle Finn caught his eye and smiled reassuringly. "I didn't. I let my rashness color my judgement, and we lost a lot of good people. Including Dorias, one of my advisors."

"Yet despite that loss, you held through a siege for so long that the attackers were getting desperate," Seliph said, smiling at Leif. Leif shrugged and looked away, embarrassed. "That is amazing, truly."

"I think it's more a testament to the skill of the people around me, personally."

"And yet, they chose to follow you, so have a bit more faith in their judgment," Diarmuid chided, smiling softly. Then he grinned. "Or fake it like the rest of us. Either-or." And that sparked another round of laughter. "So, Riona, all of this was because you wanted to tell us Julius went insane? Violently insane?"

"Except no healer can find anything wrong with him," I countered, perhaps a touch harshly. It was more frustration than anything, but Ulster did use his free hand to poke my cheek in quiet rebuke. "No poison, no illness, nothing at all wrong with his brain or anything. And we're talking about some of the best healers in Jugdral researching constantly for the past four years." Silence fell. "If you just looked at his health, then aside from being prone to normal illnesses, he should be fine. There's no sort of traumatic brain injury or anything that would lead to such a difference in personality."

"So, dark magic?"

"Could be. Could be a curse." I thought of what Cyas said, though. "If that's the case, then no one has been able to break it. Cyas even mentioned that it might take a god to break it, if it is one."

"...So, he just-"
"And while that was a memorable incident, his moods would always swing about wildly. Literally, one moment he would be concerned over a person. The next? Killing someone because they walked too fast or something." I could feel myself sagging just at the memory of it. "Balancing on the edge of a knife every day, wondering whether you'd have 'nice and charming' or 'murderous'. Wondering if he'd kill someone just to make himself feel better or if you could distract him from it because he didn't care either way." It was like... it was like humans were livestock or odd little pets. "And there's one kill that was... interesting."

"Oh, hell, we're going to need calming teas after this, aren't we?" Iuchar groaned, facepalming. I kind of hoped he'd follow it with something gloriously melodramatic, but sadly, that wasn't the case. "Or a bunch of alcohol."

"Warm milk with honey," Ulster corrected. He looked right at Shanan then, and frowned a bit when he noticed how badly Yuria was doing. "You still need to show us the family recipe."

"When we have more of a breather, I suppose we can just have a full cooking lesson or something," Shanan replied. He stepped away from Yuria so that Oifeye could move Yuria a little closer to Aunt Lachesis, who pushed herself up to help with comforting Yuria. Uncle Finn, after a moment, just had Yuria sit down. I felt so guilty... "Maybe we can get Oifeye to make something edible."

"Let's save the miracles for the battlefield, please." And there was a round of laughter, one that got an 'encore' because it took Oifeye a second to even realize there had been a joke at his expense. "Hey, is Yuria-?"

"W-what was interesting about it?" Yuria interrupted, somehow making her question firm despite the shakiness of her voice. She looked right at me, and despite the fact that she had two people holding her, despite the fact that she was trembling and hugging herself... her eyes were resolute. She wanted to hear this. "Riona?"

"It was the wound," I whispered. At first, I looked away from her to address everyone else, almost nauseous with guilt. But then I realized that this, above all else, was probably what she needed to hear and so, I looked back at her. "It was diagonal. Almost like something had tried to rip the person in half." I moved my hand over my torso, to mirror the wound. Larcei and Lana immediately gasped; they picked up on it instantly. "...I'm not sure..." How did I continue this? I didn't...

"It matches my scar." Tears filled Yuria's eyes, but she didn't shed any. Not yet. "It's a perfect mirror of my scar." I saw Leif and Nanna look at each other in confusion. Patty frowned, and tugged on Lana's sleeve. "Leif, Nanna, Patty... Yuria is the name I am using because I lost my memories, but my birth name is Julia. I am Seliph's younger sister, and... and Julius's younger twin." She tripped over the words a few times and, to my knowledge, it was the first time she had ever announced it personally. But still, her voice was firm. "So, it's possible that Julius tried to kill me. And, since I remember... sort of... being sent away by Mother as someone was trying to kill us both..."

"...Perhaps we let that thought rest for now." I closed my eyes, fighting back a grimace. I'd been so startled at the time, but if you took what bits Yuria could remember... and I knew from Conall that Julius had 'seen Deirdre's corpse first'... No, I didn't want to think of that connection yet. Not yet. "But I did want to bring that up, and how..."

"How it's entirely possible that whatever happened to Julius, it increases the chances of us having to kill him," Seliph whispered. I winced, feeling just the worst. I knew how much he had wanted to meet Julius. All of us did. Well, all of us Tirnanog people did. "But if that's the case, then why is Conall still trying to 'fix' him?" Seliph sighed and rubbed at his eyes. Exhaustion, or tears he
wouldn't shed. "If you could figure that out in…"

"Well, for one, I didn't grow up with him. Conall did, so I am less 'invested' in Julius than him." I pointed out automatically. Instinctive reaction to try and protect him. But then I sighed. "And because… there was one more strange incident."

"Who died and how?"

"No one." I made sure to look at everyone and saw Tine looking curiously at me. Like she knew what I was talking about, but didn't think it was possible. Or… still possible, rather. "He had some sort of coughing fit or something. I held him while his lungs tried to remove themselves from his chest cavity. Like a cat trying to hack up a hairball or something."

"...Interesting mental image." Still, Seliph smiled slightly, and I was glad. I'd used that analogy in the hopes of making him laugh. "Was the attack unusual?"

"I only saw the one, but I don't know." I looked down, remembering. "When he talked, he sounded more… timid, I suppose. Shyer. And his smile was completely different. Lit up his face differently. Honestly, it was like he was a completely different person. And I didn't get a sense of danger. All I got was a sense of…" I tried to think of a good comparison. "Like trying to hug water or something. Sure, you can get your arms 'around' it, sort of, but in the end, it'll slip away."

"That's a little…"

"And there's something he said then that just won't leave my head." And at the memory, I… I actually felt like crying. "I told him a little bit about you, Seliph. And he asked if you would save him. When I told him that you would, he asked if I would too. I promised I would and he just looked so relieved…" I had to stop, seriously feeling my eyes burning and a lump forming in my throat. Ulster immediately pulled me into a more 'proper' hug, and the whole room was silent. "He then said that he knew it. That he had accidentally trapped Conall and Ishtar and others, somehow, but he knew that we, all of us here, would make everything right again. That we would save him, and everything. He fell asleep soon after and I didn't really get a chance to clarify, but…" That one incident…

Silence continued, no one really knowing what else to say or do. I certainly didn't. But then, thankfully, Oifeye raised his hand to catch our attention. "I'd say to think more on this, and leave more discussion for another time," he 'suggested' quietly yet firmly. He had a badly shaking Yuria in a hug and was already leading her to the door. "And take at least the afternoon off."

"I can ask Sara if she knows anything too," Leif offered. He was rubbing Seliph's back now, and Seliph was looking down, with his eyes closed to will back tears. "She's got a connection to the Loptyrians, and… well, there's a former priest in my army. Salem. Sadly, he's at Leonster, but…"

"Then let us talk of this again, together, after you talk to him." Oifeye made sure to look at all of us, his eyes sad. "But, for now, rest."

We did actually try to stay to discuss more, but the adults chased us out. Aunt Lachesis took charge of Seliph in particular, though Hestia stuck close to him. Uncle Finn and Shanan herded the rest of us down the hall and at some point during the walk, someone snagged my sleeve. I was surprised to see it was Tine, but when she saw she had my attention, she pointed outside, and so, I followed her out into the gardens. Eventually, we wandered to a great tree, the leaves slowly beginning to change colors, and we sat down among the thick roots and rested against the trunk. It was… wonderfully relaxing, truthfully, but I couldn't help but remember the tree I had hidden in back at Alster, the one Julius had rotted with a touch.
"When that happens, we say it's the 'old' Julius," Tine quietly explained. She drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around legs, resting her chin on her knees. "What you were talking about, when he talking about 'saving'."

"It really did feel like I was looking at a completely different person," I murmured, looking up at the leaves. They swayed in the wind, and I wondered what the wind said. Would've been so helpful to have Lewyn around to tell us, but nope! Nowhere to be found! Did he leave the army or something? It wasn't like he was social or anything, so if he had, we probably wouldn't be able to notice. "I'm… guessing it's that 'old self' that leads to…"

"That and it was slow." Her eyes wavered, as if with tears, but she was too tired and worn to cry. At least about this. "At the start, he was mostly normal. That's when he and Ishtar started dating. Back when he was normal. And Conall would research and Cyas would take care of everyone. Reinhardt kept a watchful eye."

"And gradually, it got worse."

"Yes. The times where his old self shows are few and far between. He's even taken to threatening Conall, and he didn't use to. Only Ishtar escapes threats, but the people around her…" Tine flinched and hid her face in her knees. "She's never had a lot of friends, but Julius threatens the few she has."

"Like Reinhardt."

"I'm surprised he hasn't killed Reinhardt yet. I really am." She looked up again, smiling bitterly. So very bitterly. "I keep wishing that Conall would just… take Ishtar away to somewhere safe. Be the knight in shining armor. Even though Conall has never been 'knightly'. Arvis…"

Again, her eyes wavered. "When I told Arvis, he whispered he used to think the same about his mother. That Prince Kurth would save her from the demon that was his father."

"So, is Ishtar in love with Conall?" Not sure why my mind jumped to that. Maybe it was because even I knew the story of Cigyun and her tragic love with Prince Kurth. Oifeye had told me. "You don't have to answer, of course."

"Sadly, I have no idea." She sighed and hid her face in her knees again. "I know she loves Julius, or at least the old Julius, but Ishtar doesn't really confide in me. She tries to be the strong one. But while Ishtar and Conall always been close, I do think that there's been a shift in how she feels. Not just the strong friendship they've had since they met, but…"

"And Conall?"

"Conall doesn't confide in anyone, save Ishtar maybe. Well, probably talks more with Arion, but I don't really know Arion, so…" She shrugged, still hiding. "If he wants something to be secret, it remains secret. And Ishtar has always gotten his best smiles, so…"

"I see." Truthfully, I shouldn't have even asked. It was only my business if they made it mine, but I couldn't help but be curious. And I couldn't help but remember what Julius had said about accidentally 'trapping' them. "Cyas thinks there's no way to save him."

"I don't think so either. I haven't for a while." She turned her head to look at me, resting her cheek on her knees. "I'm honestly not sure if Ishtar and Conall think there is either. They just can't simply give up on him."

"Blinding themselves to cling to hope…" Conall, that… that wasn't a 'neutral' path at all. My silly,
hurting twin… Next time I saw you, I was giving you a big hug. "Or, rather, letting hope burn their eyes shut."

"What will you do about them?"

"Save them, hopefully. We'll certainly try." I smiled bitterly. "I'm sure it doesn't mean much from me, considering Ish tore died. And I can't even promise that we will save… well, either of them, but I've got more tricks for Conall than Ishtar."

"And you'll try. You'll try for both of them. Even Ishtar." She smiled sadly, yet there was a sweetness to it. "And… and I'll try too. I'm still not too sure about… um… fighting with you all. But I know you're sincere and that you do your best." She lifted her head finally, a determined light in her eyes now. "Ishtar has always been there for me. Ever since I came to Alster, she was there for me. Helping me." She looked up at the leaves, watching them move with the breeze. "I want to help her. I want to be strong enough to support her. Strong enough that she knows I can support her. So, I'll try too."

"You'll probably have much better luck than us."

"I hope so." She sighed. "I hope so." And the conversation might've ended there, but that was when I remembered something. Because, typical me, I remembered things a tad late.

"Tine, did I give you Ishtar's letter?" I facepalmed when she shook her head. "Can't believe I forgot. Here." I stood up and brushed myself off before offering my hand. After a moment of hesitation, she took it and let me pull her up. "Here, let's get that to you. Maybe it'll give a clue to how we can save her from herself."


"Thank you for organizing the medicines for me, Riona," Aunt Lachesis murmured, a little more focused on the book she was reading than her words. I didn't blame her, though. One of the refugees had come down with an illness that no one seemed to recognize, so we had to research just what it was. So, here Aunt Lachesis was, sitting at a table set up in the medicine closet while I worked. "Augh… how did Alicia memorize all of this stuff?"

"Well, based on the stories, it's a damn miracle that Conall and I even got conceived with how much of a workaholic Mom was," I pointed out, dusting the shelves. Organizing meant cleaning too, after all. "Could also be that she had a good memory for that sort of thing. Like how Diarmuid can remember the exact number of swords we have in the armory, but not where he left his pen. Or how I can never remember names for the life of me, but can make medicines in my sleep."

"Quite true." Still, she was grinning and I had a feeling she was biting back laughter. "I will admit that one of my first thoughts, once the excitement of hearing about her pregnancy had died down, was 'wait, when did they even have the time to have sex?'."

"Ah, just what every teenager wants to hear. Her parents' sex lives."

"No worse than the well-meaning, but nosy ladies who keep prodding me over whether or not Finn and I will try for a third child or not." She rolled her eyes and flipped through a few pages, stopping at one and running her finger down it to look for something specific. "Honestly."

"People are seriously asking you that?" I rolled my eyes and coughed when I accidentally dusted
dust into my face. "Blech. Dust tastes horrible. Almost as bad as Oifeye's cooking." I made a face before shrugging. "Anyway, maybe they think you're younger than you are?"

"Are you calling your aunt old, Riona?" She gasped, comically offended with her hand over her heart even, before laughing and shrugging. "Could be. I did notice some surprise when I told someone that I was thirty-seven." As soon as she said the number, her good mood shattered like a glass. "Thirty-seven... that's over eleven years past the age Sigurd lived. He and Quan were twenty-six. Ethlyn had been twenty." Hearing that made me pause. I'd never realized Ethlyn had been so young. That's how old Seliph was. "Elodie had been... twenty-four." Made me wonder how old Ares would be. I... think he was just two years older than Seliph, so twenty-two? "Ah, never mind me." She waved her hands in front of her, 'wiping' away the thoughts like I was wiping away dirt from the shelf. Whoever cleaned last didn't do a good job. "But I guess that is a good lead-in to more serious talk."

"Like...?"

"How you're recovering." She returned to her researching, cross-checking with the piece of paper where all of the sick person's symptoms were listed. As well as semi-recent medical history. Just in case. "You were captured and in enemy territory, and what you told us wasn't exactly..."

"I think I'm doing okay." I paused in my cleaning, biting my lip. "The main thing is that I don't know what to do, nor do I know how to try and 'fix' things."

"Regarding Julius, you mean."

"Yeah." I sighed and rested my head against the shelf briefly before drying everything off and actually organizing the medicines. Via returning them to the shelf in a proper order. "Then I feel like I should've gotten more information. Tried to throw what weight I have. Just..."

"From what you said, and from what Finn told me, you had your hands full making sure Julius didn't kill massacre the city on a whim."

"Worst part is that I think that's an underestimation. I really do." I mean... Julius turned a man to mush and made a tree rot with... "Hey, Aunt Lachesis?"

"Hmm?"

"Have...?" Without really thinking about it, I rested a hand over my Mark, remembering how it had burned then. It had never happened before, and hadn't happened since. But I was certain I hadn't imagined it. "Have you ever heard of the Marks burning?"

"The Holy Marks?" She glanced at me curiously before flipping to another page. "Mmm... no, not that... Well, actually..." She leaned forward a bit, like she found something, but then she sighed and sat back in her chair and flipped to another page. Whatever this disease was, it wasn't proving easy to identify, it seemed. "There's an old story about how the Marks would always know the power of Loptyr and warn the bearers of their blessing, which could be a burning feeling. I suppose." She shrugged. "That all said, it's a very old story and nothing else even remotely hints to it."

"I see." Power of Loptyr? Was that why? It only happened once, but... in that case, though, why would...

Wait, no, of course, the Loptyrians would have the power of Loptyr. Why else would they come out and be all powerful and everything? Yes, most people thought it was all Arvis's doing, so
people didn't think of Loptyr, but from what I knew, Arvis didn't have anything to do with it. So, of course, the Loptyrians had found a Loptyr Major. But who was it? Julius, perhaps? The Mark on his forehead had been a darker red than my own Fjalar Mark. To most people, red was red, but what if Loptyr's Mark was a 'dark red' to Fjalar's 'fire red'? Though, even if that was the case, how would Julius be Loptyr Major? Arvis was Fjalar, and Deirdre was Naga, and no one person could bear two Majors…

"Aunt Lachesis, can a Major be born from a Minor?" I asked, returning to my cleaning. Then I grimaced because that was out of nowhere. Well, so had the first one, but… "I mean… um…"

"Wondering what stories I might've learned compared to Oifeye?" she asked, distracted by her research. I sighed in relief that she came up with an answer. "Anyway, according to the stories, the answer is 'yes', but only if two Minors of the same Holy Blood got together and had a child. Most of the time, care is taken to make sure that doesn't happen, to prevent there from being multiple people with Major Blood running about and making a mess of political stuff. You've got a similar thing with Major-Minor pairings, though in that case, they're simply 'strongly encouraged' to only have one child." She shrugged, far more focused on the book. The excitement in her face hinted she might've identified the disease, but she was making sure before declaring anything. "There was talk of marrying Oifeye and Ethlyn together once, actually."

"Really?" I'd never heard that. "Why?"

"Because Sigurd didn't show any inclination for marrying. Or even courting, really. Not until Deirdre. When we got the invitation, I had to read it ten times to even remotely believe it was real." She double-checked the list of symptoms, carefully comparing them to whatever was in the book. "After Ethlyn married Quan, many people bemoaned the fact that the next generation likely wouldn't have Major Baldr. Ignoring how arranged marriages are technically a thing."

"Interesting." But my mind was more on the first thing she said. That it was possible, if born from two Minors. So, if Julius really was Major Loptyr, then Arvis and Deirdre would've both been Loptyr Minor. But how did that happen? Considering the Loptyrian Hunts, where would someone of Loptyrian blood even live? …Wait, of course. Deirdre was from the Spirit Forest. Based on the stories I knew, that was definitely a good place to hide. But then where did Arvis get the blood? Had it always been in the… no, that wasn't possible either. Children only inherited one Holy Blood from a parent. That meant that Arvis's mother had to have had it...

"You look like you're thinking yourself in circles."

"I am, and I'm not even sure if it's an important circle or not." I sighed and shook my head. Better to think more on that when I had paper to keep track of things. "So, subject change!" I grinned at her over my shoulder, because if there was one thing I was good at, it was smiling through just about anything. "Connecting to something hinted towards before we got all serious and everything, are things going well with Uncle Finn? They look it, but…"

"Well, we're still adapting to each other. There are new traumas. New scars. New nightmares. New things to compromise on." She smiled softly, though, her eyes filled with love and contentment. "But, at his heart, he's still the same squire I fell in love with all those years ago, and I'm still the spoiled brat he somehow fell in love with." She giggled and then sighed happily. "So, we make it work, and will make it work."

"I'm glad." Though it would've been understandable, it would've been heartbreaking if they couldn't be together. If everything had changed too much for them to 'make it work'. "I'm sure Mom's smiling."
"Alicia smiled a lot, during those days." She sighed and leaned back in her chair, stretching out her neck slowly. "I wish... it's rather sad, though."

"What is?"

"Out of all the couples in the army, only Finn and I..."

"...Ah." That was right. By this point, all of the various couples... either one or both were dead. Long dead, in some cases. "I heard you two eloped?"

"Yes, though it was always just meant to be a promise. Ultimately, though, that's our wedding. Nothing like I envisioned, but at the same time, my 'dream wedding' can never happen. Too many people I would've want involved are gone." She laughed, though, and went back to her research. "Still, I can't say I regret it. Eloping, I mean. It was very nice, and I was very happy."

"Oifeye told me that you two had Mom as your witness." I finally finished with one shelf and moved to the next one to clean and organize it. "Why her? If you don't mind me asking."

"A few reasons, including how both of us were very close with her. But chief among those reasons was that both of us knew she wouldn't stop us. She was like that." She giggled, back to her research. "So long as it didn't hurt people, she... mostly let people do what they wanted. She was a bit stricter when it came to you and Conall, but even then, it was born from her desire for you two to not be hurt." She smiled warmly, yet sadly. "Everyone else we might've wanted... Finn and I weren't sure if they'd try to talk us out of it or not, and it was important to us. We knew it was silly, and possibly ill-advised, but it was important."

"And Mom would go along with it, because it's what you wanted and it wouldn't be entirely detrimental to your health."

"Precisely. And she got all into it too." Her eyes were distant now, no doubt 'looking' at the little chapel in Silesse where she and Uncle Finn married. "Fancied up one of my dresses, make me a little veil. Even gathered some fresh flowers to braid into my hair and use as a bouquet."

"It sounds like fun."

"It was." Her eyes danced when she looked over at me. "I'm not sure you and Seliph can get away with it, though."

"There are way too many things going on to even think about marriage." Still, I knew I turned red. Bright red, based on how much my face hurt. "A-anything, next practice session, do you mind showing me a few more tricks to add to my repertoire?"

"That's a bad subject change, but of course I'll teach you." She laughed, distinctly amused. "I can't fight properly, sadly, but I can at least help with that. I'll be teaching some people staves over the next few days."

"Good, we need more healers." And I didn't want to be teased about romance at the moment, so desperately, I tried to think of a subject change. A lighthearted subject change, since I was guessing she wanted that. "So..."

"Lachesis, how are you doing?" Enter Oifeye, beacon of convenience. "Any luck?" he asked, bringing in some fresh candles for us to use. I absently lit them as he set them out, 'tossing' the little flames while I cleaned. "His sister was asking."

"I think I have it narrowed down to two, but honestly we need to do a little test to be sure," Aunt
Lachesis explained, showing him the page. However, she suddenly smirked and winked at me. "That said, I just asked Riona about what I should say to the lovely men and women all asking me about your availability."

"My… availability?" Oifeye frowned, confused, and I had to fight back laughter. Aunt Lachesis contained hers to snickering. "Why would they need to meet me?"

"Oh, for dates, perhaps?" Aunt Lachesis grinned. "Basically, what should I say to the people asking me about whether you're single or not?"

I just about died of laughter at Oifeye's completely undignified squawk. It was just too funny!

I could get to like mornings, at least mornings where neither Seliph nor I had anything to do. After letting Hestia out to go hunting with Lester, I just lazed about in bed while Seliph slept beside me. Well, not lazed-lazed. I still did some work. Mostly reviewing some paperwork. When I was done with that, though, I began writing down everything I could think of about Julius's heritage and potential Loptyr blood. Because hopefully seeing it would help me or something. Honestly, it might've been better to wait to do this until Leif talked to Salem. Or until Sara said something. I mean; Leif and Nanna had both asked her, but Sara had gently refused to say anything, specifically stating that it was better for someone nice 'like Salem' to say it. She would if she had to, of course, but she'd rather he did it. Which already seemed to hint that Cyas was right. Whatever happened to Julius had no cure. So, it was really just a matter of figuring out what, and how. Or really the 'how', because I hoped that the 'how' could help us find a weakness or… something. I didn't know. It just felt important. So, I kept track of my logic, and kept track of my questions. Chief among them being 'who exactly was Cigyun?' and 'if they do have the Loptyr tome, how the hell did they get it?'

Of course, it didn't matter because I was suddenly kicked, and I frowned at Seliph, annoyed at the disruption. Then I gasped and threw the paper and pens to the side because he was tossing and turning, caught in a nightmare. "Seliph?" I called, leaning over him and shaking his shoulder. He woke with a gasp, breathing heavily and coughing. "Hey, Seliph." I leaned a little more over him, letting my hair fall over my shoulder almost like a curtain to block out everything else. "Easy. You're awake now."

"Am I?" he croaked, still coughing. His hand shook as he reached up to touch my face. "You're here, right? Really here?"

"Yep." I shifted a bit so that I could lightly pinch his cheek. "Really here and really real."

"And you know who I am, right?"

"You are Seliph, the nefarious thief who stole my heart before I even knew it." I smiled down at him, and he breathed a sigh of relief. "Though, I suppose I just replaced mine with yours or something."

"You must have." He caressed my cheek and slowly relaxed, though his breathing was still a little shaky. "Morning?"

"And it's a very good morning for you to wake up to such a lovely sight, yes?" I leaned down and brushed a kiss over his mouth. "Bad nightmare?"

"Very." He threaded his hand through my hair before pulling me in for a slightly longer kiss. "I dreamed I led everyone into a trap, and you just… watched. Because you didn't know us."
wavered. "The others…"

"Are just fine, or were when we said goodnight to them yesterday." I smiled slightly, raising an eyebrow. "But seriously, Seliph. Can you really see me not leaping to people's aid?"

"Well, you didn't have your memories." He did smile, though. "That said, it is hard to imagine. Maybe if you were told we were people like General Richard or Danann."

"Maybe." I laid down on my side and pulled him into a hug. He ducked his head, so that his ear was over my heart, and I ran my hands through his hair, carefully picking apart the tangles. I'd brush it properly later tonight. I'd brush it properly later tonight. For now, I just held him for however long it was, feeling him slowly and surely relax and his breathing even out. "Are you feeling better?"

"Much." He suddenly shifted and kissed my neck. I gasped without thinking about it and felt him smirk. "I find it amusing how many sensitive spots you have there."

"Watch it, mister. I know where you're ticklish." I tried to scowl at him, but I could only laugh as he rolled us over so that he was pinning me to the bed. "My, my. Here I am, at your mercy. What a lovely way to thank your lady love."

"I was wondering what would be a good way to show how much I appreciate you." He kissed me, and then kissed me right under the jaw. "What's a good way, dear?"

"Well…" I struggled to not squirm as he kissed down my neck. "You're doing a great job so far, physically wise. Maybe some words of praise and adoration?"

"How flowery? Iuchar levels?"

"Tempting, but…" And, of course, that's when someone knocked on the door. Because what else was going to happen? "Please tell me I didn't hear that."

"For crying out loud, we have the morning off…" Seliph groaned and pulled the blankets over both of us. I couldn't help but giggle. "Think we can get away with pretending to be asleep?"

"Like you would." I did pull him down into a hug and kissed the top of his head. "Because you'll worry it's an emergency."

"Damn my responsible self." He sighed and kissed me soundly before rolling off the bed and onto his feet. "Let's see who it is."

The answer, it turned out, was Leif and Diarmuid. A very apologetic Leif, and a decidedly not-apologetic Diarmuid. "Aw, what a shame," Diarmuid teased as soon as the door was open. "You're both clothed. Sleeping-clothes, but still."

"You want me to answer the door while naked?" Seliph asked sarcastically, rolling his eyes. Diarmuid just smirked. Leif, hilariously, went red. "No, sorry, you don't get that kind of show from me, Diarmuid."

"I suppose I'll have to content myself with admiring all the others in our army." Diarmuid sighed mournfully. "There are just so many gorgeous people in this army. It's ridiculous. Nearly too much for my poor pansexual heart."

"It does mean we get a nice view no matter where we look, though!" I joked, laughing. Seliph rolled his eyes again and then playfully looked hurt. "You, my dearest love, have nothing to fear. To me, you are the loveliest sight. After all, you are my one true love, the soulmate of my heart.
and very being."

"Save for Hestia," Seliph immediately deadpanned. Diarmuid just laughed and laughed, and Leif was resembling a rotten tomato. "I have to compete with her."

"Well, it is Hestia."

"True, true."

"Gods, I love you two," Diarmuid managed through his laughter. He then patted Leif on the head, still snickering. "Ah, sorry. Don't think you've seen us banter like that before."

"Diarmuid, stop acting like the older one," I teased, leaning against Seliph. Seliph wrapped an arm around my waist and kissed my temple. "Leif's older than you by… like… three months."

"I'm just showing affection for the boy who has a crush on my little sister," Diarmuid replied with great dignity. Leif promptly squawked some sort of noise, and the three of us, being horrible, giggle-snicker-laughed. "Okay, more seriously, if we're going too far, hit us in the head or something."

"Yes, please. Everyone has their own boundaries."

"Seriously, it's like I'm back in Fiana again," Leif grumbled, still red. Seliph and Diarmuid looked curious about that, but I just smiled. "Anyway, the whole point of coming to bother you was that I wanted to talk with you about what sort of role Nanna, Linoan, Sara, Finn, and I will be playing in the army? Diarmuid was showing me the way."

"Are we talking present or future?" Seliph asked, becoming thoughtful. I ducked back into the room and found the papers he'd need for this discussion. "The two will be slightly different, since in the future, we'll be integrated your forces into the main army, and I don't know how your people will want to do that." He took the papers from me and kissed me. "Thanks, Riona."

"I think the study just down the hall should be empty, if you two want to talk privately," I told him, smiling warmly. "Diarmuid and I will send food there and then… I don't know… watch the soldiers train?"

"Don't forget that you have a morning meeting."

"Right, about delegating things more and getting more officers. I'm working with Oifeye and Uncle Finn on that." I shrugged and nudged Diarmuid. "You? I know you have a bunch of afternoon meetings, but…"

"I have a meeting at the same time you do with Iuchar and Lester about reorganizing the cavalry," Diarmuid answered. That's when we noticed Leif giving us weird looks. "What? We can be serious. Sort of. Sometimes."

"But that's for later. Well, for Diarmuid and me," I replied with a great big grin. Then I started nudging the door shut. "I think Seliph and I need to get ready for the day. Diarmuid, let's go find a good place to enjoy the view and pass the time before our meetings, shall we?"

Just another day, really. But I treasured these days, especially now. I swore I'd go mad without them.

"So, Larcei, I've a quick question," I began absently, desperately fighting back laughter. She looked
at me suspiciously, setting down the paper she'd been reading. "You mean to give me this poorly written love letter?"

"Wait, what?" she asked. She snatched the paper from me and groaned. "Damn it! I thought I burned all of these!"

"Are your soldiers sending you love letters disguised as reports?" I lost the battle with my laughter and actually fell off the windowseat we were both sitting on. "Oh dear gods!"

After our now-traditional lunch with the army, Larcei snagged me to help her get through a backlog of reports, using a parlor instead of her more typical 'office' for a change of scenery. Shanan, thankfully, would be officially assisting her in leading the infantry, but we were definitely going to have to split things further (hence my meeting with Oifeye and Uncle Finn). We were just getting too large, and with some of the refugees volunteering to fight for us… plus we needed someone to help coordinate all of our 'army-related civilians' or whatever the proper term was. Like the cooks, messengers… lots of work to be done, and since my 'duties' were so varied and the like, it fell on me to reorganize things. When I wasn't dying from laughter as I was now.

"Okay… okay… I can breathe…" I wheezed, leaning against Larcei's legs. She scowled and huffed, and immediately set her papers to the side to mess with my hair. "Now that initial reaction is done, you want me to burn it?" She dropped the offending paper in my lap. "Got it. A pile of ash, just for you~!" I did my best to catch all the ash from the former-paper and held up my hand. "What do you want to do with it?"

"This." She opened up the window and moved my hand so that she could blow the ash out said window. "Well, I feel a bit better now."

"Has this happened a few times?"

"More than a few."

"Okay, I'll get that addressed." I tipped my head back to look at her and twisted my hand so that I could squeeze her reassuringly before wiping off the residual ash on the floor. "Has this happened a lot?"

"Often enough that I'm questioning whether they take me seriously or not." She grimaced, closing the window. "And I'm not sure what to do differently."

"Should check to make sure none of the others have experienced this." I did hope that it was just some well-intentioned, lovesick fools who didn't understand how badly their efforts came across. "I will definitely make sure it's addressed."

"Via scolding?"

"I'll let a few women know, women who definitely know what it feels like to be harrassed." I grinned at her. "We can also tell Aunt Lachesis."

"...Oh, gods, let me do that. I want to see her reaction." She snickered and moved to sit down on the floor next to me. "I keep forgetting we have more adults to depend on. I didn't want to trouble Oifeye when he's got work literally overflowing his desk."

"And we also want to impress him. And Shanan. Emphasize that we can stand on… mostly equal ground." And since Shanan was now helping Larcei, she really wanted to seem his equal. "But speaking of more adults, how have you been?"
"About the sheer irony that Diarmuid, who firmly believed his parents were dead gets his parents back?" Her voice was dry enough to spark flames, but she simply sighed. "Well, I won't deny that I'm bitter. I want my parents. I want my mother's hugs. I want to ride on my father's shoulders… well, more like his back, given my size. I want to hear their words of praise, instead of hearing 'they would have been so proud of you'." She rested her head on my shoulder and closed her eyes. "But, at the same time, I'm so happy for him. And I'm more than a little smug that I was at least right about him."

"You got to say 'I told you so' yet?"

"I did during our talk. And I might use that to get him to go along with a scheme or two." She snickered. "Anyway, I think I'm happier than I am bitter. But I won't deny that little ache."

"Yeah, I know the feeling." I rested my head against hers. "Can't help but wonder how loving my parents were with each other."

"You get the stories, but what happened behind closed doors… we'll likely never know that."

"Unless they happened to write it down." Or if there was a way to properly communicate with spirits. Which could be possible. Look at Sara's ability. But still… "It is fun watching them, though. Aunt Lachesis and Uncle Finn, I mean."

"It is. And since Aunt Lachesis is a girl, we can talk to her about things like 'hey, is it normal to miss a period when you know you aren't pregnant?' and the like."

"Larcei, we've known that for years. Stress messes up so many things."

"As well as weight loss." She made a face. "I've lost some. Which most would be happy about, but it makes my clothes look weird on me."

"Maybe we should listen to the cooks and eat more." I grinned. "Perfect excuse to splurge on sweets!"

"Gods, what I wouldn't give for a piece of spiced honey cake right now…" She sighed happily, humming in delight. "Mmm… or those honey balls Muirne makes?"

"The fried dough rolled in honey?" My mouth watered just remembering it. Muirne was an amazing baker. "Oh, or maybe the roasted peach and honey nut tarts that Dalvin makes?"

"Oh, those are so good!" She squealed in delight, clapping her hands. "What were those muffins that Mistress Caoimhe handed out during the winter festivities?"

"Um… ah! The black tea and honey muffins?"

"Yes, those!" She licked her lips, and I had to wipe my mouth because I was actually drooling at this point. "Ugh… I'm hungry now."

"Me too." I paused, thinking. "Wait, what's stopping us from going to make some?"

"Er…" She pointed to the papers. "Work?"

"Oh. Right." I hummed a bit, thinking. "Maybe you can work in the kitchen while I cook? Like how we used to do our math assignments while doing chores?"

"What if I get another love letter?"
"Show it to the cooks and kitchen assistants and bemoan how they're wasting your time." I winked at her, amused at the mental image. "Bet that'll help you deal with this!"

"Mmm… you know what? Sure. Maybe if I'm a little more social, then I can get protection from that idiocy." She made a face. "I have a crush already, damn it."

"Speaking of which…"

"No."

"Got it." I kissed her cheek and then tickled her side to make her laugh. If she didn't want to talk, then it was better to not force. For now. "So…"

"Hey, you two in here?" Fee opened the door to the parlor and peeked inside curiously. "Yay, you are!" she giggled, waving us out of the room. Larcei and I shared a look and a shrug before doing just that. "Where's Hestia?"

"She's with Uncle Finn," I explained, noticing Fee was actually skipping down the hall. What happened? Or what was happening? "He woke up from a nap due to nightmares, and she refused to leave his side." Which hinted a lot to how much Uncle Finn stoically endured and how bad the nightmare had been. "So, what's going on?"

"Better to show you~!" She giggled, in the best mood than I'd seen in a while, and before long, she led us out onto a balcony. A balcony where most of our 'War Council' were crammed near the railing. "Found them."

"Perfection~" Lester teased, twisting to grin at us. I did a mental count of everyone, and noticed that while Tine and Yuria were all stuck in the middle of the mess with the rest of the War Council (including Leif, Patty, and Nanna), Ulster and Lana weren't. Though Yuria looked elated by whatever was going on, holding onto Diarmuid's arm excitedly. "Hurry."

"Is this what I think it is?" Larcei asked with a tiny, disbeliefing smile. Seliph helped her get to the front and she flailed a bit, her smile growing. "It is…!"

"Keep quiet."

"Right, right…"

Curious now, I pushed my way forward too, ending up next to Patty and Iuchar. I helped Patty sit on the railing, since she was in serious danger of being crushed, and Iuchar moved so that a bit more breathing room. Only then did I look around and in an instance, I saw what was going on. In the courtyard below, there was a blushing and uncharacteristically nervous Ulster trying to talk to a mildly confused Lana. Oh, no wonder everyone was here. Though poor Tine, Patty, Leif, and Nanna looked so confused. But even Arthur was wearing a grin.

"Oh, just… here!" Ulster was saying, shoving a piece of paper into Lana's hands. He looked away, raking a hand through his hair and pulling on the strands. "That might… explain things better?"

"You wrote down what you were going to say?" Lana asked, smiling slightly in amusement. Still, as she read through the note, that smile slowly transformed into just disbelief. Open-mouth disbelief at that. "These are… some my favorite lines from The Assassin's Bride…"

"The advice I got was to actually say them, but when I practiced, it sounded like I was making fun of it. I'm no Iuchar who can actually put meaning behind them, regardless of dramatics and grandiose gestures." He shrugged, rubbing the back of his neck now. Iuchar sniffed, pretending to
be tearing up from the praise. "So, I thought I'd write them instead. I'm better at writing anyway."

"Oh…" Slowly, Lana began smiling again, this time warmly. Though I saw happy tears in her eyes, threatening to fall. "So, quick question."

"Yes?"

"A lot of these lines involved declarations of love. Can I interpret this as such?" Her smile grew when he nodded. "Really?"

"I would hope you would, actually." Finally, Ulster looked at her and smiled shyly. "So, um… considering what you dropped on me last-MMPH!" And that was when Lana kissed him. Threw herself at him and kissed him. He barely caught his balance, and her, but kissed her back.

Up on the balcony, all of us were practically wiggling from sheer delight, though we did our best to be quiet. While a bit disappointing that we couldn't actually hear too-serious Ulster say the lines, I had to admit that this suited him more. And made them all the more sincere for it. Plus, Lana still loved it, and that was all that mattered. So, we all kept quiet, letting them have their moment. However, when Lester nodded, us Tirnanog kids began cheering and clapping, with the others following suit a split-second later. Both Ulster and Lana jumped and yelped, blushing redder than my eyes, and looked up to see us there with our pleased-cat-grins. When they scowled and opened their mouths to yell, though, we all fled, the Tirnanog kids making sure to grab at least one non-Tirnanog person to ensure they escaped. I ended up with Fee, and we ran and ran down the halls, laughing so loudly that the sound echoed off the walls.

"Oh, that was so much fun!" Fee giggled once we were safely outside. We actually ran into the market, using the crowd to hide. "I was surprised at first when Diarmuid told me what we were doing, but it was fun!"

"That's why they were so mad that Seliph and I confessed where they couldn't see," I explained, keeping a hold on her hand as we meandered through the crowd. I couldn't help but notice how much more cheerful this market was compared to Alster's. Less things, but far more cheerful. Certainly less wary. "I'm certain they're plotting something to get back at us."

"Have you all done this before?"

"More or less every time there was a new couple in Tirnanog. It was a practical application of our sneaking lessons." I grinned, remembering how we used that to justify it to Aideen when she caught us once. She just walked away and let us be obnoxious. "But anyway, you been okay?"

"Me? I've been great! Mostly." She stepped a bit closer to me and hugged me. "I have been wanting to apologize to you, though."

"For?"

"You got caught. I'm one of the people in charge of patrols, but…" She looked down, and I realized this had really been weighing on her. "I'm sorry."

"They hid in the woods, and I know one person in that group had…" I bit my tongue, shaking my head. No, I shouldn't say that. Not only was it not reassuring, but… "I accept the apology, Fee. Have you thought about how to strengthen the patrols?"

"I've been talking with Oifeye and Finn about it, actually." She sighed gustily. "This will be easier once Leif's army joins up. They have fliers too, you see."
"Do they?"

"Yep! Not a lot, but still, more aerial patrols is only a good thing." She began to perk up again, which was only good. The world didn't seem right if Fee wasn't smiling. "But yes, I've got a lot of ideas that I'm shifting… wait, no, sifting through to fit us best."

"Tell me about them. And we can shop while we talk." I winked, giggling. "First things first, though. I want something sweet!" Even watching Ulster and Lana confess did nothing to curb how hungry I was! "Sugar to make our brains work!"

"Huzzah!"

We actually spent a good chunk of the afternoon in the market, not only talking army stuff, but also gossiping in general, with her letting me know of fun things that happened while I was gone. While eating lots of sweets, of course. Would ruin our dinners, but who cared? We were (technically) adults, after all!

"Blech, I'm tired of walking…" I complained just seconds before I jumped onto Shanan's back. He yelped and stumbled, but caught me. And barely avoided getting hit in the face with my basket. "Carry me!"

"You're not eight years old anymore, you know," he half-complained. He still carried me with ease, though, once he'd adjusted to my weight. Up ahead, Hestia raced about this way and that, burrowing under random shrubs and coming out with some dead squirrel or something. I just hoped she didn't get a snake again. "Oh, my poor back."

"Is this where I'm supposed to make jokes about you being old? Because I think Oifeye, Uncle Finn, and Aunt Lachesis would protest that." I snickered, just imagining the reaction, and Shanan groaned. "Besides, you're the one who insisted on coming with me when I went herb collecting."

"You got captured the last time you went herb picking!" He scoffed and shifted me so that he could hold me a little better. "Of course I'm coming with you."

"I was doing just fine until Reinhardt showed up, and I'm sure Reinhard has a healthy respect for Hestia now." Though, at the moment, Hestia was happily running around like she was a puppy again. "Bah, whatever. I get you all to myself for once! Yay!"

"I feel like most people would be fetal for a week after being in enemy territory where your life could end on a whim."

"So, you mean most of my life?"

"Okay, point…" He sighed. "Really should've done better by you all."

"If we want someone to blame, I think it should go to the people who kind of burned our parents alive. Or held hostages to massacre them. Or electrocuted them to death. Or-"

"I get it; I get it!" He sighed again, this time in exasperation. "You're always so quick to stop my self-pity."

"That's because you make things your fault when they're not your fault." I held onto him a little tighter. "I told you that Conall said you were an idiot for blaming yourself, right? That he thinks it's his fault because he ran the wrong way."
"Not sure why he thinks he knew what way was up when he'd been separated from his twin sister via the burning roof caving in." Not to mention how chaotic all of that was. "But, as you saw, if I'd had Balmung, I could've gotten him."

"Wouldn't have had to get him if I hadn't been stubborn." Seriously, blame fell on me. I was the one who insisted on going back for the things.

"Or Aideen, Oifeye, and I could've made sure that you had all the important things."

"If that's the case, then you need to split the blame between all three of you, not shoulder it on your own." Not to mention how he felt responsible for Deirdre's kidnapping. And all the trouble that resulted from *that*. "Bleh, we're too serious."

"We are. Also, aren't you supposed to be foraging?"

"I already got everything, silly." I giggled and he rolled his eyes and promptly 'dropped' me. Really just loosened his grip on my legs and I hopped off. "Mean!"

"We're walking deeper into the forest when we don't have to." He looked around and whistled for Hestia. She popped her head out from behind a shrub and disappeared again. "Then again, Hestia is having quite a bit of fun."

"Of course she is." It had been a bit since we had a simple 'hike' through the woods. "Say, Shanan, have you ever had a crush on anyone?"

"Have I *what*?!!" He actually tripped over his own feet because I'd startled him so, and I had to laugh and laugh and laugh. "Where did that come from?!"

"Lighthearted conversation. Obviously." I tried to stop laughing, but I couldn't. His expression was just so scandalized! "I mean; bunches of people had crushes on you back at Tirnanog, but I don't think I ever saw you go on a date or anything!"

"I… hmm…” After recovering, which took a hilariously long few seconds, he crossed his arms and leaned against a tree, clearly thinking about it. "Well, I definitely had a few precocious crushes on some people in the army. Fleeting things, really. I can't even remember anymore."

"Mom, maybe? You were with her a lot." I giggled, mostly because I thought it was ridiculous and all. "Falling in love with the healer who tended to your every ill~?"

"Oh, please. I think Alicia would roll her eyes at the thought." So, Shanan rolled his eyes in her place. "No, Alicia was almost immediately like an older sister, or even mother, to me. Right about the same as Aunt Ayra. Probably the healer thing." He chuckled, amused by the thought. "To be honest, I don't think I had a crush on any of the core members. The people you would've grown up hearing about."

"Aw, that's boring." I huffed, actually a bit annoyed. "Really? You're not hiding anything from me?"

"So many ways to answer that, but on this front, no." He chuckled and brought his hair over his shoulder to begin braiding it. "I haven't thought about such things for a long time. For a while, my priority was keeping you all safe, just as I promised. Then I had to do what I could to protect Isaach."

"Huh." That just… "You know… Seliph once made a comment about being worried I set myself on fire to keep others warm." I smiled sadly at him, moving the basket of herbs to my other hand.
"Wonder if I learned that from you."

"Riona, there's nothing to worry about." He smiled, but I saw the tiredness in it. "It's a-"

"Shanan, I know we're weak still, but we're getting stronger. And our strength has always been tied with the bonds we have." I walked over to him so that I could reach up and poke his cheek. Like I could just poke the exhaustion out of his smile, and him. "You're allowed to be happy and to have your own life. I can't think of anyone in the army who would be upset about that. And that's both Sigurd's and ours." I then tugged his sleeve, like I could just pull him away from the guilt. If only it were so easy. "Stop being a lone wolf. You'll have difficulty catching your preferred prey if you don't. Fancy sword or not."

"Balmung is a weapon of divine power." He sounded almost offended by the 'trivial' description. Which was amusing, but could also simply be because it was one of the very few things he had from his family.

"Divine sword or not, then." I pouted up at him. "Will you promise? To stop being the lone wolf and all?"

"Yes, yes." He sighed when I kept pouting. "I promise, Riona, that I will try. I'm pretty content with my life, though. More or less."

"I just don't want you to use duty, and us, as a chain. I love you, Shanan. I don't want to be something weighing you down." I wondered if there was a way I could 'make the promise stronger' or at least lighten the mood a little. I'd heard of people doing 'pinky promises', but Shanan refused to do those. He'd made two 'pinky promises' in his life, one with Deirdre and one with Mom. And both times, it had been the last time he had seen them. "So, if you keep doing that, I will have Hestia sit on you and lick your face off."

"That's…!" He burst into laughter, and I grinned, pleased to succeed. "Now that is quite the threat!"

"Right up there with Aunt Lachesis and Oifeye lecturing you?"

"Don't even get me started on those two's lectures!" He groaned, facepalming, and I snickered. They had sat him down for a good four hours, or so I heard. "Seriously, those two… and Finn was sitting there, laughing like he hadn't done stupid stuff before like get himself impaled, twice-!" Sadly, Hestia's sudden barking cut off that no-doubt-interesting line of conversations, and I made a mental note to ask him more about it before running towards where the barking was coming from. "Hey! Don't go off on your own! You were captured not all that long ago!"

"I'm following Hestia!"

"That doesn't mean anything!"

I rolled my eyes, but kept on running, soon finding Hestia who was not only barking, but whimpering. I wondered why, but then I saw the young girl on her knees by a tree, struggling to stand. After a moment, I realized that I knew her. She was far more disheveled, with her hair falling out of a braid and dirt and sweat staining her simple dress, but it was one of the dancers from Darna. Layla, I believed her name was? Lene's friend. I opened my mouth to ask what she was doing here, but then I yelped and rushed over, dropping the basket as I desperately hunted for some sort of spare clothed because her feet were… well, they were mangled. There was no other way to describe them. The amount of blood oozing out of them made me almost nauseous, not to mention all the rocks and sticks embedded into what bits of skin weren't cut and jagged. And some of it that
was. I wondered where her shoes were, but for all I knew, they fell apart.

"Easy, easy, help is here," I whispered to her. Shanan stumbled to a stop behind me, no doubt noticing the injuries as well. I saw him search his pockets for something to help with the bleeding, but he sighed. Neither of us exactly expected this. "I'm not sure if you remember me. I'm Riona."

"Princess Caitriona?" she rasped. She coughed harshly, like she hadn't had water for a while or something. "So, I am near Melgen? I had to leave the road once I got a short distance out of the city. Patrols."

"Yes, you're near..." The implications of her words finally came through. "Did... did you walk here? From Darna?"

"Ran, walked, limped... I've been crawling a bit these past few steps. My feet and ankles hurt too much for my knees to bear my weight." She gripped my shirt and looked up at me finally, tears streaming down her cheeks. Days-old makeup blotched her face, and she was grey from exhaustion. "Hey... I know... I know you all have so much to look after, but I couldn't think of anyone else who could help..." Her voice cracked and she bowed her head. The hand gripping my shirt trembled. "Please... please save my friends?"

"Shanan, let the infirmary know what's going on." I hugged Layla and turned to look at him. "I'll follow, but infirmary needs a heads up."

"I'm staying with you until we're out of the forest," Shanan replied. He didn't look at me, but at the area around, and picked up my basket of herbs. "Just in case. Once there, I'll run ahead."

"I'll take it," I agreed, not wanting to argue. Then I turned back to Layla. "I'm going to get you on my back. You can tell me more on the way, okay? We'll do what we can for your friends. I promise."

"Okay..." she mumbled, laughing tiredly, yet happily. "I made it... thank goodness..." She rested her head against my shoulder, sagging from sheer relief. "I just hope it's in time for Lene and Ares..." Shanan reacted at both names. I definitely knew that second one. "Gods, thank you for hearing my prayers..."

Well, this was going to be an interesting story.

There was a bit of a whirlwind when I carried Layla back to Melgen, mostly people reacting to how badly her feet were wounded. I had more than a few of the soldiers appearing at the infirmary to lend her their clothes, and even more helping to reassure Layla while Yuria and I got things together to actually treat Layla. And brush her hair and help her change. Really, our soldiers were amazing.

"Are you in pain?" I asked softly, carefully picking out rocks, dirt, sticks, and what seemed like metal shards from her feet. I tried to be as gentle as I could, but I did have to repeatedly dig into the wounds. "Do we need to numb your feet up more?"

"No, I'm good," Layla reassured, sipping her tea. A nice chamomile mix to help her relax, courtesy of Linoan before she finished up her shift in the infirmary. "Are you sure the towel is enough?" She pointed to the towel I had over my lap, to catch the blood from her feet. "I mean..."

"Layla, if you bleed enough to saturate this, you'd be in shock. And I mean the medical definition of it." I grinned at her before returning to my work. This was slow going, which was why I was doing it instead of, say, Yuria. Yuria was mixing up medicines for her in the back corner, while
Sara tended to the more 'typical' injured. Not that I could see those typical injured, since we had Layla set up in a curtained off part for privacy, right near an open window for the breeze. "Chair comfortable?"

"Very." She smiled sweetly and leaned back in said chair for emphasis. One foot was in my lap, letting me work, while the other was resting on an a stack of pillows on the bed, elevated and bandaged. I'd done that one first since I knew positioning would be awkward. "Your soldiers are so kind. And they truly believe in you."

"I'm glad, and will continue to do my best to be worthy of that trust." It was nice to hear, even though I was sure that for some, they believed because of my heritage. But hopefully, I would prove them right with my deeds. "You up for telling me what is going on? Darna is quite a few days travel away, on the road. Through the trees and off the path, it would take even longer."

"Ah, yes, of course…" She sipped her tea, gathering her thoughts. I continued picking things out of her feet, waiting for her. "Bramsel got tired of waiting, and is sending mercenaries to ambush you here at Melgen."

"That so?" Been expecting something like that.

"But I overheard Bramsel give Javarro an order. While they were out, he wanted Javarro to test Ares's loyalty. And if it falters, Javarro was to kill him."

"That's an interesting request." Ares… son of Eldigan and Grahnye, cousin to Diarmuid and Nanna, nephew to Aunt Lachesis and Uncle Finn… while many of us had hoped to meet him, this sort of thing was… "Are they not mercenaries?"

"They are, and Ares is very skilled. He's the Black Knight." And if Ares had Mystletainn, then that reputation of 'invincibility', made sense. "The thing is… he doesn't like Bramsel, staying only because he owes Javarro for saving his life when he was a child. And Bramsel… he lusts after Lene."

"And Ares protects her?"

"Yes, they're lovers." ...That was why her lover had looked familiar. Similar features to the Nordions here. "Well, he'd protect her anyway, but that in particular plays a part in why Bramsel wants Ares 'put in his place'." She tightened her grip on her mug, looking down. "So Ares is in danger from the very person he feels indebted to, and doesn't know it, and I'm worried. But, admittedly, I'm more worried about Lene."

"...If Ares is away…"

"No one protects us dancers. Ares is the only one who gives a single damn about us in that place." She began trembling and I saw her bite her lip. "Worse, Lene sassed Bramsel, insulted him for only being 'brave' when Ares wasn't around. So now, Lene is in the dungeons, or worse. Honestly, it's probably worse already."

"...I see." Though I continued to work, inside I was frozen. That bright and kind girl… that sweet and devoted boy… even ignoring the connection we had to Ares, all of that… "Still, it is quite the distance."

"I know. At first, I tried to chase after Ares. But some of the other mercenaries caught me. They beat me, and threatened to rape me if I tried to leave again. Bramsel didn't want anyone to leave the castle, probably to make sure no one told Ares. The servants like Ares far more than him, after
all." She shrugged helplessly. "But I couldn't just sit around while Lene was in danger. She…" She took another sip of her tea and took a few breaths to calm down. "When I was younger, a plague ripped through Darna."

"Did it?"

"It was horrible. My parents died fairly early into it and I can still remember my little brother bleeding from his eyes and nose, spitting up blood as it threatened to drown him. His tongue blackened, he turned all yellow, and he was just in so much pain. Head, belly, chest… it took him four days to die, and he looked so relieved when he passed." She laughed hollowly. "Can you imagine? A one-year-old being relieved to die?"

"Were there no doctors?"

"There was a husband and wife team who worked heavily with the church. Tending to everyone they could, without payment. It's how I survived, actually." Her smile was mirthless. I wondered if she regretted living, while her little brother didn't. "I never got his name, but he was so very kind. Long blonde hair tied in a braid, and gentle gold eyes. Just a beacon of serenity. I believed him when he said he'd help me, and he did."

"Did they catch the plague?"

"No, the bastard Imperials... I heard they killed that kind man like a dog. Never heard what happened to his wife." Why the hell would they do that? And this would've been back when Arvis was... gods damn it all. "I ended up in the orphanage, the one tended to by the church, and just... I felt dead. I just wanted to die. But then... then I met Lene."

"She was in the orphanage too?"

"Yep. Though, at first, I ignored her. I didn't want anything to do with anyone. So, I never reacted when she came over to say hello." She smiled warmly and when she closed her eyes, a single tear fell down her cheek. "But Lene didn't give up on me. She kept at it, doing whatever she could think of to get me to smile. And, one day, she proudly showed me her dancing." She laughed, delighted by the memory. "I wouldn't call it a 'good' dance or anything. Good for a child, perhaps, but only that at best. However, It was like... I could just see the color flow back into the world with her every movement. Her laughter, cheer, and passion lit up the world..."

"Like your own dances."

"Exactly..." She opened her eyes again. "We've been friends ever since. Each other's only friend. She takes care of me; I take care of her. And I'm fond of Ares because he helps Lene smile. He brought back her smile, her true smile, when the worst aspects of our job started to wear it away." She looked down and sipped her tea. I began properly cleaning and bandaging her foot, finally done getting the debris out. "So, I wanted to help them. And I remembered how kindly you and Prince Seliph watched our dance, Princess Caitriona. The warm smiles and the genuine praise. And Lene told me that you and your wolf helped her. So..."

"Easy, we'll figure out something." I tied off the bandage and made sure to look her in the eye. I wanted to make sure she knew how serious I was. "I promise we will do every we can for them. And I guarantee you that we will get Lene out of that place."

"...Thank you..." She smiled tearfully, and a few more tears fell down her face. "Thank you so much..."
I made sure Layla was comfortable before cleaning up and letting Yuria know I was done. Then I left the infirmary, noting Hestia laying down by the door. She got up with a stretch and a yawn, shaking herself awake from her doze, and she led me to a large room where the rest of the War Council was meeting. Just as before, Leif, Nanna, and Tine joined us. I was just grateful that the room was actually large enough to accommodate us this time. Though, I did wish there was a little less yelling.

"We're saving the girl!" Larcei snapped, bristling. Iuchar rubbed her back in an attempt to soothe her, but she remained tense. "So-!"

"Larcei, I don't recall anyone saying that we weren't going to save her," Seliph countered. He had his eyes narrowed in annoyance, hinting this argument was less due to disagreements and more due to bad word choices and misinterpretations. "But we have to be smart about it. Just storming the place might put her in more danger."

"Yet every second we waste…!"

"We'll waste more time if we get captured or if the girl is used as a hostage! Or killed because we rushed in!"

"Wonder how long this has been going on," I whispered, petting Hestia as I watched others jump into the argument, namely Lana and Lester, though the others didn't exactly calm any of it. She simply yawned, unimpressed by all of this. "I know; I know…” I debated joining the table, but decided that I didn't want to jump into this, so I instead headed into the back where Shanan watched over all of us. Oifeye, Uncle Finn, and Aunt Lachesis weren't here for whatever reason, which was probably why this argument was even happening. "Layla's feet are treated, but Yuria still needs to do another check to know the long-term damage."

"I hope she'll be okay," Shanan whispered. He continued watching before turning to me. "I'm guessing you Tirnanog kids are being particularly bristly because of what happened to Creidne?"

"Hey, for once, I'm not involved." I sighed and looked over everyone again, noticing it really was just us. Everyone else was awkwardly fidgeting, no doubt wondering what was going on. I was pretty sure this was the first time they'd really seen any of us argue. "But has the story spread or something?"

"Some of the soldiers remember her as one of the dancers in Darna, and Bramsel apparently has a… reputation." He dug his fingers into his arms. "So, everyone has made a guess. Is it wrong?"

"Wish it was. But there's more to the story." I bumped my shoulder into him. "Hey, how do you know the name 'Lene'? You reacted to it."

"Hmm? Ah, I suppose we did rarely talk about her. We thought she'd been lost in the Massacre, so it was painful." Shanan looked down briefly before focusing on me. "'Lene' is the name of Sylvia and Claude's daughter."

"Oh." I facepalmed, now getting why the name had been familiar. I knew I'd kick myself over that eventually. "Green-haired dancer. Why didn't I suspect something just from that?"

"Because there's a bunch of people with green hair, and lots of dancers?"

"Point taken." Still, it probably would've made things a lot easier if I'd made that connection sooner. "Why haven't you stopped them?"

"Figured it would be good for them to get it out while waiting for you." He straightened then and
strode to the table, leaning against it. Everyone immediately shut up, looking at him. "So, you all feeling better?" I nudged Hestia to run over to either Larcei or Lana before joining Shanan at the table. Larcei made things easier by moving to Lana's side to hug her. "Riona has information."

"Sadly, it's basically what we all suspect," I sighed, running a hand through my hair. Because of where I was, I was actually next to Arthur (and Tine, who hid behind him as usual), and to my surprise, he took my hand. The grip was hesitant, but comforting. "Mostly. There's another part to this all. Ares." Nanna and Diarmuid's eyes widened. Leif and Seliph both jumped. "I can't confirm much, but I've actually seen him. He and Lene are lovers, so I met him briefly in Darna. Based on that little bit, and the name, I can guess he is, in fact, Ares of Nordion, heir to Hezul. And it's quite likely that he's got Mystletainn. Ares is the 'Black Knight' that Patty told us about."

"Mystletainn heals the wielder as it drinks the blood of its kills," Iuchar murmured, nodding. Slowly, very slowly, everyone was relaxing. "I recall the stories giving Hezul himself a reputation of invincibility once he received the blessings of the God of War, Jarl."

"Yet, because apparently Ares has been protecting Lene from Bramsel's lust, Bramsel has set up a little 'test' for Ares. What makes it dangerous is that the one administering that test is someone named 'Javarro', who apparently is the reason why Ares surviving Leonster's Fall."

"Meaning he might let down his guard or even let him claim his life."

"Or whatever. No clue. All depends on how Javarro goes about it." I held onto Arthur's hand a little tighter. "So, what are we doing? Ares's mercenary group is coming towards Melgen to ambush us, so no clue where exactly he is, but Lene is in Darna."

"I can fly over the route and keep an eye out for the mercenary group," Fee offered, resting her hand on her chest. Emphasizing the words. "I imagine someone nicknamed the Black Knight will stand out a tad."

"Yes, leave that sort of thing to the scouts," Ulster added quietly. He took Lana's vacated spot, standing in between Iuchar and Diarmuid. "Once he's found, then we can figure that part out from there."

"So, as for Lene…"

"You guys have sent groups ahead to deal with enemy leaders before, right?" Arthur asked, shrugging. He glanced around the room, like he was wondering just why it didn't come up sooner. "It's not like you're going to make this guy an ally or anything, right? It'll be like with Danann?"

"If he surrenders, then he gets a trial and execution," Seliph whispered. He didn't quite look anyone in the eye, no doubt embarrassed by the yelling now. "Probably not publically. Well, maybe a public trial. I don't know. We'll think of something if that happens."

"Pretty sure you can just skip to the execution, but whatever." Arthur sighed. "So, anyway, now that everyone is calmed down, can we get an explanation for why you all went off?"

"...Uh…"

"...A friend of ours was captured and raped while playing bait to ensure Larcei and Lana escaped," Lester explained softly. Diarmuid moved so that he could hug him, though he himself was trembling. Patty patted both of them on the back, looking a little lost. "She was only just beginning to recover when we left Tirnanog. So, situations like that are a little…"

"Basically, the situation surrounding Miss Lene hits too close to home," Nanna summarized, with a
soft and gentle smile. The mood of the room lightened a little at that smile. "I understand. It was a bit unnerving to see you all arguing."

"Well, normally, we *try* to talk things out before things get to all-out-yelling like that." Lester sighed and looked to Seliph. "Still, Arthur is right. A small group to get inside Darna and rescue Lene seems best."

"I agree, and it should probably be just girls," Seliph murmured. He looked at Larcei and smiled. "I don't even have to ask, I know, but-"

"Not even a god could stop me," Larcei boasted, grinning. She soon smiled apologetically, though, and Seliph waved away the apology. All were at fault, after all. "We know that Fee will have to stay here for scouting."

"But she can also serve as a messenger." Seliph looked to Fee to confirm that, and she nodded, beaming a bit. "Patty?"

"Yep, I'm good to come along!" Patty agreed, puffing out her chest. She even grinned. "Not the first time I've done something like this. Uncle Dew would always do what he could to help out the captured and Hunted."

"I'll be coming along as well," I declared firmly. I saw the protests on everyone's faces and shook my head. "I'm the only one in the group she's actively talked to. Seliph and I are the only ones she'll recognize, likely, but since this group is going to be all girls…"

"Well, it's not like you'll be alone." Patty pointed to Hestia. "Is she coming along?"

"Er… good question." The immediate answer was 'no' because sneaking through an urban area and giant mottled-gray wolf didn't typically go together. But when I looked down at Hestia, I saw that despite her doing her best to behave and comfort Lana and Larcei, her hackles were raised. "I think she's coming whether we want her to or not. She doesn't like these sorts of situations anymore than we do."

"And she won't scare Lene?"

"Probably not, actually. Lene was being harassed when I properly met her."

"Oh, this is when Hestia ran off on her own instead of at our signal," Seliph murmured, piecing the timeline together. I nodded, and he smiled slightly. "In that case, Lene would've already seen Hestia as something protective. And I do remember Hestia figuring out why… our friend was screaming before the rest of us."

"Besides, she's at the perfect height to bite Bramsel's balls off if need be," Lana deadpanned. It startled a laugh out of most of us, though the boys winced in sympathy. Or imagined pain. Either-or. "Hey, Nanna?" Lana stepped out of Larcei's hug to lean into Ulster, rested a hand on her back to support her. "Do you mind going along?"

"I certainly don't mind, but are you sure you don't want to instead?" Nanna asked. She and Leif exchanged a look, and Leif smiled warmly at her. "Considering earlier…"

"We can only spare one healer, definitely need a healer along just in case, and I'm not trained to fight." Lana shook her head and looked down. "I would love to see someone rip his heart out and squeeze the black out of it, but it's better if someone trained to fight went along. Yuria can't go, and neither can Lachesis."
"Then, of course I will." Nanna smiled, though I saw most were a little surprised by the creative imagery Lana used. Been a while since I saw her this mad. "I'd be honored to."

"Um… might I come along as well?" Tine suddenly requested. I actually jumped because I'd completely forgotten she was behind Arthur and me. "I'd like to help her, if I can." She tentatively stepped out from behind Arthur to look at all of us. "I'm still not sure about fighting for the army, but this… this is different."

"We'd be honored for your assistance, Tine," Seliph replied softly, smiling at her. She ducked her head and hid, but I thought I saw her smiling too. "Let that be the group, then. You guys go ahead and leave to get ready. Ulster, Fee, let's work on some immediate patrols to scan the area, and the rest of us will discuss what to do for Melgen's defenses."

He didn't need to tell us twice. In fact, our group was so quick to get out of the room that was actually crashed into each other. After laughing at the ridiculousness of it all, we rushed down the halls, to head to our rooms. I ran into a surprise near mine, though. Literally. I ran into Lewyn.

"Holy hell, you are still alive," I deadpanned, unable to help it. This was, literally, the first time I'd seen him since we took Melgen. "Okay, got so many things to say to you, but can you head to-"

"That girl, Lene, is fine for now, and if you are quick, you might make it," he blurted. I blinked slowly, trying to figure out what the hell, and I realized that he looked… well… winded. "Ares is proving a tad more… difficult. The sylphs are more worried about Lene, and you have as much luck herding sylphs as you do cats, but I believe he and his are closer to Darna than Melgen for now and might still be when you-"

"Did you, for the first time, gather information for us without us asking?" I pointed at him, surprised. "I mean… wait, how do you even know about Lene and Ares?"

"Wind. The infirmary window was open. I heard what Layla told you."

"Ah. Right." Well, that was a stupid question. "Okay, so, we can help her…" That was a bit of a relief to hear, especially from him. "I think this is the first time you've not been pragmatic. Or pretended to be pragmatic."

"There are many unforgivable things, and according to the wind, Bramsel is guilty of quite a few." His eyes hardened. "I'm disgusted such a man defiles Darna."

"Huh. We might eventually get along after all." I shrugged and pointed to his arm. "Everything fine with them?"

"No worse than what you saw and, no, I have not forgotten my promise." He ran a hand through his hair and grimaced. "I was looking into something and it took longer than I anticipated."

"Next time, can you warn us that you're leaving the army for a bit or something? Please?"

"I will. As I said, it took far longer than anticipated. I'd expected to be back the same day."

"I grimaced, but then shook his head. "No matter. I've been following the wind to figure out what room you all moved to."

"Make sure you know what I reported about my capture, okay? Because I've got a feeling you've answers to it."

"I might." He hesitated, but then did something unexpected. He ruffled my hair. "Move quickly, but you've more time than you think. From what I can tell on the wind, Bramsel will wait until
Ares is more than a day away."

"Thank you."

He left then, done being social, and despite how weird that was, I ran into my room, making mental notes of what I'd all need, and who all I'd need to speak to before leaving. The next few days were going to be… interesting. Very interesting.

Darna looked the same as it did before. Except there were fewer guards. You'd think that would make things easy, but no. Because of a few key things. The worst of which was, of course…

"Hestia, you being a brat makes things harder," I sighed, sitting in the branches of a nearby tree. The exact reason why I'd been hesitant about her coming along. "Sorry, everyone."

"Considering she was out the castle before we were ready, I'm certain that she would've been following us, or leading us, before long," Larcei pointed out, leaning over to bump shoulders with me. She and I were sitting on the same branch. "Still, looks like Patty is back from her scouting."

"Yep." And I led the way down, swinging from one branch to the next. When I landed on the ground, right by where Hestia was laying down, Nanna and Tine actually clapped. "Thank you, thank you~!" I stepped out of the way so that Larcei could land without worrying about kicking me. "I'm glad you enjoyed the show~!"

"Well, you climbed down so gracefully!" Nanna laughed, grabbing her staff again. A mend staff she got from her mother. She also wore a very unique sword called an 'Earth Sword', which she explained was like a weaker version of Mystletainn. "I couldn't help but be in awe."

"Always glad to have a pretty lady's attention," I declared with a wink. Nanna laughed again, this time blushing. "Tine, have you recovered your breath?"

"I have, thank you," Tine replied, looking down. Though the days of travel had led her to not be as inclined to hide, she still had difficulty looking us in the face when talking. "I'm sorry…"

"Don't be. You're not the one causing problems." I looked pointedly at Hestia, who stood with a stretch and shake and walked over to lick my hand. "Yes, you're cute."

"She's very cute." She petted Hestia without hesitation. Which made sense because she likely had spent quite a bit of time with Hekate. "You know… there is a poaching market."

"There's a what." My voice went flat, and I felt Larcei, who finally climbed down, place her hands on my shoulders. "I take it you don't mean something like 'hunting on noble lands is technically illegal but damn it, there is not enough food'?"

"No, I mean people who capture baby animals to be sold as exotic pets and entertainment."

"...Fucking…!" And I promptly turned the air blue with curses, the most vile ones I could think of. Hunting for food was one thing. Hunting to turn beautiful animals into fucking court jesters was a completely different thing!

And that, of course, was when Patty returned, her eyes wide as she cautiously approached us. "Uh… what happened?" Patty began slowly. She hid behind Nanna, who looked like she was trying to decide if she should stay back or stop me. "Um…"

"Wow, she has the same reaction Conall did," Tine noted. Surprisingly, given how timid she
normally was, she wasn't startled by my cursing. In fact, it seemed to amuse her. "Anyway, I brought it up because I thought that we might be able to use that excuse?"

"Brought up what? The caged animals?"

"...Oh, right, they use cages." She sighed. "Never mind."

"Patty, we're freeing the animals after we've saved Lene," I declared, stomping my foot. Larcei rubbed my shoulders, trying to calm me down. "Those poor babies… all frightened and away from their mamas…"

"Swear you're going to get eaten by a bear one of these days," Larcei sighed. She hugged me and rested her chin on my shoulder. "So, Patty, how's the town?"

"They're being very cautious about letting people in and out," Patty reported, stepping out from behind Nanna. She crossed her arms and sighed. "Very cautious."

"So, send Riona and… well, it worked with Diarmuid, so maybe Nanna can."

"Huh?"

"What are you… oh, hell no!" I yelped, turning to scowl at Larcei. Larcei just grinned. "Come on! For one thing, they know who I am, and for another thing, Diarmuid and I still don't know how that worked!"

"Are we talking charming the guards?" Nanna asked. She looked completely unamused. "I have done that before and I don't know how it worked either."

"See! You can't count on that!" Giggling stopped my protests, but mostly because it was Tine giggling. "Conall do something like this too?"

"Oh, no, Conall tells them exactly what he thinks and while they're reeling, just walks on through," Tine managed to explain. She kept on giggling, though she covered her mouth to try and muffle it. "You're all just flailing about and…"

"It is really funny to see," Patty agreed with her own grin. Still, she let it fall for a 'serious' look and focused on Hestia. "Getting her in is the main problem. Best idea I have is splitting up somehow, but even then, that doesn't solve the main issue."

"Perhaps we can have Riona walk in to negotiate with Bramsel?"

"Now that's a thought…"

"Will it work with Hestia, though?" Nanna asked. She shifted her weight, trying to ease aching feet. "To be so close to Bramsel and…" Hestia growled then. "Ah. I'm taking that as a 'no'."

"I can probably keep her under control, but it's a 'maybe' depending on how angry she gets," I sighed. Really should've left her, but Larcei was right. Hestia had been waiting for us outside the gates, and we already knew she had some way out. No one knew how she managed to escape and make it to me, after all. "If she gets really mad, then I have to physically pin her, which…"

"Not the best way to do 'negotiations', even fake ones." Nanna sighed. "You know; growing up, I wanted a pet, but…"

"I think this whole thing shows that Hestia has pet humans, not the other way around." All of us
sighed, our ideas drying up. "Patty is right, though. There's definitely going to have to be some sort of split. Since Hestia's mine, how about you four sneak in and I try to figure out something with her?"

"Is it wise to split that way? Especially since you were captured recently?"

"We're fighting a war against an Empire. I think wisdom is far away from us."

"Well, I suppose, but…" Nanna trailed off as Patty poked her and pointed up. "Hmm?" All of us looked up and we saw familiar wings very high in the sky, too high for scouts to just casually see her or anything. "Oh, that's Fee, isn't it? She's your only flier?"

"That she is," Larcei confirmed, waving her arms to let Fee know where we were. Fee arced around to some nearby cliffs and we made our way over to her as she dismounted and sat on the edge. "Hey there, gorgeous~!"

"Hi, hi!" Fee greeted, grinning. She was a bit sunburnt and definitely wind-chapped, but she was as cheerful as ever. "Any luck getting in?"

"Not yet. Hestia's a bit of a problem."

"Figured as much." She reached up into her pack and tossed down a little treat for Hestia. Who caught and gobbled it up as quickly as you please. "Well, I was doing a patrol, and I think I found the mercenaries."

"Really?" Larcei raised an eyebrow, and I knew I was surprised too. "It's been… how long now?"

"Don't ask me why they're still here. Makes no sense to me. Best guess I've got is that they're waiting to see if we'll cut back on patrols. They've got quite a few mounted in their number and all, so they'll want to take the main road as much as possible." Fee shrugged. "Regardless, was wondering if one of you wanted to come by and confirm it with me."

"Hmm… probably a good idea…"

"In that case, Hestia and I will go with Fee," I decided. We were getting absolutely nowhere, and I didn't want to prolong this anymore than we had to. Lene needed us to be as quick as we could, after all. "You four head in, and if I can make it inside, I'll meet with you. Otherwise, I'll come in with Ares, if he's there. Or get help from Fee."

"Probably the best idea," Patty agreed, hands on her hips. After a moment, she petted Hestia and gently tapped her head. "Causing all sorts of trouble. You're lucky you're so cute." Hestia promptly licked her face, making her squeak. "Ugh! Your breath stinks!"

"Yeah, we need to clean her teeth." Figured it could wait until after… whatever happened here. "Okay, I'll see you all later."

While the others headed towards Darna, Fee led Hestia and me, carefully and quietly, across the road and off through some woods, with her pegasus flying high above us to remain (mostly) hidden. Before long, we came upon where the mercenaries were camping, laughing and drinking. We crouched among the shrubbery, doing our best to not be seen, and I tried to see if Ares was within sight. Hestia, of course, decided to burrow under the bushes. I pulled her back and we made to retreat, but Hestia wagged her tail, apparently pleased by something. Two seconds later, I learned it was because Ares was near, and he'd come over to investigate the sound. Meaning he could see her, and me. And possibly Fee, though she was better hidden.
"Ares, what's wrong?" someone called. Ares just blinked slowly at me, and I mimed for quiet before beckoning him to follow. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, I'm just going to see what made that noise," Ares called back, looking over his shoulder at the person. I started falling back, pulling Hestia with me. "I need to stretch my legs." I just continued to make my way backwards, meeting Fee at some point. After a moment, Ares followed us and looked almost irritated. "If that was an attempt at spying, it was a very poor one."

"If we wanted to spy, we'd send the specialists, like Fee," I pointed to Fee, who waved and smiled. Hestia decided she was tired of behaving and headbutted Ares's legs. "She's been very worried about you."

"Has she?" Ares became confused for a moment before kneeling down to pet her. "Not sure what I did to worry you, but I'm sorry for it."

"It's less what you did, and more what we know," Fee explained. She glanced at me, and I gestured for her to take lead here. "A friend of yours, Layla, told us some information."

"Layla… should be in Darna," Ares replied slowly. Now he was frowning. "You're in Melgen. Well, not now. Did she tell you here?"

"No, she basically mutilated her feet running from Darna to Melgen."

"She what?" Ares stood up abruptly, almost panicked. "Is she okay?"

"She will be. But right now, we're worrying about you." Fee hesitated for a moment before nodding to herself. "You and Lene."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Basically, Bramsel wants you dead so that he can have Lene to himself," I answered, deciding to take over. And probably oversimplify a lot. "Javarro is supposed to test your loyalty and if you fail, he's to kill you. Meanwhile, he's taking advantage of Lene sassing him to throw her in the dungeons or something."

"...Lene…" he breathed before wincing and looking down. He clenched and unclenched his fists a few times, with Hestia nosing his hands worriedly, and then he abruptly turned around and began walking away. "I'm talking to Javarro."

"That's not-"

"Don't misunderstand. It's not that I don't believe you." He kept his head bowed, and I saw how rigidly he stood. "I know Bramsel has been lusting after Lene. And despite the fact that Javarro is the only parental figure I really remember, I have no illusions that he has any real affection for me. He values me for my skill in battle, and the boost to reputation I give to him and his mercenaries. Nothing else." He clenched his fists again, this time hard enough to enough to tremble. "But I need to hear it from him. For my own sake. And if I simply leave, then I'll just lead all of them straight back to Darna, where the civilians can get caught up. And who the hell knows what more Bramsel will do to Lene."

"Ares…" I couldn't think of anything else to say, and he didn't really expect a reply since he kept on walking. When he was out of sight, I sighed and looked to Fee. "I think I messed that up."

"How else were we going to explain what danger he was in?" Fee pointed out. I nodded, conceding the point, but I petted Hestia, wishing I had a bit more tact or something. Maybe I could've
softer the blow. "I'm going to get my pegasus and head up. If he needs help, I can get to him quickly."

"I'll make my way back to camp and... see what happens, I suppose," I murmured. Really, I just had to hope I didn't get Ares stabbed or something. "See you later."

Fee made a point to hug me, and I kissed her head before we parted. I kept a firm grip on Hestia as we moved, keeping low to the ground. Before long, we were back to the camp, and I watched as Ares walked up to where a man dressed in noticeably better armor than the rest was sitting. That... had to be the leader, Javarro.

"Javarro, if we're not going to be moving any time soon, then I'm heading back to Darna," Ares said softly, just loud enough to be heard. Javarro glanced up at him, eyes narrowed in annoyance. "I'm a bit worried about Lene."

"Ares, what is it with you getting mixed up with that girl anyway?" Javarro sighed, exasperation making each of his words heavy. He stood slowly, rolling his shoulders. "I have told you before. You can have fun with women, but don't get tangled up with them. Gets in the way of the job."

"And I respectfully disagree, but that doesn't have much to do with what I said." Ares still held himself stiffly. "So?"

"Request denied." Javarro shrugged and turned away. "Besides, you should put the girl behind you. I imagine Bramsel has broken her by this point... heh..."

"Seems their information was right. Both about what happened to Lene, and how you would test my loyalty, by purposely saying something you know would rile me." Ares glared when Javarro whirled to face him. "You're not as smart as you think you are, Javarro. You or Bramsel. The rebels... no, the Liberation Army knows all about your plans. About our 'ambush', and about how Bramsel ordered you to kill me." He scoffed then, and laughed mockingly. "Also, I don't recall saying that I request anything. I told you what I was doing."

"I don't take kindly to those who disobey orders, Ares...!" Javarro growled. The nearby mercenaries were all in various states of 'ready to fight', watching the show with some degree of shock and fear. "Not even you!"

"I am grateful for all that you have done for me, Javarro, regardless for your reasons, but I'm cutting our ties here." Ares's glare somehow became even fiercer. "I am loyal to a fault, and loyalty is a prison, but if you're going to make me choose between those conflicting loyalties, I will choose a path that I can be proud to walk."

"You little ingrate!" Javarro tried to punch Ares in the face, but Ares caught his fist with ease, stopping the motion cold. "Who do you think you are?! You're nothing but a dog of war, like the rest of us!"

"...I am Ares, heir to Hezul." Ares spoke softly, but with conviction, and he pushed Javarro back, hard enough that Javarro actually hit the ground. "I am Ares of Nordion, of Agustria. Ares, son of Eldigan the Lionheart." He turned away from Javarro, walking slowly towards where the horses were grazing. Silently taunting them to strike, but none moved. They were too stunned, and I didn't blame them. "I am the son of the greatest of knights, and I refuse to stain his legacy by simply leaving someone to such a fate. Especially the woman I love and cherish." He found his horse and got them ready for riding before mounting up with ease. He held his head high, and I swore I was looking at a king. A proper king. "All who stand in my way will become naught but stains on the Demon Blade." He drew his sword and my blood hummed at the sight. The blade itself glinted in
the sunlight, and it pulsed with power, like it was celebrating the battle to come. "So, will you
become my prey? Or will you choose to cling to your miserable lives for a few more moments?"

Someone shot. I didn't see who. But before the arrow could hit him, I set it aflame, just reacting
automatically. In the back, there was a scream, and I looked to see Fee surging up into the air on
her pegasus, a body slipping off her bloody lance. Other screams joined the air, calls to arms, and
as I watched Javarro slowly pick himself off the ground, I decided to just set the ground on fire, to
get a small barrier and buy Ares and Fee a little more time to get situated. And freak out the
mercenarys more. ...And I miiiiight have set Javarro's shirt on fire. Because of what he said.

"Ares!" I yelled, already heading away from the camp. He glanced back at me. "I'm going to meet
up with the rest of my group to save Lene!" Hestia kept up with me easily, howling to disorient the
mercenarys further. "You work with Fee to survive and make it back to her!"

"I owe you!" he yelled back. Which was all he had time to say. The first ones fell on him, but he
cut through them easily, the blood flying everywhere. With Fee swooping down to pick off any
archers, the feathers from her pegasus's wings dancing with the blood as both caught the wind.

Hestia and I ran. We ran from the battle to head for Darna. I didn't bother going to the 'old spot'
where I had last seen the others. Without Hestia to worry about, I knew they'd already gotten in. I
just now had to do the same. Somehow. Here was where things got tricky, but I would give it my
all. Of course, it was easier said than done. After all, the guards were keeping close watch on the
entrance.

"Much as I hate to follow Larcei's idea, I am seriously wondering if I have to try and talk our way
in," I whispered, pressing myself against the outer wall to stay out of their immediate sight. If I
didn't have Hestia, I could scale it easily, especially the older parts, but Hestia didn't climb easily.
Or at all. Mostly. She climbed a tree once, but fell and never did it again. "Blech… well, the wall
is old and Mursili had mentioned that Bramsel hadn't tended to it well. Could be a weak point
or…"

Hestia suddenly whimpered and I looked down, confused. But she was looking at something
behind us, so I turned and I saw there was actually a rather tall man standing silently a short
distance away, by the wall. He looked to be in his early thirties, and something about him was
strangely calming. It might've been the eyes, a soft gold, or the gentle and serene smile he wore.
Kind of reminded me of Aideen, really, and he even had blond hair like her, worn in a braid that
fell over his shoulder, though he wore simpler clothing than Aideen ever did. But when he saw me
looking, he beckoned me towards him, pointing to a spot of the wall hidden in shadow. Curious
despite myself, I crept over, with a whimpering Hestia all-but-attached to my leg. But I didn't find
anything in the shadows.

"So, something here?" I looked around a bit more and sighed. "I don't see anything." The man
appeared at my side and Hestia growled a bit, but he didn't seem bothered. Instead, he pointed to a
very specific part of the wall and, when I touched it, I felt it shift. "What the…?!!"

Startled, I ran my fingers over the stone and found very distinct notches, hard to see but easy to feel.
Not the convenient handholds and footholds I'd use to climb, but something intentionally made.
And when I pulled the stone out, it came out in one piece, and there was a handle on the other side.
And it revealed a smooth tunnel, with supports on the inside, leading to a similar stone on the other
side. It was big enough for a person easily. Big enough for a wolf, too.

"Oh, well, that's convenient. Thank you…?" I turned to face the person, and found that he was
gone. "Another ghost? Seriously?" I looked down at Hestia, who whimpered again. "You're not
fond of ghosts, huh? I'm sorry, sweetie. But at least they're helping?" Unlike what most of the
stories I grew up with said. Oh well. Just showed that you shouldn't completely trust stories. Use them as a guide and a starting point, sure, but not your sole bit of information. Still, so many of them... "I guess it goes to show how awful the Empire is. Even the dead are doing what they can to take them down. Or something." And I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth or whatever the phrase was. Because now I could sneak in, with Hestia.

Time to find the others then. And hope there was still time for Lene... and that Ares and Fee would be okay...

"There was a freaking hidden tunnel?" Patty grumbled. Thanks to Hestia, I'd found the rest of the girls easily and told them about what all happened on my end while we waited for a change of guards at the actual castle. Patty was sure that would be the best time to sneak inside. "I've never heard of that, but it makes sense. Gets people out."

"Or people in if the place is under siege," Tine pointed out. She frowned a bit, thinking, and stepped a little closer to me when we heard people pass. All of us were in an alley right by the castle gates, where we could keep an eye on things. "I know that Alster has a few doors like that, but they were actual doors."

"Alster is a newer castle though, right? I vaguely remember hearing that?"

"Alster was destroyed by Loptyrian priests in the days prior to the Miracle of Darna, so it had to be completely rebuilt," Nanna rattled off easily, shifting so that she had a little more room to breathe. She was squished between Larcei and Patty, across from me. Hestia was, of course, at my side, where I could keep a good grip on her. "At least, that's what Father taught me."

"That's the story told in Alster as well," Tine agreed. Larcei and I just shared a shrug because we had no clue. History-history wasn't something Oifeye, Aideen, or Shanan specialized in and though Danann let Isaach keep their printing presses, there were limits to just how many books made it through Yied and Rivough. Sadly. "So, Alster itself is older, but the structures are newer, yes. Built during a relatively more peaceful time."

"I remember, vaguely, using some of those doors to escape Alster when Bloom found out that Leif was there." Nanna sighed. "Lots of running and city-hopping there."

"Gods, I remember how much fun that was," Larcei groaned. I grimaced, remembering. Tirnanog really had been a blessing for us, but even then, it was only because it was super hidden and stories of it were the only real proof it even existed. Shanan only had known the story because it was where Od grew up prior to being Hunted and dragged across the desert and all. "Blech, too dark. But such tunnels are something we should check in other places."

"I imagine most of the castles and cities have secrets like that," I added, wondering if there was a way we could find them efficiently and incorporate them into strategies. If so, then we could really... "I bet Leonster has a few." Nanna nodded vigorously, smiling slightly. They must've used one to get out of Leonster in the first place. "Something to keep in mind, at least."

"Yeah, and we need to assume our enemies know about most of them. Bramsel is probably the only one stupid enough to not maintain a defensive wall." No doubt about that. "Patty, how we doing?"

"Let's see..." Patty murmured. She crept to the end of the alley and leaned out slightly to survey the area. "Guards are changing... no one around..." She looked back at us. "We won't get a better chance. Everyone remember the plan?"
"Groups of two," I reminded. Well, 'two'. I'd be with Hestia. Larcei and Patty would pair up, as well as Tine and Nanna. "Do whatever we have to in order to keep ourselves safe, and Lene, and make decisions based on that."

"Yep." Patty glanced around again, double-checking, and she nodded. "Okay. Let's move."

We followed Patty's lead, keeping Hestia between us to lessen the chances of a guard catching sight of her. When we all split up, Larcei briefly took my hand and squeezed it. I made sure to give her a hug and a kiss on the cheek before heading down my randomly chosen path. I knew there was a worry about me being captured again, but more groups were better in this case. We didn't know where exactly Lene would be, after all. Dungeons? Bramsel's room, wherever that was? Some other random place? Castles were huge. And I was the only one Hestia would listen to if she became aggressive.

"Don't suppose you can try and follow any familiar scents here, Hestia?" I asked her softly, moving quickly and quietly through the castle. By sheer… something… I didn't really run into anyone, though I had to duck into some alcoves and dive behind statues a couple of times to hide. "Though, I suppose I really could just ask someone…" Layla had mentioned that the staff here liked Ares more than Bramsel, and based on our last visit, Bramsel wasn't liked at all, really. But… "Ah, let's just…" And that's when I noticed Hestia walking ahead, apparently going with my suggestion. "Oh, gods damn it." Quickly, I caught up with her, and snagged her fur. "That hadn't been a serious suggestion, you know."

"Who's there?" And this was, of course, when I encountered someone. Because what else was going to happen? "You are no…" However, I knew this person. I knew the guard who stepped around the corner and blocked my path. "Princess Riona?" Mursili asked, startled. To be fair, I was too. I knew he was in the guard, but what were the chances…? "What are you doing here?"

"I… well…" I hesitated, but I thought of how friendly he had been last time. And how much Sandas looked up to him. "I'm looking for Lene."

"Lene?"

"She's one of the court dancers here. Green hair?"

"The fiery one Bramsel wants." He looked down briefly, and when he looked up again, there was a strange resolution in his eyes. A fierce light of determination, burning among what looked to be guilt. "They just took her from the dungeons, on their way to Bramsel's room. Follow me."

"Thank you!" I smiled, elated, and Hestia actually licked his hand. "Really, thank you so much!"

"It's something I should've been doing anyway." He strode rapidly through the halls, clearly knowing just where to go, and I kept up as best as I could. Hestia, of course, kept up easily, because wolves. "How is Sandas doing, by the way?"

"He's doing wonderfully. He's healing from being Hunted and he's just a bundle of adorableness. I've had quite a few soldiers tell me that his enthusiasm at being a messenger has lifted their spirits." And that was when I remembered a potentially awkward thing. "Er… I did let him get a pet, though?"

"A pet?" He glanced over at me. "Really?"

"I thought the responsibility would be good for him and give him something to focus on when he's not running messages." I shrugged, smiling awkwardly. "And, you know… I find animals
comforting, and I knew he had nightmares."

"Of course..." He laughed quietly. "Well, we can make it work. What kind of pet?"

"A leopard?"

"A... a what?" He almost stopped to give me a 'what the hell' look, but Hestia bumped into him to keep him moving. "A leopard?!"

"He named him after you. Mursi. Super adorable."

"A leopard?!"

"He's a kitten?" I was reminded of when I first asked to keep Hestia. "There were three leopard kittens. Their mama was killed by hunters, and they're too young to know how to hunt and all?"

"...Forgive my impertinence, but you have strange ideas for pets, my lady," He sighed, and made a sharp turn down another hallway. We didn't run into anyone, surprisingly. Or maybe not so surprisingly, since Mursili was leading. "That's going to be interesting to explain to Maliya."

"I... half apologize?" I scrambled to follow him. Hestia actually slipped a bit. "He's really attached, and Mursi has been helping him with the nightmares, so... oh, never mind. Just blame me."

"Believe me, my lady, I am." He suddenly began moving even faster. "There...!" He pointed and I saw a small group of soldiers, five of them, walking ahead. A bound, gagged, and crying Lene was thrown over one's shoulder, and though she struggled some, it was clear she was tired out. "Hey!"

Hestia didn't even give them that much of a warning. Seeing our quarry at last, she surged forward, using her full speed, to blitz on past them and block their path. She snarled, baring her fangs, and her hackles were up to make her appear even larger than normal. Even with her crouched down and back, ready to pounce and snap. And she made sure they knew how unafraid she was by looking right at them, unblinking. Like she was staring at their souls and judging them unworthy of them.

Not going to lie, I almost went for my weapon too. I almost threatened them just as Hestia did. I certainly was furious enough, seeing how Lene was. But then Mursili stepped forward and asked them, "is this the choice you want to make?" The guards looked everywhere but him, and cowered from Hestia's snarl. "Is this really the choice you want to make? Doing what you're told and looking the other way, despite knowing what Bramsel will do to that girl who has done nothing wrong?" He spoke very softly, but he held their attention anyway. "Is that the choice you will make again? Again and again and again? How many times do you make it until your heart stops screaming? A hundred? A thousand?"

No one moved. No one twitched. Without thinking about it, I relaxed, just... listening. Something about how he spoke, so quietly but with such conviction... this is something he had thought about for a while now. Something he had wanted to say for a while. And since I didn't know if the guards were actually listening, since they looked down and purposely used their helmets to hide their expressions, I made sure I was.

"I know. I know it's hard. I know that we do what we have to in order to survive. After all, we have no hope in winning against the Empire, right? No hope for anything, really." He laughed bitterly. "But if we keep our heads down and our mouths shut, then maybe we can eke out some semblance of a happy life, right? Bought by innocent lives, perhaps, but who cares? Who can care? With everything as messed up as it is, it's terrifying enough just to care for the people around you. I know that. I know that very well."
I gestured for Hestia to calm, matching her defiant stare with my own confident one. Eventually, she eased out of her crouch, holding herself tall instead. Dominant, but not aggressive. Of course, based on the flinches, the guards didn't know the difference. Or perhaps their flinches were actually because of Mursili's words.

"My home was torched during a Hunt. There's not even ash left of it. And during that Hunt, my little brother-in-law, Sandas, was taken. I can still hear Maliya's screams as he was ripped from her arms. And I remember..." His voice cracked. "I remember turning away, leaving him behind. My little brother... I left him to that fate, because I had no hope of saving him. Maliya and I barely escaped with our own lives. But still, I left him..." He was crying. The tears streamed down his face, but he kept on talking. "I didn't even try! Because what hope was there? None! None at all!"

This time it was my turn to flinch, wishing we had somehow gotten here sooner to help somehow. I wanted to look away in shame. But I held myself still, and checked my other urge to rush over and hug Mursili. The tears were ones he had wanted to cry for a long while. I could tell that. And I thought... I thought I saw some of the guards crying too.

"We made it to Darna. We cobbled together a new life from the pieces. I got a job as a guard, and was eventually assigned to guard the blockade. I watched the Liberation Army set up camp, and I just looked away, not willing to put my trust in them. Because any sort of victory over the Empire was nothing more than a fantasy." He laughed, but I couldn't figure out the tone. Bitter? Incredulous? Neither quite fit. "But then I heard something. I heard that some of their leaders went to the Yied Shrine. Cleared it out. Supposedly even saved some children that had been there. Unbelievable, right? But the rumors were consistent, too consistent to be anything but truth."

Hestia stopped snarling, though her hackles remained up to emphasize her size. Not that the guards were actually trying to get around her. They were frozen just as they were. I thought Lene might've been able to get out of their grip, but she remained where she was, too tired to try and, likely, not willing to chance it. After all, from here, I could see her ankles were bound too. She still cried. If I didn't feel like this was important, I would've rushed over. But I felt like doing so would undermine just... whatever was going on. And it was... it was important. I knew that.

"Then, incredibly, one of those leaders actually walked up to talk to us while her wolf hunted. Us, soldiers of the enemy. Nameless soldiers... yet she wanted to learn what we knew. Valued our insight, because she wanted to learn if there was a way to solve things without violence." This time, his laugh definitely was incredulous. He even shook his head before rubbing some of the tears off his face. "Without violence... in a world like this? Madness, isn't it? But she truly believed in it. And that belief made me ask what I thought was the impossible. Did she happen to see Sandas in the Shrine? And she had. Not only that, but she had saved him. She saved my little brother, who I thought lost. She'd done what I had known was impossible. Sworn was impossible."

I remembered his reaction, that day. That relief... that had been what I had seen. All I had seen. I wondered now what other emotional tells I had missed that day. I wondered what ones I was missing now, especially since all the guards, including Mursili, wore their helmets. Those things really did cover faces, which I supposed was part of the point. Protection.

"I saw Sandas later that day, and he greeted me with a bright smile and hug. The same smile and hug as always. After babbling about how glad he was that I was safe, as if I'd been in any real danger, he told me of how Princess Riona herself had carried him out of his cell." He gestured to me for emphasis. I hoped I looked suitably... I don't know. Dignified? "He told me of how Prince Seliph played with him, how Lord Oifeye and Lady Lachesis would tell him stories to help him sleep. How all of the leaders, the Scions... how, despite their numerous duties, they took care of him, holding him when he had nightmares, giving him hugs whenever he wished, helping him
relearn how to play with the other children… it was a miracle to me. Beyond a miracle, even."

One of the guards stumbled backwards until they hit the wall, like they couldn't stand up on their own anymore. A few more were trembling. The one carrying Lene was rigid, frozen like they'd become a statue. But they lifted their head slightly, and I saw they were silently crying, just like Mursili still was. Now I was sure some of the others were.

"I talked to others in the army, those willing to come converse, and I learned that such miracles… they weren't uncommon. Not with them. Almost every single one of them had a story where one of the Scions of Light, the leaders of the Liberation Army, had helped them personally, both on and off the battlefield." I hadn't known anyone else had spoken with the border guards. I wonder who all had. "For instance, one was saved from certain death by Princess Fee of Silesse swooping down and risking arrows, just to pull them out of harm's way. Another twisted an ankle while on march, and Lord Diarmuid carried them on his back until they could safely stop and be treated. Every single soldier I spoke with had a story like that." Mursili laughed, and again, I couldn't quite place the tone. I thought 'disbelief' fit best, but… "And they also spoke of how valued they felt. How there were efforts, from the very leaders, to make sure every soldier was comfortable. How they never expected blind obedience, and explained their reasons when asked. How they were more than willing to listen to grievances and questions. How, despite their lofty lineages, they took part in every chore, and always volunteered themselves first for the dangerous missions."

Now I felt like crying, overwhelmed. I was just… I was just so happy, to know the soldiers did know how much we appreciated them. I only didn't cry because I knew that if I cried, I wouldn't stop, and then all the attention would be on me. And that… that wasn't right here. No, it should be on Mursili. So, I bit them back and just smiled. And barely saw how a couple of the guards started, because what Mursili said was just so foreign to them.

"Most importantly, though, was how determined they are. How, despite knowing the pain that can come from caring, they care for every person. How they cry and ache for every death and vow to do better, so that next time, they can save even just one more person. How they are willing to fight for people they don't know, and will never know, just because they know it is right. Because they truly believe that despite the darkness that has enveloped the continent, despite the things that people had done or ignored in order to survive… they still truly believe that we are worth fighting for, living for, dying for."

Mursili discarded his helmet then, letting it clang to the ground. The tears he still shed somehow only enhanced the conviction and strength in his gaze, the determination in his features. I saw Hestia relax slightly, like she knew that she didn't need to be so on edge, with him looking like this. And I felt the same. I was glad I followed my instincts on this.

"So, should we still do what we've done for years? Stand aside and ignore the evil that has burrowed its way into our homes? Keep our heads down and cover our ears, pretending we do not see the horrors being committed and hear the screams of the victims?" Mursili looked each one of them, not quite in the face since most were still looking down, but as close as he could. "Can we do so, knowing that these people who don't know us, will never know us, fight and die for us? Fight and bleed? Fight and suffer? All for us! Can we really do so and help their enemy? Help our enemy?" Silence… silence… the guards were frozen. "There's a choice. There's always been a choice. So, do you choose the same as you always have? Or will you choose differently, at last?"

The guards remained still for one more breathless moment, and then the one holding Lene set her down gently, helping her sit on the ground, and stumbled back. I immediately rushed to her side and went to undo her gag. She held up her bound hands, though, and shook them as if to say 'these first'. So I did, and she began to remove the gag herself, shaking her head when I tried to help
again. I nodded, understanding, and petted Hestia when she joined us and shielded Lene. I heard several clangs then, and when I glanced back, I saw the guards had thrown away their own helmets, so that they could cry freely and cover their faces. Every single one of them was crying. A few even leaned against the wall, sobbing.

"It's okay," I whispered, standing and walking to the closest one. Using my sleeve, I wiped away the tears and smiled at them. "I thank you for the courage you've shown. I know it had to be hard, when you know, far better than I, the dangers of the world right now." I looked at each of the guards, and then at Mursili, who was smiling in relief. Relief that his words reached them. "Mursili, there are four others who came with me. Hestia can help us find them." I glanced down at Hestia, and she barked, agreeing to it. "After we find them, what do you say to kicking Bramsel out of Darna and into the pits of hell? I think it's long past time for Darna to return to its people."

After all, after a speech like that... how could I simply leave? I couldn't. They trusted me, trusted us, with so much. And so, I had to do what I could to be worthy of it. Just as I strove to be worthy of the trust all of our soldiers gave me. A most arduous task, but it was one I took on gladly. And one I would never regret.

The others were found before long and plans were quickly made (once I explained what was going on). There wasn't any time, really, to focus on what all actually happened until later. And when there was finally a little bit of time, Larcei just wouldn't shut up about it. Gods damn it.

"Seriously, we should've just sent you alone and sweet-talk the guards," Larcei 'groused'. She grinned far too much for it to actually be that. "I mean…"

"Look, it was their own morals," I retorted, rolling my eyes. I was never living this down. "Their own morals."

"Yeah, after being reminded of them by the guard you charmed."

"I didn't charm anyone!..." I grumbled a bit more and then looked back to where Lene was. When we all split off, Lene had requested not being left alone. Larcei and I immediately said she could come with us. "You okay? I know all four of us are kind of scrunched together in this alcove."

Because, of course, Hestia was with us.

"Why wouldn't I be good with being close to two pretty girls?" Lene immediately replied with a small smile. Larcei and I both grinned. "And Hestia is so soft and sweet." Hestia, tail wagging, licked her arm and pressed into her leg. "But yes, I'm okay. I think this alcove is bigger than the first apartment Layla and I had, actually."

"Cozy~!" I teased. Since I had a means of fighting without my swords, if the need came to it, I held out my hand to her. She seized it quickly. "If things get chaotic, and there's a chance it might, Hestia will keep you safe. Larcei and I will do what we can, but if we're separated, Hestia will stay with you. And get you right back to us."

"Then I'm as safe as I can be in this weird situation, huh?" She kept on smiling, but I had a feeling she was a bit like me. Capable of smiling through just about anything. "If we end up near my room, and it hasn't been looted, I do have a sword? Not that I really know how to use it, mind, but…"

"You let us know if we're near, okay?" I squeezed her hand, and she squeezed back. "Larcei?"

"Let's see..." Larcei whispered. She peeked out of the alcove and quickly darted back. "Okay, they're leading him past." She lightly kicked my leg. "Why are we not killing him outright again?"
"To be better than we were before," I murmured. I stepped back and moved more in front of Lene, so that she couldn't be seen. "And because we are a very small group who has had no time to secure the civilians."

"That's right…" She sighed and knelt down to hug Hestia. "There. Now I won't do something stupid. Like tear out his guts through his throat."

"And reach all down into that? No need to get elbow-deep in a muck like that guy."

"With the amount he drinks, you'd probably get more wine than blood on you," Lene muttered. She held my hand a little more tightly, and actually a little painfully, but I let her. No matter how calm she appeared, I knew she had to be shaken. "I hear them…"

"Ah, I can't wait to see Javarro's 'gift!'" Bramsel was laughing. He strode on past with a set of guards, the very same ones ordered to bring Lene to Bramsel, though either Mursili's story had explained that away or Bramsel truly didn't notice. Either way, Bramsel was moving. "I wonder if it's just the head or not."

"His messenger didn't say, my lord," Mursili replied, since he was leading the group. He glanced at the alcove and I winked at him when he caught my eye. "But he's certain it's a gift you shall never forget."

"Excellent, excellent!" Bramsel kept on laughing, and Mursili kept up the act and story, whatever exactly it was.

We waited a little longer and then Larcei peeked out again. She then nodded and motioned for us to follow her, and we promptly began our own little patrol around the castle. Our goal? To convince the guards here to at least surrender. The guards and mercenaries outside the castle were being handled by Patty, Tine, and Nanna, who would also handle spreading word throughout the city to let the people know just what was going on. We hoped it would minimize battles here, and thus, minimize deaths. As for convincing? It went well. Most knew at least me on sight, thanks to the earlier visit, and they knew what our presence meant and surrendered quickly. Many even smiled in relief. They were tired, so very tired, of how life was. Of course, not all surrendered, for whatever reason. For those, Larcei and I managed to knock them out. And lock in rooms. Sort of.

"I love all the convenient heavy things in this castle," I noted, dusting my hands off. Just got done moving some furniture to barricade a bathroom where we'd thrown a couple unconscious people. "We will need to get Nanna over to them soon, though, just in case." Brain damage was a thing, after all. "We all good out here?" I walked out of the room and shut the door behind me. I saw Lene petting Hestia, but Larcei wasn't out of her room yet. "We're probably almost done, aren't we?" Many of the guards who surrendered volunteered to convince their fellows, and the groups had found us to formally surrender and all. "Good… we'll make it with plenty of time, then."

"More time to plan the perfect entrance," Lene teased, looking at me. But she wasn't smiling now. "Why did you come, though?"

"To… Darna?"

"Yes." She frowned a bit. "I know how the world works. Now, granted, based on that long speech Mursili gave, you all are a bunch of weirdos like Ares. But Mursili told me that you had come into the castle, specifically, to find me."

"We did." I saw no reason to hide it. "As for why… there's a few parts to it." I sighed and reached back to undo my braid. It was falling out. "One, a good friend was raped. Back in Isaach. She
played bait to protect Larcei and another friend of ours, Lana, and when they caught her..." I closed my eyes, forcing back nausea as I remembered. "So, that's one reason. It's also why I lost my temper last time I was here, and why Hestia was all snarly. Always had a low tolerance, but after that..." I shrugged and smiled bitterly. "Well, let's just say that it's taking a lot of self-control to not just kill stab Bramsel a lot and let him slowly bleed out."

"Why not do that?"

"Because I've done similar in the past, and I hate it. And because I made a promise to try and do better." I had to shake my head to dispel the oh-so-tempting mental image. Though I disguised it by shaking out my hair. "As for the other reason... well, you're probably wondering where Layla is."

"Probably wherever the hell all the servants are."

"Nope, but that's a good point that we should ask about." Seriously, where were they? "She's in Melgen."

"...Melgen?!

Lene's voice went very squeaky and despite her shock, I had to admit it was adorable. "But that's..."

"Yeah. She ran all the way to Melgen to ask for help." I began braiding my hair again, and checked on Hestia. She was laying down at Lene's feet, perfectly calm. "She tried to get Ares, but was stopped." Which reminded me. I wanted to find those mercenaries. They'd probably fight anyway, but I wanted to get that confirmed.

"Ha... not sure if Ares would've come anyway..." She winced and looked away. "We had an argument right before he left. A bad one. Told him to just forget we ever met. So, I mean..."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, Lene." Half-thought about saying more, but then I saw Larcei coming out of the room she'd been throwing people in. "All good?"

"Yeah, I had one stir and had to quickly shove them into a different spot," Larcei sighed, rolling her shoulders. She then hopped a bit to get a little more pep to her and grinned. "Okay, we continuing on?"

"We should see if any guards know where the servants are," I suggested. She nodded, her eyes narrowing slightly. She'd noticed that little oddity too. "But yes, I'm sure we're almost done, so let's check a few more halls and then head outside."

"Sounds good to me~!" Larcei winked and skipped over to kiss my cheek. "Onward! Hestia, come with me to sniff someone out!" Hestia tilted her head, actively debating, before getting up to do that. "Good girl! I'll get you a treat later!"

"No spoiling until we're done working!" I made to follow, but Lene snagged the back of my shirt. "Yes?"

"I still don't get why you came," she whispered. She didn't look up at all, just kept her eyes to the floor. "You all have lots of important things to do. Saving the world and all. So..."

"If we can't save a single person, then how can we save the world?" I asked quietly. I turned to face her and took her hand in both of mine. "And ignoring the personal reason, the fate that awaited you isn't one I'd wish on my worst enemy. Plus, as I said, Layla ran all the way to Melgen, ran until her feet bled, on the off-chance that we could help. How could we tell her 'no'?"

"You're really far too kind." She still didn't look up. "I mean; you're even just knocking out the
people attacking you."

"We don't know why they're fighting. Willing to bet they're scared. Lots of people are scared. And why wouldn't they be? We're all keenly aware of what'll happen if we lose. And even if we win, there's no guarantee that things will be better." I shrugged. "Besides, isn't there enough despair and misery and woe in the world? Enough death and violence?" I laughed then, feeling a bit self-conscious. "I'd rather be merciful and give people a choice. Because if people feel like they haven't a choice, then what else are they going to do?" I thought of what Inanna told me about what she'd been taught. I thought about what Mursili had said. "Now, if a person chooses to fight, then I will oblige. But if they want to take another path..." I let go of her hand, but still held out both of mine. "Then I want to help pull them onto a different one. Because I believe it is our choices who determine who we really are. Our choices when we know there is another way."

"...You're so weird." Still, she took my hands and she finally looked up, smiling shyly. "Um... thank you. For coming for me. If not for you and Mursili..."

"Of course." I squeezed her hands. "Come on. We're falling behind."

"Right!"

We quickly caught up with Larcei and Hestia, and continued our patrol, setting some of the guards to find the servants and reassure them. Then we headed outside. We met Tine, Nanna, and Patty on the way and followed them through the various alleys up onto the walls of Darna, waiting for Mursili to finish his part of the plan. After all, we finished up a lot quicker than expected.

"There's a few mercenaries who need a little more convincing, and a couple that I think will need some time to fix their joints before we see just how serious they were about their threats," Nanna explained to me. She, Lene, and I were sitting on one side of the gates while Larcei was chatting with Tine and Patty on the other. Split so that we could hide a bit easier. Hestia was laying behind Lene and me, hidden. "I might have broken something. A few somethings, actually."

"I love how you're all prim and proper looking, and you apparently can snap bones with ease," Lene giggled. I bit my tongue about mentioning Nanna was Hezul Minor, mostly because... well, I was sure Lene knew about Ares's heritage, and it felt better for that familial connection to be revealed by Nanna, to Ares. "Was everything okay otherwise?"

"Oh, yes. Tine was quiet, but her words seemed to convinced them more than ours."

"Well, she's of Friege, and yet, she's with you all. And, you know..." Lene shrugged. "You guys did kind of kill her cousin."

"Huh?"

"Nanna wasn't with us for that," I sighed, wincing. I still felt horrible about Ishtore's death. I'd make sure there were fresh flowers when I was back. "And it's not that simple or anything. Sadly, lots of things are complicated." The things with Julius... Conall and Ishtar being on the other side... gods, I hated this... "And that's a gloomy topic for a time that is not now." I looked around for a distraction. And I found one almost instantly. "Hmm? What's that?"

"What's what?" Lene asked, trying to find what I was talking about. She gasped when she did, covering her mouth. "That's can't be... Ares...?"

"Huh?" I frowned, squinting as I looked, and I barely noticed Nanna scramble behind me and lean against my back. "Oh, that is him..." I didn't notice at first because... well... he was covered in a
lot of blood and sweat. So he didn't look blonde for the moment. "And he's… heading for the gate." Logically, of course, but… "Damn it. Okay."

Thinking quickly, I scrambled over to the far side and climbed down, slipping a few times because I didn't have time to find a good route. But despite the scrapes and bruises, I still made it down in one piece and I waved, just barely catching Ares's attention. He changed direction to head straight for me. As he did, a shadow flew above us, and I looked up to see Fee flying near, and preparing to land. I shook my head and pointed inside the city, back towards the castle, and she nodded and pulled Annand up to continue on flying.

"What's going on?" Ares asked, dismounting. He was definitely coated in blood. Not quite dripping, but enough that I had to wonder if he favored black so that the bloodstains wouldn't be quite as noticeable. "I-"

"No time," I whispered. I actually had no idea, but better to be safe than sorry. "Lene is fine. Is there like another door or something you can use to get inside with your horse?"

"Around back, closer to the castle." Reassured that Lene was fine, he instantly relaxed and he leaned against his horse. "I'll coordinate with Fee. That's her name, right? Not a lot of name-shouting."

"Yeah, it is." Without thinking about it, I brushed the hair out of his face. "You get inside. We'll fill you in later."

"Thank you." He smiled slightly, but it quickly fell. "I didn't kill all of Javarro's people. And not Javarro himself."

"That's fine. We're expecting at least one more battle." I grinned. "Like I said, we'll fill you in later. I think you'll like the story. But for now, move quickly. Don't want them catching on."

"What the hell did you do?" He sighed. "Whatever. Later."

"Yes, later." And I scaled the wall again, this time being a little easier than heading down because I could better find a path up. Once I was at the top, I checked down to make sure Ares was moving, and when I confirmed he was, I returned to where Nanna was. And where Lene and Hestia should've been, but I saw Lene was heading down the stairs, with Hestia following her closely, and I couldn't blame her. For one, she'd been certain Ares wouldn't come back. For another…

"Ah, Lord Bramsel, please move ahead for a moment." Mursili and his group had brought Bramsel here, which meant we had to lay low and hope he didn't look up. "I wish to check the gates," Mursili was saying, keeping his head low. Bramsel, stuck as he was in whatever fantasy he had, walked on through the gates without even questioning anything. That surprised me, since I was sure someone would have to shove him or, worse, stay out with him. "Thank you."

It was only after Bramsel took a few steps beyond the gates that he slowed, starting to suspect something. But, by then, Mursili and his group were already on the gate controls and the gates slammed shut, trapping Bramsel outside of Darna.

"Sorry, Bramsel, but the people have spoken," I declared firmly, drawing his attention up. His eyes widened when he saw all of five of us on the wall. Larcei, on the other side of the gates, even waved. "They prefer having someone else ruling over them. So, we're giving you a choice. Surrender, and be put on trial for your misdeeds, or be gutted like the pig you are." I smiled sweetly, checking the urge to snarl. Hestia could handle the snarling. Later. "The choice is yours. We'll give you some time to think on it."
He shouted some sort of profanity, but I didn't pay attention. Neither did the rest of us. After all, just because Bramsel was outside… that didn't mean our job was over. But I did see some people already laughing and clapping in the streets. Not full on celebration yet, but easy to see that this one action had lifted their mood considerably. And, though I was tempted to join in, I instead split off from the others, going to try and find Lene and Hestia. Plus Fee and Ares. To my surprise, I ended up finding Ares and Lene first, not far from the castle at all.

"Lene!" In two long strides, he caught up to her and swept her up in a hug. "I'm sorry," he whispered. Lene shook her head, clinging to him tightly. "Are you okay?"

"I've been better," she mumbled. Despite the blood on him, she held him even more tightly. "I have been worse, though. I got rescued before anything happened. Save, you know, being bound up in the dungeons. I swear; that place hasn't been cleaned since the Miracle of Darna."

"Ha…" He pulled away a little, just enough to brush the hair out of her face. "I'm sorry. I should've listened to you. I…"

"Forget about it." She shook her head. "You… you came back. You came back for me…"

"Of course." He rested his forehead against hers. "I love you."

"And I love you…" She smiled sweetly, if a bit shakily. "Don't leave me again?"

"Never." He smiled back. "You're stuck with me."

"I think it's the other way around!" Though she managed a laugh, she began crying, her smiling mask finally breaking. "I was so scared… scared of what Bramsel would do… scared that I wouldn't see you again…"

"I am the Black Knight, incarnation of the War God, remember? I'll always come right back to you." He tried to wipe her tears away, accidentally smearing blood on her. "I'm sorry I wasn't here. But you're safe now, at least. And I'll make sure you always stay safe."

"Okay…"

Movement caught my eye and I turned to see Fee waving at me, Hestia sitting at her side with her tail wagging and wagging. "So, what exactly happened?" she asked me, smiling in amusement. She had a few cuts on her, and a few bruises, but otherwise, seemed fine. If sweaty. "Because this is going to be a fun story, isn't it?"

"It's certainly a story," I replied. I glanced over at Ares and Lene again, before returning my attention to her. "Here, let's get you to Nanna for a checkup and I'll tell you on the way."

Now came the tough part. But we had time to plan. Hopefully.

After being healed up, Fee left to inform Melgen what all had happened here. It was something the six of us had debated for a bit before deciding letting Melgen know that Ares and Lene were safe, and that we were taking Darna was more important than having one extra fighter, even if that fighter was a flier. After seeing her off, we got to work moving Darna's citizens into the castle for protection, and talking to the remaining guards and mercenaries. Those who didn't want to fight at all were kept under watch, but otherwise allowed to wander as they pleased. The more argumentative ones… were put into the dungeons. For their own safety. Hestia nearly tore the throat out of one when they spat at me.
"Oh, I'm so glad Sandas is making friends with the other children!" Maliya laughed, stirring whatever stew she was cooking for everyone. As soon as we started moving people into the castle, Maliya had found and hugged me before thanking me a thousand and one times, at least, for saving her little brother. And asked numerous questions about how he was doing and all. Contrary to what Mursili feared, she didn't seem to mind Mursi that much, though it could be her relief overshadowing her unease. "Ah, I think I'm going to cry again..."

"If you start crying, then this time, I might cry!" I teased, carefully added honey to the milk I had warmed. With magic, because the stoves were all full of food. Those who volunteered to cook, plus the actual hired cooks, were going all out today, it seemed. And it all smelled wonderful... I was tempted to imitate Hestia and steal some! And glad I'd barred her from the kitchen. I would've had to roll her out! "Also, is that supposed to be boiling like that?"

"Yikes, no!" She moved the pot to a cooler spot and tentatively checked under the lid. Before long, she breathed a sigh of relief. "Good, caught it before it did any damage. Fine way to thank you all, messing up the food!"

"Oh, believe me, you could burn it all to ash, and it would still be better than some meals I've had in the past." Satisfied with the amount of honey, I moved the two mugs to a tray. "Now, let's see if I can make it through without dropping anything."

"Good luck, my lady!"

"Thank you~!" I winked at her, and carefully weaved around the various people in the kitchen to leave. Hestia met me immediately, whimpering a bit. "Look, I'll get you a treat later. If you go in there now, you're going to get something hot dropped on you." I nudged her away from the door with my foot. "Now, come on. I need you to lead me to Ares and Lene." Because the warm milk with honey was for them. Larcei would make some for the rest of us later. I just happened to finish up sooner than anticipated.

Hestia sighed and looked mournfully at the kitchen before slowly trudging down the hall. I rolled my eyes and followed her, keeping to the side to stay out of the way of the people rushing to and fro. A few people stopped to talk to me, but for the most part, they were too busy to notice me beyond 'try not to run into this person'. Which was nice because it meant I reached the room Ares and Lene were sharing fairly quickly. But that led to a bit of awkwardness. Namely, they were having a private discussion and for one reason or another, had the door cracked open. Meaning I was eavesdropping by accident. Damn it.

"So, what's going to happen?" Lene was asking. She sat on the bed, absently kicking her feet since they barely brushed the floor. She wore much different clothes than before, a simple dress, and hugged a stuffed bear to her chest, one that matched Seliph's. After all these years, Ares... he still had the bear Mom had given him... "I mean..."

"Bramsel and Javarro both need to die," Ares murmured, tending to Mystletainn by a writing desk. It seemed like he was mostly cleaning it, but it still somehow startled me to see a 'Divine Weapon' being tended to like any other weapon. "And even if I tried to stay out of it... well, that wouldn't happen."

"That's true." Lene hugged the bear even more tightly. "And we really should go to Melgen and see Layla. And your family, right? That healer girl... what was her name? Nanna, right?"

"Yes, and she's apparently my cousin. Got the Mark and everything." He chuckled, shaking his head. "It's so bizarre to me. I was so sure that my family was dead. Yet, my aunt and uncle apparently still live, and I have two cousins. Madness, really."
"And names for them too!"

"And names. Which is a relief..." Ares stood up and leaned Mystletainn against the wall before sitting down beside Lene. "Bit of a shock to learn my uncle is the famous Finn of Leonster, though."

"I'm not too surprised. Makes sense to me you'd be related to a hero." She leaned against Ares and began playing with the bear, mostly moving the arms up and down and making it 'dance' in her lap. "Even if it's not by blood."

"...Not sure if you're complimenting me or making fun of me." He frowned at her, and she smiled innocently. "Oh, whatever. Regardless, I'm not really sure what to do besides that. My life has been defined by jobs and battles. I don't think..." He paused, blinking slowly. "Yeah, I've... never picked my own destination before. Mercenaries go where the work is, and Javarro handled the contacts."

"And I've never left Darna. Even the idea of going to Melgen is frightening, though less frightening than not seeing Layla. But, Ares, will it be okay?" She looked up at him and hugged the bear to her chest again. "Being with the army? You're not exactly found of Seliph."

"Sigurd. I hate Sigurd. He betrayed my father, ruined his homeland, and then got Leonster slaughtered because of his stupidity." Ares's words were blunt and no-nonsense. He even scoffed. "Hailed as a hero... idiocy at its finest, really."

"Well, you were hoping to kill Seliph to seek revenge against Sigurd, right?"

"Yes." Again, he was blunt. I felt myself seize up, though, and pain spiked through me. Not just because of the terror of losing Seliph, but also... also that Ares would hate Sigurd, when I knew from the stories that Sigurd had worried about Ares right up until the end and that, before Agustria fell, Ares had loved him too. Him and Seliph, both. "I recall you mocking me for it."

"I wasn't mocking." Lene scowled at him. "I was telling you it was stupid. Big difference." She rolled her eyes, and shook her head. "People do what they have to in order to survive. Fact of life. And people have to put up with shitty stuff to do their jobs. I've had to dance for dirty old men, have my dance defiled with their lewd eyes, just to make a living, you know? Knights have to kill people. It's their job to kill people."

"Yeah, I know. Doesn't change that pretty much everything that went wrong in my life can be easily traced back to Sigurd. So, yes, I want revenge. Yes, I want to kill Seliph for that revenge."

He undid Lene's ribbon and carefully ran his fingers through her hair. "And yet, that desire played a part in why I wasn't here when you needed help. So, you went through something horrible that would've been worse if not for sheer luck and Layla nearly breaking herself. Meaning Layla also got hurt. You and Layla both were harmed, for my revenge. And that's not worth that. Nothing is worth that." He tilted her face up towards him. "Nothing is worth losing you."

"Ares..." Lene blushed and quickly kissed him, catching him by surprise. "Seriously, you say some of the cheesiest things!"

"I did spend my toddler years in a court." He grinned and she 'hit' him with the bear. "Don't use my toy against me. It's precious."

"And currently in my hands, so ha!" She held her head up haughtily before laughing and relaxing. "But that doesn't really answer my question, you know? Will it be okay? Do you still want to kill him?"
"Part of me, yes."

"But not fully." She smiled knowingly. "You've never been fully behind it. That's why you asked Riona about him."

"Thanks for reminding me that I need to ask what she meant about Father's death." ...Ha… that was far meaner in retrospect. Whoops. "Later, when my head isn't as much of a mess. Today's been… interesting. And everything had been much less certain. All I know is certain is that I owe them." He ran a hand through her hair again, before gently caressing her cheek. Lene leaned into the touch, closing her eyes. "They saved you, after all. I really should've listened to you. I knew you were right."

"I could've worded it better. Even if you two didn't agree, you did feel indebted to Javarro for saving your life and all." She set the bear in her lap and held his hand on her face with both of her hands. "But you came back. I yelled horrible things and still, you came back."

"I knew you were just frustrated with my stubbornness. It's not like it's the first time that's happened." He smiled when she laughed and nodded. "Anyway, we can figure out the future later. When we're both a little less frazzled from the day."

"We?" Lene opened her eyes, startled by something. "Really?"

"I told you. I'm not leaving you. So, of course we'll discuss it together." His smile softened as he laughed. "You're stuck with me."

"Ares…" Lene stared for a moment before she tackled him down to the bed and kissed him. "I love you."

"I love you too. Though, your knee is in my gut."

"Oops!" She scrambled off of him and picked back up the bear. It had fallen to the floor. "Sorry. I was just… really happy. That's all."

"Did you expect me to make the decision for you or something?" He pushed himself back up, looking unamused. "Really?"

"No, of course not. You know you'd lose your bear if you tried!" She stuck her tongue out before shrugging. "I don't know what I expected. Maybe it was just hearing it aloud or… WHOA!" I wondered why the hell Lene yelped, but then I realized that I'd been so distracted by the conversation that I'd forgotten to keep an eye on Hestia. And she'd apparently decided she was bored. Though, the fact that she hadn't forced her way in sooner did really hint that no matter what Ares said, his desire to not hurt Seliph was greater than his longing to get revenge against Sigurd. "Um… hi, Hestia?"

"Did she open the door?" Ares knelt down on the floor next to Hestia and scratched her behind the ears. Hestia panted happily, her tongue lolling out and her tail wagging. "Really?"

"Normally, the answer to that would be 'yes', but your door was already open," I explained, walking in as if I had just arrived. I gave Hestia a dirty look, and she ignored me to rest her head on Lene's lap, earning some pets from her. "I swear that I try to teach her manners, but wolves have very different ideas about etiquette."

"I'm surprised by how well-behaved she is," Ares noted, standing. He saw the tray I was holding then and gestured to his desk. "What is that?"
"Warm milk with honey." I set the tray down and checked the temperature of the mugs. Deciding they were a little cold, I warmed them up again using magic. "It's a comfort drink in Isaach. Thought you both could use it after today."

"Oh, that's…" Ares seemed surprised by that, as did Lene. "Thank you."

"It's no problem. If anything, I should apologize for being a busybody fretter." I winked at them and headed for the door. "Hestia, come on. I'm sure they want to rest." Hestia barked in agreement and lingered just long enough to lick Ares and Lene before rushing out the door and down the hall. "Dinner will be ready in a bit. I can send someone to get you, or you can follow your nose. Everything smells amazing~!"

"One of the few things you can't complain about in Darna is the food." Ares took one of the mugs and sipped it curiously. He then smiled slightly. "This is good. I didn't know milk could be good."

"I'm glad you like!" I made to leave, but then I thought about what I overheard. Most of it… most of it, I really shouldn't comment on. Yet. Watch, certainly, but only that. But there was one thing… "Oh, I almost forgot."

"Hmm?"

"Well, I'm assuming you two will be coming with us to Melgen, to see Layla, right?" I turned to face both of them, noticing Ares passing Lene a mug. "Well, if you two want, you can travel with us too. And not fight. We don't force anyone to fight for us. Chores, sure, but not fighting. Fighting is something you should choose." And both Ares and Lene were looking at me like I'd grown a second head or something. "So, if you want the safety of traveling with a bunch of people, you're more than welcome to stay with us."

"That's… an interesting policy." Ares's expression smoothed out to some sort of neutral scowl, and completely unreadable. "What if someone does force us, though?"

"I'll have Hestia bite them. So, you just let me, or one of the other leaders, know if that does happen. Because fighting is scary, especially fighting in a war. Especially fighting in a war against the very powerful Empire and all. So, it should be something chosen willingly." I winked at them again. "And speaking of Hestia, I need to make sure she's not sneaking into the kitchens, so I'll see you two at dinner, okay?"

I left then, not wanting to drag things out and make them awkward-awkward. And because Hestia sneaking into the kitchens was a very real danger. Proven when I caught her right by the door. It took a bit to drag her away, and even then, I had to send her to Larcei and Patty for distraction purposes. Shortly after that, Nanna snagged me to help her set up the infirmary, mainly clean it properly and reorganize things to be more efficient. Before long, though, I noticed her fidgeting and realized she had used the excuse to try and talk to me about something. I pretended to not notice. She'd bring it up when she was ready, and whoever last cleaned here apparently didn't know corners existed, based on all the gunk I cleaned off the walls in the corner.

"So, I had a question," Nanna eventually began. I glanced over my shoulder and saw her making beds. "If you don't mind?"

"I never mind questions, but I can't guarantee I have answers," I replied, dragging a chair over so that I could reach a bit higher. Seriously, the amount of skimping… Aideen would've tied them into knots! "What is it?"

"Um… well…" She took her time, and when I looked at her again, I saw she was blushing. "I was
wondering… how do you let someone know that you're interested? Or gauge their interest? Romantically, I mean."

"Huh?" I definitely had to do a double-take there. "Why ask me?"

"Because you're in such a happy relationship? And um…" Her blush deepened. "You all helped Lana and Ulster…"

"True." I climbed off the chain and leaned against the (clean) wall, thinking. "The best way, in my opinion, is to be sincere and straightforward. Trying to be coy and all is cute, but it could lead to your words being misinterpreted. That said, it's way easier said than done for most."

"Yes…" She nodded, thoughtful now. And still blushing. Seriously, she was bright enough to glow! "Did you have difficulties?"

"My case was a bit… odd. But yes, I nearly had a full-blown panic attack at the thought. I was scared of losing the closeness and making things awkward." I smiled at her and ruffled her hair. "What helped me through was actually my friends. Especially Diarmuid, who reminded me that he wouldn't push if he thought things would be awkward. After all, we're all a pretty close group, so that awkwardness would affect us all."

"So, a good way to assess the situation would be to talk to those close to me and him…" She nodded, giggling. "Yes, that makes sense." She finished making the bed and smoothed out her skirt before moving to the next one. "I'm sorry for the random question. I asked Eleri, of course, and Selfina, but I was curious about what advice you'd have."

"Honored and surprised you think I have the wisdom to give advice." I grinned at her and tossed the rag I'd been using with the other dirty laundry and got a clean one to work on the next wall. Corner, rather. "Who's Selfina?"

"One of Father's friends." She frowned as she pulled a blanket off, and showed it to me. I nearly choked when I saw the gigantic hole in it. What the hell?! "She and Glade were Father's only friends before he joined Sigurd's army."

"I see." I wondered why he only had them. Oh well, not my business. "And Eleri is like an older sister to you, right? Leif mentioned that."

"Yes, and she's in a relationship with Eda, a Thracian Knight who joined us." She sighed gustily. "Oh, I hope things are still going well for them…"

"A Thracian Knight?" I grinned to hide my surprise. Given what Thracia had done to Leonster, I wouldn't have expected any in Leif's army. Clearly, I'd done him an injustice. "Now that sounds interesting."

"How she joined or how they confessed?" She shrugged. "Neither is really as interesting as it sounds, mind, but…"

"I can find interest in most things. How about I trade you story for story? I'm not sure what all you've heard, but I can guarantee you that things were far less interesting than the songs make them sound."

"Well…"

As I helped her, we both talked about our journeys thus far. Quick summaries, most of it, but enough to get an idea of what all we've gone through. And our hopes for the next parts of the
journey. When things calmed down, we were definitely doing a girls' night or something. I had a feeling it would be super fun.

A few days later, Bramsel tried to take back Darna. It failed miserably, but he simply retreated and came back with Javarro's forces and whoever else he gathered. Or Javarro gathered. Whichever. Regardless, the second time was a little more successful. They got through the city gates, at least.

"Mursili, why is everyone breaking formation?" I asked, frowning as I saw the panic in the ranks. After the first 'attack', we discussed how best to defend the city, and eventually realized that just leaving it to the guard was the thing to do. After all, they were actually trained for this sort of thing. We six 'outsiders', and well as Ares and Lene... well, our job was to support where we could, but it was hard to do that when they were running all over the place. "Got a few falling back to the infirmary with Lene and Hestia." Because that's the main thing Lene was doing. She had some medicinal knowledge, so she was helping with field medicine and the like. Hestia was with her for protection, and for comfort. I worried for her, but she had begged for something to do, so...

"Working on getting a report on that, my lady," Mursili replied, more than a little nervous. I'd requested he take over the guards, since I knew he could be trusted. No one protested, and I wondered if that was a belief in him or a belief in us. "It happened quite suddenly."

"Of course." I patted his back. "Hey, you're doing fine. I'm sorry if I sounded snappy."

"My life used to be so much simpler." He sighed. "But it was bought with the blood of others."

"And now, it's our turn to pay the price."

"Yes."

I stayed with him until a scout reported, but the report left me cold. Fire. Bramsel and Javarro were having their fighters set the city on fire. I was immediately running back to the main part of the city, wondering just what I could do. Fjalar's descendents could control flame, but when I climbed to the roof of a house, I saw the fire was spreading rapidly. I didn't think I could do it. Some of it, yes. All of it? If I were a Major, sure, but...

"Riona!" It took me a full second to recognize the voice, because I wasn't used to hearing Tine yell at all. "Can you help me up?" she asked when I looked down. "I can climb, but I can't climb like a cat!"

"Get up as high as you can and I'll help you from there," I replied, half-climbing down. She managed to almost get to me via windows and ledges, but we did have to do a couple of risky reaches and jumps to get her fully onto the roof. "So, what's up?"

"B-besides us?" She smiled nervously, and I had to snicker at the joke. "Um... you and I are cousins. We share Fjalar blood, yes?"

"Yes?" I got it in an instance. I was still used to being the only one with Fjalar blood in the group. Arthur rarely used anything but thunder. "If I get half, can you get the other half?"

"I... I don't know, but it can't be much harder than seizing thunder, right?"

"Well, we can certainly try." I turned away, facing one half, and I felt her turn the other way. After a moment, she stepped back so that were were back-to-back. "Okay, here we go...!"

It was hard. It was very hard. Almost immediately, my head was throbbing. I swore my blood was
boiling in my veins. My throat and mouth dried out. My vision blurred, making the world hazy. But I refused to yield and after a second of eternity, I was able to tear the flames from the buildings and raise them into the sky, the only 'safe' place I could think of. Behind me, Tine trembled, but when I spared a moment to check on her, I saw she had managed the same. Fire in the sky.

"Want to throw it?" I croaked. My lip split just from that; I tasted the blood. "I can't hold it much longer."

"Neither can I, so let's throw it towards the desert?" Tine suggested. Her voice was very thin and crackly. "One… two…"

Both of us threw the fire simultaneously and we both fell to our knees at how wobbly and unbalanced we were. But we managed to not completely collapse, mostly by leaning against each other, and the fires were gone. Smoke slowly spiraled into the air, but that was it. There was some damage, but that was it. She and I did it. And, based on the sudden burst of cheers, the morale boost to our fighters just added to it.

"Next time we do that, we're dragging Arthur into it," Tine whimpered. She coughed and rubbed at her mouth, smearing some blood. Her lips were cracked too. "Definitely."

"And Yuria," I added, feeling like I'd just sparred Shanan and Oifeye simultaneously. Though, absently, I added 'Conall' to that list too. Hopefully… "Ugh… and we have to keep going… or I have to. You can rest."

"No, I chose to help, so…"

"Okay." I pushed myself up first, taking a couple of deep breaths to steady myself, and held out my hand. "Here." She took it and let me pull her up. "Houses are packed together here, aren't they?" If the fire had spread further… how many homes were already gone? "I'm going to go jumping." And if I had to do magic again, then I was using my Fire Sword. "What about you?"

"I am not climbing down." She grimaced at the thought. "Following you."

"Fine by me!"

We both took off, jumping from roof to roof. Or even just straight running from roof to roof where they were particularly close together. As we ran, I looked around at the various battles, checking to see how things were going. Below, I saw Larcei protect a guard by grabbing an enemy's axe by the blade and slamming it into their face; the guard then gutted the enemy, taking advantage of the dropped guard despite the fear in their face. An archer tried to shoot them, but Patty used her Wind Sword's magic to disorient them before darted in to kill them. I caught her eye and grinned and she waved back before rushing off, doing lots of hit and runs to help with distractions. Despite the wounds the rest of us had, Patty looked completely fine. Ulir luck, as per usual, doing strange things. But no time to grumble about that. Because as we got closer to the gates, the fighting became more and more chaotic, and before long, I saw that it was more than chaotic. Our defensive lines were in complete disarray, and they had no time to reform with the enemy bearing down on them.

Automatically, I drew Dad's silver blade, intending to jump down and assist, but I thought better of it. With things that jumbled, I'd just be a hindrance below. And I couldn't really do a fireball without hurting my own. So, I decided to just… wing it and sheathed the silver blade again to pop the Fire Sword a little out of its own sheathe. I used it as a spark to pool fire into my hand, but instead of throwing it as normal, I… well, I did throw it. But now as a fireball or anything. I threw it between our allies and our enemies and willed it to spread, forming a wall. A wall to protect the
guards while they got themselves reorganized. And it worked. It worked better than manipulating the fire before, possibly because this was my own magic, shaping to my intent.

"Can you fence them in?" Tine asked me. She was frowning, considering something. "Is that something that you can do?"

"Sure, why not?" I replied, since hell if I actually knew. But I focused on the fire and made it grow, pouring more magic into it so that it could. It took a moment for me to figure out how to make it go multiple directions and all, but before long, I had the enemy completely fenced in by the flames. "That good?"

"Yes…” She pulled out her Elthunder tome and held it to her chest. "Okay… just like Reinhardt taught me…" She took a deep breath, and concentrated, lightning crackling around her. The force of her magic made her clothes and pigtails flutter, like in a breeze, and she slowly brought up her hand. "And… now!" With a sharp gesture, she cast the spell and a single lightning bolt struck. Right in the center of the group. And they all writhed and spasmed in pain before falling, still. Dead. "It worked!"

"What did you do exactly?" I dispelled the fire and sagged briefly, tired. Holding spells was exhausting. I'd known that, of course, but I was feeling it now. "Like…"

"When people are all clustered together, the lightning can chain about, though you have to cast the spell a little differently." She laughed nervously, clutching the tome now. "F-first time I've done it, though. Oh, I might be sick…"

"If you're going to vomit, vomit on the enemy." I managed a tired grin, and she snorted. "Okay, I, at least, need to head down at this point. You?"

"I think I'll stay up. Lightning is better from above."

"See you later, then." I winked at her and then climbed down the house. I slipped a few times, but nothing too bad. "Okay… Uh…"

"Oh, Lene is over that way!" Tine called down. She pointed towards the walls of the city. "I hope everything is okay…"

"I'll go check!" Yay, something to do! "Stay safe!"

I'd barely gotten two blocks away from her before wishing I'd taken my own advice. While turning down an alley to try and get around a battle, I found myself looking right at an enemy. Who had clearly been waiting for someone to come that way so that they could ambush them, because while I was trying to recover, they were already moving, their sword ready to take my head. Because of their speed, and the limited room, I didn't have time to properly draw my sword at all. But I did still have the Fire Sword popped out, so I drew more fire from it, and thrust out my hand, intending to launch the fireball. You know… like usual. Instead, I accidentally shoved the fire into the person's face and therefore, released the spell point-blank. The result was a thoroughly charred skull… with the skin sloughing off because even the simple act of removing my hand from what was left of their face was enough to tear it apart.

"Oh… I am going to be throwing up so much later…" I whimpered, barely keeping my stomach in check. Hadn't meant to do that. Hadn't meant to do that at all. "Ugh…” I stepped gingerly around the body and shook my hand to try and get rid of the horrible sticky feeling on my hand. But it wouldn't go away, even after I roughly wiped it across the stone of the nearby buildings. "That is so joining the nightmares…”
I leaned against the building briefly, closing my eyes to gather whatever will and courage I had left. Then I made myself walk forward, because I knew I had to. I couldn't let even something like this shake me. So, I kept on going, despite my own exhaustion catching up to me and making it hard to walk. I seriously felt like someone had strapped full suits of armor to each of my limbs. I did my best to not look it, but it took me a second to even realize I'd made it to the gates of the wall. Took me another to realize I almost walked right in the middle of Ares and Javarro fighting.

No idea when it started, since last I'd heard, Ares had been helping guards closer to the castle gates. But it was brutal. They matched each other blow for blow, and I quickly saw how Javarro had accounted for Ares's greater strength: making *deliberate* holes in his guard to make sure he could block in a way that had the strongest part of his sword meeting the weakest part of Mystletainn. Of course, knowing Diarmuid and the crazy stuff he'd done, I thought that shouldn't have worked, but it was possible Ares held back. Either on instinct or because no matter how angry he was, he was fighting the person who saved his life as a child. But the number of wounds on both showed that the fight couldn't go on much longer, and I absently wondered if I should interfere or stay out of it.

Turned out that I didn't have to decide. Javarro disarmed Ares, but Ares surged forward and grabbed Javarro by the face. Then, in one smooth motion, Ares slammed Javarro into the ground, cracking his skull against the ground. Or, rather, *exploding* the damn skull because there wasn't a head left! Just a pile of mush and blood, and bone splinters all over the place, from Ares's hand to my own face, because a piece had flown that far.

"That's going to be fun to pick out," I deadpanned, because my other option was definitely throwing up. Ares glanced back at me before looking at his very bloody hand. That had pieces of Javarro's skull embedded into it. Because my brain couldn't let that go at all. "Well, whatever. Do what you do. Any idea where Bramsel is?"

"No, not at all," Ares replied. He limped over to where Mystletainn had landed and picked it up with his not-bone-embedded hand. "You're not too surprised by what happened."

"I've grown up with Diarmuid. Who is Hezul Minor. And I also grew up with three people with Ulir luck. You want weird? Watch an Ulir in a dangerous situation. I swear that the laws of physics break before them." I rambled that off, a bit too tired to filter things out, but he laughed, so all was well. Or something. "Okay, seriously, how about I help you back so that we can at least get your hand treated and…?"

There was movement above. I barely saw it, and Ares whirled as soon as he did. There, up on the wall, was Bramsel, wielding a javelin. I didn't expect him with a weapon. I didn't think he'd know how to fight at all, but he held the javelin with near-perfect form and seemed to know exactly what he was doing. Which was, clearly, chucking a lance right at Ares…!

Except, that didn't happen. It didn't happen, because someone shoved Bramsel right before he threw the lance, making the lance clatter to the stone of the wall. It wasn't until the someone kicked him and picked up the lance that I realized it was Lene. And I could only watch in shock as she hit Bramsel over the head with his own lance and knocked him off the wall. Mostly. He caught himself with one hand. One hand with a slipping grip.

"...You can't do *anything* with dignity, can you?" Lene asked coldly. Then, with a glare as icy as her voice, she stabbed Bramsel's hand, so that he fell. He fell, screaming, and hit the ground with a strangely loud 'splat'. It was only afterwards that I remembered the whole reason why I'd been heading towards the wall had been because Tine had seen Lene heading this way. "Ah…"

"Lene!" Ares called. He ran towards the nearby staircase up to the wall. Absently, I walked over to
Bramsel's body and nudged it to confirm he was dead. "Lene, are you okay?"

"I… uh… might be sick once I stop being mad at him?" Lene dropped the lance and, when Ares made it up to her, she half-collapsed against him. "Ha… but look! I got to save you. For once."

"...You idiot…" Ares held her tightly with his less-injured arm. "You save me every day."

Hestia found me by Bramsel's body, nosing it to confirm the death for herself. I petted her and sighed, looking up briefly at Ares and Lene before trudging back towards the main part of the battle, with Hestia following me. This wouldn't last much longer. Not with the two leaders dead.

Darna wouldn't cause us anymore trouble, it seemed. But it would be a bit before we returned to Melgen. There was a lot to clean.

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Arthur

**Class: Mage; Skills: Wrath, Pursuit**

The seventeen year old son of Azel of Velthomer and Tailtiu of Friege, though thanks to Friege soldiers, he barely has memories of either and was raised by an elderly woman in a remote village. Because he lost his family when he was young, and because his caretaker wasn't the most affectionate of people, he can be a little prickly, especially at first glance, and has underdeveloped social skills.

 Bears the Marks of Thrud and Fjalår on his right hand, which spiral around his wrist and bleed partially down the top of his hand. Their blessings gives him a boost to his ability to take pain, his stamina, his magic, and his skill. They also bless him with the ability to conjure fire and lightning without tomes, though he has mostly used this ability with lightning (by accident).

Though he is best with fire and thunder, he is very skilled in all three elemental magics, due to his heritage and growing up in Silesse. His greatest asset, though, is his ability to quickly tear through enemies, especially if he has time to convert the pain he has endured into power, a trick he inherited from his mother. He's not the most defensive fighter, though, due to spending so much time alone… and only recently gaining people who cared if he lived or died.

Originally planned on leaving the army after checking in on Tine, but finds himself lingering. He keeps telling himself that it's stupid to get involved in such a big war, but he can't stand the thought of leaving the people of the army behind. Not to mention Ishtore's dying words burrowing deep into his heart, making him want to be the person Ishtore thought he was.

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Chapter End Notes

Author's notes: So, I did things a tad out of order here. Typically, you kill Bramsel, seize Darna, and then have Ares enter Darna in order to recruit Lene. But I liked the idea of Lene killing Brams, so I shifted things. As for Ares… well, after you capture Melgen, Ares appears on the field with Javarro and then you get a string of cutscenes where Bramsel orders the guards to grab and take Lene away (with the implication that he plans to rape her), and Javarro (randomly in game) brings this up to Ares. Ares decides that Javarro is a jackass and is auto-recruited at that point. Ares is, of course, a killing machine, but since he doesn't really have a reliable way to heal on his own (in
the game), he does need support (because he kills like... everyone, meaning he constantly loses health and while he does have Ambush, he's not necessarily killing things in one hit without a critical at this point). Though, there may be a church nearby? I can't remember.

Anyway, it's left ambiguous in game whether or not Bramsel... succeeded in his attempts on Lene, and I chose against it for my own reasons. This whole thing is also why I have Lene being among the older children. Bad enough for an eighteen year old, but if I kept to the canon timeline of this being Gran 777 instead of Gran 779, then Lene would've been 16. And if she'd been one of the younger children, then she would've been even younger. Yeah. For people asking why I made her older, here you go.

So, in FE5, Reinhardt actually has two swords associated with him. One is a super fancy, semi-broken sword that he never uses in game, but will give to his sister (Olwen) if she talks to him. The other is the Master Sword or the Meisterschwert as it seems to be called in the localization. In Fe5, it basically just acts as a stronger brave sword (much like in Heroes). However, the sword also appears in FE3/12 as a crit-based silver sword (same might, but +25% critical rate). It's this iteration I'm using for the sword Riona stole from Reinhardt last chapter (hence the slightly different description than the one Reinhardt uses in Fe5 and Heroes), because I thought it suited Riona better.

While in FE4, axe knights (and their promotions) only used axes, they are capable of using both axes and swords in FE5 (sorta, because of the god-awful dismounting thing there). Also in either game, Diarmuid can't actually learn lances, but I thought it would be something he'd do to spend time with his father, so he's picking up a second weapon.

Lief's explanation about Dorias dying refers to events in his game. And yes, I know that there's a conversation where August says something to Leif about Julius in FE5, but that's being tweaked. Because I can. (More seriously, it's to keep in line with how no one seems to know what's going on in FE4.)

A neat thing about FE4 is that there is a 'road' terrain, with its own bonuses. It decreases avoid, but it 'boosts' movement (i.e. you can reach your destination faster via the road than the plain right next to it). Forests, as per usual, reduce movement as well. So, Riona's comment to Layla about how long she ran is a nod to both.

Next Chapter - Interlude, Lull (ftr, we're almost done with Game-Chapter 7)
We've freed Darna! It... ah... wasn't exactly anticipated, but hey, we did it! Now, of course, we have to fix things up. Not only did our battle make a mess, but Bramsel's neglect also led to so many places just being unsafe to live in. Then we have the survivors of the battle...

Never a free moment, huh?

Poachers could all burn in hell. Or, at least, the poachers that stole baby animals. Seriously, I wasn't sure what to do with them. Thankfully, there weren't that many (just four), but there were still enough to be... troublesome. Adorable fluffs of troublesome, but troublesome nonetheless.

"Ignoring the fact that most are too young to know how to hunt properly, all of the ones here are not local," I murmured, flipping through my notes as I walked down the hall with Hestia. Surprisingly enough, Bramsel did have a library, and one decent enough that I could do some research on animal habitats. And, unfortunately, confirmed my suspicions. "We can't release them into the wild for both of those reasons, but I can't make the people of Darna take care of them..." Reconstruction was going well enough, but it would be a while before you could say Darna was 'recovered'. Food was just one of many issues. "And I absolutely cannot abide by that one suggestion..."

Hestia whimpered, sensing my thoughts, and I sighed and petted her head, remembering. One civilian had suggested just killing them, especially since two had been sick (though now thankfully recovered). I had nearly told Hestia to attack him, though, and also nearly set him on fire. Thankfully, Nanna had covered for me, but I had to stomp off to get my temper back under control. Which was mortifying and I knew that I was being stupid, but damn it, they were babies. They were barely weaned, if that!

"Man, if people saw how morose you were looking, they'd be terribly worried." Larcei appeared at my other side and plucked the notes from my hand. I blinked slowly, trying to figure out where she had come from. Hestia hadn't warned me. "Ah, research to see if there might be some wild animals we could reintroduce the captured to?" she asked, flipping through. "No luck?"

"That's even assuming we could introduce them and not have instant rejection," I pointed out. It had been an option, of course, but not one I'd been hopeful on. "But no, no luck. What are you doing? I thought you were with the guards."

"I was, but honestly, Mursili has it totally under control, so instead, I decided to check in on our 'very special guests'." She made a face. I wondered what the imprisoned mercenaries did this time. "Got a few troublesome ones being moved to more secure locations soon."

"I see..." I could only sigh at that. How could we convince them that we meant what we said? I didn't know, and... "Well, hopefully the others have had a more productive morning. Afternoon. Shit, what time is it anyway?"

"Hell if I know. Not late enough that Patty is scolding us about not eating? Again." There was so
much to be done that we often lost track of time. Patty made it her job to make sure we didn't collapse from hunger. "Man, if the others find out, we're going to have to listen to so many lectures."

"Well, they don't have to know?" I snickered and she grinned. "Now, was I looking so despondent that you just had to come cheer me up?"

"What better way than giving you a pretty face to look at?" She laughed and swung behind me to jump on my back. I barely caught her, with some stumbling, and Hestia barked, wagging her tail excitedly. "Though now that I'm thinking about it, I'm supposed to help Tine with market inspection. Mind if we borrow Hestia for that? Last time, I thought some folk were leering at her and I'd rather have her around to confirm it's not just me being sensitive before bashing their skulls in."

"No violence." I continued down the hall with her on my back, Hestia faithfully at my side. "Or at least let Hestia handle it."

"Fine. I guess." She sighed, resting her chin on my head. "I'm tired. Mind if we share a bed tonight?"

"Sure, that's fine. We can gossip." Hopefully, that would help me too. I also had been having trouble sleeping. My mind just whirling with everything that needed to be done. "So, to the market?"

"Huzzah!"

I ended up carrying Larcei to the castle gates, but decided against going into the market with her and Hestia. Instead, I decided to take some of the lesser used roads to see how repairs were going to the not-main areas, and then I headed for the front gates to check on the wall itself, since we were reinforcing it. And that was when I was very distracted. One, Ares was talking to someone wearing clothes that… well, they reminded me more of a simpler version of what Conall wore: practical, almost to the point of severity, unlike the clothes of Darna's people, which had colorful and vibrant embroidery no matter what social rank they were. Two, Ares was actually being sociable. Three? Well...

"Is that a dragon?" Those probably shouldn't have been the first words out of my mouth, considering what a dragon being here (likely) represented, but holy shit, it was a dragon! Right in front of me! "Oh my gods, it's a dragon!" I squealed, immediately rushing over to them. I barely caught Ares giving me a 'what the hell' look' and the knight looked bewildered, but I didn't care because dragon! "Oh, aren't you a beauty…!" I stopped just in front of the dragon, almost bouncing from excitement as I looked into their eyes. "Beautiful one, might I study you? You're such a wonder! Far more so than the pictures in books!"

After a moment, the dragon nodded, eyeing me warily. So, I did my best to stay within easy sight as I… well, studied them. The first thing I noticed was that their scales were warm. In fact, they were like a roaring fire with the heat they gave off. I wondered if they shed. If they did, how did they shed? In one piece? In many pieces? And oh, the absolute beauty of the muscles underneath the scales. The leg muscles were noticeably more developed than the rest, making me think they launched themselves up into the air unlike pegasi. Not that their 'arms' and claws were much less developed, hinting that they fought with everything they had (and the way the arms moved showed the mobility needed to pick up and throw something). Their teeth were sharp as well, hinting to a more carnivorous diet, and the eyes were double-lidded, no doubt to protect them from dust and high force winds. Their wings fascinated me, though, because the membrane there was surprisingly thin compared to the sturdiness of the rest of them. In fact, it was practically transparent when held
to the sun, and that let me see something I found peculiar and interesting. There were actually very few veins and arteries there, making it almost seem like... like a cloak you pinned on or something.

"That could explain why dragons can handle arrow wounds better than pegasi?" I whispered, thinking. I remembered Oifeye mentioning that, but I had always assumed it was simply the armor, since dragons were known for being stronger and sturdier anyway. But if pegasi had more veins and arteries in their wings, then of course they would be effect more. "How fascinating... I wonder why they have that sort of adaptation... does it make it easier to conserve heat or something?" I watched them move the wing and determined that any muscles and veins were in the supporting cartilage. At least, I thought it was cartilage. It felt more flexible? "Wow, you are a wonder..."

"Well, she's totally enthralled," Ares deadpanned, distracting me for a moment. I glanced over briefly to see him talking to the Thracian dragon knight, and went back to my studying because that was far more interesting. "Whatever. What was I... oh, right. Her letter was a little later than usual. Was it the chaos here?"

"No, her highness was simply busy," the knight replied. The title made me pause, because I realized... I realized I hadn't even known Travant had kids. I mean; it made sense. But no one ever talked about them. Just evil Travant and his evil ways of evil. Okay, and admittedly, even if I could see the logic in them, his tactics were harsh. ...Made me wonder how people would call our tactics, considering... "The Loptyrian priests have been pressing their luck more and more."

"Please tell me she didn't have her dragon eat anyone."

"No, no, she didn't have time. Believe it or not, Prince Arion lost his temper first." Arion... so, Travant had two children, a boy and a girl. I should ask more about that later. I had no doubts we would eventually have to negotiate with Travant, after all. But I was a bit baffled by just how many people of that generation had a boy and a girl.

"Arion did? We sure that the priests only 'pressed their luck'?" Ares crossed his arms, and I saw he was holding a letter. So, he was friends with at least the Thracian princess... maybe that could help? "Arion's calmer than a still lake normally and he's the only one in that family with any sort of tact." And maaaaybe try to talk to Arion first? Or would that be rude?

"I'm sure the details are in the letter, Master Ares." They nodded to the gates. "So, what happened here? Did that liberation whatever actually take Darna?"

"Isaach is liberated, completely, and they've destroyed the Yied shrine, freed Darna, and use Melgen as their base." Ares shrugged; the knight looked impressed. "As you can see, though, they're a tad weird. More than a 'tad', actually."

"Hmm?"

"Your dragon is magnificent!" I gushed, deciding to just jump into the conversation then. I stepped back and bowed to the dragon, grinning. "Thank you, wonderful one! I am pleased to learn so much first hand instead of simply relying on my readings. They left far too much stuff out." I then skipped over to Ares's side, grinning. "Anyway, yes, your dragon is amazing! I can't believe I got to study one!"

"I... thank you?" the knight replied. They struggled to act like they met weird girls all the time, but I could tell they were bewildered. The whole 'are you okay?' look in their eyes was a dead giveaway. "I... must admit to being surprised. Most don't deign to talk with us because they think we're like hyenas."
"...Isn't that a compliment?" I frowned, confused. The knight just blinked slowly at me, like I'd grown a tail or something. "I mean… hyenas are super clever. Cunning. Adaptable. They're highly successful hunters, able to survive where others would starve. And their cooperation skills are supposed to be amazing." So it honestly sounded like a compliment to me! "I mean… Thracians were always described as brutal pragmatists to me. Not hyenas."

"I think it was supposed to convey a mental image of carnage."

"You mean like every single battlefield that has ever existed?" I couldn't help the dryness in my voice. "I mean… all the ones I've seen were a mess of blood, mud, body parts, and bodily fluids other than blood all mixed together with copious amounts of smells that turn your stomach inside out twice and the screams of the soldiers still clinging to life."

"...You would get along well in Thracia, my lady." While… while I hoped that meant good things for talking with Thracians, I… wasn't sure how much I liked that, actually. While hyenas were amazing, I preferred being a wolf. Though, I think… wait, no, hold on, my books mentioned… "You look lost in thought."

"Hyenas are related more closely to cats than canines, I think…" I mumbled, barely paying attention. "Though they do share quite a few similarities to canines, including some behaviors…"

"Pardon?"

"Oh! Sorry! Thinking aloud!" Okay, this was awkward. "Um…"

"I just realized I forgot to thank you for delivering both her letter and my reply," Ares cut in, salvaging the conversation. I breathed a sigh of relief. "But you should warn her that this will probably be the last letter for a while, since Lene and I will be going to Melgen to visit some people and…"

"Why would that matter?" I asked, frowning. I really didn't understand. "So long as they don't come swooping down on their dragon, I don't see how anyone is going to differentiate them from all the other messengers that show up in Melgen." I shrugged off their weird looks. "It's not like we give people a hundred questions about their purpose and where they're from or anything."

"...How the hell are you all not dead yet?" Ares pinched the bridge of his nose, like he was getting a headache. "Seriously." He shook his head. "Whatever. Please still give her the warning."

The knight bowed in acknowledgement and left without another word. Ares left as well, returning to the castle, and I followed him because I wanted to ask more about why he had thought it would matter. However, that didn't happen because… well, something happened. Because something always happened.

There was barely any time to react, really. One second, people were walking and chatting. The next, they were screaming as one of the imprisoned mercenaries suddenly rushed through the crowd, a weapon in hand. Heading straight for Ares and me. Both of us moved instantly, with me setting their shirt on fire and Ares casually snapping their arm in half and sending the sword up into the air. I managed to snag it, by the lower part of the blade so I only sliced my palm instead of gouged it off, and as Ares slammed the mercenary to the ground, I stabbed downwards, aiming right for their chest. I stopped just before contact, though, because I saw the fear in their eyes. So, instead, I smiled and stepped back, turning to hail one of the guards and ask what happened.

Two seconds later, all the air left my lungs and there was a sharp, burning pain in my lower back. It took another second to realize I'd been stabbed. But when I could finally try to react, someone
picked me up as easily as you would a doll and carried me off while everyone else dealt with what happened. I couldn't really process anything, barely even registering that the person who carried me got me into a building.

"I'm fine," I wheezed as whoever it was set me down on a table. It didn't surprise me to see it was Ares. If I could think a little more clearly, it would've been obvious from the start. "Just needs-"

"Treatment," he cut off, disappearing from my side briefly. He returned with a medical kit. "We are in one of the guard barracks, by the way. Since I'm sure you're a little too hazy to figure out geography and city maps at the moment."

"Don't think I've actually been inside one." I coughed, clearing my throat. It was so dry. "So, who stabbed me?"

"The person you should've just killed." He scattered everything onto the table and pushed up my shirt to apply a cloth on it for pressure. "Why do you insist of giving them mercy?" He held up his hand to stop my answer. "No, wait, better question. Why do you insist on making things complicated?"

"Uh… because things are complicated?" What sort of question was that? "People are all doing what they think is right or what they think they have to do to survive and-"

"Bullshit." He rolled his eyes. He actually rolled his eyes."Yes, you've got good people, sure. But you can't just give them all chances or anything."

"How else will they make a choice? If they don't realize that there's another-"

"The ones that would choose otherwise would've already done so. You won. You showed them a different path. Stop confusing different fears. That's what got you with a dagger in your back." He pushed my shirt a little higher to make it easier to keep pressure on it and I just took the damn thing off because that was easiest. "You're so focused on saving people. It's damn near excessive. Obsessive, even."

"I promised a young girl that I'd try to break the cycle of revenge."

"That's also ridiculous. One person alone can't do that. Not even a group. That has to be a personal choice of each person. Which they can't do when someone keeps insisting on dragging things out in the name of mercy."

"That's…!" I could only wince because I couldn't… I couldn't really argue… "One should… lead by example…"

"One shouldn't lead by stupidity."

"But what if they're innocent?"

"You know by now that few adults are 'innocent' in this hell of a world."

"And they should be given choices! How can they choose differently if…?" I shook my head almost violently. "It's just because I wasn't believable."

"Then what do you call Mursili believing in you? What do you call this entire city of crazies who are inspired by you?" He waited, cleaning my injury, but I didn't… I didn't know how to respond. "You're letting yourself be blinded."
"But…"

"So, enough of the bullshit. Enough of finding excuses. They work because they're partially or even mostly true, but they're not why you're obsessed. They just add onto why you do what you do."

"I…" Silence. Silence as I desperately tried to think of some sort of reply. Silence as I desperately tried to think at all. But, eventually… eventually, something did bubble to my lips. But they weren't… what I expected. "...My parents… were innocent people sacrificed because it was convenient." The words came slowly, and I felt like I had to force each one. "Sacrificed for a better world… but who was it better for? I mean… it wasn't better for me. I lost my parents, was separated from my twin, was hunted like a rabbit just for who I was related to. And it wasn't better for the people around me..." I spoke to the floor, like it had answers or something, and absentely kicked my feet through the air. "You asked how I'm not dead yet? It's because hundreds of others died in our place. Hundreds that the supposedly 'better world' wasn't better for. Hundreds who wanted us to save them and their loved ones from the 'better world' Arvis supposedly crafted."

Ares remained silent, still pressing on my wound. Eventually, he pulled away and began cleaning it. He even numbed up the area so that I wouldn't be in as much pain when he used water to flush out any potential debris.

"No, it wasn't better for Isaach. They lost two kings and a princess because they were used as scapegoats. And it wasn't better for Silesse, which was robbed of their independence and their expected golden age under Lewyn." I ground my teeth in frustration over Lewyn. And frustration in general about Silesse. "It certainly wasn't better for Leonster, which was taken over twice in the chaos, or the Manster District. And let's not forget about Verdane, who lost most of their royal family to this mess and who loved Sigurd so."

Ares still kept quiet, continuing to clean the wound. He took his time with it, and I absentely noticed that he used a few different ones. You didn't normally need to do that, but he was taking no chances. He also used a basic broad-range antidote, just in case there was poison.

"Now, granted, it's possible it was better for Agustria. But if what I heard was true, then being better than Chagall isn't exactly a challenge. And even then..." I could only sigh. No, there was no reason to bring up Agustria and Nordion to him of all people. "Sure, things weren't bad, necessarily. But 'not being bad' doesn't automatically mean better. And we're in that exactly same scenario now. Fighting a war and killing people, good people, in the name of a 'better world'...

Frustration made my words bitter now. "And people look to us for salvation and... and...!"

"Why are you so afraid of being human?" Ares's question was soft, but they hit me with all the force of a landslide. "Blessed as we are with Holy Blood, we are still human. Yet no matter how much you act, I can't shake the feeling that you're running from that. Could be because people want you to save them, but still..." Finished with cleaning, he began bandaging, being more careful than I was used to seeing. I wondered if it was because of his Hezul strength and then decided that had to be it. "Be hypocritical. That's human nature. Let your temper run. Scream in fury and anger. Break down crying when you're sad. Stop hiding everything behind a smile. Fuck anyone who expect nothing but perfection from you. They're idiots."

"...I do let myself be angry, you know." Gods, the number of times my temper had nearly cost us a mission or me my life... or led me to do horrible acts or almost do horrible acts...

"Do you really? Or do you hold back out of fear of making a mistake?" He shrugged. I wasn't really sure how to respond. "I don't know, really. But I have noticed you hold back everything else. Tears, exhaustion... makes me think you don't let yourself be as angry as you are. But hey, maybe I'm
wrong. I'm a warrior, not a philosopher." He finished bandaging me and set his hands on my shoulders. "Okay, all done."

"...Hey, Ares?" I couldn't look up at all. I had no idea what to feel, really. I wasn't even sure I really caught his meaning yet. What he was really trying to say. "Can you take over interrogations?" But I did hope that I caught enough to know… to know that I shouldn't… that none of us who didn't live here in Darna should be handling that.

"Of course." He squeezed my shoulders. "You take a break. You got stabbed, after all. I'll carry you to your room."

"Thank you."

"Looks like it's healing well," Nanna murmured, carefully checking the stab wound on my back. I made some sort of noise, half-asleep on the bed. "You know; when I suggested you lay on your stomach to make it easier to tend to this, I didn't expect you to fall asleep."

"Not sure why, since it's a flat surface that's easy to sleep on," I replied absently. Didn't help that I was laying in a bit of sunshine from the window and the blankets were soft and smelled amazing. Smelled like home, actually. Larcei must've done laundry this time. "Still good to let it heal as is and without a staff?"

"Yes, though honestly…" Nanna sighed and moved away briefly to gather up the medicine and bandages she'd need. "We're almost at a point where using a staff is a better use of resources…"

"Wait, what?" Well, that got me awake. I almost sat up, but she gently pushed me back down because she still needed to clean. "Seriously?"

"Mmhmm…" She worked quickly and efficiently, and I smiled at that. She wasn't as skilled as Nanna, but she had clearly put a lot of work into mastering her trade. "It's because we had so many civilians to treat. Felt like thousands of septic injuries, illnesses… things that heal best without a staff."

"So many that we're running low?" I frowned, thinking. I knew I had made some medicine just yesterday, but I hadn't done inventory here. "Are we just reliant on what we brought or something?"

"No, Bramsel actually kept his infirmary well stocked." She sighed gustily and had me sit up so that she could bandage the injury. "It was, literally, just that many people."

"I see…" I was tempted to ask if she'd accidentally used too much medicine, but I had a feeling she'd admit to that if she thought that might be the case (plus, it sounded patronizing). And I did know the infirmary was quite full and had been since we arrived, but that many? "Apothecaries? We do have gold with us to compensate them." Bramsel's treasury was practically overflowing.

"Patty went around getting me everything she could find and, honestly, most of the apothecaries graciously just gave us what we needed." Note to self: sneak money to them as soon as possible. "The problem is that we've even run their stocks low."

"What the freaking hell?" I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose. "Are healing herbs and the like just rarer here? I admit I'd assumed we'd be fine because there's never been an issue before this." Stupid. That had been stupid. "Why are there so many sick and injured among the civilians, though?"
"I don't know. I mean; I have seen similar things in other places on the peninsula, but nothing like…"

"It's because the church charges for healing, so they tried to suck it up to make ends meet," Lene explained, skipping into the room. She was carrying a basket filled with jars. Medicine, since she immediately began putting them on the shelf. "But with you all here treating people for free… well, they like not being sick and in pain and all."

"So many that…" I began. But I trailed off and shook my head. Victims of the labor camps had required quite a bit of staff healing aside from initial triage or whatever, and the refugees we had numbered less than a city full of injured. Plus we had more people with time to make medicine in the army. "Never mind. I'm guessing Bramsel liked keeping his taxes high like Bloom?"

"Brams actually kept taxes reasonable, believe it or not. Sure, people are poor, but that's more due to Bloom and the Empire than him. Much as I hate giving him any sort of praise and all." She finished shelving the medicines and turned to face Nanna and me, settling the now-empty basket in the crook of her elbow. "Excessive and icky as he was, Brams knew money. He was a merchant before being a lord and he knew that if you kept taxes too high for lower-income folk, then people don't buy things. No buying meant no traveling merchants, and Darna would deteriorate even further."

"I see." Huh. I hadn't even thought about that. Made me wonder how trade was in the rest of the Manster District. "So, why so many…?"

"Well, the church charges gold."

"I see… wait, huh?" Temper… rising… no, I had to keep calm… "So, how much does the average person make around here? I know what it was in Isaach, but-"

"Coppers."

"That's…!" I bit my tongue. Twice. Closed my eyes, counted to thirty. Twice. I hoped that was enough to… well… "Where's Hestia?"

"Huh? She's…" Lene slowly grinned as she figured out why I was asking. "Well, darling, I'll show you as soon as cute Nanna here says you're all done, okay~?" She winked and then looked Nanna up and down. "Also, curious, is everyone in the army gorgeous or something?"

"Diarmuid often complains about how the army is almost too much for his pansexual heart and Larcei and I concur wholeheartedly." I grinned and poor Nanna squeaked behind me. "If you're wondering about Ares's family in particularly, though, then yes, all of them are freaking gorgeous. Should Ares be worried?"

"Nah, he is my one and only, but you can't help but enjoy a good view, right?"

"Of course!" I had to giggle. "Now, pardon my rudeness, but I am simply very nosy. Are you bisexual like Larcei and me or…?"

"I identify as pansexual actually!" She smiled at Nanna, who was blushing terribly. "Oh, you are so adorable. Now, we know that you're completely into this Leif boy, but…"

Lene and I tagged teamed on tasing Nanna until she was redder than… some really red thing I couldn't think of for the moment. Eventually, she pushed us both out of the infirmary, and that was when the two of us fetched Hestia and headed for the main cathedral of Darna. I had intended on going with just Hestia, but Lene insisted on coming along. Something about how she knew no one
would pay attention to her (and thus, let her sneak around) and because she wanted to see what happened. I just hoped I kept my temper… and that Hestia didn't bite someone's arm off.

"Ah, Princess Caitriona!" As soon as I stepped inside, the bishop who ran the place walked up to greet me. "Welcome, welcome," he said, smiling kindly. Hestia began sniffing around and Lene promptly disappeared into the shadows of the pillars, sneaking to the back easily. He noticed neither of them, focused completely on me. "What brings you to our humble church?" Humble, he said. There were stained glass windows. It turned the interior a beautiful array of colors, especially on the otherwise plain stone that made up the floor and walls, but that seemed fancy. But, then again, maybe stained glass was common? "Are you here for prayer?"

"One doesn't need to be in a church to pray," I pointed out automatically before mentally cursing myself for the rudeness. But truthfully, I… uh… didn't quite understand the importance of churches? I mean; I knew some people considered them sanctuaries and all, but they never had a strong influence in Isaach even before all the chaos. From what I understood, that was one of the reasons it was 'easy' for Grannvale to believe they massacred Darna (instead of it just being a single madman). It was also why you didn't have a lot of healers in Isaach; staves were held by the church first and foremost. The healing staves we had were scavenged from Dozel forces (save for Lana's staves since they were from Aideen and Conall). "No, I'm simply here to ask if you have any staves or medicines to share. There have been a lot of injuries and illnesses, so many that we can't keep up."

"The poor people…" He briefly brought his hands up in prayer… and stood rigidly. A sudden and incredibly noticeable rigidity. "I fear that I cannot help you, though. Between Bramsel and the Yied Shrine, our own supplies have dwindled into nothing."

"Oh?"

"Yes, they seized all that we have." His hands came down to his side again, and I saw him nervously pull on the edges of the sleeve. He was hiding something. He had to be. "And merchants do not travel through the desert, due to the Loptyrians. Wretched creatures, are they not?"

"No, they're not." Again, the words were automatic, but this time, I basked in the enjoyment his briefly shocked expression gave me. "So, you truly have nothing to give?"

"No, nothing at all."

"That's interesting, because look what I found," Lene suddenly called, skipping back into the main room and brandishing a freaking fortify staff in one hand. The other held an entire basket full of medicines. "By the way, there's more in the back." She smiled smugly, yet innocently, with one brow raised. "At least an entire room full of each." She came to my side and presented the basket. I recognized a few of the medicines easily. "Even more interesting, though? The people locked up in the back. Hestia scared off the guards there, so I imagine that one or two will be making their way here soon."

"That is preposterous!" the bishop snapped, face turning a remarkable shade of purple. And I saw the fear in his eyes and winced. "A slip of a girl claimed to find such things here? She's connected to Bramsel, so she must have-"

"You mean the same guy that almost raped me? Yeah, no." Lene's expression flattened, but her eyes sparkled with quiet fury. "Don't even try. I killed him and even if it sickens me, I am ecstatic that I did."

"Such brutal words surely-!"
"No, enough!" And that was when a very disheveled acolyte (or low leveled priest? I had no idea, but there was less ornamentation of his robes) rushed in from the back, quickly followed by Hestia. "No more lies! No more!" the acolyte snapped, glaring with a surprising amount of hatred. I waved Hestia over to my side, feeling a little out of sorts. This was far more dramatic than I had anticipated. "Time and time again we have been forced aside, beaten by thugs whenever we tried to follow our duty! Meanwhile, you have been fattening the church's coffers with bribes from the Empire! Playing spy!"

"You accuse me of lies when you spew such baseless vitriol?" the bishop retorted. He tried to keep dignified, but Hestia growled at him, snapping a bit. That alone told me what I needed to know, but I had no idea how to intervene here. "What is your proof?"

"If the medicine and staff are not enough, do you think we haven't been hoarding proof over these years?" The acolyte snarled. I held onto Hestia and rubbed my temple, warding off a headache. "But let the body count serve as proof as well! Especially Father Claude's!" His eyes filled with tears and I almost reeled back from shock. Nope, this is so not what I anticipated. "In the middle of a plague, when so many were dying in horrible pain, you sold him out for your own ego!"

"Lies! Baseless accusations!"

"All because he would not defer to you, healed all he could without payment! You informed the Empire he was here and they slaughtered him!" Now the acolyte cried, and I glanced worriedly at Lene. But she just seemed amused by the 'show', with no reaction towards the words at all. "His home a burnt ruin, his wife and children missing, and him dead in a ditch!" I needed an adult. This was awkward and nauseating, not the least because a) Lene was right next to me and b) children meant more than one. Meaning Sylvia and Claude had a second child and we knew nothing about them.

"That is…!" The bishop glanced at me, no doubt trying to gauge my reaction. And seeing how unamused I was, he promptly threw himself at my feet. "My lady, please, mercy! I feared for my life! For the lives of my congregation!" He looked up at me with no trace of the earlier dignity. He certainly did look afraid. "Please!"

My instinctive reaction was to be merciful. Of course he would've been afraid. Who wouldn't be? But even as I thought that, I remembered what Ares had said and… and I got it then. Maybe. But we had been here for so long, and yet the bishop continued to hide needed supplies and did not come forward. He had hidden it even when I came myself. Professing fear now… was just him trying to take advantage of me. And even if that had been true once, it wasn't true now. I couldn't… I couldn't confuse 'different fears' again. Doing so…

"Hestia," I whispered, petting her head. She licked my hand, gold eyes focused on me. "Go fetch a guard for me, will you?" She licked my hand again and loped off, through the open doors. "Everyone here is going to be arrested, pending investigation. I'm curious about where these bribes have gone."

"Y-your highness?!" The bishop's jaw dropped. Lene clapped in delight, while the acolyte looked elated. "I… but…"

"You asked for mercy, but mercy is not always justice. And in this case, I know there must be justice. Too many have suffered." Hestia returned then, with a few guards. "Take the bishop to the prisons, please. The others, if they cooperate, should have any injuries tended to and more comfortable accommodations."

"Of course, Princess Riona," one of the guards replied, saluting to me. I recognized them, sort of.
"Not by name, but they were Mursili's sharp-eyed friend. "We will handle it."

"Thank you," I murmured. I resisted the urge to sigh, though. Seriously, not what I was expecting at all. "Oh, I've been meaning to say this to like… everyone, but there really is no reason to call me 'princess'. Just because I am Arvis's niece…"

"Oh, your highness, we don't call you by that title because of the Empire." They smiled mischievously. "We call you that because you are the love of our Prince Seliph."

"...Oh." I tried to play it off, but I could feel my face burn with a blush. It even went down my neck and up to my ears! "I see."

I desperately tried to pretend I had some sort of dignity as the guards rounded up everyone and escorted them off. But I might as well not bothered. Not only did the guards smile knowingly, but as soon as everyone was gone, Lene laughed at me. Full on laugh, too, with it echoing through the room!

"You can be so cute~!" Lene teased, once her laughter calmed. I could only scowl, even though I knew it wasn't effective in the slightest. "Ah, this was great! Almost as good as I was expecting!"

"Expecting?" I squeaked, seizing the potential change in conversation. I also looked for Hestia for another one, but she was sitting rather peacefully next to me. "You were expecting something?"

"Well, I was kind of hoping to see you snap a bit. It feels like you all forget you're human." She giggled, smiling, and I was struck by how similar the words were to what Ares had said. They suited each other well. "You're not just symbols. Symbols are pretty, but that's it. You actually get shit done, and work yourself to the bone to do so."

"...We do try to delegate?" I couldn't think of what else to say. It was similar enough to what Ares said that I felt shaken. "Ah, anyway, so there was a plague here, huh? Layla mentioned it too." And now that I thought of the description of the healer who saved her, it did match the pictures and stories of Claude. It also matched the ghost who had helped me get inside Darna. "You remember anything about it?"

"Not really." She shrugged and knelt down to pet Hestia. Hestia eagerly jumped on her and she laughed. "All I really remember is that it's when my mom abandoned me."

"I see." That really confirmed it then. She didn't remember. She didn't know. And her Mark had faded, surely, so that couldn't really be used. So, all I could think of was to keep quiet until a 'proper' adult could explain things. "Hey, you want to go to the market? This was far beyond what I was expecting, and I think the cheer there will make me feel better."

"How can I ever refuse such an invitation?" She winked, giggling. "I need to change, though. How do you get this fur off anyway?"

"I gave up ages ago." I yelped when Hestia decided to jump on me. "Hestia!"

It took a while to actually get to the market. Hestia demanded attention.

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One of the first things the acolytes told Ares (who continued handling interrogations) was the location of Claude's grave. Though the soldiers had been inclined to leave Claude to rot where he died, the younger priests and acolytes had secretly retrieved and buried the body. So, that evening, when I finally had some free time, I gathered up some flowers and ribbons and visited. It only felt right, after all.
"Hello, Claude," I murmured, carefully setting the flowers on the grave. It was very humble, with barely any sort of markers, but it was well tended to. And the path between it and the cathedral was well worn, showing many had come to pay their respects. "You helped me get to Lene, didn't you? Thank you for that. Wonder if I surprised you with how big I was now." I felt awkward. This… this was the first time I'd visited the grave of one of Sigurd's army. I never got around to visiting Aunt Ayra or Uncle Lex in Isaach, after all. "I need to look up other folklore about ghosts because I seriously have seen far too many for me to be comfortable."

I fell silent then, fussing over the flowers and just… not sure what else to say or do. All I could think of how he was buried here in Darna, so far away from Edda. So far away from his home. And no one seemed to know what happened to Sylvia. Lene (unknowingly) had been the last to see her, and she apparently just disappeared. No signs, no hints. Nothing. It was like she had never existed, but I knew that wasn't true.

And then there was her other child. While we had learned she had a son (continuing the 'tradition' of all of Mom's friends having one boy and one girl), no one knew what had happened to him. And by this point, there wasn't even a name to use (likewise, no one remembered that 'Lene' was the name of Claude and Sylvia's daughter here either). It was just… I didn't know. I just didn't know what to do. And I knew I'd have to deliver the news to the others, and...

"Oh!" Tine's quiet gasp caught my ear, and I turned to see her carrying an armful of flowers. "I see we had the same idea," she whispered, hesitantly stepping forward. When I smiled, she sat down next to me and began arranging all the flowers, mine and hers. "Mother would often talk about a 'Father Claude'. I figured this had to be him."

"Yeah, it was," I murmured. If I remembered the stories correctly, the whole reason why Aunt Tailtiu got involved with this was because she had followed Claude. I wondered if Claude ever felt guilty over that. "They probably killed him because he knew the truth of what happened."

"As much as anyone did," I mumbled. If I remembered the stories correctly, the whole reason why Aunt Tailtiu got involved with this was because she had followed Claude. I wondered if Claude ever felt guilty over that. "They probably killed him because he knew the truth of what happened."

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"What's wrong?"

"It's just… I've been horribly selfish, haven't I?" I couldn't even look at her. "Using mercy as a means of escaping my own fears and guilt."

"Guilt?"

"I don't think that's a bad thing." She continued arranging the flowers. Belatedly, I remembered the ribbons I had brought and handed the over to her. She promptly used them to group the different flowers together. "It sounds horrible, but I'm glad you feel guilty over Ishtore? He was nice. I love him. So, even though it's mean, I'm happy you're not happy about it." She smiled bitterly. "Guess
"I'm a bad person, huh?"

"A bad person wouldn't balk at orders to hold children hostages."

"By that same logic, a bad person wouldn't agonize over those she's killed." Her smile softened a little. "This war is all crazy. It's everyone's good intentions colliding all over the place, shattering everything in the path. Everyone's visions of a 'perfect world' not quite matching, and so, things get broken as everyone tries to make the world as they want it."

"Yeah, that makes sense." I looked back up at the stars, scooting a little closer to her as the wind blew. Desert nights were cold. "I wish it didn't though."

"Same. It would be nice if everyone could be… I don't know… selfless? But, then again, people need to be. At least, that's what Conall and Ishtar always said." She laughed sadly, shaking her head. "'Only dolls aren't selfish'… that's something Ishtar told me, once. She said that Diadora told her that."

"Really?" Wonder why. "That's pretty interesting."

"I think it had something to do with Hilda." Now that wouldn't surprise me, actually. "Plus, you know, those two are being horribly selfish." She scowled a little, frustrated. "Trying to 'save' Julius instead of… um…"

"That is a good point." I chuckled. "And we're being selfish hoping we can save them."

"Yes, exactly." She relaxed and smiled at me briefly. "So, um… what was my point again?"

"I don't know, but it makes sense."

"I'm glad it does to someone." She finished tying the ribbons and set up all the bouquets by the grave. "Anyway, I don't think it's bad, being selfish and all. Instead of fearing that, I think you need to fear going to the 'extremes'. I think that's what happened with Arvis."

"Oh?"

"Yeah…" She glanced at me before sitting back on her heels with her hands in her lap. "What do you know about… our… grandfather?"

"Our grandfather?" It took a long moment to remember who she was talking about. "Oh, Victor of Velthomer." It took a while. I'd never been interested in him. "I know he was a horrible person." A known womanizer with a myriad of mistresses… a known rapist who got away with it because of his rank… from my understanding, both Mother and Uncle Azel had been born from him forcing himself on their mothers. "Drunkard. Ignored his duties for his own pleasure. Complete hypocrite."

"Yeah, he's been a terrible shadow over Arvis all of his life. Stories about him have turned up in gossips again, ever since… well…" She shrugged and smiled bitterly. "They like to say things like 'blood ran true after all' and things."

"Oh, yikes…" Even if I hated Arvis, that was just… ow…

"Yeah. He never talked about him, though. About his father, I mean. But you could just… tell anyway. Whenever he talked about his past, or explained some policy, you could feel that weight of that shadow on his shoulders. Uncle Bloom said that when they were younger, you could also feel the weight of everyone's judgement. Which just… adds to it."
"...I can understand that." I mean; people loved my parents, but I knew the weight of having expectations based on your parents and heritage. I wasn't sure how much I liked understanding him more, though. "So, he became desperate to prove he was different and didn't recognize he was being set up for something just as bad, if not worse." In order to make it through this, we... we had to walk the middle road, didn't we? A true middle road, not the one we had been walking. "You think he might've also refused to step back because Cigyun ran and he didn't want to run from his 'problems' or something?"

"Maybe. I don't know about that, but he kind of put his mother on a pedestal, so to speak. Though conflicted over her leaving, she is 'perfect' to him. Same for Sunna and Sif."

"Who?"

"Alicia's mother, and Az... and Father's." So, my grandmother and... my step-grandmother? What would you call that relation? "Also Cigyun's best friend and Cigyun's favorite maid."

"Huh." I hadn't known that about my grandmother. I did know that Mom had complicated feelings about her, though. And purposely never talked about either parent unless she had to. That was about it, honestly. "Wonder if it played a role in a different way then. Wanting a 'perfect world' that they would've loved."

"Maybe. Hard to say." She shrugged. "It's not like I asked. I'm really only making guesses."

"Hey, I only had like... two conversations with him, one of which involved me screaming at him." Which I didn't feel bad about at all. I half felt... going with what Ares also said, I felt like it had been Arvis's way of encouraging me to not hide, to 'be human'. If so, that kind of pissed me off. But also... showed a bit of the person Mom had loved and trusted so much. "Ah, we should probably-"

"Oh, hey!" I had to say that I had not expected to see Patty running down the path for us. Especially not with her hair in such disarray. Like... so much of her hair was falling out of her braid that you honestly couldn't call it 'braided' anymore. "Um... sorry if I'm interrupting, but I deciphered those papers from the church and Bramsel's study!" she blurted. I'd been ao stuck in my own self-pity that I'd forgotten. "And I've been trying to find one of you guys, but Nanna is busy with some sick kids, Ares and Lene are in their room and like hell I am walking in on a couple during alone time, and-"

"I say sweets are needed if we're going to work," I replied, standing up. I brushed the dirt off my skirt and offered my hand to Tine. To my delight, she took it without hesitation, though she did pull herself up instead of letting me help. "So, break to bake and then we'll go over it, okay?"

"Oh, yay, I need the sugar." Patty grinned and looked to Tine. "What about you? You joining?"

"Mmm... yes, I think I will, if that's okay?" Tine whispered after a moment. She smiled shyly and ducked her head. "I might know names or locations..."

"Very true," I agreed, making sure to smile at her. Her own smile grew. "But seriously, we're baking first. What should we eat?"

It turned into a bit of a cooking lesson, since Tine didn't know how to bake and Patty and I were trading recipes. And we... ah... actually ended up baking a lot, to the point that we more or less had treats for everyone. Whoops?

We decided to not involve ourselves anymore with interrogations or trials, unless specifically
asked. Ares took over, with Mursili assisting, and before long, they had bunches of information, conspirators, potential leads… and the people of Darna decided the punishments. The priests and acolytes got off lightly, because of their cooperation. The bishop, the mercenaries who refused to join, and some other conspirators, though? They were sentenced to death. Ares handled the executions.

"I never want to see a public execution again…" I whispered, looking up at the cloudless sky. After the executions were done, Darna returned to life as normal. I, however, felt so nauseous over it, and had gone to the wall to sit and let the wind wash over me. "Never…" Worse was that I probably would.

"Princess Riona, there you are." Mursili walked up the nearby staircase and joined me on the wall. "Are you okay?" he asked softly. "It doesn't normally take long to find you."

"I'm fine." The lie came easy, but I really wasn't. Even the most defiant of the executed had been terrified right before Ares cut off their heads. Some, like the bishop, had been sobbing and pleading for mercy until the last. I swore their fear remained in their eyes long after their heads hit the ground and rolled. "I just needed a bit of quiet."

"Because of the executions?"

"...Yeah." In theory, it shouldn't have been much different than ambushing soldiers during a battle, but… "You must think I'm ridiculous."

"Not at all, my lady." He shook his head, and his eyes were painfully sincere. "After all, it is your kindness that leads you to feel sympathy to all. Even folk like them."

"Well, that's kinder than what I was thinking." I looked over at him and smiled wryly. "Be honest with me. Have people here been annoyed at how involved I'd gotten? And how I insisted on mercy for so long?"

"...I will not deny that, my lady." He spoke slowly, and a bit hesitantly. But he continued when I didn't say anything. "There are some who thought you were looking down on us, even. That you believed us incapable of making our own decisions."

"I see." I hadn't thought of that. That was… the worst… "Did you?"

"No." It was surprising how strong that single word was. "No, because I knew it was, again, your kindness, but mixed with your own pain. You are keenly aware of how easily a hero can be written as a villain. Everyone knows the tragic tale of Sigurd the Holy Knight nowadays, but I am also old enough to remember the tales of the treacherous knight who plunged the continent into chaos."

"And how Arvis went from hero to villain in the space of five years."

"Precisely. You are very aware of this. Painfully so." He smiled kindly at me. "It's not necessarily a bad thing. It lets you pause and give people a chance. It means you do not blame children for a parent's crimes, nor do you believe anyone is inherently evil."

"But I take it too far."

"Sometimes, yes." It was all too easy to hear the 'here, you did' hidden in the words. "And those in pain can be annoyed by that."

"Of course." I closed my eyes and fought off a sigh. That really was the worst… "Surprised I didn't have people yelling at me. Did I come off as unwilling to listen?"
"No, my lady. Those that knew you simply… stepped in." He glanced away when I looked at him, and I realized in that moment that he'd been talking to people on my behalf. And I hadn't known at all. "Maliya nearly hit a few in the head, actually."

"I'm going to point out that neither you nor she owe me anything for saving Sandas."

"I promise you that is not why we defend you nor is it why we support you." He shrugged. "It helps, certainly. But it helps in that it gave us hope. Gave me hope. Those who believe in you, my lady, are glad to support and defend you. And that makes up most of the civilians here. It was not the Empire who saved us from Bramsel, after all. It wasn't the Empire who ran around like a madwoman during and after the battle, saving all that she could."

"That's…" I could only sigh. "I try too hard to be the person people think I am, don't I?"

"My lady, you are the person we think you are." Seriously, how could someone be so sincere? I didn't feel worthy of it at all. "You simply look too far ahead and try to change the opinions of those who have not met you."

"And I… really shouldn't, because it's not the rumors, but our actions that…" It was my guilt over Iucharba and Ishtore coloring everything. "The rumors might lead others to listen, but it's our actions that…"

"That gives us hope. After all, I didn't believe until you saved Sandas, a feat I swore was impossible." Yes, he had said that, to the soldiers carrying Lene. And that was how he had saved all of them. "You are too harsh on yourself. I am grateful that you find us worthy of saving, but you should let us put in the work too."

"I see…" I had literally never had someone say that to me before. And I didn't know how to react, so instead, I stood up and stretched. Defaulting to the smile because what else could I do? "Okay, enough moping. I…" And that's when I realized something. "Shit, where's Hestia?"

"I don't know." He sighed. "By the way, does Sandas's leopard get into as much trouble?"

"Not yet?"

"Joy."

Mursili helped me look for Hestia and, thankfully, she hadn't gotten into too much trouble or anything. She had just decided to try and charm some treats from the guards manning the walls (and succeeded with all but the last, since I arrived and pulled her away before they gave in to her cuteness). With my wolf secure, Mursili left to continue his duties, and I decided to wander the market. Not really to talk or anything, but to see how reconstruction was going. Curious about how strong the buildings were, and if they would hold.

However, while I was walking on the edges of the crowd, I noticed some people on the roof of a house, struggling to keep things steady and without thinking about it, I climbed up to assist. While at first they welcomed the extra pair of hands, when things were finally steady, they looked at me with such shock that I barely kept myself from squirming.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled. This was just great. Right after having that talk with Mursili, I… "I should've asked first..." I could only look away, mortified. And check to make sure Hestia was behaving on the ground. "I kind of just... um..."

"Whoever mends your clothes, my lady, is going to pitch a fit at you tearing a hole in your dress," one commented. They pointed to said hole for emphasis and I inspected it curiously. Though it was
noticeable, it wasn't too large and it was along a seam, so... "Also, how did you get up here anyway?"

"I climbed?" How else was I supposed to answer that? "Ah, this is a quick fix anyway. I'll probably have it done in a few minutes."

"You, my lady?"

"Well, Larcei might badger me into letting her do it. Depends on how bored she is." They were giving me weird looks... "Something tells me that no one expected us to know how to do chores?"

"Well, you hear about how you divide the labor, but for something like mending…"

"Yeah, I used to think it a waste of time, since I was always tearing holes in my clothing because I was chasing after animals." Or running around hiding from soldiers. "Aideen got so mad at me that she sat me down with every piece of clothing we all owned and made me mend each one! My hands were so stiff by the end of it!"

"Seriously, my lady?"

"Oh, trust me, I could be a brat when I was little. Still can be, actually."

Slowly, I began telling them stories about growing up in Isaach, with a focus on just the everyday life we lived. I noticed many people gather around and listen and had to climb down at one point to keep some children from pulling Hestia's tail. Which led into other stories. And I wasn't the only one talking. When Larcei saw what I was doing, she chimed in, and soon, Nanna and Patty joined us. Tine didn't say anything, but she sat nearby to listen and she talked shyly with Ares as Lene launched into an impromptu performance which dazzled and amazed the crowd.

The smiles on everyone's faces… I wanted to remember them always. Because, ultimately, that was what I was fighting for. And I couldn't lose sight of that.

A few days after the executions, we left Darna, along with what felt like half the city. People volunteering to fight, people volunteering to help with the day-to-day running of an army… we had a lot of volunteers. It was enough to make me smile and that was good. One really should be smiling when they returned home, after all.

"Lady Riona!" Especially when the first ones to rush and greet me were Sandas and Anat, though neither carried their leopards. Instead, Mursi and Neith rushed after them happily and twined about their legs before nuzzling against my shins. "Welcome back!" Anat laughed, clinging to my hand. Sandas stepped back, but he bounced from excitement. "You saved Darna!"

"With quite a bit of help," I confirmed, feeling weeks of tension just melt away. Hard to be anything but relaxed when faced with such happy smiles. "See? We brought more friends."

"Yay! More soldiers to play with!"

"That's Mursili!" Sandas gasped just seconds after, his bouncing letting him see Mursili amidst the crowd. "Mursili! Hi!" He darted forward, stopped, and rushed back to grab Anat's hand. "I'll introduce you!" And away they went, dashing through the crowd with Mursi and Neith following faithfully while also batting at every dangling thing in their path.

I laughed and thought about following, just to see the no-doubt endearing scene, but I soon had the other children rushing forward to greet me. And not just the ones from the shrine. The other
refugee children also shyly stepped up for hugs and smiles. I was a bit surprised, especially when I saw some of the older children join in, but I soon realized why they were. Inanna encouraged them.

"They kept saying that you were too busy to be bothered, and I kept insisting that they'd brighten up your day," she told me when the others cleared and she had me to herself. She carried her leopard, and that let me see that said leopard was getting big. Probably why Sandas and Anat stopping carrying theirs. "I was right, right?"

"Of course you were," I teased, hugging her. She laughed, beaming. "What has you in a good mood?"

"You're back! Welcome home, by the way." She grinned now. "I picked out a name while you were away!"

"For… oh, for your leopard!" Had a brief moment of panic there, not going to lie. "So?"

"Eresh."

"A marvelous name for a marvelous kitty." I scratched Eresh behind the ear, and was rewarded with a lick. "How have things been?"

"Quiet, mostly. Bit anticlimactic over here where everyone was prepping for an ambush, only for Lady Fee to inform us that you all handled everything."

"With help?" Oh, I wasn't looking forward to everyone hearing the whole story there. "You know… I expected to get ambushed by Ulster or someone by now."

"They're busy. You're much earlier than expected."

"I see." Strange… I didn't think we had made particularly good time on the road. "In that case…" I thought about walking around through the crowd, but that was when I noticed two people very noticeably trying to get as far away from people as possible. Lene and Ares, both looking a little overwhelmed. And why wouldn't they? The place was practically flooded with the crowd! "I'm going to help two new ones settle in."

"Got it! I'll let people know!" And she rushed off into the crowd, pushing her way through.

I spent a moment watching, marveling at how at ease she felt with the army now, and then picked my way over to Lene and Ares. "Sorry, I guess we forgot to warn you about a potential crowd," I commented, smiling sheepishly. I was surprised that Hestia wasn't near, but then I saw she had firmly attached herself to Tine as Tine tried to escape the crush of the crowd. She definitely needed Hestia more than these two. "I'm sure it'll be a bit longer before rooms are available, but would you like to see Layla?"

The answer was, of course, yes and thankfully, once you got out of the courtyard, things actually quieted down and the infirmary itself was calm. Even more thankfully, Lana was on duty, so I got to hug her! Though I did wish Sara was also working so that I could tell her directly that we had succeeded. I'd find her later. Hugs from Lana took priority.

"Welcome home!" Lana cheered, smiling brightly at me as she stepped back. It dimmed slightly when she saw Lene and Ares, but that was only to switch to her 'healer mask'. "Ah, hello. Who might you two…?" She paused and leaned forward a bit to study Ares. I rested my hands on her shoulders to help her keep balanced. "You've got just enough similarities to Diarmuid and Lachesis that I assume you're Ares. Am I correct?" She grinned when Ares nodded. "Welcome to Melgen, Ares. And you must be Lene, so welcome as well. I assume you're both here to see Layla? Lachesis
is in the market with Finn, so she's the only one here you two know."

"Is she okay?" Lene asked hesitantly. She held herself a little stiffly, curling into herself. Ares held her hand to reassure her. "I mean… um…"

"I won't deny that she's badly hurt, but it's nothing that we can't fix. Her recovery will be long and will likely require some physical therapy, but she'll make a full one." Lana smiled reassuringly and started for the back. "One second, okay?" She quickly headed for the back, where the long-term patients had sections curtained off for some semblance of privacy, and just as quickly returned. "All right, she's up for visitors, so follow me. But fair warning, we have her feet unbandaged at the moment, so…"

"Won't that delay healing? It dries things out and…" Lene's face turned a mottled red and she ducked her head. Ares rubbed her back reassuringly. "Oh, listen to me, lecturing a healer about healing."

"I don't mind and you're right. Typically, you want to keep the wounds covered to encourage healing. Less necrosis, less inflammation… all good stuff." Lana continued smiling, though I saw the tiredness in it now. "However, you caught me in the middle of changing the bandages."

"Oh. Right. That makes sense." Lene whimpered. "I'm sorry…"

"Hey, you weren't screaming about how I'm too young to know what I'm doing like some others. You're fine." Lana chuckled, and waved off my concerned look. "Anyway, come on. We made sure she was by a window." Lana led the way to the back and pushed aside one of the curtains. There Layla rested, and she smiled at all of us, relief making her smile brighter than anything.

"Layla!" Lene rushed over to Layla's side and hugged her tightly, sitting on the bed. Layla, for her part, clung desperately to Lene. "Oh, Layla, why would you do something like this?" Lene asked, pulling away and looking at Layla's feet. And they didn't look much better than they did before we left. Though at least they did look like feet? "Seriously…"

"Much preferable compared to just waiting around knowing you and Ares were in danger," Layla replied without a single hesitation. She turned her attention to, and waved him closer so that she could hug him. "Besides, I'm being spoilt rotten here."

"Yeah, and you mangled your feet."

"But you two are safe and smiling and here, so I definitely won. Besides…" Layla reached for the nightstand by the bed and pulled over a book. A sketchbook, actually, one that was nearly full. "I get to sketch again!"

"You mentioned to me once that you used to sketch," Ares murmured, leaning against the bed so that he could see the sketches better. Lene moved to Layla's feet and, when Lana returned with the bandages, began bandaging them herself. Lana watched for a moment before nodding and leaving. "You're quite good."

"Thank you, since I'm out of practice," Layla giggled. Her smile was warm and lit up her entire expression. "Prince Seliph actually bought them for me, if you can believe it. While I was dozy from pain medication, I mentioned it while he was here checking on patients and he came by later that evening with some that the merchants recommended. Refuses to tell me how much it was."

"Really now?"

"Yes, he's quite kind. I think you'll like him, Ares." Layla flipped through her sketchbook, looking
for something, and thus missed the awkward look Ares gave Lene. Lene raised a brow and looked a little smug in return before focusing back on bandaging. "Ah, here's my most recent…"

Lana and I left the trio alone at that point, making sure the curtain was closed, and headed back for the front of the infirmary. "Hey, you doing okay?" I asked her softly, gently touching her cheek. She leaned into my hand and closed her eyes. "Inanna told me things were quiet. Were they really?"

"No, they were," she reassured. She opened her eyes and smiled tiredly at me. "Yuria got sick, though, so…"

"Oh no! How is she?"

"She's doing much better, just needs a few more days of rest. No going to see her just yet, though." Now Lana winked. "You see… I sent Diarmuid over not long ago with some medicine and soup."

"Uh-huh..." I gave her a look and she nodded, catching the silent question. I sighed in relief that he had talked to them about it. "I should have another talk with him soon. See how he's doing."

"And a talk with Yuria as well?"

"Oh, she's told you? Good."

"Yep, she has and she plans on talking to Larcei and Patty before talking to Lachesis if she's still confused." She stuck her tongue out at me. "Man, I was hoping to catch you off-guard with that one. How do you get to hear all the secrets first?"

"I do not!" I pretended to be insulted and got a laugh in return. "More seriously, I really don't. But I am very nosy and I walk around a lot. And I have Hestia, who's even nosier than me."

"Speaking of her, where is the fluffy cutie? I need Hestia hugs."

"Keeping Tine from panicking at the crowd that greeted us." Speaking of which… "I should probably head back and make sure no one got crushed. Got some priests and acolytes with the group, along with more soldiers and people willing to help."

"Really?!" Lana cheered and hugged me. "Yay~! I love you!"

"Love you too." I noticed the curtains move in the back and was surprised to see Ares stepping out from Layla's section and heading for us. "Ares, are you leaving? I would've thought…"

"I've said what I wanted to say for now," he explained with a shrug. Lana gave me another hug before leaving to check on the other patients. "She and Lene need their own time without worrying about me." He sighed then, and ran a hand through his hair. "I need to pay her back…"

"...She told me that you gave Lene back her smile, so I think in her view, she owed you." I smiled at him, and he looked a little startled. "I think you two need to have a private talk as well."

"Clearly so. But Lene takes priority."

"Of course." I headed for the door and Ares followed me out, looking around curiously. "I need to head back to the courtyard, but we can see if Oifeye or Shanan is available? You probably don't remember either, of course, but…"

"There's my sunshine!" That was when Seliph caught me by the waist and pulled me back into a
hug to kiss my cheek. "Welcome back," he greeted, smiling softly. "Surprised you're not in the crowd."

"I was showing Ares and Lene where the infirmary was, so that they could see Layla," I explained, kissing him. Then I stepped back and gestured to Ares. "Speaking of whom… wait, is that grammatically correct?"

"Hell if I know, and I can hear Deimne scolding us for not knowing or caring." Seliph stared at Ares for a moment before catching on to what I'd been about to say. "Oh! Hello, Ares! I'm so glad to… well, I suppose it's 'see you again', though I was barely a few months old, according to Oifeye." He smiled warmly, and Ares… well, he managed a smile, but I could tell it was awkward. And I knew Seliph saw it too. "Ah, but here, Lachesis and Finn just returned from the market. Why don't I show you where they are? Riona still has to greet people."

"And here I was coming to give you a warning that people were looking for her!" Leif jogged over, laughing. He waved when Ares frowned at him. "I'm Leif," he introduced. "We knew each other in Leonster."

"You're also the one with a crush on Nanna, or so Larcei mentioned," Ares replied. Leif immediately went red, and Seliph quickly muffled a laugh. "Strange, you remind me of a friend of mine. Mostly the eyes."

"Really? That's weird." He shrugged. "Anyway, seriously, I think we might have a mob heading our way."

Carefully, Seliph and Leif led Ares away, with Seliph making sure Leif was between him and Ares. I watched them leave, smiling softly and… well, for a split-second, I thought I saw three ghosts standing near… three ghosts that looked so much like Seliph, Leif, and Ares, all smiling so softly. But I blinked and then there was nothing, so perhaps it was just my imagination. And it didn't really matter, because I soon saw Shanan walking towards me, so I skipped over to hug him.

"I hope the three of them can become friends," he murmured, hugging me back. He then turned his attention to the trio as they disappeared around a corner. "I know their fathers would've wanted that."

"Well, Seliph and Leif are already friends," I pointed out. But I couldn't help but think about Altena and how she should've been in that group too. "Ares will be… well, I think his only reference for everything that happened comes from songs, rumors, and his own memories?"

"We discussed that possibility while you were away, and all agreed to leave it entirely to Lachesis and Finn." He gestured for me to follow him to a window nearby and I did so curiously. And smiled because it gave a perfect view of a quiet side garden… and where Aunt Lachesis and Uncle Finn were. Seliph and Leif led Ares there before long, and I swore I saw tears in Ares's eyes as he rushed over to hug Aunt Lachesis and Uncle Finn. They, of course, hugged him back just as tightly.

"What about Lene?"

"Lene doesn't remember her parents. I'll give you all the full story, as I know it, later, but the short version is that Imperials found Claude and Sylvia and… well, Claude died and Sylvia left Lene at a church before disappearing." I would… tell the adults about the second child later. I didn't want to repeat that often, especially since we had no idea… "Her Holy Mark also faded for her own protection, so…"

"I see." Shanan closed his eyes, thinking. I continued to watch Ares interact with Aunt Lachesis and Uncle Finn, barely noticing that Leif and Seliph had left to give them privacy. Ares continued
clinging to them both with hands that shook, but Uncle Finn supported his back while Aunt Lachesis held onto Ares's hand. Only Uncle Finn wasn't crying, but his smile was warm and bright. "In that case, we'll definitely wait for her to settle in before deciding how to go about that."

"Yeah, definitely leaving that to you all." And I needed a subject change, so I thought of one quickly. "Oh, by the way, Darna had a market for animals, so we brought the four still there back with us."

"I see… wait, what?"

"Actually, I should make sure everything is okay there, huh?" I sighed, annoyed that I had forgotten and pointedly ignoring Shanan's gawking. "So, let's figure out the best way to-"

"RIONA!" And there was Oifeye, stomping down the hall towards us. I was certainly popular today, huh? "Riona, why are there so many animals?" he demanded. He yelped as a young cheetah climbed all the way up from the ground to his shoulder. "And why are they all here?!"

"Well, what are we supposed to do? Not only do we have babies, but a lot of them aren't even local animals!" I protested, rushing over. I plucked the cheetah from his shoulder and cuddled them, giggling at how fluffy they were. "Can you imagine what it would do to the ecosystem around here? And we couldn't leave them in Darna! They barely have enough to feed themselves!"

"But so many?!"

"It's not that many!" I scowled. It was only four! "Besides, they were in cages, Oifeye. Cages! Cramped little cages at that! I'm not the one who kidnapped them, you know!" I held up the cheetah. "Besides, look at this poor adorable baby! We couldn't abandon them!" And then the cheetah did something I didn't know cheetahs could do. Chirp almost like a bird. "Holy wow, is that a good sound?" It was followed by a purr. "Yay! Good sound!"

"Riona, we're an army, not a menagerie!"

"They are not up for exhibition!"

That was the point when Shanan decided to just burst into laughter, and Oifeye started scolding him while I quietly fumed… before Oifeye and I joined in on the laughter because it was just very silly. Even if I refused to give on it.

"Hestia, seriously, you need to stay by me," I chided, grabbing her fur to keep her close. Hestia looked up at me all innocently, tongue lolling out and tail wagging. "Yes, you're cute. But you tripping the guards earlier means you're still in trouble." She barked and pressed herself into my leg. "So, no running off."

She tilted her head like she was considering being defiant, but she barked again and stayed close. Scratching her head in thanks, I flipped through my papers, skimming through to make sure everything made sense. Most of this were things that the refugees needed (or wanted) to help their lives be a little more comfortable, as well as requests for more work. I already assigned quite a few to laundry and the kitchens, because there was always something to do when it came to that, but I needed help with others. Plus there was also worries of what to do if we got more. Which was a possibility.

"Honestly, at this rate, we need to take Alster just to have room for everyone." I sighed and Hestia licked my hand before pressing herself into me again, this time to comfort me. "It's okay, Hestia. I'm just fretting." She just kept on pressing, almost knocking me over. "Okay, now you are just
being silly, you adorable brat. Come on, let's-

"Ah, Ares, there you are!" Distantly, I heard Aunt Lachesis and, me being nosy, I immediately headed for her because I wanted to see her and Ares interact. Hestia, of course, followed because she was just as nosy. "Whoa…!" Of course, she yelped and I almost dashed to see what happened, but instead, I ducked behind a statue with Hestia because Ares had caught her. "Thank you," she laughed, steadying herself again. Her complexion was a little gray. Actually, it was 'a lot' gray. "Goodness, you're tall. As tall as Eldie, easily."

"Lene complains that it makes it hard to surprise me," Ares replied, smiling slightly. He then went back to a stoic frown. "Are you okay? You look tired."

"I just got done with some physical therapy. I'll lay down in a moment, but I wanted to make sure I gave this to you before I forgot." She handed him a folded piece of paper, one that was a little battered on the edges and had a couple of dirt stains on it. "This is yours."

"It is?" Ares took it and eyed it skeptically. "What is it?"

"A letter from Eldie." ...I swore even the air froze at that. I knew Ares definitely did. "He… oh, read it first. I shouldn't really say anything."

"You've been holding onto…?" Ares carefully tucked the letter into his pocket. "How?"

"Finn is very organized, and made sure Nanna left Leonster with it." Aunt Lachesis smiled, but it was a smile filled with old pain. "Oh, wait, are you asking how one got to me? He gave it to Alicia and she passed it on to me after his death."

"Okay, and Alicia is… who again?"

"Riona's mother, and the one who saved your life when you got shot by a poisoned arrow. And got you your stuffed bear." Aunt Lachesis giggled. "You were obsessed with her hair. You grabbed it every single time."

"I… don't remember that." Ares looked away awkwardly, and Aunt Lachesis's cheer faded for sadness. "I mean… I remember the one who gave me my bear was a woman with long red hair and a kind, gentle smile."

"Yep, that's her. Here…" She took his arm and he automatically shifted so that she could lean on him. "Help me to my room? I'll tell you a little more about her on the way."

"Are you sure you don't need me to carry you?"

"Let your poor aunt pretend to have some dignity, Ares."

The two walked off then, bantering about this and that. Despite the warm and fuzzy feeling in my chest, I made sure to stay where I was before continuing on, to lessen the chances of accidentally eavesdropping more. No need for that, especially since I did have a specific destination: Ofeye's office. And when we finally arrived, Hestia, as per usual, opened the door by herself and jumped on him. Because she could.

"Hestia, you're not a puppy!" Ofeye yelped, trying and failing to fend off affectionate Hestia. Whose tail was wagging so much that she actually knocked papers over. "$t$e are you here? I've eaten; I promise!"

"Sadly, this is work, not me nagging," I explained, closing the door behind me and leaning against
"I made no move to help him with Hestia. "Just get out of the chair. It's not like you're not covered in wolf slobber already."

"Ugh…!" Still, he did as I said and submitted to Hestia kisses. "Work, you said?"

"I wanted your opinion on some things. And to give a report."

"A report?" He managed to tuck Hestia under his chin to focus on me. And looked very undignified with his hair messed up, but I'd pretend otherwise for his pride. "On what?"

"Seems like the animals are really cheering up the patients and the children." I felt very smug, and he gave me a look. "Yes, there are some bitey-bites, but people get me and I handle that. If Inanna doesn't take over since she's had to do the same with Eresh. Seriously, the children love them and there's this one lion cub that I think is growing attached to Ares and it's so cute~!"

"We still can't take every animal, you know."

"I don't want to do that. I'd prefer it if they were with their mamas and papas." Gods knew I wanted to see Mom and Dad. "But, well…" I shrugged, and shook my head as I sat down next to him. The thought of my parents made me think of what all had been said those last days in Darna. But I had a job, so… "Regardless, I wanted to ask-"

"Riona, have you been okay?" He frowned at me and pushed Hestia down so that he could lean over and touch my cheek. "I can't pinpoint anything specifically telling me that something is wrong, yet I can't shake the feeling anyway."

"I..." I hesitated. Not because I didn't want to say anything, but because I wasn't sure how to word things. Oifeye sat back down and waited for me. "Hey, Oifeye?"

"Yes?"

"When did everyone start expecting us to save them?" Perhaps that was the best way to start. Because the words that shook me... they all seemed to conflict with that 'truth'. People died for us, because they expected us to save them.

"Ah." Oifeye closed his eyes and his entire demeanor just... wilted. Hestia whined and nosed him to try and cheer him up, but it didn't work. "Aideen and I... we did our best to try and keep that pressure off of you all. Shanan, in his way, did his best to shield you, by taking the burden himself. But I knew..." He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I knew when you all grew used to people dying for you, grew used to the smell of death and blood, that we didn't succeed. Couldn't succeed. Still tried, though."

"When did you know that?"

"It was..." He sighed and absentely petted Hestia. "Well, death has always followed us."

"Yeah, I know that." That was just a constant. Always had been. "Back during the civil war in Silesse, Seliph and I almost died to pegasus knights." Shanan had a few scars from it that never seemed to fade, just like the huge scar on his back from when he protected Seliph from Deirdre's kidnapper. "And then after the Belhalla Massacre..."

"Yes, and within that first year, I lost track of the number of times we had to flee, leaving others to die to buy us time. And sometimes, the soldiers came too quickly."

"Right..." That was what happened when Conall was kidnapped. "So, was it during one of those
flights?"

"Yes, you almost died." He closed his eyes, his hands shaking as he continued to pet Hestia. I just listened, unsurprised to hear I had almost died. I knew it had happened too many times to count before I could even remember. "I can still remember that soldier holding their blade high above their head. I remember how all sound faded away. All colors disappeared. Just that soldier about to kill you, and no one close enough to save you."

"Must've been terrifying."

"The worst part… well, the worst part since you survived, that is…” He paused, collecting his thoughts. "You weren't afraid."

"Hmm?"

"I could tell. You were looking death in the face. You knew you were. I could tell you understood. And you weren't afraid." He opened his eyes and smiled so sadly, so painfully, that my heart keened. "You were a toddler, barely three years old, and you weren't afraid of death."

"I see." That didn't surprise me either. "How did I survive?"

"They hesitated and that bought Shanan the second he had needed." That made sense. Shanan would've been running as fast as possible even if it seemed too late. "But when that happened, I knew there was no way we would be able to keep that pressure off of you all. Not entirely. All we could do was try to give you the tools to not crack under the weight." He smiled wryly. "Not enough, it seems. What makes you ask that?"

"I… well…” Back to trying to gather words. It sucked trying to make thoughts coherent. "I just had a few people openly worry about me. About all of us, really. How we seem to run from being human… don't always recognize that we're more than symbols…” Plus there was just what Mursili said. It still was so different… "But, is it okay?” That… that was the crux of it all. I could hear it from a million people… "Is it really okay? For us to be selfish, be hypocritical, be… I don't even know..." But I needed, needed to hear it from…

"Yes." Oifeye shoved Hestia into my lap and sat next to me to stroke my hair. "Yes, Riona, it's okay. It always has been, and always will be. Cry, scream, laugh… whatever you want to do, do it." He smiled slightly. "Well, I would like it if you stopped climbing so high. Or my heart would, at least."

"But you make such funny noises…”

It was a weak attempt to change the subject, but Oifeye's next attempts were stronger and it took a while before I finally got around to asking those questions I had about the refugees and all. Because… because I had needed to just be… me for a moment. Me, getting comfort from Oifeye. Like we were back in Tirnanog.

I missed everyone there. I hoped they were okay.

"You're putting too much weight in your heel," Shanan scolded, swinging his practice sword. I tried to adjust before he connected, but failed, so I ended up falling straight on my back, with the blunted 'point' in my face. "Yield."

"Never," I replied before spinning around to sweep his legs out from under him. He jumped over my legs, but it gave me time to scramble up with practice blade in hand. Or… well… it did until
my leg decided to protest. Vehemently. And painfully. "Ow, ow, ow…!"

"Riona!" Shanan dropped the 'stern teacher' act immediately to support me, and help me limp over to the side. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I think my leg just cramped…" Slowly, I extended it, whimpering in pain. "Yep… definitely a cramp.."

"It's because you spend too much time at a desk." Shanan pulled my leg into his lap and began massaging it for me, letting me just rest. "Larcei cramped up badly yesterday too." I wondered if he'd rubbed her leg, because there were so many ways to tease her for that. "I think Diarmuid sprained his shoulder yesterday as well. Seriously, all of you spend too much time working and not enough time moving."

"But there's always stuff to do!" I sulked for a moment before wincing when he found a knot. My legs were in worse shape than I thought. "But I guess that's why my back has been hurting too. I just thought it was my boobs causing problems like usual."

"No, it's your back protesting sitting. You're not made for it. Especially you, miss 'jump into muddy puddles to chase after dogs'."

"I haven't done that since I was little!" I scowled before shrugging. After all, he was right. I didn't used to sit around so much. Probably why I walked around talking to people. "Anyway, aren't leaders supposed to always be busy? You were, back in Isaach."

"I was busy because I was constantly going on missions. I felt that sort of leadership worked best for the smaller force I led." He smiled sadly, eyes distant now. "But for an army, you should move a bit more. Balance."

"You think so?"

"Well, Sigurd, Jamke, and Lewyn did, when I asked them about it." His smile became pained now. "I talked to them a lot about leadership, that last year. Because at the time, we were all just so sure…"

"Ah." I hadn't known he had talked to them about leading. Really highlighted how different his life was compared to how he thought it would be. Arvis's 'better world' hadn't been better for him, just like the rest of us. And that thought reminded me, again, of those talks. They just weighed so heavily on me… "Hey, Shanan?" I drew my other leg up so that I could rest my arms on my knee. "Do you… have we been too merciful?"

"I don't know. He shook his head, more focused on easing the pain in my leg. "I have my fears, yes, but I know those fears are born from the terror that you will end up sharing the same fate as Sigurd." He shifted my leg off his lap and moved to sit beside me. "But what do you think, Riona?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking."

"Then how about a different question?" He made sure to look me right in the eye. I had a feeling this is something he had been wanting to ask us for a while. "Do you feel like you're saving people because it's expected of you?"

"I…" I closed my eyes and thought. I thought for a long time before an answer settled comfortably in my heart. "No, I save them because I want to."
"Oh?"

"Yes." I was at least certain of that. "People are... messy. They do bad things for good reasons. Good things for bad reasons. Swallow their morals for duty or survival or both. People are selfish and mean, and all too easily turn on perceived enemies. And yet..." I couldn't help but smile. "Yet they are also really wonderful, aren't they? How in times of danger, people will help complete strangers, just because they can. How quickly they can bond. How they strive to support each other. So, I mean..."

"You want to save them because we're all beautiful messes."

"That's right. We are." My smile faltered, though, as I thought about all the recent trouble. "I think, though, that the expectations people had and my own traumas... I think they turned that want into something darker. An obsession." Just as Ares had said, and Mursili. "And being obsessed isn't a good thing."

"Obsession blinds you a lot, yes."

"Like being obsessed with protecting children who have grown up just a little?" I smirked and he held up his hands in 'surrender', accepting the bard. "Shanan, when did you last take a break anyway?" I poked his cheek, and poked him a few more times when he didn't answer. When there was still no answer, I decided to be mischievous. "Hey, why not take Larcei out to the market? I know she's overworking too, and I'm sure she'll like it."

"You think so?" He became thoughtful before nodding. "Well, I've been meaning to get her new gauntlets. Her current ones are falling apart."

"Make sure they're pretty and functional." I grinned at him. "You have to look good when you're decapitating people, you know."

"But of course. That's why I forgo helmets and leave my hair loose. It catches the wind so dramatically."

"It does!"

We joked around a little more, and then he left to take Larcei out. I waited until he was out of sight to giggle and skip a bit, already imagining Larcei's reaction. Then I headed inside and decided to take some shortcuts to avoid people and get to my room as soon as possible. I desperately needed a good soak. With some of those bath oils Muirne scent... oh, that just sounded heavenly. Just what I needed and maybe it was a bit luxurious, but... well...

"Ares, for heaven's sake, that is the twelfth time you've picked that damn thing up and put it down!" And that was Lene, being angry at Ares. Since I was near their room, and a fretting busybody, I promptly headed over and peered inside through the open door. "You're being even more indecisive than I am with jewelry for performances," she continued. Paired with her expression, it was clear she was more annoyed than angry. She did have her hands on her hands on her hips, though, and scowled. Amusingly, Ares seemed suitably cowed, despite being twice her size. "Seriously!"

"I... it's not easy?" Ares protested, holding something up. It took me a moment to realize it was the letter I'd seen Aunt Lachesis give him. "I mean... this is something my father wrote. I've never had anything of his before. Unless you count Mystletainn."

"I know; that's why it's taken you forever to pull it out of the desk." She sighed and held out her
hand. "Here, how about I read it aloud? Think that might make it easier? You obviously want to know, but you're also scared."

"That..." Ares closed his eyes to think before nodding and passing it over. "Yes, let's... try that. Because, as always, you're right. You ever want to try being wrong for a change?"

"I was really wrong about you before, remember? This is just making up for it." She sat down on the bed and carefully unfolded the letter before patting the space next to her. "Here, sit with me." Ares sighed and did that, resting his head on her shoulder. "Okay... oh, the greeting is so sweet..."

'My beloved son... I wonder how old you are when you read this. Are you still a little boy, getting into all sorts of scraps? Are you a young man, studying to be a knight? It's easy to imagine you as both, though I fear I will not live to see either. And, if you're reading this, then my fears were correct. I wonder what you have heard about my death. Knowing Sigurd, he has said it is all his fault. Which could not be further from the truth."

Lene paused when Ares winced. "Do you want me to keep going?" Ares nodded, not saying anything. "Okay." She took his hand. "Where was I?"

'Though, even if it was his fault, I would not mind. I don't know if anyone has told you, but Sigurd was my first friend. I was a shy child, which was made worse by the isolation that tends to follow us of Holy Blood, but Sigurd saw how lonely I was and reached out, for which I am forever grateful. I'm glad you, however, bond so quickly with people without the need for someone to reach out. I'm sure you have many friends. I hope they're as good of friends to you as Sigurd and Quan are to me."

Again, Lene paused. Ares's hands were trembling, even the one she held. "Still good?" Ares nodded. "Okay."

'There's a thousand things I want to say, but it's difficult to parse. I suppose the first thing I should write is an apology. I am leaving you, after all, and no doubt you have complicated feelings over that. Worse, I'm choosing this death. In the morning, I will go to Chagall and try to convince him to stand down yet again and I know it is likely he will have me executed for it. So, I'm sure the question you're wondering right now is... why? Why would I choose this?"

"Wow, even as a toddler, he knew you well." Lene rested her cheek against Ares's hair. "You want to stop?" Ares shook his head. "Right then."

'There are many answers to this, but they all ultimately lead to one. I made many promises, swore many oaths, and they came into conflict. So, I have to pick the ones I know I would most regret breaking. And, believe it or not, it's not my knightly oath. No, instead, it is two separate oaths. One is my oath to defend Nordion. The other is the oath I made to Sigurd and Quan. We made a promise to always aid one another when we were younger, and I refuse to falter from that, even though my life is at risk. Sigurd and Quan are my dearest friends. Though I would love to live for them, dying for them is just as easy."

"You still holding up?" Lene kissed Ares's head and he nodded. "There's not much left."

'My sole regret is leaving you, Ares. I'm not too afraid of your future. Though Agustria falls, I know you will be safe. Grahnye, Lachesis, Sigurd, Quan, Ethlyn... I could probably fill a book with everyone who will watch out for you. But I won't be able to see you grow up into the fine young man I know you will be. I won't be able to take you out for another ride through the countryside. I won't be able to teach you or help you. But I'll be watching over you. Because you are my son, and I love you very much. I am blessed to have been your father, and I hope that in a different life, a
better life, I might have that honor again.

Know that I am always proud of you, my son, and that I will always, always love you.'

"It's signed with 'your father, Eldigan'." Lene set the letter to the side and gathered Ares in her arms to hold him close. At this point, I saw he was crying and I honestly wondered how long he had been. "I'm here, Ares. You just let it out, okay? I'm right here."

I made sure to leave then, not wanting to risk either of them learning I was there. As I headed down the hall, though, I made a little detour to the infirmary to ask Lana if she'd make everyone warm milk with honey while I took a bath. Because it was such a comforting thing, and all of us probably needed it anyway, so I could hide it. Or something. It made total sense to me, at the time.

Melgen's castle was much easier to climb when you weren't climbing during a thunderstorm. It made sense, of course, and this was by no means the first time I had scaled the walls since we captured Melgen, but there was just something almost relaxing about the comparison. Probably because sunny skies were so much better than storms. I hated storms. I really did hope I never had to fight in another one. But that was neither here nor there. My original plan for climbing had been to sneak in some reading time, because despite my climbing being well known, few actually looked up on the roof for me. So, I was very surprised to see that someone had actually beaten me to the roof: Uncle Finn.

"Now that right there is something Alicia would've had a heart attack over," he joked when he saw me pull myself up. He even grinned, though there was something sad to it. I guessed he was easily imagining her reaction. "Much more than the animals you adopted."

"Did I adopt them or did they adopt us?" I countered, pouting a little. Mostly just for fun, though. I was honestly relieved that the four new ones settled in well, thriving from all the affection they were getting. And worried about how things would change as they got bigger, but that was for the future. "Was Mom afraid of heights or something?"

"Alicia did her best to be the calm and reliable one, because it was a role she liked and felt was the best way she could support us, but the second she thought you or Conall were in danger, she would panic."

"I see…" That made me strangely happy. I often heard stories about how Mom could hold onto her calm through just about everything. But I was glad she loved Conall and me so much that she couldn't. "Well, I climbed up because I really wanted to do some reading. What brings you up here? You and Aunt Lachesis normally relax in your room in the early hours." And it was early. Lester had just left with Hestia and the other hunters.

"Typically, yes, but Ares asked if she and he could talk about Lord Eldigan, the letter, and his death." He shrugged, and I could only wince, remembering what I had overheard. "I figured that was a conversation best suited to the two of them. If he wishes to ask me, he can do so later."

"That makes sense…" And I needed a subject change, so I desperately tried to come up with something. And noticed where he was standing in relation to the sun. "Were you looking at Alster, then?" I skipped over to his side and looked out as well. "Worried?"

"I always worry. I was taught how to worry by the best fretters in the world, after all." He smiled slightly and I had to chuckle. "Oifeye learned from them too."

"That tells me all I need to know right there." That was right… Uncle Finn had been fighting…
actually, as a Leonster Knight (and squire), he would've been fighting even before joining with Sigurd. He would've been killing people since he was fourteen or fifteen. Which meant he might...

"Hey, Uncle Finn, do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Does it have something to do with you fretting over your potential obsession with saving people?" He chuckled when I gaped at him. "Oifeye rambles when he's worried. Actually how we met, because he was rambling about potential strategies."

"Oh." Well, that was embarrassing. "It does, but it's a different sort of question."

"Ask away, then."

"How do you deal with the fact that you kill good people in wars?"

"That's not the question you want to ask." The words were blunt, but his expression was kind and sympathetic. "You already know what you have to do. Either you harden your heart or cry and keep on going. They may be silent tears or physical, but tears are tears." He ruffled my hair, even as I ducked my head in embarrassment. "So, perhaps you should ramble instead of trying to force the words into a sentence."

"...I'm terrified of being like Arvis. So terrified that I think it feeds into... even more than I thought." I spoke slowly, wondering if I needed to elaborate on why that was. But his eyes were understanding. "And there's the whole 'going from one extreme to the other' thing that worries me, especially now that I am aware..." I bit my lip, desperately trying to think of the words I wanted. "But the guilt over Iucharba's death and Ishtore's is so overwhelming... I think and think, but my thinking is what put me on that potential path in the first place, so I..." And I was terrified, because I knew that even if I somehow convinced people, it wouldn't erase the deaths that already occurred. "How do you deal with the guilt when you don't... when you're still learning it's okay to cry?"

"Why would you think it wasn't?"

"Because so many were hurt or worse protecting us... and they didn't want or need my tears. They needed my smile..." My voice cracked, though my eyes didn't burn or anything. But my heart keened, especially as I remembered the day Creidne came back. "So, I don't..." I took a deep breath to try and calm myself. It... mostly... worked. "How did my parents deal with this sort of guilt?"

"That's not a fair question to ask. You might be alike in many ways, but you're also very different." Uncle Finn pulled me into a half-hug and I leaned against him, clutching my book to my chest. "I once asked Chulainn a similar question, and he told me about how killing meant nothing to him. It was no different than hunting an animal, because as both a gladiator and a mercenary, your ability to kill was directly related to your ability to survive."

"That... makes sense..."

"It played a part in why Chulainn never thought himself all that good of a person. The rest of us disagreed, but I know he was scared you or Conall would end up like him. That you feel guilt... he'd be upset because you're hurting, but relieved as well." That made sense. That fit into the stories I had heard. "As for Alicia? Alicia found it hard to hurt people in general. Sure, if you riled her enough, she would, but..."

I just caught his grimace. "Was it annoying?"

"It was... certainly a worry?" He didn't quite look at me, telling me that yes, it was annoying. Which made me smile, because... I don't know. "It became a bigger worry after Deirdre was..."
well, whatever happened."

"Because Mom almost died?"

"And because of how that opening got there. She and Deirdre actually did fight. Alicia controlled flames, but..." He sighed. "But she saw the fear in his eyes, hesitated, and he exploited that opening. She never forgave herself for it, but at the same time, she never learned how to fight. Never learned how to overcome that hesitancy. Many offered, but she refused, focused solely on healing people."

"That seems selfish." But, it also just... fit the stories. Mom was a healer first and foremost.

"It was. And, knowing what I do about Victor of Velthomer, sometimes I wondered if that hesitancy was born from a fear of turning into her father. But, of course, I never asked." Back to him, huh? Since he died so long ago, I never really thought about what influence he would've had on Mom or Arvis. "But because of all of that, Riona... Alicia felt guilt over those she couldn't save, yes, but not in the same context as you."

"So, what do you do?"

"Sadly, I don't truly have an answer. I'd rather you not lock up anymore than you have. Not as I did." He smiled gently at me. "My suggestion, though, is to take advantage of something neither of your parents had while growing up. Having friends and family you can depend on. Because I am certain that they feel similarly to you. Especially those you grew up with."

"...Just out of curiosity, did you have a similar talk with Diarmuid?"

"A father always keeps his son's secrets." Uncle Finn ruffled my hair again. "What is it that you were planning on reading anyway?"

"Huh? Oh! It's a book I... ah... borrowed from Alster!" I held it up to show him. "It's a history about the Loptyrian Empire. I thought that maybe it would help... um..."

"Does it say something more than 'it was terrible'?"

"A lot more, actually! I'm about halfway through, and...

I rambled on and on, and Uncle Finn let me, asking questions here and there, and weighing in with stories he knew or his own knowledge depending on the subject. It was actually really fun and I felt... I felt like I was actually making progress or something. Maybe I just liked the excuse to spend time with Uncle Finn. That would also make sense.

"Hmm... yeah, that sounds like the same mess that's been in my own head recently," Seliph murmured, absentley running his fingers through my hair. For once, we both had a morning off, so we were lazing in bed. And talking about what had been on our minds recently because Uncle Finn was right. Talking about it was better than trying to keep it all inside. "We should slowly ask the others too."

"Yeah," I agreed, snuggling a little closer to him. He was delightfully warm, after all. "What sparked you thinking about it, though?"

"Arthur asking me why I'd have a trial for Bramsel. I couldn't find an answer that satisfied either of us, really." Way to go, Arthur. "I still like giving them chances. But we should plan things like that with others weighing in more."
"Definitely." And, more importantly, make sure they knew we valued their input. "Wow, here we are in bed together and we're being serious."

"Like whatever you were writing last night?" He nodded to the nightstand where I had papers carefully stacked. And turned over so that he couldn't sneak a peek. "What were you working on?"

"That's… ah… something we'll talk about later?" It was my notes about Julius (possibly) being Loptryr Major and all that. "Could be nothing."

"If it's worrying you, then it's not nothing."

"It could just be me chasing a dust mote while thinking it's a bunny. You know; like what Hestia used to do." I quickly twisted so that I could pin him to the bed, straddling his waist while I leaned over him. "It is much too serious for a restful morning."

"What is? I think my brain stopped, so I can't remember what we were talking about." Seliph smiled softly and reached up to pull me down into a kiss. "I meant to ask last night, but I forgot. Why are you wearing my nightshirt?"

"Because Hestia got my only clean nightgown dirty." I couldn't even glower at her now, though, because she wasn't here. She had left with the hunters, as per usual, and was now… somewhere that wasn't here. "Are you mad?"

"It looks better on you than it does me. So, a little."

"Now, does it actually look better or just me wearing your clothes is a nice sight?"

"Both?" He grinned and I laughed, leaning down to rest my forehead against his. "But you are right. We have been much too serious." He brushed my hair behind my ear, his touch lingering on my cheek. "We should try to match schedules more. I scandalized a couple of soldiers when they realized you and I don't go on regular dates."

"Similar thing happened to me." In fact, truthfully, I didn't have this morning off. Mursili, however, learned about how Seliph and I didn't get to spend a lot of time together and recruited a few others, like Niamh, to take my morning duties. "That said, we are blessed with kind and competent soldiers."

"We really should rely on them more."

"I think so too. Gets us more mornings like this." I kissed him slowly, lazily, and smirked at the dazed look on his face when I pulled away. "Wonder what you're thinking."

"Well…" And then there was a knock on the door. "Well, right now, I'm thinking there's a conspiracy."

"Seriously." I sighed and rolled off the bed to head for the door. Seliph was right behind me, grumbling. "Okay, who is it?"

"It's Ulster," Ulster answered through the door. Which… was confusing because he and Lana had the day off entirely and were supposed to be… "Please don't kill me."

"Well, now I'm wondering what the emergency is," Seliph replied, opening the door. Ulster stood there looking apologetic, and annoyed. "So?"

"Lewyn asked for a meeting, and if things make you feel better, Lana and I were just about to
leave." Ulster sighed and I patted his shoulder sympathetically. "I'm not sure how much of an emergency it is, since he's not being urgent and all…"

"Then why is he asking for one?"

"Well, apparently, he promised our darling wolf-girl…" He pointed to me, and I frowned. "Some explanation about something and that you also made him promise that Fee gets to hear, so he's decided that everyone gets to hear it at once."

"The hell?" I asked, frowning. Then I gasped as I remembered. "Oh, right! His arm rotting!"

"...His what?!" Seliph yelped. I ignored him to head for the closet to pick out clothes for both of us. "Why… what…?!"

"I don't know and that's the point of this!" And I was certain he picked today of all days to get back at me for extracting a promise for an explanation. "Hey, Seliph, where's that blue… oh, never mind, I found it."

Though Ulster and Seliph tried to get more information out of me, I ignored them (because I really didn't have anything else to say) to get ready instead. Since Ulster had to fetch us, the three of us ended up being the last ones in the War Room, and I noticed three things. One, Lewyn wasn't here. Two, most of everyone who was here was clustered around the table, annoyed and grumbling, no doubt because of the first. Three, we had a couple more people than usual: Ares and Lene. Ares was in the corner with the adults, talking to Uncle Finn, and Lene was off to the side, noticeably apart from everyone, but watching with sparkling eyes as she pet Hestia. I supposed Hestia decided Lene would be the best source of treats for the morning or something.

"How did you get dragged into this mess?" I asked her curiously, deciding to join her instead of grouping up with the others. Honestly, it seemed like mostly grumbling and I didn't need that this morning. "Is it Hestia's fault?"

"I'm just here to make sure Ares is okay, truthfully," Lene explained with a wink. She continued petting Hestia, who was very pleased by all of this. "You can ignore me~"

"How can we ever ignore such a beautiful lady, though?" I grinned and she giggled. "Why is Ares here?"

"Finn invited him along, so that he can see who all is on the War Council."

"Interesting." That made me wonder if Ares was considering fighting for us, but that was so not my business at the moment. "How is he doing? I'm sure reuniting with family, and meeting them in Diarmuid's case, is a little…"

"Plus learning more about how complicated his father's death was." She smiled knowingly at me and I looked away. I still felt bad for using that as an example of songs simplifying things, even if it had been a complete accident. "Honestly, he doesn't know. But I think…" She tapped her cheek, finding her words. "You know how you sometimes have to lance a wound to get infection out? I feel like it's like that."

"So, painful for now, but it should eventually scar."

"I think so." She grinned. "If you don't mind helping to distract him? He trusts the ones that came to save me, because of the whole 'owe' thing, and I think that'll help him."

"I'll do what I can. And we can recruit Diarmuid as well. He's very good at things like this."
"I've noticed. I'm very grateful." Her grin softened into a smile. "I'm grateful to Seliph as well. Not just for the care he's given Layla, but for recognizing he needed to wait for Ares. And being willing to wait."

"No need to tell me how wonderful my lover is."

"True, true." She clapped her hands, eyes dancing now. "Ah, but when Ares is ready, we should totally do a double-date sort of thing. I think it'll be fun."

"Now that is an idea. Maybe a triple, and drag Ulster and Lana as well?"

"We could also set some folks up?"

"Have to be careful with a few, but-"

"Sorry for the abruptness of this," Lewyn said, finally arriving. He looked a little winded and definitely a bit distracted. That made me frown, and I tried to catch someone's eye, wondering if this had become normal recently. Diarmuid, over by Leif, noticed and shook his head, hinting that no, this wasn't. Something had happened, or was going to happen. "With the way the wind is blowing, I have a feeling things will get quite busy very quickly, and a promise is a promise."

"And what is the wind saying?" Oifeye asked calmly. His expression was stony, though, and I saw Shanan grip his shoulder reassuring. "Anything interesting?"

"It's screaming lots of thing and taking a while to separate. I'll get the information as soon as I make sense of it all." That… didn't sound good. "Anyway, since I know this is abrupt and all of you have things you'd rather be doing, I'm just going to be very to the point."

"It would be a nice change."

"Just warning." Lewyn then pushed back his sleeve and, without hesitation, unraveled the bandages on his arm to reveal the necrosis and deterioration underneath. To the screams and gasps of everyone. "So, as you can see, my arm is rotting. I should've died back in Belhalla that day. And I don't mean it in the survivor guilt way. I literally should have died. Tailtiu and Alicia only bought me time to make a bargain with Forseti." He shrugged and… attempted to rebandage his arm. I got annoyed and went over to fix it myself, scowling. "I left because I had noticed the pulse slowing and knew this body would die and animated only by magic from that point forth. And yes, Erinys knew and I left with her knowledge and permission." He looked at everyone's wide-eyed stares and waited for me to tie the bandage off. "And that's about the sum of it. Have a lovely afternoon."

And then he left. He just freaking left. What the hell?!

"If half of what he said was true, I'm guessing the rot got the empathy part of the mind and heart," I deadpanned, unable to help it. I held up my hands when all eyes turned to me. "Yes, I knew about the arm thing, but not the why or anything. The promise he mentioned was to me, so this meeting is partially my fault. I didn't say anything because it was back when Ishtore threw boltings at the camp, and now, I know nothing more than you do." I looked at everyone in exasperation. "You want more info? Badger it out of him, though I think you'd have more luck getting Hestia up a tree."

Despite my warning, Aunt Lachesis was the first one out of the room, striding out with purpose and fury in her eyes. Oifeye wasn't far behind, expression stony. Shanan and Uncle Finn glanced at each other, sighed, and followed the two out, likely leaving to handle damage control. Something Arthur and Tine also decided to do for Fee, since she was standing there in shock. Hestia went with them. She knew Fee would need the comfort.
"He's as capricious as the wind itself," Ares noted dryly, preventing an awkward silence from falling. He pushed off the wall and sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Is there anything I can do to help make sure she doesn't have to work today? I've never been involved in the more administrative part of battles, but..."

"I think we're all going to first get something to eat and rest a bit," Seliph replied slowly. He smiled, though, and surprisingly, Ares smiled back. It was a very tiny smile, but one nonetheless. "Then we all can shuffle duties around. I do know Fee was supposed to help with foraging for medicinal herbs, but..."

"Oh, I can do that for her, at least!" Lene volunteered, raising her hand to make sure she was seen. She smiled brightly when everyone focused on her. "I mean; I'd need a guard or something, because I don't know how to fight, but I can forage."

"She was going to head out with me, so we'll go together!" Nanna laughed, smiling brightly. Despite the smile, though, she was very shy when taking Lene's arm. "Mother told me some stories about Ares when he was little, so..."

"Perfection~!"

Slowly, everyone began leaving the room, with Iuchar and Diarmuid talking with Ares (probably to have him take some of their jobs so they could take over for Fee). I almost followed, but I saw Yuria hadn't moved from the table. So, I instead waited for her by the door and knocked on the frame when it became obvious that she was lost in thought.

"Oh, sorry!" she gasped, rushing over to me. She nearly tripped over her feet, but I helped steady her. "I was just... thinking."

"About what Lewyn said?" I asked, nudging her out the door and down the hall. She nodded, expression becoming absent as she began thinking about. "What is it? Something wrong?"

"It's just..." She bit her lip. "I don't want to say he was lying, because I don't think he was. But..."

"You think there's more to the story."

"Much more." She looked right at me. "Plus, he said 'bargain'. That implies Forseti wanted something. But he didn't say..."

"...He didn't say what that was." I almost growled in frustration. No doubt he had left so quickly to make sure no one caught that until after he left, damn it. "Well, he did explain the rotting thing. Sadly, that was all I got out of a promise."

"And I can extrapolate from there that he is being harsh because he has no idea when the body will fall apart and he wants to spare his loved ones more pain, but that..." She shook her head. "That doesn't feel 'right'. I think the answer to his harshness lies in what he didn't say."

"Joy." Got one explanation and a thousand more questions. Typical. "Here, let's catch up to the others. And I want to know how you've been doing on your feelings for Diarmuid."

"That's...!"

I kept on teasing her, and I eventually had to come up with new names for 'blushing madly' because she had a near permanent blush the entire time! But it was fun, and that was something I dearly needed. I made sure to stop when we caught up to the others, though. I wanted her to be comfortable before we did group teasings, after all.
After lunch, and duty reshuffling, we all got to work and I actually thought to inform a couple of the soldiers that Fee wasn't feeling well and would be taking the rest of the day off. I'd barely finished the explanation before they volunteered to help out where they could, so I sent them to the others and made mental notes about other ways to reshuffle duties and the like. And physical notes when I got to my study and found pen and paper. Then I went about my afternoon duties, which I finished more quickly than I expected. Funny how fast things got done when you stopped trying to do it all on your own, huh? So, with the unexpected free time, I decided to swing by and check on the children.

"Looks like everything is going well," I murmured, leaning against the doorframe and doing my best to not be seen. I didn't want to interrupt. Today, they had actually started lessons, learning how to read and write and the like. Meaning the 'play room' was awash with paper and pens and the younger children trying to do their work while the older children did their best to help. And, of course, the animals getting in the way, demanding attention. Save for one. "Where is that lion cub?"

A second and third look proved that the little lion wasn't in the room like the others, so I left to go hunting. I wished I had Hestia with me, but Fee needed her more, so I just had to hunt through the castle myself for a tiny little cub. And hope she hadn't escaped the castle and was in the city somewhere. Because if she was, I was going to catch an earful of a lecture from Oifeye. I just knew it.

"Easy, Lachesis…" When I heard Seliph, I was tempted to ask him for help, but I held off when I found him and saw he was helping Aunt Lachesis limp down the hall. "I think you overdid it chasing Lewyn," he teased. She just made a face at him and surprisingly didn't say anything. She just stared at his face, like she was just seeing it or something. "You're wearing the same look Aideen does when Hestia tracks mud in the house. Is something smeared on my face?"

"Hmm? Oh, no!" Aunt Lachesis reassured. She smiled sheepishly and shook her head. "No, it's just… I just noticed how much like Deirdre you look. That's all."

"You have Sigurd's coloring for sure, but your features are much more delicate than his." She poked his cheek, tilting her head to the side. "Your eyes are the same as his, but that's it. I was curious if there was more or not."

"Is… it a bad thing?"

"Of course not. Just… well, when you were a baby, you appeared to take more after Sigurd than her." She smiled and, tentatively, Seliph smiled back. "So I was startled. You'd think I would've noticed that sooner. They were always very distinctive."

"Were they?"

"Yep." Lachesis giggled. "Oh, wait, you probably don't like having your looks described as feminine."

"My looks are my looks, and people can describe them however they wish." Seliph shrugged, unbothered. "It made things useful when we were little. I could just borrow Larcei or Riona's dresses and pretend to be a girl."

"Really?"

"Yeah, we did that a few times when we were younger, to make it easier to escape." Seliph became
thoughtful, glancing up and conveniently missing Aunt Lachesis's pained look. "I wonder if I can still pull that off, actually."

"Hmm... you know... you just might. Especially since outside of Isaach and Thracia, men tend to wear their hair short." She tugged a lock of his hair for emphasis. "Actually, that reminds me. I know Ulster keeps his short to emulate Lex, but why is Larcei's? I would've thought she'd keep it long."

"Huh. You know; I don't remember." And Seliph smiled thoughtfully, like he didn't just lie. But he had. Of course he knew. All of us from Tirnanog did.

Larcei used to have long hair. As long as mine and Seliph's. She had been proud of it, taken incredibly good care of her hair... it helped her remember Aunt Ayra. Made her feel closer to her. But after Creidne's suicide attempt... well, Creidne's hair had also been long, once. But after her assault, she couldn't bring herself to take care of it, so it got horribly tangled. Then she tried to kill herself, and because she had curled up on the floor, the blood had caked her hair into matts. Impossible to detangle. So, when she survived, it had to be cut, and she had cried so bitterly. It was just one more thing taken away due to that general. So, Larcei had sat down and demanded her hair be cut too. A show of solidarity. A reminder to Creidne that she wasn't alone. And Larcei would keep it short until Creidne grew hers out again.

"Ah, Lachesis, I've been meaning to ask you something," Seliph began, deftly changing the subject. The explanation wasn't his to tell, after all. "But I have noticed you wincing every time someone mentioned bringing in refugees without asking questions, and... well..."

"I really do need to school my expressions better," Aunt Lachesis sighed. She then smiled sadly. "Sorry, it's not that you're doing something wrong. I just worry."

"...It was both Sigurd's greatest strength and weakness." She spoke very softly, but each word was brimming with old pain. She missed him terribly. "His ability to accept people, to trust people... it worked quite a few times. It's how he met Quan and Eldie to begin with. It's how Ayra and Shanan joined up with us. How Jamke did."

"But it's also how Arvis and Aida were able to lead him into a trap, alongside everyone else."

"Yes." She closed her eyes, forcing back tears. "And just bringing people in... well, that's how Deirdre was kidnapped. She and Alicia were bringing in refugees, helping them, and..."

"I know the story. Shanan told me." Admittedly, Shanan had actually been delirious from pain medication at the time. His appendix had decided to burst not long after we arrived at Tirnanog, and Seliph and I had kept him distracted until the sleeping medication kicked in for Aiden to do the surgery. "I suppose we simply need to try and keep vigilant. And rely on the people around us."

"Oh, trust me. The old ones in this crazy group are paranoid enough to balance you young ones out."

"You're not that old, Lachesis."

That's when I remembered I was wandering the halls looking for something (a lion cub), not to stand around eavesdropping on interesting conversations. So, I resumed my hunt, looking around in every room and nook and cranny in the castle. And asking soldiers if they had seen the cub. As the search continued on, I worried she was hurt (or worse) and began panicking. After all, she was only a baby and if she was hurt, she had to be lost and confused and-
"There you are!" And there was Ares rushing for me. My panic was reaching the skies at this point. "Been looking all over for you," he grumbled. Thinking past my anxiety, I frowned in confusion, since I knew he had to be busy. He had taken over nearly half of Iuchar's duties, and a quarter of Diarmuid's. "Help."

"With…?" I asked, raising a brow now. But he pointed down and I quickly saw the answer. I found the lion cub. She was all-but-clinging to his leg. "Aw, hello there, cutie!" And she looked just fine, so relief washed through me. She was fine. Everything was okay.

"I need help with it!" He looked a little panicked as he glanced down. "Won't leave me alone and nearly got stepped on by my horse."

"This is the first time she's actually sought you out, huh?" Normally, it was just when he had been passing by.

"Yes, and I don't know why!"

"Hmm… well…" I watched her rub her face against his leg and smiled sadly as one thought did come to mind. Eldigan was known as the Lionheart after all. "Could be she sees you as a kindred spirit? She's a cub violently separated from her parents, after all." I picked her up and handed her to him, fixing his grip so that she was secure. "I've read that lions are very social cats who adore contact. So, she might just feel most at home with you."

"That…" He looked at the cub, who began rubbing her head against his chin and cheek. "So, what do I do?"

"I can try to dissuade her, but I'm not sure it'll work. Bar you being abusive and I'm telling you now, if you are, then I'm setting you on fire." I thought about what Lene said about distractions and smiled, realizing this could be a blessing. And hey, it worked for Inanna, Anat, and Sandas, so maybe? "That said, I can also help you train her to at least not get underfoot with horses about. I had to teach Hestia too, and I'm sure most of the animals need to learn that quick. And when she's bigger, she'll probably be a great guard for Lene."

"Assuming Lene doesn't kill either of us…" He sighed and, hesitantly, began petting the cub's head. "You know… when I was a child, I did actually want a cat."

"Yeah, I wanted a dog and got a wolf. Life is funny that way." I grinned, delighted. "Come on. Let's find Lene and let her know, okay? I'll help out."

"Oh, good, I can hide behind you."

While we were hunting for Lene, we came across Leif, who was looking to the east, towards Alster, with grim eyes. Ares, surprisingly, called out to him first, but I quickly dragged Leif into helping out as well, mostly by joking and teasing about the cub. It wasn't long before Leif was back in a good mood, but even then, it was clear what weighed on him. After all, it weighed on all of us, even if none of us said anything about it.

With Darna captured, it was time to march on Alster. Gods help us.
Author's notes: Well, here's quite a few things? I probably should've named the interlude something else, huh? Riona being confused about why 'hyena' in that context would be an insult is a callback to *Memoirs of Thracia* where Conall has similar confusion. 'Eresh' is short for Ereshkigal, a figure in Babylonian mythology who rules the underworld and is the sister of Ishtar (who is often associated with Inanna). 'Neith' is an Egyptian goddess often associated with 'Anat'.

Also, Seliph looking like Deirdre is based off of how his in-game portrait takes more after Deirdre's than Sigurd's (much like the other children; Larcei's is just Ayra's portrait with short hair, and Nanna's is Lachesis's with short hair and a feather) and some developer notes implying it was intentional. (I think both the Fuyuki and Oosawa manga also make a mention of this, but don't quote me on that). If you look at character portraits and character art, then the only men with long hair are, for the most part, only from Isaach and Thracia (see: Shanan, Travant, Arion, Dean, Marricle).

In-game, Nanna is actually the one who gives Ares the letter (and it's in the next Game-Chapter), but since Lachesis is here, I figured this would be better. The game itself doesn't really go into the details of what's in the letter, save that it shows that Eldigan and Sigurd were friends until the end (and carefully avoids saying whether or not Sigurd *did* kill Eldigan since that is a possibility), but I thought it would be fun to show (especially since it's been so many chapters since Eldigan was present). Also yes, I just couldn't resist giving Ares a lion cub. I tried really hard, but I couldn't.

About hyenas. Yes, they are in the same order (well, suborder, rather) as cats (and mongooses) meaning they are more phylogenetically similar to them than dogs. However, both canines and hyenas share similar 'niches' in their ecosystem iirc, so the similarities in morphology and behavior are an example on convergent evolution. That said, their grooming habits, scent marking, mating, and parental behavior are consistent with felines. (Truly, though, they're in their own family, but neither here nor there; Riona can't be COMPLETELY right about animals all the time)

Next Chapter - Divinity
Chapter 41) Divinity

Darna is ours and is on the road to recovery. Now, we had to go prepare to take Alster... while also reevaluating how we looked at things. Or maybe that was just me and those I grew up with? Who knew?

Oifeye once told me that you never stopped learning and changing for as long as you lived. This war of ours really does highlight that.

The sun was warm. The wind was cold, but the sun was warm, and I could easily see myself dozing off as I laid up here on the roof of Melgen's castle. But I did my best not to, because I'd climbed up here to think. And laugh at myself as lessons slowly seeped in and became solid in my mind. Or something.

"I talked about listening, but I purposely kept myself ignorant just so that I could remember how complicated things are,' I whispered to myself. No reason, really. I just had wanted to hear the words aloud, to make them more 'real'. "I suppose it's better to say that I was… not pretending, exactly, but…” I kept it at the 'present', and maybe some of the 'future'. Not the past. Aside from the Loptyrian Hunts, that is...

I briefly thought about why that was, beyond my own issues, and came upon an answer quickly enough. Despite the complexity, it had actually been easier. I was used to complexity. I didn't actually know what to do when things were 'simple' or perceived to be simple, at least. Because, all my life, I had been raised knowing that the 'mythical Someday' where we 'saved Jugdral' would never be a conflict between good and evil. It was a conflict between everyone who did what they thought was right, and a conflict of hurt people desperately longing for revenge. Sure, there would probably be a few who didn't qualify for that (Hilda came to mind, but I didn't know every ally we had; we could have bandits with us for all I knew). But for the most part, it was a mess, because people were messes. And it wasn't as if Bloom was quite like Danann. I mean… Danann let his soldiers butcher and rape as they pleased, and forced Isaachians into 'labor camps' where they worked until they fell over dead. Danann hadn't ruled, really. He'd strangled Isaach. Bloom did seem interested in ruling… with everyone in chains. At least, based on my own limited knowledge...

"The first thing Oifeye taught us was that no one is 'the villain' in their own mind. Their actions are always justifiable to themselves. They always have a 'good reason'. They're the 'hero', after all. It's all a matter of perspective." And with simple gossip and history, you twisted people's perception. You saw it with my parents and their friends, who went from traitors to heroes in the space of five years. You saw it with Arvis, who went from traitors to heroes in the space of five years. You saw it with Arvis, who went from hero to villain. And I was sure the Loptyrians saw themselves as justified in their revenge. "But… but justifications doesn't mean you're right. And feeling bad doesn't erase your guilt…”

Look at Bloom, for instance. I purposely hadn't focused on it both because he was Ishtar's father and because his actions never directly affected me (unlike Danann), but regardless of his feelings on the matter, he had kidnapped Aunt Tailtiu and Tine and secluded them from everyone. His
soldiers had killed Uncle Azel, and he'd covered it up (though, perhaps that never did get reported). He had turned away while his wife beat Aunt Tailtiu to death, and hid the cause of death. He kept people like Bramsel in power, despite Bramsel being a known rapist, and supported others who were just as bad. He purposely kept the people of Manster on the edge of starving, to 'minimize' the chances of them rising up against him. Not to mention copious use of assassins, even against children, and remained so stubborn about 'threats to the Empire' that he had destroyed entire cities. And that was just what I knew about. If I did a little bit of looking, I was sure I could find more. I had just… not done that. Because he was Ishtar's father (and she had to learn her kindness from somewhere among her family and it sure as hell wasn't Hilda) and I felt guilty over Ishtore. Because I felt I had to keep remembering the complexity of the situation, both because of what happened to my parents and because of how guilty I felt not only over the deaths, but how I had lost my temper while fighting General Richard and Danann.

But… I shouldn't. I shouldn't feel guilty. Because who wouldn't lose their temper when fighting them? Richard raped Creidne, brutalized her to the point of suicide, and Creidne had been our first friend in Tiranog, one of the few who loved us and not just the 'hope' and 'salvation' we represented. And Danann… well, I had thought about it earlier, but he'd slowly strangled Isaach for nothing more than a desperate need to 'prove' his superiority. I shouldn't feel bad for losing my temper, even if I acknowledged the brutal way both died. I shouldn't feel guilty over it, because I was human and I was allowed to feel. I was allowed to be imperfect. And… and if I didn't lose my temper, then how could I know how to reign it in when I inevitably lost it again? That was why I didn't know what to do when my emotions wanted to simplify things. I always fought against it, fought to keep everything buried so that I could smile for everyone else.

"But it's okay to keep some things simple, right?" I smiled as I whispered the words, because it went so contrary with what I grew up with. "It's okay. I just… I won't forget that I'm fighting people. I will never forget that, even as I let some things become simple." That I was fighting scared people. We'd give them chances, but I had to be careful about confusing different fears. And I had to be careful to not offer mercy at the expense of justice and I had to just accept that I wasn't… I would never reach everyone. Not with my words. My actions spoke louder. All of our actions spoke louder… "Ha… I can't believe I'm legally an adult when I'm this stupid. That I'm like… two, three years into being an adult when..." Who decided that 'sixteen' was of age? How could anyone think that a sixteen year old could-

"RIONA!"

"I didn't do it!" The words came automatically and I swung my legs around to hop to my feet before I even really processed that Oifeye had shouted for me. Mostly because I knew that tone and it always meant trouble. 'I was in big trouble' trouble, not 'everyone is going to die' trouble. "Unless it was something I was supposed to do, because in that case, I did do it!" I rambled, heading to the edge of the roof to try and find him below. I mean… I had made sure I had everything done before I decided to talk to myself on the roof like a potential-crazy person. "So… uh…"

"Oh, Princess Riona!" That was a different voice, belonging to one of the older refugee girls we had staying with us. Even from here, I could see her smiling, though Oifeye was scowling as she rushed over to join him. The contrast between the two was kind of amusing, really. She even had blonde hair to his darker brown. "Can you help us with something?" she asked, waving her hands to make sure she was seen. "Please?"

"Yeah, sure, I'll climb down." So… what was going on? Oifeye wouldn't be mad at someone needing my help. And he was definitely at least annoyed. Did I miss a message from Sandas or Anat? "Give me a second!"
It didn't take long for me to climb down, and then I followed the girl, who cheerfully skipped along despite wearing a heavily patched and loose dress, and Oifeye, who was doing his best impression of a storm cloud. I desperately tried to think of just what had happened, and wondered if it was less something I had/hadn't done, but something Hestia had. But if that were the case, Oifeye would've just said something? This was all weird, and I kept on fretting as we made it to the large room where the children played and took their lessons. That's when I discovered what the problem was. There were cats. Wild cats. Caracels, I believed they were called, based on the little 'tufts' I could see on the ears. And they were baby ones, toddling about to sniff around, making this very high pitched noise that almost sounded like 'meep', and happily 'headbutting' the children, who squealed in delight. Completely adorable… and completely not really supposed to be anywhere near here, much less in the middle of the kids' room. For crying out loud, I was pretty sure they were nocturnal anyway!

"We found them outside all alone!" the girl explained with a bright smile. I needed to find out her name, since if she was the one who got me, she was a 'leader' among the children. "So, how do we make sure they're okay?"

"I… well…" I began, desperately trying to not laugh. Oh, I knew why Oifeye was mad now. He had to be scripting a very long lecture in his head. "Okay, first off… ah, never mind. We'll have lessons about approaching wild animals later." There was no way I could lecture with fluffy cuties in the room. "Let's see the dears and then we'll work on getting you all checked over."

The children were delighted at watching me carefully look the baby-caracals over, while one of the older children went to get a healer at my request. Once I was reasonably certain that they had nothing wrong with them (that I could find), I checked them over for ticks and fleas and the like. And then checked the children over for the same. And, once Lana arrived (giving me the most 'you have got to be kidding' face before switching to her 'healer mask'), we gave the caracals baths. And then the children got their own baths, with all cloth going to the laundry, juuuust in cases. Once all that was done, I left the room to let Lana check for any potential diseases and whatnot and headed down the hall. And just barely made it out of sight before I had to lean against the wall because I couldn't keep from laughing anymore and I was laughing so hard that I teared up and my belly ached!

"Of all the things…" Oifeye, however, was far less amused when he caught up with me. Not even the leftover suds clinging to his hair diminished the 'thundercloud' look. The toddlers and babies liked to splash (probably because we made funny noises), and he had kindly taken over bathing them when we had difficulties. "This is your influence, you know," he scolded. I nodded, even as I kept on laughing. "So. Plan of action?"

"We… we need…" I struggled to say, trying to get my breath under control so that I could be serious. But then I was hiccups, so that was pointless. Oh gods… "Whoo boy…" And there was another hiccup. Or twelve. "We need…"

"Calm down first."

"Trying!" I took a deep breath and held it until my chest began hurting, and then breathed out. Like usual, it worked for me; Lester never had luck with it. "Okay… we need to warn the soldiers that there might be a mama-caracal prowling around, angrily looking for her babies. And once we're sure everyone is fine, then I need to give them lectures about approaching wild animals."

"And figure out what we're going to do with the new ones."

"Ideally, we get them to their mama!" Otherwise, we… er… might have new baby animals to take care of? "Look, I don't know why they decided to emulate me! There's hundreds of other sane
people in this army!" Oifeye was still scowling, though. "But I'm going to be giving them all the lectures! Many lectures. So many lectures." I pushed off the wall and took a step back, smiling innocently. "After warning soldiers, sooooo… byeeeee~!" And I ran off as fast as I could because I knew Oifeye had only just started the lecture.

I heard Oifeye yell after me, but I ran quick, an expert at dodging such lectures by this point in my life. Besides, I really did want to find a soldier as soon as possible. If their mama was still alive, she had to be deathly worried about her babies. I wanted to soothe that distress quickly and, luckily for me, I ran into a soldier before long. Mursili at that.

"Is something wrong, my lady?" he asked, looking me over curiously. No doubt trying to piece together why I was running through the halls. "Did Hestia cause trouble again?"

"I hope not!" I replied with a laugh. Even as worry burrowed into my head because it had been a few hours since I'd seen her. "She should still be with Larcei and Shanan, helping train the soldiers."

"You mean terrify them into running quickly, yes?" Mursili shuddered, and I muffled another laugh. After all, that was exactly what she was helping with. Few things got someone running faster than a wolf charging towards them. "If it is not that, though…"

"Actually I was looking for someone to talk to the soldiers for me." I smiled at him, now biting back laughter for a different reason. "So, for whatever reason, the children decided to emulate me and when they found baby wild animals, they brought them inside." I couldn't keep from laughing when Mursili groaned. "I know; I know. But if you can tell everyone to keep an eye out for a potentially angry mama-caracal?"

"I will, but I'm not certain we should get our hopes up, my lady." Mursili sighed, shaking his head, and I frowned. "Scouts found a few Friege soldiers attempting, poorly, to do surveillance on us."

Poorly, huh? Was it because they had no knowledge of the land or because Bloom was running low on skilled scouts? "They'd been here for a few days, based on their camp, and Bloom never stopped his soldiers from overhunting, so..."

"...I see." So, rather like Danann on that front. Did Grannvale have an overabundance of prey animals or something? ...Well, it didn't matter, because I was sure someone local had to have warned him of the dangers or tried to. And Bloom had ignored it, just like Danann. "Well, perhaps we'll get lucky? You never know."

Note to self: make sure I listen to the people around me. That way I hopefully did less stupid stuff than this. ...Hopefully.

"I still can't believe you set me up!" Larcei grumbled, sprawling out on my bed. She had the morning off, so she was hanging out with me until I had to leave. "Seriously!"

"I have no idea what you mean," I replied absently, going through my closet. I was trying to find something to wear, but nothing was really… well, catching my interest. "Ugh… why are clothes difficult?"

"It's all the worse when you have a vague, but super particular, impression in your head for how you want to look." Larcei threw a pillow at my head, and I glanced back to give her a 'really?' look after it bounced off of me and hit the floor. "Nice underwear, by the way. That's a new breast-band, isn't it?"
"Yeah, the lost weight decided to come from my boobs, so my old ones were getting big."

"I know that feeling. I had to buy new ones myself." She sighed mournfully, so much so that I had to chuckle because I knew she was being over-the-top on purpose. "Such a shame. I liked how my breasts looked."

"You still have awesome breasts, Larcei. Promise."

"Thanks, love!" She laughed, bouncing a bit on the bed, based on the squeaking I heard. I needed to have someone check to make sure the bed was still stable and all. "I think you benefited from smaller ones, though. Your figure looks better than ever."

"Aw, thank you~!" Ah, boosts to the ego. Just what I needed. "Now, if only I can find something to freaking wear."

"Doesn't help that it's been getting cold. We should probably do shopping." Larcei gasped and snapped her fingers. "Wait! I was complaining at you!"

"Was wondering when you'd get back to that." I grinned at her over my shoulder and caught her playful glare. "But honestly, I'm not sure what you're referring to. It's been a busy few days."

"Shanan taking me out shopping for gauntlets!" Oh. That. Yep, totally forgot about that. "And don't pretend you didn't! He said that you recommended it!"

"Well, I'm not going to pretend now that I know what you're talking about." Back to flipping through clothes. "But both of you needed a break, and you've needed new gauntlets for a while apparently."

"...Not a while." Larcei was mumbled, and when I glanced back at her, I saw she was looking away, blushing faintly. "It was only damaged in one of the last couple of fights."

"Oh. Huh." So many things to say to that, but it would be a little mean to keep teasing right now. "But yes, I did recommend it. I figured it was a convenient enough excuse. But I won't do stuff like that if you don't want me to." I walked over and kissed her cheek, ducking down to smile at her. "Should I not?"

"I..." She groaned and flopped back onto the bed, burying her face in the pillows. So, basically, 'I have no idea'. "Oh, hey, this smells good. New shampoo?"

"Seliph got a new one, yes." And I seriously thought about stealing it. Wouldn't be hard at all, since his stuff was set up next to mine in the bathroom. "Nice change in subject."

"Not change! Distraction!" She lifted her head up briefly to grin before laying down again. "I don't really know. I should talk to the adults, huh?"

"Aunt Lachesis."

"She is rapidly becoming our 'we don't understand romance so help!' person, huh?" Well, to be fair, she both offered and in this case, the other options were Uncle Finn and Oifeye, who were Shanan's best friends. "Give me your honest opinion."

"I always do."

"Even more so that usual." She was quiet for a long moment, but I let her gather her thoughts. I knew she needed it. "You think I have a chance?"
"I think you have as much of a chance as anyone." I went back to my closet and going through my clothes, trying to find... I didn't even know. Something that jumped out, I supposed. "Main problem is Shanan switching from 'sole protection because I feel guilty for surviving' to 'oh, right, I am allowed to find my own happiness'. I've been prodding him about it, and I know the others have, but you got to go through that first before there even really is a chance. The army's annihilation completely messed up everyone connected to them." And it seemed like the older I got, and the more I interacted with people, the more aware I became of that.

"True." Larcei lifted her head up again, and smiled slightly. "Okay, I think... I think I'll be a little more active. After Alster. Because I doubt any attempts will get through his thick skull before then."

"Too true." Now, if only I could come up with some sort of 'plan of attack' for my current problem of...

"Okay, it's taking you a ridiculous amount of time picking out clothes. Even for you." Larcei swung around so that she was sitting again. "What's wrong? I can see clothes so it's not a lack of options or anything."

"Yeah, but none of it is..." I struggled for a word. "I want to dress up a little, I suppose. But not festive dress up."

"Ooooohhhh..." Larcei grinned, eyes sparkling with glee. Whoo boy... "Something to wow Seliph when you two are-" And then there was a knock on the door. "I swear to the gods if this is an emergency..."

"I hope not." My mind was generating thousands of possibilities, though, from 'Hestia is being a little shit' to the more terrifying. "Come in!"

"Riona, you're in your underwear."

"Come in if you don't mind seeing my lovely underwear!"

"Well, I don't mind, I think." Maliya opened the door and came in, closing the door behind her before bowing to Larcei and me. "Pardon the interruption," she murmured, straightening. I waved off the apology, and instead focused on the bundle of cloth she carried. If Maliya was the one here, then it probably wasn't an emergency-emergency. And the color was super pretty. "This... actually, this might be a little forward, but..."

"Not sure why you think that, when Riona's literally standing around in her underwear," Larcei joked with a bright grin. Maliya quickly muffled a laugh. "What's up?"

"Well, some of us have notice that your clothes don't quite suit the changing weather." That was true. None of us had really packed 'winter clothing', since there was so much else to keep up with, and certainly not clothing that dealt with the sharper changes in temperature the Manster District was prone to. Isaach was more of a 'constant cold' once fall and winter hit, lie Silesse. "So, we've begun mending and making some clothes for you all?"

"That's so sweet!" It really was. "Is that one of them?"

"Yes. I had planned on waiting, but... well, Lady Riona, you're having your first date in goodness knows how long, so..." Maliya carefully unfolded the cloth, revealing it to be an absolutely beautiful dress of blues and grays. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm wearing that!" I laughed, grinning. It suited my vague imagination much more than my
Isaachian clothes! "So, anything special with how it's put on or anything?"

Maliya helped me get ready, not only helping make sure the dress hung right on me, but tying scarves around my waist like a belt to give the dress even more color, but not overwhelmingly so. And I had to admit that the look was very flattering on me, more than I would've expected, really. But what really startled me were the intricate braids Maliya put into my hair, leaving most of it down, but deftly making sure it would stay out of my face. Larcei got on her hands and knees on my bed and leaned forward to watch Maliya work, sparkling eyes hinting that she might see if there was something similar she could do for her shorter hair.

"My lady, I hope you're not in here." Around the time Maliya finished, Niamh knocked on my door and came in, eyes narrowed suspiciously. She quickly relaxed when she saw Maliya fussing over my appearance. "Oh, good, I was worried you were discarding relaxation for work again," she explained, leaning against the frame. "Please make sure you enjoy the entire day, Lady Riona."

"Don't hesitate to get us if there's an emergency, though," I replied, feeling a bit… bubbly, I suppose. It was ridiculous, of course, but I felt like a 'princess', far more so than I had when trapped in Alster. Sure, the clothing there might've been nicer, but there was something much warmer about this and how Maliya made sure everything was perfect. "Ah, and make sure that everyone is extra quiet around the infirmary. They're doing some surgeries there." One of the soldiers got appendicitis in the middle of the night, plus there were some others. Some blocked arteries that had to be cleared, debridement of some wounds, couple of hernias… most were in the refugees who arrived a few days ago. Think there was someone with a literal hole in their heart. "And if Hestia acts up…"

"My lady, by this point, we know exactly what to do when Hestia decides she's bored."

"Yeah, get one of us!" Larcei laughed, hopping off the bed. When Maliya stepped away from me, she began pushing me out the door, with Niamh helpfully holding the door open. "Go on, go on! Find treats for us!"

I didn't even dignify that with a reply. I just rolled my eyes and left, doing my best to not wear a silly smile or skip. I mostly failed, but I didn't actually mind, particularly when the people I passed complimented me. Though, I was a bit out of sorts when I got to the main gate and Seliph wasn't there. There had been a couple of morning meetings that he couldn't put off or delegate, but I'd assumed that all the fretting and fussing over my clothes took more time than his meetings. Apparently not.

But it was okay, because before I could really start thinking of how to pass the time, Seliph walked into the courtyard, discussing something with Ares, of all people. I wasn't sure what, though I was glad to see the two of them interacting, so I couldn't help but smile when Seliph glanced my way. Then I had to fight to keep from laughing when Seliph just stared and… ah… didn't finish his sentence. Wasn't sure he finished his word, actually.

"This is why I got you," Ares said dryly, smirking in amusement. His posture was stiff, but I noticed it was more relaxed than it had been the past few days. "You're too easily distracted."

"I'm not sure this is… I'm not easily distracted!" Seliph protested, blushing from embarrassment. I covered my mouth to muffle my laugh. Ares just looked skeptical. "I'm… ah…"

"You're only two years younger than me. Why do you make me feel old?" Ares rolled his eyes and shoved Seliph towards me. "Seriously, go have fun for once. Oh, but Riona?" He focused on me, and I did my best to pretend seriousness. "Can Hestia help out the cavalry soldiers learn how to freaking dodge? It's too easy to pull them from their saddles."
"...Just keep her safe, please," I agreed slowly. I mean; I couldn't deny being uneasy about it, because a horse's kick could easily hurt or kill her. At the same time, though, everyone and their dead great-grandmothers knew how important Hestia was to me, so... "I'm sure she'd be delighted to help, of course, but..."

"Don't worry. Won't have her around the horses to avoid spooking them. There's this training thing Iuchar set up for practice sitting since some of the new ones sit in the saddle like they've got an iron rod up their asses." Understandable, of course. Horses could be expensive to keep, particularly in an area that didn't have a lot of extra funds. "Anyway, have fun, you two."

"Thanks for dropping Seliph off!" I waved Ares goodbye and, as Ares left, skipped over to Seliph with a smile. "So, how do I look?"

"Even prettier than normal, which is really saying something," Seliph answered easily, leaning down to kiss me. I blushed, pleased. "So, off to the market?"

"Sounds like fun!" I laughed, taking his hand and tugging him forward. We both made sure to wave to the guards manning the gates as we passed through. "Meetings run long?"

"I ended up having an extra one." Seliph kept on smiling, but I could see the strain in it. "I had a couple of representatives from town wanting to speak with me."

"...About the lack of room."

"Yeah." We stopped walking so that Seliph could lean against me. It must've taken a lot out of him... "They do want to help, but Melgen wasn't made for this many people." He gave me a look and... well, attempted a joke. "And animals."

"Hey, I gave them the warnings!" And, heartbreakingly, patrolling soldiers had discovered the dead body of a caracal not far from where the kittens had been found. So, they had stayed with us, to Oifeye's grief. "But yeah, we need more room... and we need to get everyone home..." Or, more accurately, repair those homes. Though, you did have the issue of people just... staying with us. To fight. To handle the day to day things. "But we'll make it through."

"I know. But we might have to march on Alster sooner rather than later, and not just the refugees. I sent Fee off to check on Leonster, but..." We could only hope Leonster was still standing. None of the refugees brought any news about it falling, but... "But you're right. We'll make it through."

"Indeed." I smiled warmly and kissed his cheek before pulling him down the road, again. "Oh, Larcei wants treats, by the way."

"She always wants treats. She's almost as bad as Hestia!"

"I know, right?"

We made sure to talk of lighter things to get our moods back up so that we were smiling by the time we actually ran into people at the market. As usual, it was a bustling place, filled with loud laughter. Strains of musics flitted through the air from various musicians plying their trade between the stalls. Children raced about playing, while their parents shopped and did chores. Vendors boasted about their wares, trying to lure in customers. It was so wonderful to see a place so lively, though I was sure there were problems I just couldn't see. But I couldn't let the shadows drag down my sunshine, right?

"Whoa, easy there!" Seliph laughed when a child ran into his leg. He stopped laughing, though, when he saw that the child was tearing up, clearly distressed instead of having fun like some of the
others. "Hey, what's wrong?" He let go of my hand and knelt in front of the child, wiping their face. "You get lost?" After a moment of staring at us, the child nodded slowly. "Here, I'll help. And... up we go!" He easily lifted the child onto his shoulders, and the child was so startled that they stopped tearing up almost instantly to look about in stunned wonder. "Which way did you last see them?" The child pointed further into the crowd. I'd never known a child to be so quiet before. "That way? Okay!"

"You want a sweet while we hunt?" I asked, smiling up at them. The child hesitated before nodding and smiling shyly. "Then let's get you one, okay?"

We wandered the market, eventually buying a pastry for the child while we looked for their parents. Or at least someone who knew them. It was surprisingly hard, but that was mostly because the child didn't say anything. Just pointed. Seliph and I quickly figured out to only ask 'yes or no' questions while searching, and I honestly wondered if we'd have luck. In fact, I wondered if they less 'got lost' and more had their parents die and they just didn't understand.

"Emilia!" Thankfully, the worries proved unfounded, more or less. The young woman who pushed through the crowd and rushed for us looked a little too young to be the child's mother, but she was at least someone who knew them. "Oh, Prince Seliph, Princess Riona, thank you so, so much!" she blurted, tripping a bit over her words. "We got separated in the crowd and..."

"I'm just glad we were able to assist," Seliph reassured, smiling warmly. I helped Emilia off Seliph's shoulders and wiped the crumbs off her cheeks when I saw them. "Oh, we did buy her a treat, though. I hope that's okay."

"Of course!" She smiled and then knelt down to hug Emilia. "I'm so sorry. I should've kept a better grip on your hand..." Emilia just smiled, still not saying anything. "Let's get home. Auntie is worried."

"Please, it's no trouble. Again, I'm just glad we could help." Seliph crouched to ruffle Emilia's hair. Emilia beamed up at him. "Be safe."

"Thank you!"

I swore she thanked us at least twenty more times before leaving, careful to keep a good, yet gentle, grip on Emilia's hand the whole time. Emilia turned around and waved goodbye to us, and we of course did the same until they were out of sight. But, I couldn't help but be curious about...

"Ah, that was a mighty kind thing you two did, Prince Seliph, Princess Riona." A nearby vendor, an old man with plenty of smile lines on his weathered face, called to us. Seliph and I immediately ducked a little closer so that we could hear him better, and I found myself entranced by his wares: beautiful bolts of cloth and the like. "Poor Sierra was running all over the place, trying to find her sister," he explained, smiling sadly. "Just had to calm her down from a panic attack, actually."

"I imagine the liveliness of the market didn't make it easy," Seliph murmured, looking down the path again. I focused on a beautiful pale pink cloth that I thought would look beautiful on Yuria. "Plus Emilia's quietness..."

"Muteness, you mean, your highness." The vendor sighed, and Seliph and I glanced at each other, startled. So, that was why... "Their parents were executed by Bloom for 'treasonous intentions'." The hell did that even mean? "Really, they were just complaining a bit about how the taxes made it hard to make ends meet." That was enough for death?! The hell?! "They were killed right in front of Emilia. She's been mute ever since. Luckily, Sierra and Emilia had family who could take them in. The children of executed are just ignored by our lovely empire." That was so... "Ah, listen to
me ramble when-

"No, thank you." Seliph made sure to look him in the eye, to emphasize the sincerity of his words. "I had not heard what constituted a death sentence, nor did I ever know that the families of the executed were essentially thrown to the side. Thank you for telling me. I know it's another thing I need to watch for."

"That said, we're being very serious for a date," I pointed out, mostly because this wasn't something Seliph and I should discuss alone. It should be everyone, particularly those who didn't grow up in Tirnanog. So, we would remember, but... "I know that the more tailor-y minded folk are thinking about making new clothes for us, so you mind if we talk about prices for these lovely colors?"

Thankfully, both the vendor and Seliph were more than happy to switch to business, and we spent a while discussing the fabrics before we found terms all three of us were happy with. With the promise of the bolts' delivery in the morning, Seliph and I continued walking through the market, to continue our date. We did make sure to get treats for everyone, plus a little extra, and we also sent some to Sierra and Emilia's home, both because we thought they deserved some after what we heard, and as a 'thank you' for showing us another reason to fight, and win.

I did my best to keep stoic as I read through Diarmuid's notes on the inventory, but it was hard. We were running low on... just about everything, really. It would be easier to make of list of what we had in 'adequate' supplies, and I could probably count the number of 'plentiful' resources on one hand. When paired with the other report I had from Ulster's scouts... Bloom had never set regulations or anything about overhunting or overforaging and, as kind as Ishtore was, Ishtore didn't change that either. The locals had done things as they always had, but the soldiers had just done whatever. Meaning that the local flora and fauna were already 'low' for the season... and we were making them even lower. We had to take less, and soon, we couldn't take any, if we wanted there to be enough both for the locals to get by and...

"We could switch to one or two meals a day to help stretch things," I murmured, walking through some of the lesser used halls. If I, of all people, walked around with a frown, I knew it would worry everyone. My whole 'able to smile through anything' thing coming back to bite me in the ass, really. Even if we were learning to be more open and delegate more. "Low resources, little space..." And more and more refugees by the day. Based on the maps and the news the refugees bought, practically every village within two days of Leonster had been destroyed by bandits. The ones that hadn't were still unlivable as Friege's soldiers had seized their possessions for 'replenishing supplies', which, when combined with how little they had anyway... "Starting to wonder where Ishtar and Ishtore did get their niceness." I had assumed Bloom, both because there was no way it was Hilda and because of how fatherly he had been to Ishtar, but... "I think I need to remember that even when things are complicated, people wear masks." Particularly when they wanted to take advantage... ah, none of this was helping with the current problem...

"He's so fluffy!" Inanna's lighthearted voice caught my ear, and I decided to go see her, hoping that seeing her cheerful would soothe my nerves. Of course, it took a bit to find her, since she was actually sitting outside in the sunshine with Eresh in her lap, chatting with the blonde girl who had first told me about the caracals. "I love the tufts!" Inanna giggled, petting the caracal in the girl's lap while keeping her other hand on her leopard. One of the things I'd insisted on was, like the other animals we'd adopted, each of them needed an 'owner'. The blonde girl was the first one to volunteer. "Roxana, you should think of a name, though!"

"I'm so bad at names!" the blonde girl complained, carefully brushing her caracal's fur. So, her
name was Roxana. About time I learned that. And seeing her and Inanna side by side made me guess that she was around Inanna's age. "How did you pick Eresh's?"

"I talked a bit with Lady Riona for advice!"

"Do…" Roxana smiled shyly. "Do you think she'd mind if I ask too?"

"Of course she won't." Inanna rolled her eyes and picked up some flowers to… attempt weaving them. She wasn't very good at it. "One of these days, I'm going to convince you that none of them mind. If it's a bad time, they'll actually tell you."

"But it's the Scions and they're amazing and wonderful and… oh, you're giving me that look again." Roxana brushed her hair behind her ear before returning to brushing her caracal. Her very happy caracal, based on the purring I heard. The shininess of Eresh's fur hinted that they'd first brushed her, likely Inanna showing Roxana how to do so. "Um… subject change, but you're really bad at flower crowns."

"I-I'm still getting used to seeing flowers all the time!" Inanna scowled, before yelping because Eresh decided one of the flowers looked tasty and tried to nibble on it. "No, no! That's not food! Ugh… is that poisonous to you…?"

"I doubt it. But we can take her by the infirmary later. Or do we have animal doctors?"

"None yet." But that was a good point. We needed to recruit some. Some that wouldn't balk at the… ah… unique ones who traveled with us. "Argh… why is it so hard?"

"Well, for one thing, you're pinching too hard." Roxana reached over to fix Inanna's grip; I thought I caught a little blush on Inanna's face and had to smile. Crush or embarrassment? No clue, but the thought amused me. "Oh, I'm reminded. I'm next for our question trading, right?"

"Yep!" Inanna smiled, and I wondered what they were talking about. Then again, it could be how Inanna tried to bridge the Loptyrians and the non-Loptyrians. I'd ask later, because that was also a good idea. "You said you had one, but it was sad and dark."

"Yeah, I was just…" Roxana returned to brushing her caracal. "What… were you taught about the Child Hunts? And the sacrifices?"

"Ah. Yeah, that's dark." Inanna took her time to answer, continuing to try and make a flower crown. "Well, we're taught it's necessary in order to keep Loptyr's strength up. So, ever since the Loptyrian Empire fell, we had yearly sacrifices." They… they sacrificed their own…? "So, the whole sacrifice thing… well, just felt like everyone else taking up their share of the price, finally."

"Do you still think that?"

"No. I mean…" Inanna struggled for her words; Eresh wake up briefly to lick her cheek before settling down for napping again. "Among us, it was always volunteers. What Sandas and the others went through, though…" Inanna bit her lip, finding it hard to continue. "Well, that's not volunteering."

"Wouldn't call being dragging screaming from your mama 'volunteering' either." Still, Roxana smiled, understanding that Inanna couldn't elaborate more. "What did the adults think about it?"

"Dunno. I mean; they might believe what I did. They might… well, they might not care, because of the Loptyrian hunts. Child Hunts could just be revenge for that. Though, I've heard that the Loptyrian Empire had them too, so maybe it's a weird revenge-revenge thing?"
"Hmm… I wonder too…" And that's when Roxana glanced back and saw me standing at the threshold like a stalker. "Oh, Lady Riona!" She scrambled up, almost sending her caracal to the ground, though she quickly caught them and tucked them against her shoulder. "Did you need something?"

"Oh, I just heard some laughter and thought I'd be nosy," I replied airily, smiling. Seeing her slump a bit, though, I skimmed through my papers for something and, thankfully, found something quickly, thanks to a note Diarmuid wrote in the margins. "With that said, if you don't mind doing an errand for me…"

"Of course!" Roxana's eyes sparkled and she bounced on her toes, eagerness radiating off her like a puppy. Her caracal, somehow, mirrored the look, with less bouncing. "What is it?"

"Well, I was looking over what's needed, and… frankly, given how many babies we have with us, the number here for diapers seems low?" Careful to cover up most of the paper, so that they couldn't see what else was there, I showed both of them the number. While 'adequate' was written next to it, Diarmuid had jotted down 'based on how many diaper changes we had to do in Isaach, I'm not sure this number is 'adequate' at all, so can you check?'. "Can you check this for me? Either the numbers we have are wrong, or they're enduring, and the last thing we need is fussier babies."

"And waking everyone up in the middle of the night." Roxana nodded and beamed. "I'll ask my sister! She takes care of the babies a lot. See you later, Inanna!" And she was off like a cheetah, disappearing down the hall with a speed that frankly startled me.

"I'm sorry for stealing her, but she looked so disappointed she couldn't help and that is something that needs to be checked…" I leaned down to ruffle Inanna's hair, and she smiled up at me, showing no hard feelings. "Also, big surprise, I was here for a bit."

"Wow, that is a surprise," Inanna retorted, voice perfectly dry. Someone was definitely picking up sarcasm from us. "You can't even blame Hestia this time!"

"Hestia is the reason most of the time, though!" I 'protested', smiling too much for it to be anything but playful. It wasn't as if I could argue the point, after all. "Anyway, you've been doing okay? Belief wise? That question made me realize we haven't talked about that in a while."

"It's… difficult. Both because they're not only something I believe… or believed… or… whatever… and what my parents did and everyone around me." Inanna returned to her flower crown making, while Eresh yawned and blinked sleepily at me. I gave her a scratch behind the ears. "At the same time, though, I… I think of that village. I remember the stories of what all happened to our people in the past, for crimes not ours. I know those are true."

"Yes, unfortunately." People cheering over the death of children… even if I could understand that they had been grieving, I couldn't understand why they had felt so righteous in that moment. I doubted I ever would. "Sadly, we don't really have a lot of priests traveling with us who might be able to help with a crisis of faith, but you know we're always willing to listen anyway, right?"

"I am. And Lady Sara said there's a priest among Lord Leif's forces who I can talk to." Ah, yes, Leif had mentioned him as well. Since Sara kept silent, he would be the one to confirm if… "So, I think… I'll talk to him. When he joins up with us. Lady Sara never really believed, so she can't help, though she has tried for me and she's super nice."

"Of course." I properly knelt down and kissed her forehead. "Like you told Roxana, though, I'm never so busy that I can't at least tell you 'we need to talk later.'"
"Especially since you're delegating finally!" Inanna cheered in delight as she finally finished the flower crown. It was a very crooked thing, but whole. "Yay! My first one!" Then, to my surprise, she set it on my head. "My next one will be better. Promise!"

"I think it's better than my first one, so you don't need to worry." In truth, I was touched that she'd give me it at all. "Thank you. I'll treasure it."

"Hee~" Inanna beamed and stood up, cradling the protesting Eresh. "Ah, I almost forgot. I'm having lunch with Anat."

"Better not keep her waiting!" I laughed and waved her goodbye as she dashed off, smiling. Of course, my cheer dropped when I looked back to the inventory papers. "Ah, no good…" I pinched my cheeks in an attempt to 'jolt' them into smiling or something and then decided to walk around outside to let the sunshine cheer me up. Of course, I only managed like… two steps before I realized there was another person out here: Ares, with Sarabi curled up against his shoulder. "Uh…"

"Animals are such nosy creatures, aren't they?" Ares half-joked, pointing to Sarabi. Apparently, the 'curiosity killed the cat' phrase applied to little lion cubs too. "I think she smelled the other two cats and wanted to play." Right now, though, she was content with batting/chewing Ares's hair. "And, yes, I did overhear a good big of that."

"This is why I blame Hestia for most of the conversations I overhear," I replied with a laugh, tucking the papers in my pocket. Then I stretched my arms over my head, being careful to not dislodge my flower-crown. "It is her fault a lot."

"Conversations like hearing Lene read Father's letter to me?" Ares kept his expression neutral, and I… uh… tried to figure out how to respond to that. "Hestia sheds a lot."

"Er…" Oh, I had no good answer for this. But, if he knew, I guess I just had to keep as honest as possible. "Surprised she read it aloud. For people to potentially overhear, I mean."

"Not an uncommon trick to give someone a push without drowning them. Or to get them to do something they know they should do, but keep getting distracted from." He shrugged, and untangled Sarabi from his hair. She proceeded to 'bite' his fingers; we needed to find some sort of toy for her. Even if she did look adorable. "She's read letters for me in the past because I'd have to get ready for a job or something. Probably the first emotionally challenging one, but it's little different than what we've done before. Save that I wasn't running around trying to remember where I put a glove or something."

"And you knew Hestia and I were at least near because of her fur." Note to self: make sure Hestia got brushed before any operation from now on. "Well, awkward much?"

"You do a good job keeping secrets. I noticed that since you and Hestia were also outside our room that first night in Darna for longer than you implied." Ares waited for an answer, but I didn't really have one. I mean; he wasn't wrong? Just curious how he figured that out. "I must say, given some of the things I said that day, I'm surprised Hestia didn't come in sooner."

"...The fact that she didn't is testament to how she knew you would never actually do that." At this point, I might as well not bother hiding. And, seriously, check to make sure no shed fur gave us away. Never had that trouble before, but Ares was clearly trained to look for anything out of place. And I had to assume our future enemies would do the same. "Otherwise, she would've torn out your throat. She's a wolf, and we're her pack. Even if Lene gives her yummy treats." I sighed, not sure on what to say. This was so awkward… which might've been Ares's intention, since I'd overheard
two very emotional things. "But the door really was open."

"Yeah, I noticed the lock was broken after you had left. They must've broken it in case Lene escaped them. That was my room, you see." Meaning it was an obvious place for Lene to run and hide if she had escaped the soldiers. "But, while I'm thinking about it, would it be all right if we locked the door here?"

"Of course?" Okay, now I had to frown. "Why wouldn't it?"

"Well, I've noticed that few do here." That was surprising. I hadn't noticed at all. "I asked around a bit, and learned it was because you and yours from Tirnanog didn't really keep doors locked? Closed at most, unless Hestia is barricading it."

"Hmm? Well, yeah, we do that, I suppose. There are exceptions, of course, mostly Lana since she often keeps half-made medicines in her room, or did, and..." I facepalmed as I finally got it. "Ugh... okay, need to run around... wait, no, I'm not taking everything. I promised myself that." Freaking hell, I needed better habits. "Niamh and Mursili. I'll start with them."

"Uh..."

"Sorry, mental jumps." I almost ran a hand through my hair in frustration, but remembered the crown in time. "Ares, we Tirnanog crazies don't lock our doors or anything because of Hestia. She opens doors with ease, and while locks held her back when she was a puppy... not so much now. She can, and has, broken doors before. That's why someone has to go with her to take her out, actually. She broke the door back at our home in Tirnanog trying to get out on her own." And the doors leading outside in castles tended to be heavier than the doors inside.

"I see." Ares smiled slightly, finally showing something besides neutral stoicism. The mischievous light quietly dancing in his eyes hinted he had fun watching me squirm. Well, couldn't say I didn't deserve it. "Well, then I think we'll do that, then."

"Yeah, no, do what makes you comfortable." Freaking hell, the things I don't notice could fill an entire freaking library! Maybe two! "And I do apologize for overhearing. I swear; it wasn't planned necessarily. I just... uh..."

"Stayed because you're used to eavesdropping because it was the only way you learned things as a child when things were dangerous. I know I did the same." He sounded surprisingly unbothered by it, now that he'd had his revenge, but I stiffened because... well, I couldn't say he was wrong. Even if I hadn't considered it before. Ugh... "Just please try not to do so again? At least when Lene and I are in our room?"

"Oh, yeah, I can try." Just pushing things to the side for now. "Hestia has a habit of chasing after bad feelings like she does a rabbit, though."

"I can tell. She practically glued herself to my legs after I first got that letter." He scowled suddenly at Sarabi, who looked up at him with big innocent eyes, still happily (and gently) gnawing on his fingers. "My hand isn't food, you know. Are you hungry again or something?"

"She could be. Hestia ate a lot as a puppy."

"Speaking of your Hestia, by the way, I think she's teaching Sarabi how to open doors."

"...I hope you don't mean for me to stop her, because I think I'd have an easier time winning an arm wrestling match against you." Hestia did what she wanted, and sometimes, it corresponded to what I wanted her to do. "But we definitely will need to have people lock their doors if that is the case.
"I now get why the most common phrase out of a pet owner's mouth is 'what is that in your mouth?'." Ares grumbled something and continued scowling at Sarabi. Until Sarabi made this silly sound that sounded almost like a hum or something, and nuzzled his cheek. "...Why does that work?"

"They know that cuteness lets them get away with things." I had to chuckle, though, at just how easily she thawed him. "Anyway, I need to find people to get that whole 'locked doors are okay' thing started. Want to walk with me?"

Turned out that Sarabi agreed before Ares could, and wiggled out of his arms to run away. Which, of course, resulted in Ares and I chasing after her. Which made her run more because obviously it was a game, and not us being worried or anything. Animals. Got to love them.

"You want to know what duties you can take over?" I asked, startled. I mean… it wasn't what I expected when Arthur asked to talk to me. He'd helped us a lot, of course, but… "Why?"

"I think at this point I need to accept that I'm fond of you crazy insane people and I'm staying," Arthur sighed, reaching back to fix his hair. Tine has asked to braid it and, of course, Arthur had indulged her request. "And, since I'm staying, I insist on working."

"Of course." Still, not what I'd expected, so I took a moment to look around the garden where we were sitting. The trees were changing color, giving the garden a warm feeling. Though, some of the flowers were already withering from the cold. And there were weeds sprouting because we just… didn't have time to add weeding to the chores. Though, I did wonder if some were edible. There might've been dandelions. "I'll let Seliph know. We might shove all the mages onto you, to give them their own classification and make less work for the others."

"Some of the Friege soldiers… well, former Friege soldiers… joined up, right?"

"Some, yes." Plus, some of the new soldiers had a talent for magic, and thus, were learning so that we could diversify our forces further. "Are you sure, though? I love having you around, but…"

"...I keep thinking of Ishtore's last words." Arthur looked up at the sky, watching the clouds pass by. There were a few grey wisps, but nothing that looked like a storm. Thankfully. "I keep thinking about… well, why he thought I was there. Why he thought I was fighting. It won't leave my head." He sighed and closed his eyes. After a moment, he leaned over to rest his head on my shoulder. I smiled slightly and kissed his hair. "Makes me feel bad. Not just for killing him, but for all the ones I've killed. I hadn't cared, because everyone has to do what they can to survive. But, there seemed to be something… not quite wrong but…"

"Not quite right either?"

"Yeah. It's all just… icky, really. Like when you're almost sick, but not quite sick." He paused to collect his thoughts. I heard laughter and glanced over to see some of the children playing with the animals. Lene was with them, teaching them games and how to dance, somehow not losing her balance despite Sarabi staying all but attached to her foot and jumping at her scarves. "He said I had a good heart. Ishtore, I mean. I never heard anything like that before. And, honestly, I don't really believe it. I don't think I have a bad heart or anything, but… my life was defined by my own goals. One day at a time. That sort of thing."

"You had to survive."
"And I didn't have people slamming the world's weight on my shoulder. The grandest goal I had was finding Tine." With his eyes still closed, he took my hand and squeezed it. Despite the seriousness of the conversation, I smiled because it was the most affectionate he'd been with me. "But, as I said, I'm fond of you crazies and... and I want to try and be... well, not completely the person Ishtore thought I was. I doubt I ever will be. But closer. At the least, fight for the people and all that fun stuff."

"That makes sense to me."

"Plus, I want to help as a means to... okay, not quite atone... make it up to Tine? I mean; I killed one of the few people who was kind to her, unconditionally. I'd feel like a bad brother if I didn't try to make amends." He smiled bitterly. "It's all complicated. But hey, you guys are fond of complicated, right?"

"We're trying to learn how to think simply!" I laughed softly, though, changing the 'protest' to a 'joke'. "It's a work in progress."

"And that's another reason why I'm staying. You guys need people who will needle you when you're overthinking." Arthur opened his eyes finally and grinned. "Kind of like Fee."

"Still can't believe she tried to give a report after flying through the night." Fee had returned from scouting Leonster in the early hours of the morning, and was currently passed out in her room. Or should be. I left Hestia to guard her and make sure no one disturbed her. "Well, welcome officially to the army, Arthur. We're going to work you to the bone."

"Yippee." His voice was as dry as possible, and I almost laughed, but he suddenly frowned and sat up. "What's going on?" He pointed to where Lene and the children were and I saw they were no longer playing, but looking towards something. "Yo, Lene! What's going on?"

"Looks like we got another round of refugees!" Lene yelled back, waving to make sure she had our attention. I almost winced, already thinking of the logistical problems. But we couldn't not help... "I'll keep the animals and toddlers out of the way!"

With Lene handling the children, Arthur and I ran to the front courtyard, where we were already getting set up. Though I knew no few of us were uneasy, we kept up the smiles to not worry the new arrivals. And gods, they were probably the worst off we'd had yet. If that sentence made any sort of grammatical sense. But they were terribly thin, wearing ragged clothes, covered in bruises and scrapes... It was like they had run through ten or twenty battlefields to get here...

"Easy, easy..." I murmured to one, helping them hobble inside. They wore a dark cloak, some shade of purple, and they were noticeably older than most in the group. I worried they might have some sort of arthritis or gout because of the stiff movements, and made a mental note to get some remedies for that. "You're safe here." As I helped them, I noticed they were covered in burn scars, from their hands and fingers to even their face and neck. There had to be even more under the cloak and robes. "Do your scars ache? We have some medicine that can help with that." I glanced over towards Seliph, who wasn't far from me, but he was already helping someone. "So..."

"No, not physically," they reassured, smiling faintly. For some reason, though, that smile made me nervous. "You are quite kind." They reached up and patted my head. "Quite kind indeed."

"Oh, no, it's nothing!" The nervous wouldn't go away. In fact... in fact, it felt like... it felt like something was trying to squirm its way into my skull...? It was deeply unsettling, but I couldn't tell why. So, I kept up the smile, because what else was I supposed to do? They needed my smile, not my unease, after all. But that feeling was burrowing deeper and deeper and...
"Bad Grandfather." There was a small flash of light and all at once, the feeling left me. The person's hand left my head the same moment, with a bit of blood across the top. The light had been a spell. "That's very rude." It took a moment to realize Sara was the one speaking, and I twisted to see her look... I had never seen her look so stoic before. "Leave her head alone," she continued. I... had no idea what the hell she was talking about. "I'm rather tired of you drowning nice people." Actually, everything felt a little unreal. What the hell was...?

"Lady Riona, get away from him!" Still, I recognized Inanna's voice. Even if I had no idea where she was. "That's Archbishop Manfroy!" And I did know what that meant!

I threw myself back, terror flooding me to the point that I couldn't even conjure up a spark of flame. Manfroy himself looked briefly annoyed and even rolled his eyes before gesturing sharply and... and ripping through the nearby soldiers that immediately began drawing their weapons. Blood flying everywhere. Limbs flying everywhere. Screams of pain, shrieks of fear... both blended together in an ear-shattering cacophony that made it even harder to focus on anything. Manfroy scoffed and casually threw another dark spell... right at Seliph. Who looked as frozen as I did, with one more complication. Lene was behind him, along with several of the children. Meaning that he couldn't dodge, even if he could react in time. And all of us were in such shock that all we could really do was watch in stunned horror as the spell flew. Or so I thought.

Unlike everyone else, Shanan wasn't frozen. Shanan moved just as quickly as ever, and since he couldn't safely pull all of them out of the way, he intercepted the spell. He nearly buckled from the pain, though, as it tore through his side, whipping all the way up towards his face. Blood poured from the wound, and it was impossible to put pressure on the whole thing. Not that Seliph didn't try. With shaking hands, Seliph helped Shanan hold his side, where the deepest wound was. Both of their hands were coated within seconds.

"SHANAN!" I wasn't sure who yelled. Oifeye? Uncle Finn? Aunt Lachesis? Ulster? Larcei? Seliph? Someone else? Hell, with how out of it I felt, it could've been me and I wouldn't know. I barely even noticed Yuria rushing over with her healing staff, with Sara quickly joining her. But Shanan didn't pay attention. His attention was solely on Manfroy, and he glared at him with such hateful fury that my blood ran cold. I had never, never, seen that sort of expression on his face before.

"...I know this spell..." Shanan bit out, snarling. Manfroy actually tilted his head, looking curiously confused. Distantly, I still heard shouting. Someone was, smartly, trying to coordinate some sort of plan. I didn't know who. Uncle Finn, maybe? Oifeye? No clue. Hell, maybe it was Lewyn, because who knew where he was? "I know this pain. You're the one... you're the one who kidnapped Deirdre!" He... wha...?

"Oh, the little prince who kept me from killing the Baldr brat at Agusty," Manfroy murmured with a little sigh. Like he was exasperated or something. "And here you are doing the same thing again." Shanan tried to lunge, but his leg collapsed under him. Seliph held him up. "Tsk, tsk. You shouldn't move with such injuries. And Sara..." Now Manfroy just sounded disappointed as he focused on her. "What are you doing with these rebels?"

"They're warm and don't make spirits cry," Sara answered easily, far more focused on helping Yuria heal Shanan. I noticed her purposely trying to keep Yuria behind her and, distantly, I wondered where Inanna, Anat, and the other Loptyrian children were. I hoped somewhere safe. "Obviously."

"So, you turn against the one who raised you?"

"You only raised me because you killed Mama and decided you needed an heir." Sara rolled her
eyes. "You also killed Papa just for loving Mama. You're my grandfather in the most basic definition of the word, and if I could rip your blood out of me, I would. But then I'd lose Mama's blood, and that's not fun."

"I knew I should've kept you on a tighter watch." Manfroy sighed again, and then looked behind Sara. Right at Yuria. And it was only when Yuria froze, face turning a pale ash color in less than a second, that I realized why that might be bad. "Oh-ho… and there's the other nuisance. Clever, clever…" Diarmuid appeared from nowhere, by my eyes, to support Shanan's other side and 'conveniently' shield both Sara and Yuria. "That's not, though. I have no quarrel-"

"Moira's crying again." Sara said the words coldly and Manfroy stiffened. I tried to think if I knew the name, but my mind might as well have been a block of stone for all the good it was doing me at the moment. "Can't you see it? Can't you hear?"

"She only cries because I move too slowly, but I'll fix that soon!" At the forceful words, black magic whirled around Manfroy's arm. "I'll deal with all of you right now…!" And that was when things finally 'snapped' back to being real.

"Don't you dare!" I yelled, lunging forward to tackle him. With the spell disrupted, the magic broke around me like glass and gouged me. I didn't know where. Anger kept me numb. Anger at myself, for standing around like a dummy. Anger at Manfroy, for everything. "You're not killing anyone! I won't let you!"

"Ugh… why is that woman more troublesome in death than she was in life?" Manfroy growled, scowling at me. He tried to regain his calm, but the anger was still there. Anger and pain. Very deep pain, like the pain in Aideen's eyes. In Oifeye's eyes. In… "I had hoped to rattle your memories and use you, but…" The hell? "I know better than to leave too many loose-!"

A howl was the only warning any of us got before Hestia flew past me and savaged Manfroy's arm. He screamed in both pain and fury and threw a spell at Hestia, sending her flying. For one heart-stopping second, I thought… I thought he'd killed her. But Hestia managed to land and snarl, despite the blood oozing from her flank. I wondered how she lived, but then thought it might've been because Manfroy was down an arm and distracted by pain. Though, he was about to attack her again…!

"No!" Without even thinking about, I snapped my fingers and threw fire on him, setting his robe aflame. Immediately, he broke off the spell and screamed in absolutely terror. He tried batting at the flames, stumbling around, and when his scream broke off with a sob, I felt so… so guilty… I mean… I had seen those burn scars. And, because of Inanna, I actually did know his story. He had suffered so much, so I almost pulled back. I almost hesitated.

But just before I did, I remembered that it was the same thing Mom had done and the pain that had followed. And I remembered… no matter what rationalization a person had, no matter what their reasons… it didn't assuage their guilt. And the fact of the matter was… was this man led the Child Hunts. This man was someone Ishtar hated (and seeing how moral she at least tried to be, that said a lot). This man was someone Conall hated, if I remembered correctly, which said even more. This man kidnapped Deirdre and traumatized the army for nothing but his own selfishness. This man tried to take advantage of our trust to kill Seliph… So, I grit my teeth and forced the flames forward, keeping them on him. Even as he screamed in pain and terror, I kept on him, keeping calm. In fact, I kept so calm that between one breath and the next, I invoked 'Luna' without even thinking about it and the flames became a crystal blue-white that devoured everything it touched. It was joined with more orange-yellow fire, and I glanced to the side to see Arthur and Tine had joined me, concentrating their own fire on him as well.
Right about the point I was starting to get dizzy (Magic? Pain? Blood loss? Who knew?), Manfroy suddenly sprouted a blade from his chest. It took a couple of blinks to see that Ares, at some point, had slipped behind Manfroy and struck, using Mystletainn's ability to resist magic to get close. Of course, Luna kind of… bypassed that, so he ended up burned, but the black light from Mystletainn healed most of it up before long, especially after Ares ripped Mystletainn out.

Sadly, though, Ares didn't get to land a final blow. Taking advantage of the seconds in between, Manfroy whispered something and warped away. Just like that. Here and gone again. While I could totally understand just wanting to get the hell out of here when you had been run through by Mystletainn… it was just not fair that he could do that so easily! Especially when… when…!

Hestia's whimper snapped me out of my angry-daze fuzzy feeling and I immediately collapsed by her to hug her tightly. I made sure to press my hands on her injury and it took everything I had to not start bawling when I felt the warm blood. I had… I had really thought Manfroy would kill her! My Hestia… such a thing was the exact reason why I had tried to leave her back in Tirnanog in the first place! If I lost her, I… I had no idea what I would do…! But, she was here. She was here, just fine, save for that injury that didn't seem deep at all. She whimpered and nuzzled me, radiating comfort, and I clung and clung, reassuring myself that she was here. I hadn't lost her. She was here.

"Hey, you're the more injured of you two." Ares gently touched my shoulder, and I reluctantly loosened my hug on Hestia so that I could look at him. He still had some burns, but they were minor, thankfully. "Come on, let's get you both to the healers," he urged, gently helping me stand. Hestia quickly jumped up and braced herself on his arm to lick him. "Ack! Down! Down!" Hestia barked and licked him again, before switching to me. For once, I let her get away with it. "See? She's fine. Surprisingly, we're all fine. Just… injured."

"Injured, and a little too aware of…" I began. But I stopped because I couldn't think of how to continue the sentence. However, I did know what had to be done. "Ares, I can walk to the healers. Can you take Arthur and Iuchar and begin talking to the refugees? We need to confirm our safety and I know…" I would confuse the fears. I knew I would. I was certain many of us would.

"Yeah, I got that." Ares nodded at someone behind me. "Leif?"

"Seliph is a little rattled, so I figured I'd take a patrol outside to check for any ambushers," Leif explained, stepping to my side so that I could see him. He laughed when Hestia made sure to give him a good lick too. "Finn and Lachesis are already checking the interior. Or, well, Finn said he would once he convinced Shanan to sit and be a good patient."

"Can't blame him for not being calm," I mumbled. Manfroy… so he was the one who… I couldn't… well, I supposed it made some sense, but… ah… "Some leader I am, getting-"

"Hey, if I'm not allowed to badmouth my leadership skills, then I'm not letting you badmouth yours." Leif grinned and patted me on the back. "Besides, team. Working together. Aren't you all the ones who are always saying that your true strength is the bonds we share or something?"

That… was right. So right that I had to smile. "Anyway, Lene looks ready to kill Ares and me for not letting you head over, and I'm sure she wants you to get checked too, Ares, so I'm off!"

"Be careful, please." This was not how I expected today to go. At all.

This was going to be a fun evening, huh?

I spent most of the afternoon either getting treated in the infirmary, helping with the injured, or reassuring people that everything would be fine. Anat and Inanna stuck close to me throughout it,
both for their reassurance, and protection. The reminder of how dangerous dark magic was led to
spikes of anger towards Loptyrians, damn it all, and they were the focus, being the eldest two of
the Loptyrian children with us. But I believed I got most of it quieted by dinner. I hoped. I made
sure to ask Niamh, Maliya, and Mursili to keep an eye for me. After all, I couldn't. After dinner, we
held a War Council. For once, though, the 'adults' weren't there with us. Shanan was in the
infirmary, with Aunt Lachesis as his caretaker (and guard/watcher). Uncle Finn and Oifeye were
restructuring our defenses, and doing patrols to make sure we were truly safe for the time being.
Lewyn, meanwhile, was... somewhere... listening to the wind. He had actually been near beside
himself when he'd learned what had happened, as the sylphs hadn't noticed at all, so now he was
'putting them to work', so to speak. The rest of us, though...

"I'm surprised we have milk and honey left in Melgen at this point," Lester attempted to joke. It fell
flat, though, thanks to the heavy mood. Not even the traditional warm milk with honey was enough
to lighten it. "You know; we've gotten warnings plenty of times and we've had enemies on the field
attack when we tried to help, but..." It was another thing to actually see it. Especially like this.
"Anyone else notice how shaken the adults were? Besides Shanan, I mean."

"From what I understand, Manfroy used that exact same trick to kidnap Deirdre in the first place," I
whispered, nursing my milk. I honestly just wanted to cling to Hestia again, but she was with Yuria,
who was the only one sitting. Mostly because she couldn't stand. Manfroy's appearance had shaken
her and though she managed to work in the infirmary, once she was relieved of duty, her legs
refused to hold her weight. Diarmuid actually had to carry her into the room. "He'd disguised
himself as a civilian taking refuge in Agusty Castle, and then attacked. Kidnapped Deirdre, and
nearly killed Mom."

"And you know this because...?" Lester tried to give me a skeptical look, but I returned it with one
of my own and he facepalmed. "Wait, no, duh, now I remember. Oifeye freaking told us."

"Normally, I'd tease, but today's been..." I sighed and looked to everyone else, wondering if
anyone was 'okay'. Sadly, no one really seemed to be. The closest would be Ares and Lene, but
both were sitting on the windowsill, with Lene leaning against Ares, and both were exhausted at
best. "I suppose we should... I guess apologize?"

"For what? Helping people? Hell to the freaking no!" Patty immediately countered, slamming her
hands on the table just to punctuate her words. The milk mustache she had almost ruined the effect,
but her eyes were serious. "Haven't you all... or, well, I guess it's all of us by this point, huh?
Anyway, haven't we been proving that there's no weakness in being kind? Being kind is what's
getting us all sorts of allies!"

"And what are we supposed to do? Turn out all those people?" Fee added, setting her mug on the
table before putting her hands on her hips. Though she'd slept through most of the confrontation
with Manfroy, she was still showing signs of exhaustion from earlier, plus adding extra patrols
when we woke her up. However, her eyes were as sharp as ever. "That would make us as bad as
the Empire! That's part of the reason why we're fighting, right? In the hopes of being better?"

"Exactly! Also, Fee, that mug is balanced precariously." There... there was actually a bit of
laughter, quiet and tired laughter, at that, particularly when Fee squawked and hastily picked her
mug back up. "So, no apologizing! Sure, we got hit hard, but the evil dude ran away. If he didn't
die wherever he landed, at least!" Patty smiled at all of us, and the mood lightened. "So, uh... damn,
I'm hitting a blank now."

"So, really, we should be giving thanks to the beauteous gods and goddesses of war who stepped
up to batter him into submission!" Iuchar dramatically declared, gesturing grandly. With... with a
rose. He had a rose in his hand. Where did that come from?! It was so ridiculous that there was another round of laughter! Quietly, tiredly, but still…! "Plus, in a way, you could say you took the lessons from the past and applied them to the present, yes? No one was kidnapped."

"Plus… plus, no one is dead," Lana addedly slowly, smiling shakily. She was tired enough to lean on Ulster because she'd put a lot of work into healing the soldiers injured by Manfroy. But her eyes sparkled. "I believe they'll make a full recovery."

"And how many people can claim that they walked out of a battle with the Archbishop of the Loptyrian Church on their own two feet? Few, I'm sure." Iuchar bowed with a flourish and then gave the rose to Yuria. She smiled slightly and it did seem like she got a bit more color to her face. She got a bit more when Hestia braced herself on the arm of the chair to lick her cheek. She even giggled. "I am surprised by his age, though. He's old enough to have a granddaughter our age."

"Sara didn't want to talk about him when I asked, so she definitely hates him."

"Most do," Tine muttered darkly, half-hiding behind Arthur and Fee. It took a couple of blinks to even recognize her voice because I'd never heard her… "It's a mutual hatred all around, though. I hate him almost as much as I hate Hilda." That said a lot right there. "I'm told he and Duchess… er… Aunt Alicia never got along. And he and Conall loathe each other. And I know that the only reason why Ishtar hasn't killed him is because she's worried about who'll take over. Well, tried to kill him."

"Just our luck, right?" Diarmuid murmured, drumming his fingers on the table. Then, after a moment, he moved behind me to play with my hair. "I suppose his only allies, true allies, are within the church."

"If even them. I've only met him a few times, but I always got the feeling that everyone was a piece on a board for him," And he'd been playing a very long game since he was involved in Deirdre's kidnapping. Twenty years, at least. "I don't… know much other than what's probably obvious. I do know that as Archbishop, he has access to powers the others don't."

"Like whatever the hell he tried to do to Riona? That Sara stopped? Speaking of her, where is she? I know we invited her."

"Sara's not comfortable being the sole attention of many people," Leif explained, smiling apologetically. We waved the apology off, though, because if there was one thing we wanted, it was for people to be comfortable. "She was raised in isolation and all. That said, I did ask her about it. She's glad to explain things one on one." Save for what was going on with Julius… "Though, what she said was… uh…"

"She said that he was trying to 'scramble your memories'," Nanna hesitantly finished, playing with her hands. An uncomfortable silence fell and I desperately began trying to remember anything I could think of, wondering if… "She said it was an all-or-nothing sort of deal, and that he didn't have time to complete it."

"But considering what we know about Aunt Deirdre…" It… her amnesia was not due to trauma or anything. It was so obvious now. Manfroy kidnapped her, erased her memories, and set her up to marry Arvis. "I suppose it was to make sure Arvis got into power?" Leif hesitantly glanced at Seliph, who had locked up, face stony and a posture as rigid as one. Lester moved to the other side of the table and pulled him into a hug. "I mean…"

"Riona, there's something you've been working on," Seliph murmured. He leaned into Lester, not even bothering to stand up straight. Larcei rushed over to rub his back, giving what comfort she
could. "I have a feeling it's related to…"

"Well, I hadn't made the connection to Manfroy and Deirdre's kidnapping or anything," I sighed. But he was right. From what I knew… "But I don't think it was necessarily to put Arvis in power. I think it was for someone like Julius to be born."

"That… something tells me I'm going to hate this."

"There's a reason I made sure to keep the papers flipped over." Barely resisting the urge to sigh again, I just leaned back to put most of my weight on Diarmuid. He stopped playing with my hair to wrap me up in a hug. I probably should've brought this up sooner, but I... "I think Julius is Loptyr Major."

"He's what?" Well, at least the uncomfortable and awkward air was gone. Replaced with shock, but you know… "Riona, that's…"

"The Mark on his forehead is a different shade of red." I glanced over at Tine and she gasped, covering her mouth to muffle the sound. But she'd caught my thought. I knew she would. "Like Deirdre, most of his Holy Mark is on his scalp, covered by his hair. But he has part on his forehead. And that one is more of a crimson compared to the Fjalar Marks, which are more of an orange."

"...And everyone knows that every type of Holy Mark has a different color."

"Precisely. Now, for most people, red is red. And most people are unaware that Cyas is Arvis's first born." Because, no matter what he said, Cyas was most likely the Fjalar Major of our generation. I was certain of it. "So, add the two together and everyone would just assume that Julius was the Fjalar Major." Tine nodded, confirming that had been the case. "And… well…"

"No doubt that efforts were made to quiet the possibility of Julius having any Loptyr blood for his own protection as well," Ulster pointed out. He was frowning, no doubt thinking quickly to put pieces into places. "And using Arvis as a shield and scapegoat would mean the populace still wouldn't think about it, particularly when the stories all say that those of Loptyr's blood were gone."

"But Deirdre lived in the Spirit Forest, meaning it would be a good place to hide," Lester continued, pulling that little thread. Poor Seliph just had his eyes shut, not wanting to deal with this after today. "The question would be… okay, wait, can-"

"Two Minors of the same blood will beget a child with Major blood." All of us frowned at Ulster who grimaced. "I got sat down with that lecture because the villagers wanted to discourage any attraction to Riona. Which I never had, no offense." I pretended to be hurt for all of a second before waving it off. And being annoyed that he got that lecture but not me. "If a Major and Minor get together, then all their children will be Majors. Watch out for that, Larcei." The unexpected teasing startled all of us into (still tired, but slowly growing warmer) laughter, especially when Larcei threw a pen at him. "So, the question becomes 'where did Arvis get the minor blood'?"

"More like his mother," Tine mumbled, ducking a little more behind Arthur. He twisted a bit to pat her head. "He obviously got it from her, but Cigyun's past is completely unknown." She whimpered a bit and hid even more. Somehow. "I never thought about that…"

"No doubt, as has been stated, for Julius's protection, because we've all at least heard about these Loptyrian Hunts now," Lene chimed in, sitting a little straighter in Ares's lap. Though, she still leaned against him. "But… uh… while this is all good and all, don't you all think you're discussing
something that's too far ahead?" And awkward (sheepish, really) silence reigned again, because she was completely right. "You've all been talking about this for a bit, but it looks like we just got one more reason to take Alster now. Making sure that they can't use the refugees as cover again to slip inside and kill us all."

"Ah, right, did I ever give my report?!" Fee squeaked, covering her face to hide her embarrassed blush. Now that we were working on a plan, though, all of us began… well, not quite getting better or anything. But our moods were improving. Slowly. "It's… not great. Leonster is beginning to buckle. Which we expected, but…"

"But it's yet another reason," Seliph murmured, slowly straightening. Larcei and Lester remained at his side, supporting him. "Thank you, Lene, for getting us back on track." He smiled weakly at her and she gave him a big smile of her own. Ares kissed her hair, looking noticeably proud of her. "So, let's begin planning that. We have to both reinforce Leonster and take Alster. Those are our immediate goals. The former requires speed. The latter will require information." He held up a hand when Arthur immediately tensed. "Tine doesn't have to tell us anything. I remember my promise. What it does mean, though, is that we'll need an infiltration team, and not just our scouts. We need people that they won't even think to look at."

"I can go?" Patty volunteered, even putting her hand up. Her milk mustache was gone, meaning someone had informed her. Perhaps Yuria? She was looking a lot better, though she still sat and clung to Hestia, who took advantage of the situation to be half in Yuria's lap, even though she really shouldn't. "Thief, after all, and I do still have those plans I was making when Riona got kidnapped. Before Shanan went ahead like a dummy." And we'd have to watch him to make sure he didn't go off on his own again. I doubted seeing Manfroy would be good for his mental health. "I'd rather not go in alone, though."

"Of course, so…"

"Well, this might be forward, but I can go with her?" Lene volunteered, almost absently. Ares frowned at her and she shrugged. "People only pay attention to dancers when they're performing. Otherwise, we might as well be invisible. And no one expects a dancer to be much of anything."

"That may be so, but that just means it'll be all the more dangerous if you're caught," Ares pointed out softly. He took her hand and squeezed it. "I wouldn't be able to go. I stand out too much."

"I imagine there's some soldiers who will volunteer."

"I can think of a few who will jump at the opportunity," I added, though mostly absently. Mostly because there was that conversation I had overheard between Seliph and Aunt Lachesis and well… "There's also this one trick we used to do with Seliph." I glanced at him curiously, wondering if he knew what I was talking about. His almost immediate smile said 'yes. "Not sure if it'll still work, but…"

"Wait, are you thinking what I think you're thinking?" Larcei asked, also catching the thought. I just grinned and she laughed before grabbing Seliph's shoulders and leaning on his back. "I'm doing your makeup, Seliph! At least when you set off!"

Wonder how the bards would dramatize this? If it worked, that is.

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Plans were made and within a couple of days, we were moving out. Well, some of us were. We had split the army into four 'groups': Melgen, Leonster, Infiltration, Strike. Very creative names, yes. Melgen was the largest and, well, would remain in Melgen until it was time to formally move on
Alster. Infiltration left ahead of everyone else, in the hopes that whatever spies Bloom had on us wouldn't notice. Leonster and Strike moved out together to… well… head to Leonster. Yes, yes, super creative names, yes. At least they were to the point?

"Hestia can't believe you are still so nervous when she's being soooo cute," I teased, tickling Leif's side. He made this adorable squeaky noise and tried to escape, but Hestia had him blocked on his other side. "See?"

"At least let me pretend to be dignified!" Leif protested, now laughing at the tickling. The closer we got to Leonster, the more nervous he got. Understandable, of course. But I took it upon myself to try and help him relax, mostly because Hestia refused to let him be. "Come on!"

"Hey, I'm keeping Hestia from jumping on you! Imagine how dignified you'd look with all the mud and whatever on your armor!" I noticed Uncle Finn glance at us worriedly, but he relaxed when I winked and returned to talking with Diarmuid. Diarmuid's job during this trip was to make sure Uncle Finn didn't worry much. "Or, wait, do you just want to look cool for Nanna? She's busy talking with Sara and Linoan at the moment, so you don't have to worry about that." And she'd been talking with those two for practically half the journey, no doubt fretting over the medicinal supplies we were bringing.

"Freaking hell!" And now he was red, all the way to his ears! "We're the same age, you know!"

"I'm like… six months older than you, so I win~!"

"Win what?!"

I continued poking fun at Leif, both figuratively and literally, while Hestia frolicked about the rest of the group to check on everyone. I worried when I noticed her spending a particularly long time with Shanan, to the point that she actually began walking at his side. He let her, of course, keeping a hand on her and… well, the healers said that he was cleared, but I couldn't help but worry anyway. He'd been hit with a dark magic spell, after all, and we knew so little. Then again, Sara had been one of the ones tending to him and she knew a lot. So, I probably shouldn't...

I squeaked when Leif poked my side and made a face at his triumphant grin. "Yeah, yeah, you got me," I 'complained', rolling my eyes. I was actually glad he was playing around too. "I'm still ahead, though!"

"I disagree if only because I've got no idea how you get 'points'! Leif retorted with a grin. He laughed when I shoved him (lightly, of course). Up ahead, Ulster and Larcei paused their conversation to look back curiously, but shrugged when I waved them away. It had been a bit since they had time to talk to just each other, after all. "Anyway, we're coming up on Leonster soon."

"Are we?"

"Yeah…” His grin disappeared. "I can hear the fighting."

At first, I wondered what he was talking about. But as the army slowly grew silent and grim, I could hear it too. The now far-too-familiar sounds of battle… they announced we had arrived at Leonster long before we made it around the large cliffs/plateaus/whatever-they-were-called and could actually see the castle itself. It was even easier to see thanks to how the villages in front of Leonster were nothing but charred ruins.

Without thinking about it, I held Leif's hand as we approached, our army careful to keep off the main road to minimize the chances of Alster seeing us and sending forces right behind us. After all,
we were 'technically' sneaking around. That unfortunately meant that we had to walk right through
the broken villages and it was a gruesome scene. Corpses were strewn all over the place, with bits
missing due to animals. Buildings slowly crumbled in the wind. The air itself was choked with the
smell of rot and ash. And the buzzing… so many flies. They were all over the place, their maggots
happily squirming about in the corpses. Cawing crows that scattered when they noticed our
approach. Then there were just the more… I suppose 'mundane' things? The crinkling and cracking
of glass shards as we accidentally stepped on them, from where windows had shattered. What bits
of food hadn't burned or been devoured just laying in the ash, more mold than anything by this
point.

Leif stiffened next to me, and bolted for something, half-dragging me because he forgot I was
holding his hand. We both nearly fell, but Hestia was instantly by us so that we could use her as a
balance. While we did that, I saw just what had startled Leif into action. Not far away, half-hidden
in the shadows of what had once been a chimney, there was a coyote gnawing away at the corpse
of a child. Perhaps a little girl, based on the tattered ribbons still in blood-matted hair.

"I didn't know coyotes ate carrion," I whispered absently, not quite sure how else to react when I
felt so numb. But, after a moment, I thought of something. I let go of Leif's hand and approached
the coyotes. They growled at me, but I kept calm and looked right at them. "No, that's right. I read
that you prefer fresh meat, but…" I knelt by them then and pulled out some bits of dried meat from
my pack. "Clever one, might we trade?" Thinking quickly now, I pulled out some berries from my
pack as well. To sweeten the 'deal'. "The little one for this?" The coyote eyed me warily but did
step away from the corpse. "Thank you." I set the fresher food down in front of them, and studied
them as they gobbled it up. Thin. They were too thin. That was why they risked coming near a
village at all. "Thank you very much." I reached out and pet them without even thinking about it.
They actually licked me before finishing up the food and bolting, sated for now. "I hope the next
days have better hunting." Then I looked to the remains and scooped them up. Maggots and flesh
sloughed off and clung to my arms and legs, but I was more focused on how one of their arms
broke off. Mostly because I… I didn't know what to do about it as it 'thumped' to the ground.

"I've got it," Leif mumbled, appearing at my side to pick not only the arm up, but a doll that hadn't
been far from it. I hadn't noticed it because of how mud-encrusted it was. "I can see why Diarmuid
always prays that you don't get eaten by a bear." It was a weak attempt at a joke, but it was an
attempt nonetheless, so I managed a smile. Besides, I was sure that if Diarmuid didn't say the same
thing now, he would later. Same with Ulster and Larcei. "So, we should… uh…" But then came a
problem. We couldn't burn the dead; the smoke would give us away and we couldn't afford to get
cought. We couldn't really bury them either, because we had to get to Leonster as soon as possible
and even a mass grave would take too long.

"Lord Leif?" Thankfully, Uncle Finn joined us, as calm as always. "We have blankets we can use to
cover them," he offered quietly. After a moment, both Leif and I nodded. It was the best we could
do for now. When things were calmer, we would come back. "Then over here." He gestured to the
rest of the army, which was already moving. "We'll find a spot to put them."

In silence, we split up to gather the bodies in one spot. Or what remained of the bodies, as was the
case for most. The only ones that could be considered 'intact' were the ones that had been crushed
by fallen buildings, terrible as it sounded. There were even a few that we didn't really have much
And you couldn't even blame it fully on animals or just rot either. Some of the cuts were just too
clean and, regardless, the fires… they had clearly been caused by humans. Soldiers. Friege
soldiers. Friege soldiers had annihilated them. I was glad Tine wasn't with us. I wasn't sure how
she'd react.
"Riona, here." At some point between one limb and another, Shanan caught my arm and tugged me away from the pile of corp… of remains. "You cut yourself," he chided, pulling out medicine to rub on my hands. And got some tweezers to pluck some maggots from my injuries. They'd burrowed in while I was moving bodies and I hadn't noticed. I was numb. I was completely numb. "Let the others take care of the rest. There's not much, and you'll need your strength."

"...Right…" I mumbled. Or tried to. The word felt like mush in my mouth, and sounded more like it just dribbled out than anything else. So, I just rested my head against his shoulder and let him continue tending to me. "Ha… I'm an idiot for not…" I didn't even know how to finish the sentence. Probably should've just left it at 'I'm an idiot' because of how true that was.

Shanan paused in tending to my hands just long enough to kiss my hair, and then let me rest against him. I needed it.

We avoided the villages after that. For our own sake. So, it took longer than originally planned in order to actually arrive at Leonster Castle. But Leonster's forces were still fighting. I was frankly amazed by their sheer will to continue despite literal months of fighting. It was inspiring, really. If I could hold onto even half as much resolve, I'd make it through this entire war easily.

"We're just waiting to make sure the horses are fine," Larcei informed me softly. She and I were standing next to each other slightly ahead of the main group, mostly because Hestia had wanted a squirrel before the fight. And she was taking her time eating it too, just lounging between us while she munched. "Then we'll do… something, I guess?"

"I hope so as we hiked a long way to do nothing," I teased, bumping my hip against hers. She just rolled her eyes. "You ready?"

"As I'll ever be." She adjusted her gauntlets (the ones Shanan bought her, and they were pretty with whites and golds and dark blues) and looked out to the horizon, watching the battle. "How are your hands?"

"Just fine." I held one out for her to look herself and she took off my own gauntlet to do just that. My hands were still bandaged, though, just in case there was still debris or maggots in the wounds. Nanna hadn't thought so, but better safe than sorry. "See?"

"Good." She squeezed my hand briefly before putting my gauntlet back on. "I wonder what the strategy is going to be for charging in."

"Same here." Were we rushing to the front? Sneaking through a side entrance? Some combination? There were many ways to go about this. "We should…" Hestia suddenly jerked her head up, ears twitching. "Hmm? What is it, Hestia?" Hestia tossed the last of the squirrel up into the air, chomped it down with one snap of her jaws, and walked a bit ahead, ears still twitching. "Hestia, I swear to every god that has ever existed and will exist, if you're about to rush ahead for a rabbit or something…"

"Wait, hush, listen." Larcei let go of my hand and brought her hand up by her ear and I frowned as I finally heard what was causing the trouble. Screams. But a different sort of scream than earlier, one not quite part of the 'songs of war'. "Where… oh, there!" She pointed to a spot near the front gates, where an archer lady with long purple-blue hair had fallen off her horse, right as some lancers were bearing down on her. Just a reminder that while we prepared, many died…

For once, the next bit of recklessness wasn't my fault or Larcei's. It wasn't even Hestia's. It was Diarmuid's, as he charged forward on his horse before anyone could think to stop him, probably
because they didn't know what he'd planned. He didn't even have his sword drawn, after all. Not
that it mattered or anything, but Diarmuid made it to the woman and snagged one of the lancers by
the collar and threw them up into the air. And then elbowed them into the wall hard enough for
them to go 'splat'. And stole their lance to take care of the others.

"Drama queen," Larcei deadpanned once it became clear that Diarmuid would be fine. I was torn
between facepalming, groaning, and just laughing at the ridiculousness. "Well?" She glanced at me
with a smirk. I pretended to think before shrugging, since at this point, I saw no reason to wait
either. Whatever plan had been made was clearly not happening. "Then let's go, go, go!" And
Larcei and I jumped into the battle as well. We were going to get into so much trouble for this, but
hey, we'd blame Diarmuid. Because that was fun. Besides, Hestia was with us. We could also sort
of blame her. She wouldn't mind. If I gave her a treat later.

Larcei and I slid into the battle behind the archer lady, who was understandably a little baffled by
all this, and decided to rush for the ballistae that the enemy had. For some reason. My best guess
was that they were originally Leonster's and had been taken over by the enemy, but it did seem
odd. Though maybe that was just because this was my first time dealing with ballistae outside of
theoretical practice. But that just meant Larcei and I did exactly what Oifeye always said to do
when dealing with them; close the distance. They were easy pickings at that range and, even better,
for some reason, they were all in a line. So, Larcei and I could just… run the entire back of the line
and take them out one by one easily. Though, that did leave us a slight problem once we were
done. Namely, the enemy kind of noticed the lack of giant bolts flying and some went to
investigate. Which Larcei and I almost didn't notice because we were focused on disabling the
ballistae so that the enemy couldn't use them again. But that was fine, because even if we weren't
paying attention, Hestia was. And Hestia had no qualms tearing people's throats out while Larcei
and I finished up.

By the point Larcei and I disabled the last one, the rest of the group had joined the battle, so Larcei
and I split up to fall in with someone who knew the plan. Assuming there was one, at least. I had
no idea, and just followed Hestia's lead, working in tandem as we always did. Cripple, kill, guard
each other. Those were the three 'beats' of our dance through the battle. And led us to fight back to
back with Shanan.

"How does Hestia know how to fight, by the way?" Shanan asked when we had a moment to
breathe. I leaned against his back briefly to catch my breath and then flicked the blood off my
sword to sheathe it. I had been using the one I 'acquired' from Reinhardt, but at this point, I wanted
my Fire Sword. 'I mean… by now, I'm sure it's practice, but…"

"'Hunting' humans can't be much harder than hunting anything else?" I half-suggested, shrugging.
Hestia barked and rubbed her head against my free hand in a very clear 'PETS NOW!' message.
"Yes, yes, sweetie." So, I obliged, rewarded with a happy wolf, complete with tail wagging and
slinging blood and mud everywhere. "You're going to be a pain to bathe later."

"She's always a pain to bathe." Shanan smiled, though, and leaned around me to also pet Hestia.
And winced. "Agh…"

"Shanan!" Immediately, I supported him and eyed where the deepest part of the wound Manfloy
had inflicted had been. Hard to tell if things were bleeding… Shanan wore black and he was as
splattered as I was. More, actually. One only had to look at the ground to see just how many more
he had killed compared to me. "Easy…"

"Healers did clear me." He sounded defensive, but when I looked at his face, I decided it was more
'frustrated'. "I don't know why there's pain all of a sudden. I was fine not long ago. Even had Sara
check so that Finn would stop fretting."

"Uncle Finn stops fretting? I mean; he told me he was taught how to fret by the best." I made sure to smile and he did chuckle. "You mind if I prod the area?"

"Go ahead." He held still as I moved to his other side, and winced again when I barely touched it. "You know… I don't remember it doing this last time. Then again, I was in shock last time and everything hurt anyway."

"Nothing feels particularly warm or anything, so I'm going to tentatively guess you're not bleeding. At least, not outwardly." Still, this was worrying… "We're getting you to a healer. Hestia, go warn the closest one for me."

"Riona…" He sighed when Hestia loped off. "Right, right. Need to make sure I don't drop dead."

"If you drop dead, I hope Dad drop-kicks you back to the living."

"How would you drop a kick?" Shanan's eyes sharpened and in the time it took me to blink, he had whirled out of my grip and killed someone sneaking up on me. "We're fighting on the way over. There's still too many."

"I accept that compromise." Mostly because it would be idiotic to do anything else. There were too many around still. "Hestia went this way."

"How can you… never mind." He smiled slightly. "The trail of crushed limbs. I'm following you."

Hestia found Nanna first, and I dropped Shanan off with her to get checked before jumping back into the battle. Hestia kept close as always, keeping me safe while I whipped fire magic around and focused on the heavily armored soldiers. Something I noticed while doing that was… well, it was easier to use Luna. It wasn't as if every blow was Luna-fied or anything. But I did notice that I could find that calm more easily than before. Particularly when I thought of those first battles in Tirnanog and Ganeishire. I… hoped it was an indication that despite my idiocy, I was actually getting stronger?

"Riona?" And I wasn't the only one either. Ulster tearing a mage into ten pieces with two 'swings' of his brave axe showed he was able to activate Astra more reliably as well. "Hey, you mind if I throw you up?" he asked, smearing some blood across his cheek while trying to get rid of some sweat. I gave him a weird look and he pointed at my fire sword. "Diarmuid might be better, but he's busy." Oh, and I knew what he wanted now…

"What? I can't just launch myself off your shoulder?" I teased, mostly to needle him a little. He made a face, and I grinned. "Sure, why not? But if I get hit by an arrow and get yelled at, I'm blaming you." Not like I had to worry about anything else. It was Ulster, after all. I trusted him with everything.

"Like how you and Larcei charged?"

"We were just following Diarmuid!" I petted Hestia, who whimpered a little because she realized her dumb humans were going to do something potentially stupid. Again. "Okay, how are we going to do this?"

The answer was remarkably simple, given our 'love' for complexity. Namely, I ran and jumped to land on Ulster's intertwined hands and he literally threw me up as high as he could. Then, when I reached my highest point, I sparked the flames from my fire sword and spun to better 'throw' a small wave of fire. One that I 'pushed' a little with my own power to make it just a little faster, and
catch the Friege soldiers off guard. The result was some burning enemies, who were easy prey for the others nearby. And Ulster catching me to keep me from landing badly.

Hestia barked at me in annoyance as Ulster helped me to the ground, but went right on back to the fighting because that little stunt turned Ulster and me into higher-priority-targets. Ulster and I had been prepared for that, though, so we watched each other's backs, switching targets sometimes mid-run to keep our attackers guessing. Had a mini-heart-attack when Ulster got hit by an Elthunder, but despite the burns and other damage, he kept on going until we got the area clear and we could hunt down the mage who hit him. At least, that was the plan.

When we found them, though... well, someone else had reached them first. A woman about our age, give or take a year or so. She had short brown hair, with a feather hair ornament (that looked like Nanna's truthfully) pinning her bangs back, and dark green eyes. She wielded twin daggers that ripped through the mage's spine with ease, blood flying everywhere. Despite the brutality of it, though, there was a strange sort of elegance to it as well... like she was dancing with death... no, more like she was dancing and death was her accompaniment.

"Oh, I am way too bisexual for this," I breathed, just staring, even as the corpse hit the ground in a mess of blood. Ulster raised a brow at my words and I grinned. "What? You don't think a person who can kick ass is sexy?" Reminded once again of all my crushes in the past, and my dearest love. I definitely had a type.

"I was thinking she was terrifying, personally," Ulster replied with the perfect amount of dryness. He also ran a hand over my scalp, checking for head injuries. "Then again, you probably find that part of the appeal."

"Maaaaaaybeeex~?" I glanced around, looking over the rest of Leif's army, and came to a very distinct conclusion. "Our armies are filled with so many hot people. Freaking gods, I'm seriously too bisexual for this."

"Should I send a warning to Seliph?"

"Nah, Seliph is my one and only, the keeper of my heart for now and eternity." I looked back at Ulster just in time to see him roll his eyes. "But I can admit people are hot. I mean; people in general tend to be beautiful and handsome and whatnot. But like... you have to admit the number of people who are amazingly gorgeous we have in the armies is really up there."

"Mmm... yes, I suppose I do have to agree. Sadly." Ulster looked around then, conveniently ignoring my adorable pout. "Looks like things are settling down..." He was right, though. The battle was settling down. Enough that people were grouping up to chat or calling out to friends they hadn't seen in a while.

"Eleri!" Like Leif, who happily waved his hand to catch someone's attention. "Hey, Eleri!" Leif laughed, smiling. Scary-sexy-lady turned and smiled warmly, confirming that to be her name. Eleri, Leif's 'older sister'. She was... uh... not how I imagined. I kind of imagined someone like Aideen or Muirne. Not someone who reminded me a lot of a predator, complete with practical, black pants and shirt. And a red scarf. And knives strapped on her arms and thighs. They almost hid the wounds slowly seeping blood, but she was less wounded than one would expect. Then again, she seemed more like an ambush predator sort of fighter. "We're back!"

"I knew you would be," she replied with a laugh, heading over. As soon as she was close enough, she pulled him into a hug. "Ah, you're so grown up! To think that only a couple years ago, you were hiding in my skirts..." What now?
"Eleri!" Ah, the tone of an exasperated sibling. Ulster and I shared a grin, since we knew it well. "Stop saying things out of context!" Leif squirmed, now thoroughly embarrassed. "Let go! You're hugging too tightly!"

"Never~!"

The two continued 'arguing' and were soon joined by a girl with Isacchian features who wore a winglet hairpin that matched Eleri's (and Nanna's). Though I was curious, I turned my attention away, because I was more curious about who else was talking. My gaze quickly fell on Uncle Finn, though, who was a short distance away with Diarmuid. Both seemed to be talking to the archer lady from before, and also a man around Uncle Finn's age who held her shoulder.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Diarmuid was saying. Uncle Finn must be introducing them, then. "My name is Diarmuid." He smiled his most charming smile, clearly doing his best to make a good impression, and the lady's eyes filled with tears, even as she smiled. The man behind her was slack-jawed, smiling in disbelief. "You must be Selfina and Glade. Mother and Father have told me about you two." And that would explain why Diarmuid decided to be dramatic earlier, then. He had wanted to protect a friend of his parents.

"Mother?" the lady, Selfina, repeated a little shakily. Now she was definitely crying, but she kept on smiling as she turned to Uncle Finn. "Lachesis?"

"She's in Melgen right now," Uncle Finn explained softly, resting a hand on Diarmuid's back. His smile was just as soft. "She was captured, but the Liberation Army rescued her. We've been catching up."

"Oh, I…" Now in a full-on cry, Selfina hugged Uncle Finn tightly, almost knocking him off his feet. Diarmuid steadied both of them. "That's so wonderful, Finn!"

"She's going to be incoherent for a bit," Glade joked, laughing. Still, he had tears in his own eyes as he slung an arm around Diarmuid's shoulders. "Well, I guess I need to make sure Diarmuid knows stories about your younger days. The few I know that he hasn't heard, at least. So many from those early days of training…"

Ulster nudged me then and raised his hands in a pacifying gesture when I scowled at him for distracting me. He smiled apologetically and pointed to the soldiers nearby, some of which were trying, and failing, to limp to a healer. Knowing what he was trying to say, I made a face before whistling for Hestia. When she appeared at my side, and got pets, Ulster and I went to help the injured get treatment. It was the least we could do, so that the others could have the reunions, and meetings, they have long waited for.

Leonster Castle was… amazing. I wasn't quite sure just why I felt that way, walking the halls as I was. Maybe it was a carryover from my admiration of its defenders. Because like them, you could see the 'damage' (exhaustion, wounds, scars vs. cracks and dust and some halls blocked by rubble), but it still held tall. It still held proud. Like the earth itself, really. Beaten, battered, but eternal… no wonder Njorun, who had wielded the lance of earth, had resided here after the Holy War.

"I see you had the same idea I did." Diarmuid's laughing voice echoed about the hall, so it took a bit to find him. Not helped by how dim everything was. Night had long since fallen, and Leonster didn't have a lot of candles or anything left. What they did have was saved for the infirmary. "Just walking around and admiring things," he continued when I finally found him, leaning next to a large window. The full moon lit up everything enough so that I wasn't straining to see anything. "No Hestia?"
"She's in my room," I explained, skipping over to the window to peer outside. You could see more damage there. Walls broken, for instance, and churned up mud that destroyed what might've once been gardens. "I would've thought you'd have a tour."

"It was offered, but I insisted Father catch up with his friends. Not like Leonster is going anywhere, after all." He looked out the window too, admiring the view. I was sure it was absolutely gorgeous when not worn down from years of fighting. "I never thought I'd see Father's home." He smiled slightly, chuckling. "Always knew of the mythical 'someday', of course, but…"

"Never really knew where we'd go, right?" I smiled sardonically at him, just so amused by how 'prepared' we had thought we were or whatever. But I quickly frowned when I noticed his right hand was bandaged. "The hell did you do to your hand?"

"Hmm? Oh." He held it out for me to inspect. Which I did. Because his hand was completely wrapped up. "Sword broke on me finally. Haven't been keeping up with the hilt as much as Jake said I should."

"Jake…? Oh, right, the blacksmith in Ganeishire." I traced the bandages, frowning more as I thought about that day so long ago. And from there, a thought bloomed. I didn't… quite like it, but… "Here, come with me."

"I'm all bandaged and treated, you know. Nanna fussed more than Aideen!" He sighed and held up his free hand in surrender when I gave him a 'just listen' look. "Fine, fine…"

Silently holding his hand, I led him to my room and… well, fussed a bit while I mentally debated in my head. Diarmuid sensed that something was up, but didn't press me. Instead, he sat down and gave Hestia a vigorous rubdown, to her absolute delight. Finally, though, I decided to go for it and picked up Dad's Silver Blade from where I had it in the corner with my other two swords. And then spent a good moment just standing there with the sword, because… well…

"Here," I whispered, keeping my voice soft to minimize the chances of my voice cracking or anything. Diarmuid glanced up from petting Hestia curiously, and frowned when he saw what I was holding. "Yours broke. So, here." I held it out to him and his jaw dropped. "Use this one."

"I can't do that!" Diarmuid protested, scrambling onto his feet. Hestia whimpered and tried to nose his hand to demand more pets, but Diarmuid's focus was entirely on me. "That's… I mean… it was your father's!"

"And if you lose or break it, I'm going to be mad. But…” I bit my lip, trying to hide my pain. It hurt. It hurt to give it away. But… but, that was probably a sign that I…”I haven't used it a lot in battle lately. I've been using my fire sword, and I've got that new blade I… uh… acquired from Reinhardt." This time, I thrust it into his hands and stepped back so that he had to take it or let it drop. He, of course, took it. "I'll feel better knowing you've got a good blade. Especially since you'll still have a few rounds of fighting here, likely." And I was part of the strike team. "I think… no, I know that Dad would roll his eyes at me treating it as anything particularly special, especially if I'm not using it."

"But…”

"So, I want you to use it. Swords are made to be used. And I still have the things I inherited from Dad anyway. Less material, but more important." Plus, in a way, the fire sword was more… well, 'me', I supposed. Sword and flame both. Sword and magic both. "But, again, if you lose or break it, I'm getting Hestia to pin you."
"...Okay." He smiled warmly and pulled me in a hug, no doubt seeing the pain I tried to hide. "I will take care of it. And when the fighting is over, I'll give it back. Promise."

"K…"

Diarmuid held me for a while before leaving to give me time to think and relax. And relaxation sounded wonderful. I even had a book to read, packed carefully in my bag. But when I went to change into my nightgown and get that book, I noticed that my room was missing something. A large, fluffy something. I spent a good minute hunting around my room, looking behind doors and underneath the bed, before groaning. Hestia had decided, at some point, that if Diarmuid wasn't going to pet her, she'd seek pets elsewhere. Gods damn it.

Growling curses under my breath, I left my room to go hunting for my little brat of a wolf. Which was hard because she'd had ample time to escape and I didn't know this place well at all. So, I had to just wander and hope I got lucky. I tried following stray fur, but the place was just too dark for that. And, just my luck, most people were asleep for once. And the ones that weren't... well...

"Shanan, gods damn it!" Well, the only two I ran into were Larcei and Shanan, with Shanan getting yelled at by Larcei. "I know why you said you have difficulties going to healers, but seriously, we like you to not be dead!" she snapped, hands on her hips. "You're supposed to be resting!" Never did learn what was up with Shanan's injury. I'd ask another time. "Ugh... I'm glad Ulster decided to check on you!" So, Ulster was wandering around somewhere? I should go see if he could help...

"Sorry, sorry..." Shanan mumbled, shaking his head. He sounded out of it, so much so that I stayed where I was in case Larcei would need help carrying him or something. "I was resting, but then I..." He laughed bitterly, leaning against a wall. "I thought I saw Quan."...That's... "I thought I saw Quan and I was running before I could even think. Stupid, huh? Must've been a hallucination, brought on by how much I miss him."

"Shanan..." Larcei's anger faltered and she grimaced, unable to think of what to do or anything. I was the same, and felt frozen because of it. "I..."

"Being here really emphasizes it because I used to bother Quan all the time with questions about Leonster. I loved asking him, though. I loved how Quan lit up when talking about his home. I hoped that by asking, I could somehow become a prince who loved my own country just as much."

"You... don't love Isaach?"

"I didn't remember it." Shanan said the words easily, but it was enough to remind me of how young he'd been when all this started for him. "I didn't remember anything about it, really. Just... impressions. Like what you all have of your parents." He didn't look at her now. Instead, he looked out a nearby window, but I wondered what he actually saw. "Ha... even now, when I think of 'home', the first thing that comes to mind isn't anywhere in Isaach. It's collections of camps and castles where we all stayed. Particularly the snowy castle in Silesse, where we spent a very happy year resting and enjoying ourselves."

"Shanan..."

"But Quan always talked so happily about Leonster. He loved it and wanted to do everything he could to ensure it thrived." He smiled, but it was horribly sad. So sad that you couldn't really call it a 'smile' at all... "Sigurd was always my ideal 'leader', and still is, but in many ways, Quan was my ideal 'prince'. I wanted to serve my people as he did." He chuckled, but it was a terribly bitter sound. It was made worse by the deep sorrow in his eyes, too deep to even cry. "I never thought I'd see Leonster without him."
Larcei hugged Shanan from behind then, just… giving what support she could. Shanan let her, with his only reaction being a mild look of confusion. And me? I made sure to escape so that they wouldn't see me. That was clearly going to be a bit longer, and I didn't want to ruin it. And not even for teasing reasons. Shanan clearly needed that hug, and why wouldn't he? Not only was he in the home of a long dead friend, but seeing Manfroy again must've shaken him anyway. And with whatever was going on with his injury… better to let him be alone tonight, and then badger him in the morning.

So, instead, I continued my hunt for Hestia and as it turned out, she found me. She barked to let me know she was outside, and I found her in the overgrown garden, happily munching on the flank from some sort of hooved animal. "Did you sneak out for a midnight snack?" I asked her, laughing. "Little brat." Still, I petted her when she abandoned the remains and pressed herself against my leg. "You know… I can't help but wonder if Mom and Dad ever thought about visiting here?" What had been their plans after the war? Mom probably would've been a healer, of course, but what had Dad planned? Where would we have lived? "I guess it doesn't matter, huh?" Because here we were now. And we had to make a better…

I closed my eyes, still petting Hestia, and could only laugh at myself. For a better world… for a better future… ha, but who is the one who decides if something is 'better' or 'worse', huh? And who would it be better for? It wouldn't be better for quite a few people who lost their families. The Loptyrians felt that the world we lived in now was 'better', and it was hard to argue when you knew of their persecution. But it, ideally, would be better for us and the people around us…

"Saving the world is a really selfish thing, isn't it?" I opened my eyes to look at the stars sparkling above and felt… I didn't know what. "But, hopefully, the world we save… the world we make… it'll be better for more people than this current one is." That's all I could really do. I couldn't focus on the ones I couldn't save. 'Maximizing' the people saved couldn't come at the cost of justice, just as 'justice' shouldn't be served to the point of tyrannical brutality. And even those with reasons for what they did… there were a lot of things you could 'rationalize' in your head, but that didn't mean it was right. And when your goals trumped your morals… well, didn't that lead us into this mess to start with?

Hestia licked my hand, drawing me from my thoughts, and I laughed again, giving her a good rub. And did my best to avoid getting blood on me because she was such a messy eater. Before I could tease her, though, I heard someone approach. Hestia's ears twitched and she immediately growled, careful to stand and make herself as big as possible. Not quite attacking, but wary. Very wary.

"Ah." Still, the man who emerged from the shadows didn't seem like a threat. "I didn't expected to see anyone awake," he murmured, bowing his head slightly. I wondered why I didn't see him coming sooner, before noticing that his dark clothes were all various different shades of 'dark', blurring his silhouette. Blurring his outline. "You…" He frowned very slightly, studying me closely, before smiling even more slightly. "You must be Lady Caitriona. You look like your mother."

"You knew my mom?" I asked, startled. What the hell? He didn't look that much older than me and, as far as I knew, Mom never came near Leonster. "How?"

"When the Loptyrians were allowed to walk free, some of us wanted to learn magic and staves from others. Lady Alicia volunteered to teach us, despite the animosity between her and Archbishop Manfroy." Ah, that was right… Manfroy would've been… Mom, why hadn't you said anything? Was it because Deirdre lost her memories? ...Wait.

"Loptyrian?" Could he be…? "You're the former priest that Leif mentioned." And that Inanna had
mentioned. "Salem, yes?" He nodded and I hesitated, an impulse rising. "About Julius…" I shouldn't do this. I should wait for the others. But I couldn't. I just couldn't. Not when so many people I loved were tied up in this. "Sorry to just jump right into serious stuff instead of being polite, but…" I had to know. "Is there a way to save him?"

"...No." He said the word as gently as he could, but I still winced. "No, not among us. It is possible the Valkyrie Staff might be able to assist, but even that is… questionable." The Valkyrie Staff… supposedly, it could bring back the dead. But Aideen said that Claude told her there were a thousand and one conditions that had to be fulfilled to even have a chance for it to work. It was better suited as a particularly powerful healing staff. "I am not entirely sure why this is happening to him, exactly. They told us contradicting stories about it, even those of moderate rank like myself. But…" He looked down, unable to keep eye contact. "I know the end result. I know the what."

"And what is that?"

"Loptyr is devouring his soul." He spoke gently, but I felt like knives had been driven into me. "He is, essentially, a sacrifice to Loptyr just as much as those who are Hunted. The purpose… one could say it is simply power, but if that is the case, why is he not killed like the others?"

"...Basically, Julius is slowly dying, and has been for five years, and the only way to save him is…" I covered my face, remembering Julius's words. 'Real' Julius's words, in Tailtiu's dusty room. He knew. He knew the only way he could be saved. That was why he had asked. "…I… I see…" Still, Salem answered my questions, even after I so rudely blurted them out, so I dropped my hands and did my best to smile at him. For the first time in my life, though, I couldn't smile the perfect smile. "Thank you for telling me."

"I will explain all that I know at a later date. Lord Leif requested it." That didn't surprise me. Not one bit. "Do you need help to your room, Lady Caitriona?"

"Nah, I'll be fine. Hestia's with me." To prove my point, Hestia whimpered and licked my hand before pressing herself against my left reassuringly. "Again, thank you for answering my questions. I couldn't hold the forced smile anymore and so, I dropped my gaze. "Please, remember to get some rest. What has you up late tonight anyway?"

"Old nightmares." He pulled back his sleeve and I gawked at the deep scars there. "The priests do not… approve when one of the fold questions." Oh. Great. Not only warped from trauma that just sat and stagnated into infection, but the ones that questioned got offed before they could do anything? Freaking hell. "I will be heading in soon, though. Please, do not wait on my account."

"Thank you." I bowed to be polite and, thankfully, Hestia took advantage of her always being a brat to rush off. "Ack! Hestia!" Which gave me the perfect excuse to bolt out of the garden and run all the way to my room.

When I got there, and made sure Hestia was there, I shut the door behind me and leaned against it for a moment. When Hestia laid down, though, I sat and used her as a pillow, desperate for comfort. She leaned around to lick my face, and I closed my eyes, doing my best to just… I didn't even know.

Gods damn it all…

'Strike Team' left Leonster two days after arriving to continue to Alster. Though, we were a bit small for a 'team'. Really, we should've just said 'the Isaachian royals plus Riona and Hestia'
because it was just us five. Because we were all stealthy-stealth. Save Hestia, who was a giant wolf, even if she could move quietly. But Hestia did what she wanted and she had better ears and nose than us. And she was a better hunter, so we weren't having to depend on rations. And she was good about forcing us to rest when we were pushing just a little too much.

"What happened?" Ulster asked me during one such break. We weren't far from Alster, but that was all the more reason to rest. "You've been a bit off ever since we left Leonster." He spoke quietly, and sat under a tree with me. Larcei was a short distance away with Hestia and Shanan, with Shanan laying down on Hestia while Larcei brushed her. "So, what happened?"

"Trying to pretend otherwise is just going to get me a stare of doom, isn't it?" I half-joked, half-sighed. Ulster just raised a brow, waiting. "It's got nothing to do with the current operation."

"And?"

"Just pointing that out." I leaned against the smooth bark of the tree and looked up at the beautiful red, yellow, and orange leaves. The sunlight streamed through to really bring out their colors, making them so much brighter than my thoughts. "I asked Salem about Julius."

"That so?" Ulster frowned, studying me. Gleaning the conclusion of the conversation just from my demeanor. "So, no hope, huh?"

"Only hope involves the Valkyrie Staff, and you know what that means."

"...Best to save that conversation with Seliph until after this operation." He gave me a 'really?' look and I could only smile bitterly. I really should've waited. I could only hope I could wait to tell Seliph, but… "Please at least tell me that you didn't go look for him."

"I didn't. I went looking for Hestia, we spent some time in the gardens, and…" Ran into him. "I couldn't check the impulse. I should've. But I..." I couldn't.

"Well, at least it's extra time for you and me to plot how to convince Conall. Someone closer to Ishtar should handle convincing her." So, Tine. And Tine was expecting something like this. So, hopefully... "Will you be fine?"

"Yeah, I think so." I managed a smile and he studied it for a moment before nodding, believing me. Though he still slung his arm around my shoulders reassuringly. "Give me like… two seconds with Seliph, and I'll be all sunshine and rainbows again."

"You're going to make me gag."

"You're just upset that you can't cuddle with Lana because she's in Melgen." I nudged his side, eager for the subject change. "How are things going there? I've been tragically away, so I haven't been able to spy!"

"N-not answering!" He went red! He went bright red! "Not answering at all!"

"Have you at least kissed besides that first one there?" Aaaand he blushed even more. "Wow, I think you went red to the roots of your hair!"

"Riona!"

"Well, that looks like fun!" Larcei laughed, waving at us. Though I almost drew her into the teasing with me, I was distracted by Shanan attempting to get the large pile of Hestia fur off of him. Too much for simply laying on her. What the...? "He's avoiding answering my question
about how he is."

"Shanan!" Ulster scolded, seizing the convenient escape. I let him, because freaking hell, Shanan. "If you're hurting…!"

"I think Hestia would've pinned me," Shanan protested, in between sputtering and coughing. Hestia's fur clung. Badly. I pushed myself up to go help him. "And I wasn't avoiding! I just wasn't sure how to answer!"

"That's avoiding!" Ulster joined us, but made no move to help with the fur. "So…?"

"As before, I was cleared." And that was why Shanan hesitated. According to the healers, he should've been fine last time. "The only thing remotely unusual about it is that it's a bit red. But there's no signs of actual inflammation or anything."

"I see…" Pacified, Ulster began helping finally. Larcei joined in too. Hestia, of course, just laid in Shanan's lap to demand extra pets. "That reminds me, actually. Those welts from treating the Fenrir spell…"

"Oh, the ones Lana, Yuria, and Aideen got, right?" Larcei asked, more seeking clarification than actually wondering. She was more focused on attempting to get the fur out from Shanan's hair. "I wonder if we should use Hestia's fur for camouflage or something."

"I think the fur would stand out more," Shanan grumbled. He attempted to keep being 'mad' for a half second more before Hestia's innocently sweet eyes made him sigh and start petting her. "But Holy Blood attempting to protect me from something worse? That's the theory behind the welts from the Fenrir spell, after all." I didn't want to know what was worse. Why were dark magic spells so… dark? Was it Loptyr's influence or something? Made me wonder if you could make 'nice' dark magic spells. …Then again, Yuria had Nosferatu, which was a light spell that drained the targets of their life to heal the user's injuries. "Makes sense to me. Holy Blood and magic are weird enough on their own, so combining them would either cancel out the weirdness or make it worse."

"So, you're not heading anywhere on your own until that redness fades. Aside from the plan for today, because that's needed. And even then…"

"Finn told me that if I try, he'll make sure Lachesis and Oifeye know. And he knows that someone…" Shanan looked right at me. I smiled innocently. "Will tell him." I most certainly would. Hell, I'd tell Oifeye and Aunt Lachesis directly! "So, if I'm on my own, it'll be due to unexpected circumstances only. Or the plan, but we'll find a place to meet."

"That's a promise, then." Larcei scowled suddenly. "Why the hell is her fur so damn clingy?!!"

"You're the one who threw it on me, you know!"

The amount of time it took to get most of the fur off was absolutely hilarious. It got to the point that I actually began tucking some of it into Shanan's collar to make it look like it was on purpose. Which resulted in Shanan tickling me to get me to stop. And Ulster trying to fix things, while Larcei laughed and decided to join in on the fun. …Really, we only managed to get ourselves cleaned up and on the road again because Hestia knocked us to the ground and we had to get her settled down and remind her that we really didn't have the time to play at the moment.

Once we neared Alster, I split off from the others with Hestia for a couple of reasons. One was, well, Hestia. Another was that if anyone was getting caught, it was going to be me. I had been here before, and had walked through these streets often. I had a higher chance of being recognized even
with a hooded cloak and we didn't know how, exactly, people would react to that. Would they shelter me and risk themselves? Would they try to minimize trouble for their families by reporting me? Would they ignore? I didn't feel confident guessing, so it was best for me to just keep separate. Besides, it meant that I could focus on finding our Infiltration team (with Hestia) while the Royal Trio focused on information gathering. That is… if I could somehow get Hestia inside… doubted there would be any convenient ghosts and/or tunnels in the walls this time...

"Sorry, miss, but standard procedure," one of the guards said as soon as I approached the gates, waving me over. Keeping my hood up, I gave them my best smile and obeyed, not wanting to cause trouble. Trouble meant… well… trouble. "What brings you into Alster?"

"Just simple mercenary work," I lied, keeping up the smile. They held out their hand and I handed over my pack. And hoped that they wouldn't look too closely at my swords. In retrospect, snagging some steel swords to use as decoys would've been a good idea. None of us really had 'simple' weapons by this point. "Got to go where the jobs are, after all."

"And that means coming to busy, troubled areas." They went through my pack, and I glanced around, noting that the other guards on duty were questioning others who were entering. And Hestia used that distraction to slip in without anyone really paying attention, waiting for me in the shadows of a nearby building. "Everything looks in order. Though, I've not seen a mercenary carry a book before."

"Really shouldn't since it eats up space, but book hunger really makes a girl grouchy." I focused back on the guard and laughed. And… caught a blush on their face. Didn't expect that one. "So, it's my one indulgence. I'm thankfully able to afford that nowadays."

"Well, I hope you find a good job, and employer." They handed me back my pack, and passed me two cords. "Weapons have to be tied up while in the city. Lord Bloom's orders."

"Nervy fellow, isn't he?" Still, I made sure to not make a fuss, tying both with ease. If things got bad, I had my fires, after all. "Hope he's paying you lot enough."

"For now, sure. We'll see in the coming days." They winced and glanced around worriedly. I smiled encouragingly. "I'm worried about my niece and nephew with all the war talk."

"I can imagine." I made a mental note to super-prioritize getting civilians to safety. We were doing that anyway, of course, but... "Ah, but that's too gloomy of a topic. Know of a good place to relax around here?"

"There's a tavern near the main square where a dancer recently set up shop. Only seen one of her performances myself, but I don't think I've ever seen better." They grinned, and that blush was back. "Tavern is good as well. Lots of us guards take our breaks there."

"Then I'll be sure to check it out." Cords tied and pack back on my belt, I winked and waved as I headed in. "Maybe I'll see you there! I'll buy you a drink if I do!" And I made sure to duck into the crowd before heading into the shadows of a nearby alley. Hestia met me, happily pressing into my leg. "Good girl..." I scratched her behind the ear and laughed softly. "Dancer, huh? Well, well… maybe we should check that out first."

Hestia agreed by loping off, certain that I would follow and catch up. Rolling my eyes, I did and kept a grip on her fur as soon as I could, because it really was too crowded, and it just got even more crowded the closer we got to the main square. The reason became obvious very, very quickly. I'd been right; the dancer in question was Lene. And she was performing right now, a bedazzling spectacle of energy and cheer. Her smile was brighter than the sun, and she jumped and
spun as if she could never run out of energy. The crowd itself was spellbound, smiling and cheering, only taking their eyes away to make quick little purchases from nearby vendors. One in particular, a blue-haired girl wearing a simple yet pretty dress, was making a killing because she sold flowers. Flowers that were often thrown onto the stage Lene danced on as tokens of appreciation and wonder. Of course, I had a feeling that the 'girl' was there for a different reason besides money. After all, I knew that hair color easily. And, when I got closer, the 'flower girl' looked up curiously and smiled, proving me right before darting into a nearby alley. I waited a moment to send Hestia towards Lene before heading there myself, careful to make sure no one was following.

I'd barely taken two steps before Seliph snatched me up in a hug. "Missed you," he whispered, right in my ear. I tried to play off my blush, and failed miserably when he actually kissed my ear, before he moved to kiss my cheek like he hadn't just made me squirm with delight and everything. "Well, that did get a reaction. Lene was right."

"Lene?!" I squeaked, turning redder. He laughed softly and simply kissed me properly. "What does Lene have to do with anything?"

"I asked her for advice, since I'm always trying to find more ways to show you how much I love and appreciate you." He smiled gently at me, and I almost forgave him. Almost. "I've missed my sunshine."

"I… you…" Okay, things I expected? Not this. At all. Expected to maybe have a bit of teasing. And then be serious. Instead, I was a stammering, blushing mess. "You've been plotting!"

"Maybe a little." And now he looked oh-so-smug. I was getting him back for this. I really was. I'd need to figure out how and- "Revenge for laughing at me before our last date." ...Still getting him back. "How was Leonster, by the way?" Oh, I was definitely getting him back for this!

"You're horrible." I tried to scowl, but his delighted, quiet laugh just made me smile anyway. Damn him. "Absolutely horrible."

"Yes, yes." He brushed strands of hair out of my face, and leaned forward slightly, frowning worriedly. "What happened?"

"Hmm?"

"You haven't been sleeping, and your smile is sadder." He brushed his fingers under my eyes and I could only sigh. Despite what Ulster had said, and despite my joke, I'd known he'd figure out something was wrong quickly. "Leonster?"

"Leonster is fine, or was when I left. Tired, but there." Outside the alley, the crowd roared with applause, hinting that Lene had finished her dance. But neither Seliph nor I moved. "It doesn't have to do with the current operation. Could distract you from it."

"But it's clearly weighing heavily on you." Seliph kissed my forehead, a warm and gentle kiss that was so comforting that it nearly sent me to tears. "I won't force you, but I'd rather you not bear the weight just to keep from burdening me. Even if I know its because of your affection and care for me."

"...Yeah…" And now that I thought about it, I… I should've brought up the thing with Julius and Loptyr blood sooner, just so that it wasn't so much of a… ha, keeping secrets wasn't always… no, keeping secrets was sometimes a very selfish thing, huh? "I met Salem, the Loptyrian priest Leif told us about, and asked him about Julius."
"Did you?" Seliph studied my expression and his own face fell when he saw the answer in my eyes. "Ah… my poor little brother…" He pulled me into a hug, clinging tightly, and I hugged him back with all my strength. "Damn it."

"I should've waited to ask. I'm sorry."

"No, don't be. I know to not hold onto hope and burn myself. I, of all people, can't burn my eyes shut and block out everything." So he said. The shaking hands on my back told a very different story. "Tell me the full thing later?"

"It's not much, but sure." I leaned back just enough for me to kiss him. He reciprocated a bit desperately, but I didn't mind. "Let's see… lighter things. Lighter thin… a-ah…" And his idea of changing the subject was to kiss my ear! Again! "Seliph!"

"You are really sensitive there!" He grinned, and it was almost his normal one. "I definitely need to remember that. And see about applying those other bits of advice."

"What all did Lene tell you?!" And how did she even… she and I hadn't talked about stuff like this! Was it just typical stuff or did she guess because of watching me or…? Oh, man, I was blushing so badly. And it was all the worse because Seliph snickered and smirked at me. "No more ear-play!" I covered my ears for emphasis, and he leaned forward to muffle his resulting laughter in my shoulder. "I'm getting you back for this! I mean it!"

Eventually, Seliph convinced me to uncover my ears and led me to the tavern, helping me up the stairs to a back room. Where Lene and Hestia were waiting, Hestia being quite impatient. In fact, Hestia barely waited for the door to close before jumping up on Seliph, bracing her paws on his chest to lick his face repeatedly.

"Seliph, we're supposed to be doing laundry today, so when Hestia lets you go, you should really change out of the dress," Lene suggested, smiling warmly from her perch on the table. Seliph attempted to agree, but Hestia was Very Insistent on catching up on affection. "Maybe I should've said 'if'."

"Hestia, at least nudge him towards wherever he needs to go," I sort-of-scolded, mostly amused by the situation. I leaned against the table by Lene, just watching. Sure, I could help, but I wasn't.

"Where's Patty?"

"Still out investigating. She should be back soon." She bit her lip to keep from laughing as Seliph slowly managed to get Hestia to let him head to his room to change. At least, until Seliph was out of sight. Then she started guffawing. "Hestia is ridiculous!"

"Now imagine that with Sarabi."

"No way! We're going to teach her to behave!" Yeah, good luck with that one. "Anyway, though…?" She grinned meaningfully at me, eyes dancing with mischief. "So… how was your reunion with Seliph~?"

"What all did you even tell him?!" I was back to blushing. Argh… and here I thought I was finally keeping my cool… grr… "I mean…"

"Lots of prostitutes in Darna, and when Layla and I first started living on our own, a few helped us out a lot. Shared their money and food, made sure we were safe… that sort of thing." Lene shrugged, still grinning. "Layla and I repaid the favor when we could. All the interactions resulted in quite the education!" Well, I would imagine so. "Truthfully, I was surprised he asked me for..."
advice, but he said it was because I had a different background than... well, pretty much all of you. And, you know, am in a very happy relationship. Arthur grew up differently too, for instance, but can you imagine going to him for advice?"

"Well, relationship advice, sure." Arthur might just get the person checked for a head injury or something. "Still, I'm getting you back for that as well. You can't even blame Sarabi because I know how much you adore her!"

"She is cute." Lene kept on grinning, kicking her legs briefly before hopping off the table. "Ah, but can I mitigate said revenge by sharing some advice with you?" I swore she was the personification of mischief at this point. I really did. "I'm all for equal-opportunity-teasing!"

"Is that what we're calling it?" Though, I did have to admit there was an appeal. There were some things that you just... couldn't ask a parental figure, no matter how much you loved and respected them (and admitted they had good advice). And out of the people I knew well, only Lana and Lene were in any sort of relationship. Well, Maliya was too, but I didn't think she'd be so candid with me yet. "Whatever. The answer is maybe. We'll negotiate later."

"I look forward to it~!" Lene laughed and, before long, I had to join in. Not only was it an infectious laugh, but the whole situation was just so... ridiculous, really. Ridiculous, yet normal.

It made me wonder about what life would've been like (should've been like) if the Belhalla Massacre had never occured. So many what-ifs... I just had to make the most of the life I had now, though. And be thankful that I could salvage those tentative bonds.

By the time Hestia let Seliph go, and he was able to change into cleaner clothes, Patty returned, and she brought Shanan, Larcei, and Ulster with her. Which, of course, led to hugs and teasing. Hestia was particularly insistent on getting Patty covered in fur... I mean, showing her affection. I had to buy her a treat in order to get her to settle down long enough for us to exchange information. Even then, she laid right at our feet and refused to budge for anything.

"So, no troubles with you, Seliph?" Larcei teased once we were settled down around the table with some food and drink. Her eyes shone with amusement. "Can still pull off a dress?"

"Well enough, though it was definitely easier to masquerade as a woman when I was younger," Seliph answered absently. He was more focused on his food, truthfully. "Hardest part was getting inside, but when isn't that the hardest? I actually got quite a few compliments."

"I can believe it, both the compliments and how hard it is to actually get into the city." Larcei looked right at me, and I sighed, already knowing what she was going to say. "Bet Riona just talked to a guard and walked on in, though."

"Most definitely."

"I had my stuff checked!" I snapped defensively, scowling at them both. My mood wasn't helped by Ulster's snicker, and Shanan, Patty, and Lene looking a little confused. "Ugh, why do you always make things bigger than they are with that?"

"Perhaps when you don't do something ridiculous, we won't," Ulster commented lightly, his grin belying the 'calmness' of the words. Like Larcei, his eyes glittered with silent laughter and danced with mischief. "Didn't you get a date out of something like that back at Ganeishire?"

"That was Diarmuid, damn it! And I still don't know how that worked!"
"Of course it worked." Ulster shrugged, still grinning, and I was sorely tempted to throw something at him. "Shanan, did we not tell you about how we had Diarmuid and Riona charm their way into Ganeishire?"

"There was no charming!"

"Tempted as I am to join in, because Riona, you are always charming..." Lene began with a laugh. Which sparked laughter from everyone else. Gods damn it... was today 'pick on Riona' day or something?! "We do have business to discuss. Such a shame, really."

"I'm sure you feel like you're having to herd cats with us!" Paty joked, grinning. However, she soon became serious, and the lighthearted mood disappeared in an instance. "Thanks to today, I have secured three routes into the castle. And that's without me being able to climb up the side of a castle."

"...Climb up the side?"

"You haven't seen them do that yet? It's how those three..." Patty pointed to Ulster, Larcei, and me. "Get on the damn roof. Diarmuid can do it as well. You'll see it most with Riona, though, because Hestia will get all whimpery."

"...Wait, you climbed up there?!" Lene's eyes went as wide as plates. "What's wrong with stairs?!"

"Too boring." Ulster, Larcei, and I chorused, even matching pitch to be perfectly dry. It was well worth Lene's bewildered look, and everyone else's laughter.

"That reminds me," Seliph managed through his laughing. He had to briefly hide his face in my shoulder to muffle the sound and attempt to calm down. "Ares saw Diarmuid climbing and asked for him to teach him." Lene groaned and just let her head fall to the table. "Distracted, however! Basically, Patty, you were saying that these crazies might have other ways of getting inside too, yes?"

"Pretty much!" Patty chirped, grinning. She took great delight in that little bit of chaos. "Prince Shanan, why don't you climb all over the place?"

"Something about falling out of a lot of trees?"

"More like I fell out of a tree, was getting tended to by Alicia and Aideen, and J... someone set the place on fire," Shanan rattled off. I frowned curiously, because I knew this story well. It was how Jamke joined up with Sigurd, and it was why Mom and Jamke had an awkward relationship for a good few years. But then I remembered that Patty was Jamke's daughter, and hearing about how your dad set a castle on fire wasn't exactly... great. And should probably come from someone she'd personally known longer. So, I quickly covered Larcei's mouth when I noticed her about to ask why Shanan didn't use a name, and then masked it by shoving some bread in her mouth. "As a result, I... ah... stopped climbing things unless I absolutely had to. But that's neither here nor there. Any word on their army, Patty?"

"Mostly standard rank and file, since they've lost a lot due to the siege and the failed attempt to assassinate us in Melgen," Patty answered, going back to being serious. Even if she poked Lene and pointed confusedly at Larcei, who was choking on the bread and giving me dirty looks. Probably made more weird by neither Ulster nor Seliph reacting, and Shanan only reaching over to pat her back. "No Reinhardt, no Ishtar, no one of such importance that their name stands out... really, Bloom is the only we have to worry-worry about." She shrugged, sighing. "That said, he's got that psycho-electro tome thing that I can't pronounce."
"...Mjolnir?"

"That's the one!" Hard to say what was funnier. The name itself, or Shanan's slightly scandalized look at a Divine Weapon being described like that. "Anyway, he's the only real threat, from what I understand. Everyone else is reasonably skilled, but I don't think requires anything special."

"Simply information, and disruption of morale," Seliph murmured, nodding. He then leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Which is what we're all going to do until the main forces arrive. How many days before Leonster moves out?"

"Leonster's forces will march in… at this point, two days," I answered, doing some quick math in my head. They had to recover, but if we took too long, Bloom would notice the lack of reports from that front. "Melgen is probably already on the move at this point. If not, then tomorrow."

"Because we need them to move more noticeably, to hide the rest of the plan and to give everyone as much time as they can to gather their reserves." Seliph's smile grew slightly, strangely dignified. "Will you four rest or head out?"

"Think it's best we go ahead and get started with our stuff as soon as possible." I glanced at Shanan, Ulster, and Larcei and the three of them nodded. "Hestia will stay with you, for obvious reasons."

"Of course."

"So, what exactly are you four doing anyway?" Patty asked, already standing. She'd have to show us her paths, after all. "I haven't heard that yet." None of us answered verbally. Just a round of… rather evil-looking-grins. "Oh, this is going to be funny, isn't it?"

"Iuchar might groan when he hears," Ulster laughed, also standing. He stretched slowly and then sharply leaned back when Hestia tried to jump on him. "Someone hold her, or we're never getting out of here."

Lene helpfully pinned and played with Hestia so that the five of us could escape. From there, we briefly split up to hide where we were going and then followed Patty into the castle. Patty left us then to do her own thing, and Shanan went his own way because (for once) his part of the plan would be a lot easier if he was alone. Namely… well, he used Balmung to turn invisible and then shift things ever so slightly. A painting tilted just a little ajar. A vase moved. A door pushed open with a quiet creak. Things of that nature. Subtle things to make people uneasy. Make them know something was wrong, but find it difficult to just say why.

Meanwhile, Ulster, Larcei, and I climbed to the roof so that we could move more easily to other areas of the castle to do similar things. Though, in our case, it was to be a bit more blatant. Not necessarily anything to scare people, but to aggravate them. Stealing things from rooms. Scattering dirt across sparkling clean floors. Tossing neatly folded laundry all over the place. In short, a mischievous puppy's dream come true.

"I can't wait to tell Aideen about how all those pranks we pulled as children were actually training," Larcei snickered, covering her mouth to keep quiet. Ulster and I also covered her mouth. And then each other's, just for fun. "Seriously…!"

"I know, right?" I whispered, barely keeping it together. This was a very serious mission, after all, dealing with very serious matters. "Okay, okay…" But even Ulster was trying hard to not laugh, and the three of us just leaned forward to huddle together and do our best to keep absolutely quiet. "Few more and then we'll head back for the day?"
"Sounds good to me," Ulster agreed, mostly muffled because we were all still covering each other's mouths. Honestly, if we weren't so close, I doubt I would've understood. "Let's head to where we're meeting Shanan and..." He trailed off, all cheer disappearing. "...I hear shouting."

Worriedly, we crawled to the edge of the roof and then let Ulster climb down first, heading towards a place close to where the screaming was, hopefully. And, it turned out to be a study. Bloom's study, to be specific. He was snapping at servants, all but throwing things at them. I frowned at the sight, because I hadn't seen anything like that when I'd been here before... but then I thought of Ishtar. Seeing this, I had a feeling Bloom tended to be on his best behavior for people he viewed as peers or superiors, and I knew, without a doubt, that Ishtar would scold her father for yelling at the servants. So, he had probably been on his 'best behavior' the whole time I was there, and if I had stayed longer, I might've seen this back then.

Still, it bothered me, especially when I recognized one of the servants; she'd been the one who most frequently gotten me whenever Julius requested me, the one who said I was like Conall because I was kind. So, I sighted a couple of candles, flickering as they were by what seemed like some important papers, and made them flare up just as it looked like Bloom was about to hit her. We quickly had to scrabble back up the wall to avoid being seen, so all we heard was shrieks and calls for water. At least, at first. When things quieted, I (alone) climbed back to that window and peered inside. No one was there, but I did see a soaked desk, with bunches of ruined paperwork sitting in puddles, the ink slowly bleeding. I snatched them up and a few other things before leaving, knowing that even with things ruined... well, very clever people, cleverer than me, knew how to get information from anything.

Let it never be said we weren't creative?

The next few days were spent more or less the same. Before long, whispers and rumors spread that the castle was haunted, filled with the vengeful ghosts of all those killed during the Empire's occupation. We, of course, 'gently encouraged' those rumors, and spread a few more of our own. And as the stories built, the news of Melgen marching weaved its way through, binding everything up into a pretty little package. Even better, the gossip mill didn't even mention Leonster, and our own scouts confirmed that they were on the way. Things were going remarkably smoothly... which meant all of us were ready for something to go wrong.

"Why are we always so worried when everything goes okay?" Larcei complained. Quietly, of course. She, Ulster, and I were on the roof of Alster Castle, for a few reasons. And that meant we just had each other and no convenient distractions while we waited. And waited. And waited. "I mean..."

"We are very aware of the phrase 'no strategy survives contact with the enemy',' Ulster answered, despite the fact that Larcei probably hadn't actually wanted an answer. He ignored her dirty look and just leaned more on my back. Larcei herself was laying down on my lap, and I tried to think of how I ended up in the middle of the twins. And amusing myself with thoughts of how envious quite a few people would be right now. "But, that's what tactics are for."

"So, Oifeye. And Lewyn."

"Yep." Of course, we knew that was a big simplification. But this was probably the biggest battle we all fought. Larger armies, larger goal... and if we won here, we proved that Isaach was no mere fluke. Meaning Lewyn would use his winds to keep track of people, and relay the movements to Oifeye, who would adjust the plan as needed in order to fulfill the goals Seliph set. "Ah, over there." Ulster stood up and I twisted to see him pointing north, towards Leonster. Or, more accurately, the first signs of Leonster's army. "And our main army is..."
"On the hill, as they have been for the past couple of hours," I whispered, nudging Larcei up. She playfully whined, but stood and pulled me up with her. "Attempting to negotiate." Of course, we hadn't expected negotiations to work. We just wanted to give Bloom a chance to surrender, because it wasn't as if we hadn't been proven wrong a thousand and one times and more. Well, not 'just'. Negotiations bought time, and held attention. "So..." I tensed when I saw the predetermined signal: three flashes of light from a mirror, followed by two more. I glanced to Larcei to confirm, and when she nodded, I snapped my fingers and shot a small fireball into the sky. And turned towards the north, where Ulster had kept his gaze, to see Leonster's forces charge, led by its prized cavalry. The famous Lanzritter, reborn at last after its destruction following the Yied Massacre and Leonster's fall.

Within what felt both like seconds and days, the rear gates were broken through, because there had been few soldiers stationed there. Ulster nudged me and I threw two more fireballs into the sky, giving the second signal... for our main army to begin its own charge, to take advantage of the rattled defenses to overwhelm the front. I could only pray that Lene and the others had finished evacuating the civilians to some sort of safety. That was her primary job during this, with Patty assisting when she wasn't helping with messages. And no small part of me wished I could help, but... but I had my own job. The three of us had our own jobs. And it was fairly similar. Sort of.

Ulster ruffled Larcei's hair and kissed my cheek. Larcei kissed my opposite cheek and teasingly pinched Ulster's. I just hugged them both before climbing down first, swinging inside an open window before racing through the halls. Because this was part of our job. Assassinate Bloom if possible, but priority to making sure all the servants and possible guests were somewhere safe, to minimize civilian casualties. And to lessen the chances of hostages. We had to assume Bloom would do that, and I doubted there would be a convenient Ishtar or Conall showing up to help mitigate the mistake of assuming otherwise (and the mistake of not communicating properly with our angry soldiers).

"Quickly, head in here," I urged when I found a group. I helped a few into a large room, one that should fit quite a few people comfortably, but was fairly out of the way. "Keep away from the windows and shut the door, okay? Everything is going to be... well, hopefully, we'll make things okay?" Did they have loved ones fighting? If so, I couldn't really say... "You'll be safer here, so..."

"Princess Riona?" one of them called, interrupting my babbling. I only vaguely recognized them; they were one of the kitchen assistants. "Princess Riona, Lord Bloom headed to a balcony not long ago, while carrying..." Oh. Shit.

"Thank you!" I darted over to hug them before rushing out of the room. "Only move if things get dangerous here! We'll come for you when the fighting is over!" And then I was bolting down the hall as fast as I could, half-wishing Od blood boosted speed instead of skill just so that I could get there a little faster. Because Bloom moving already was... well, we'd kind of hoped he'd wait, but clearly, that wasn't going to be the case. So, now I had to hope that I could distract him or something. I doubted I could win a battle, but if I used some tricks, then maybe I could buy time or something? I wasn't...

I found a balcony and dashed outside, almost running into the railing because of how little I was paying attention, and only not doing so because I slipped and fell hard on my shoulder. Sadly, it wasn't conveniently the same balcony Bloom was on. He was on a different one, within sight, with Mjolnir's spell already in hand. And thanks to my falling, and the resulting pain, I couldn't focus on... even though he was within sight, I couldn't set anything on fire. Not before Bloom threw Mjolnir's might... right at Seliph...

Everything just... stopped for me. Sound. Wind. The fighting. My own breath. My own heart.
Everything was frozen, leaving me only with the terrible sight of Mjolnir streaking straight for Seliph. With the terrifying sight of Seliph turning and realizing with wide eyes that he wouldn't be able to dodge. And even with Naga's blood, he might... he might...

It hit with a 'boom', a rumbling akin to the loudest of thunder. Dust rose from the impact, shrouding the area in a thick cloud that none could see through. Chips of stone from the streets and nearby buildings rained down, joined by the sparkling shards of glass. I was so sure that I'd see nothing but charred corpses when it all cleared. So, so sure. But when it did... when it did clear, there weren't any. And it was not Seliph who was bloody. It was not Seliph who grit his teeth in pain. It was Ares, with Mystletainn in hand, who was bloody and who grit his teeth in pain. It was Ares, standing firm with a wide-eyed, shocked, and completely untouched Seliph safely behind him.

"Well, that hurt more than I'm used to," Ares quipped, his voice strangely loud in the quiet that filled the battlefield. He quickly flipped Mystletainn around and stabbed a frozen, nearby Friege soldier straight through their skull. Mystletainn glowed with a dark light as the body fell, and some of Ares's wounds slowly sealed up. Though, some still remained and he still spat out blood. "Still, survivable. Painful, but survivable."

"How did you...?" Bloom breathed, actually taking a half-step back. The hand clutching Mjolnir shook, even as he tightened his grip. "How does a sellsword survive Mjolnir?!"

"It's called 'Mystletainn'. You might have heard of it." He flipped Mystletainn back to the 'normal' grip and scoffed. "But if that's all you got, no wonder you had to keep hiring me to clean up your messes."

"Tch...!" Bloom prepared to throw another Mjolnir, but though he kept his eyes on Ares and Seliph, he threw it in a different direction. Screams shattered the silence and I could only gape when I saw he had purposely hit one of the nearby buildings to destroy it and send the rubble down on the soldiers below... both ours and his. And, as if to prove it hadn't been an accident, he did the same twice more. Willing to kill his own to destroy us.

Seliph immediately ordered soldiers over to assist, and Ares was right by his side, careful to keep himself between Bloom and Seliph even as he helped pull people out. The battle actually... it actually halted, for lack of a better word. Yes, there were some patches, but most efforts were with trying to free the trapped, with no regards for sides whatsoever. From my vantage point, I could see how many of the Friege soldiers seemed shaken, and why wouldn't they be? It was one thing to pledge your life, and death, to a person or cause; it was another to have someone blatantly show how disposable they thought you were.

Bloom himself was perfectly calm, looking over the crowd with sharp and calculating eyes. I attempted to set part of him on fire, but he ducked out of my sight just before I could, heading inside. I nearly fell again in my haste to do the same and try to catch up, but I managed to keep upright and sprinted down the halls, trying to catch up or at least get within sight! But, sadly, just as before, I wasn't quite in time. Though I did catch up and found him on another balcony, it wasn't in time to keep him from casting the spell.

But a powerful thunder spell hit Bloom straight in the shoulder and he jerked automatically from the pain, sending his spell flying harmlessly into the sky. And when I stepped out, ready to do whatever it took to keep Bloom from attacking again, I swore I'd see Arthur nearby. Probably riding with Fee or something. But... it wasn't. It wasn't at all. It was Tine. Tine, with tears streaming down her face, stood on a nearby rooftop, clutching her still crackling Elthuder to her chest. Arthur (and Fee, for that matter) were nowhere in sight.
"Tine…?" For the second time today, Bloom was startled. To be fair, though, I was too, to the point of not being to move (again). Tine… I had thought Tine would remain in Melgen. Remain there to help protect the refugees and others who couldn't march. That had been the plan when I'd left Melgen, at least… "Tine, are you…?" he began slowly, like he was having trouble processing what he said and saw. Couldn't blame him in the slightest. "Are you betraying me?"

"I… I'm sorry, Uncle…" Tine whimpered, crying now. She trembled badly, and I desperately looked for anyone who might be close enough to help her. "But this is wrong. You're wrong."

"After everything I did for you, you…!"

"Yes, everything you did after you let Hilda kill Mother!" Tine's voice cracked with the force of her yelling, raw pain making the words jagged. "After you covered up my father's murder by your own forces! Taking care of me doesn't erase that! If you truly felt guilty, you would've taken Hilda's head! But you chose that monster! That psychopath who hurts people just because she finds it fun! You chose her over Mother! You chose her over me!"

"Silence!" Bloom gestured sharply, wildly casting… some sort of thunder spell, one that scattered too much to be Mjolnir. That gave me the opportunity to finally stop standing around like a dumbass and to tackle Bloom to make sure he wouldn't cast Mjolnir yet again. With fire in my hands to really distract him. But… ah… in my desperation (and frustration), I'd forgotten about the railing again. And, you know, fulcrums. Physics. Center of gravity and all that. Basically, Bloom and I both went over the railing. I managed to catch myself on the floor of the balcony, barely, but unfortunately, Bloom was also quick enough to grab something: my leg. And damn, he was heavy. "You…!"

"Oh, you couldn't have even dropped the damn tome?!" I snapped when I glanced down and saw he was, in fact, still clinging to Mjolnir. I attempted to use my free leg to kick him off, but while I got him in the face, he dug his nails into my leg, not letting go. And I only had a tentative grip with one hand, so I couldn't flail about that much. I grabbed the edge with my other hand to give myself a little more stability, but even a bloodied/broken nose wasn't loosening his grip. "You're like Hestia with a bone!"

"I will not lose to children who don't understand anything!" Bloom growled, snarling up at me. Mjolnir sparked, but didn't do anything else. Probably because electrocuting me while he was using me as a rope was a really bad idea. "What it means to rule, what sacrifices it takes to-!"

"Oh, shut up! I don't care anymore how you've justified it to yourself!" Third time, sadly, wasn't lucky. I at least blackened an eye, though! "You claim this all is right, and I claim it's wrong! Your idea of justice and ruling does not, and will not, match mine! Which means we're going to fight, and someone is going to die!" Or multiple someones. My grip was slipping. But I did notice that Tine was… "Tine!" I could barely look at her, since I was focused on Bloom, but I did see her staring, still crying. "Tine, get Fee for me!" Because I couldn't ask her to attack Bloom again. She already did that once. I couldn't...

But she surprised me. Yet again. Because, all at once, I saw her gaze harden and she shot an Elthunder right at Bloom. First one missed, but the second one hit his arm, and my leg. I bit my lip to keep from screaming in pain, but Bloom's weight left me all at once. He screamed as he fell, and I watched him fall, wondering just how scary of a death it would have to be. But he didn't die. At least, I didn't think so. I saw him hit a tree on the way down, and grumbled to myself because if I'd know the tree was there, I would've just dropped anyway. However, I hadn't, so I just pulled myself up and then used the railing to get myself standing, breathing heavily from all of that. I'd let the people on the ground handle Bloom, if the ground itself hadn't. At this point, I was definitely out of
Across the way, Tine watched me worriedly. But when I smiled, she smiled back, more tears joining the first. I had no idea whether they were tears of relief, fear, anger, or some sort of combination. But her smile, at least, was sweet. That was enough for me.

"Well, damn, when Lester described the room as 'exploded', I thought he'd been exaggerating," I commented, blinking slowly at the carnage. I stood in the doorway of the room that once held the Warp Circle Alster had. Now, though? Well, calling it a 'room' probably wasn't accurate anymore. More like 'rubble that happens to be mostly contained in four walls'. "How the hell?"

"Most likely, he used Mjolnir to destroy the other one," Tine explained, supporting me. Though I'd been healed, the numerous injured meant that my leg was still… not liking me at all. When I had wanted to see the Warp Circle with my own eyes, Tine had insisted on helping me limp along. "On the bright side, he can't send people through it either?"

"True." I sighed, though, grumbling under my breath. Because yes, Bloom got away. Between trying to save people from the fallen buildings, and forgetting that Bloom being a Thrud Major mean he could take quite the beating, he had been able to escape to the Warp Circle. "Can't freaking believe…" According to those who saw, and gave chase, Bloom had suffered a broken arm and, likely, broken ribs from the fall, not accounting for bruising. And had still managed to drag himself away. "Is Mjolnir glued to his hand or something?" Because, of course, Bloom had still been clinging to it.

"I doubt it, though that happened with a different book. Ishtar and Conall thought it would be funny." She smiled at the memory and helped me walk away from the room, towards the celebrations outside. We might have only liberated half of the Manster District, but this was still a big victory. Which meant partying. "I'm really sorry about your leg…"

"Relax, I'm not going to lose it or anything. That's why it's still hurting!" It was a lesser wound in comparison to others. Being able to wait was a good thing. "I did expect you to get Fee, but your choice was definitely far more direct."

"I felt like since I had made the choice, I needed to stick with it." She didn't quite look at me as we kept walking. "You all have been so kind, letting me be neutral for as long as I have been. Letting me think and settle my heart and nerves. And never once pushing me."

"If you still want to…"

"I will not be like Conall and Ishtar, letting false hope blind me to reality. I love them and respect them, but this is not a conflict where neutrality exists. Standing aside and staying out of the battles when you have the means to fight… that isn't 'neutrality'. That is supporting the injustices that are occurring. And I won't do that." Now she looked up at me, and though there was some hesitance in her expression, her eyes were clear and true. As clear as a lightning bolt through the sky. "I have decided that what my uncle has done, and what the people he has supported are doing, is wrong. They may have good intentions, but intentions do not change their actions, nor do they change how wrong I believe they are. So, I will fight. And I will save Ishtar and Conall from themselves."

"...Yeah, we will." I pulled her into a hug and kissed her head, just… was it patronizing to feel so proud of her? Probably was, but I couldn't help it! And I was in awe, that she figured out something that had been driving me nearly mad in so short a time. "How about you help Arthur with the mages? Some are former Friege soldiers and I'm sure they'll feel more comfortable with you."
"That sounds good. I promise to work hard!" She smiled brightly, but then we entered the courtyard and got barraged by all the noise. "Eek..."

"I'm probably going to get swarmed before long, so how about you go and let Arthur know?" I smiled reassuringly at her when she hesitated. "Hestia will be here before long, and I know Fee wanted to show you something exciting."

"That's true and... oh, wait, she's waving at me." She hesitated a moment longer before nodding. "Okay, but I'm checking on you later!"

"Have fun!" I waved her goodbye and took a deep breathe, enjoying the crisp air and the delightful smells of various food and drink. They were all specialties of the area, meaning I only vaguely knew a handful of them maybe, but they were still comforting. Almost as comforting as the laughter and singing that danced amongst the scents.

A cheerful bark and howl alerted me that Hestia had arrived before I actually saw her, and I laughed as she bounded over like a puppy. She almost jumped on me, but stopped herself at the last second, remembering that I wouldn't be able to catch her. So, instead, she circled me excitedly before shoving her head under my hand for pets. Which I happily gave her, of course. She had spent the battle protecting Oifeye while he and Lewyn adjusted troop movements, and had done a very good job. Though I knew she was very cross that I got so hurt while she was away from me.

"I knew following her would lead me to you." However, Hestia wasn't alone. Nanna, apparently, had decided to follow, and she smiled wryly at me. "I can't believe she's your pet," she said, watching us. I chose against pointing out that Hestia was pack, not a pet. "Of all creatures..."

"Something wrong with wolves?" I joked, mostly just to prod a little. I remembered how many in Tirnanog had been stunned by her.

"Not necessarily, but she's a wolf." Yes. Yes, she was. "According to the people I grew up with, she's one of nature's perfect predators. All muscle and teeth and able to outrun, out-fight, and out-smart almost any other beast in its territory. Able to coordinate to eviscerate prey ten times their size, and unfazed by both weather and terrain. One could even call them creatures of war, particularly when one sees her fight alongside you." She raised an eyebrow, and skeptically looked at Hestia, who was happily receiving pets from me. "Aaaand you apparently saw her and went 'cutie!' and now she's yours."

"Aw, but just look at her!" I cooed, laughing. Hestia barked at the same time, just adding to the sound. "She's so fluffy! And just look at her pointy little ears! And look at her tail just wagging away!"

"I'm with Diarmuid. I can't believe you haven't been eaten by a wild animal yet." She sighed and I just had to laugh. "Anyway, I was looking for you because I wanted to check you over again."

"If you're out here, then should you really be working?" Still, I followed her when she beckoned, using Hestia as a crutch to keep some weight off my leg. "How are things in the infirmary?"

"We're taking turns enjoying the party. A staggered shift sort of thing. Mother insisted." I was willing to bet it was something she'd tried, and likely failed, to do with Mom. "And if I check you now, then hopefully that means less work tomorrow."

"That does make sense." We made it over to the edge of the party, where some chairs had been set out for people to rest in. Or get their leg checked over by adorable healers, as was my case. "How am I doing?"
"Looks like it's much the same as earlier. It will need a staff for full healing, but nothing immediate. We can finish healing it tomorrow." Nanna smiled at me, clearly relieved, and I grinned back. Hestia nosed my wounded leg gently before resting her head on my lap. "In that case, how about you share some cider with me? Alster has a unique recipe for it that I haven't tasted anywhere else."

"That sounds like a plan!" I carefully stood and Hestia attached herself to my leg to be used as support. "Lead on!"

Nanna and I waded into the crowd, smiling and laughing with the people as we navigated our way through. A few people tried to stop me for something, but others intervened so that I wasn't standing around for long periods of time. Hilariously, when one proved particularly stubborn, Mursili appeared out of nowhere to pick me up and place me on the other side of a person, before doing the same with Nanna. Hestia jumped over to keep up. Before long, Nanna and I had acquired our cider, and I had to agree with her. I had no idea what spices they used, but it was definitely unlike anything I'd drank before. I half-worried it was alcoholic, but no one seemed drunk off it yet, so maybe I was just being a bit of a worrywart.

At one point, though, Nanna gasped and nudged me before pointing to a spot on the edge of the crowd. At first I frowned, worried that something had happened, but then I saw what, or rather 'who', she was pointing at, and I had to smile. Because it was Seliph, Ares, and Leif, just chatting with each other while sharing a drink.

"Thank you again for earlier, Ares," Seliph was saying. It was hard to hear him, but Nanna and I crept a little closer to eavesdrop. Hestia almost ran for them, but I caught her in time. "I can't say I'm not annoyed that I've had to be shielded twice, though…"

"Better get used to it," Ares retorted without the slightest bit of sympathy. It made Leif laugh, though Seliph made a face. "You're the leader. If you die, this whole thing falls apart, you know."
Ares gently hit Seliph on the head, using his knuckle. "Honestly, you probably should do the whole 'commanders are supposed to command' thing."

"No way in hell. I will fight and bleed alongside my soldiers."

"Then get used to people throwing themselves in front of you. Besides…" Ares shrugged and took a long sip from his mug. "I knew I'd survive the hit. If I didn't, I would've taken the risk of tackling you."

"Risk?" Leif repeated, laughter being replaced with curiosity. His eyes were bright with amusement still, and it occurred to me that this was the first time I'd seen him smile so freely and easily. "Oh, right, the Hezul blood."

"Harder to control when you're running on battle-fever," Ares confirmed. He raised a brow when he saw Seliph and Leif nod knowingly, and I marveled at how the expression was so much like Nanna's earlier one. "What?"

"Well, we grew up with your cousins, remember?" Leif grinned. "We know the trouble Hezul minors get into! But anyway, you were certain you'd survive? Really?"

"Mystletainn. Now, if it was the Goddess of Thunder, I wouldn't have been so certain, but Ishtar's magical prowess comes from her mother, according to the rumors. Her mother is a Velthomer noble and even those without Fjalar's blood are magically strong. According to the rumors, at least." Ares hailed a young boy who was helping to clean and passed him his empty mug. And some coin. "But it was Bloom, and I'm careful about that sort of thing. I promised Lene that I'd
stay with her. That kind of means staying alive."

"That is true…"

"He's the sweetest sometimes," Lene suddenly whispered in my ear. Nanna and I nearly screamed and only didn't because we covered each other's mouths. Lene doubled-over from laughter, before muffling the sound by kneeling and hugging Hestia. Hestia who was suddenly chewing on a bone, so I knew how Lene managed to sneak up! "About time I found you two. I thought it might be fun to wander the market."

"The market is open?" I asked, startled. Mostly because I figured it would be a couple of days, but merchants must've seen the opportunity to hit it big. "That does sound like fun." I glanced at Nanna, who thought it over a bit before nodding and smiling in agreement. "We got to go slow for me, but Hestia will keep me stable."

Might as well have as much fun as possible for the night. I think we deserved it, at least.

Iuchar

Class: Axe Knight; Skills:

Middle child of Danann, brother of Iurcharba and Brian. As a result of being the middle child, he was often left alone, which gave him free time to read books that weren't strictly educational, such as legends and dashing tales of fantasy. As a result, he will sometimes speak in a poetic manner, with suitable drama. Well, that and he loved how much it annoyed his brothers and his father.

Has the Mark of Neir on the back of his shoulder, the lines making a pauldron-shaped pattern there. Its blessing gives him more stamina, a greater ability to resist pain, and the ability to resist physical damage. As revealed by Lewyn, the blessing also gives him a higher pain tolerance.

Has a knack for getting the drop on his enemies, even while being mounted, but because he was the middle son, he was never seriously taught, and got away with skipping training, leading to him not being as skilled as, say, his fellows among the nobles. He takes extra lessons now to try and make up for it a little, but is aware that his contributions to the army are better suited to non-battle situations

Even he isn't quite certain how he kept any sort of morals when he spent so much of his life with his father, but theorizes it's got something to do with his love of stories and his hatred of his father leading him to just be as opposite as possible. Not exactly the best of reasons, but if it works, it works

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: And thus ends game-chapter… 7? Are we on 7? Think that's it. Anyway, 'Sarabi' is the name of Simba's mother in The Lion King and I really couldn't not pick a name from there to use. (Well, I could, but… yeah.)

And Manfroy makes his appearance in Gen2. The reason for this is… actually, there's a few reasons. One) much like Arvis, Manfroy is more or less a non-entity in Gen2 until like… Game-Chapter 10, so this brings him in a little early. Second… well, in
game, the chars don't actually learn about Manfroy's involvement with… everything…
until the Final Chapter, when Manfroy monologues about it. So, I brought him in early
so that the chars could make the connections sooner. Manfroy's appearance here
purposely takes cues from Chapter 15) Screams, when Deirdre was kidnapped. The
'Moira' mentioned here is briefly brought up in both *Memoirs of Velthomer* and
Manfroy's oneshot in *Memoirs of the Lost*.

Yes, Eleri cameos here, along with other FE5 chars. This is her at like… 2 or 3 years
after the start of *Memoirs of the Liberation War*. Her joke is a nod to her first chapter,
actually. (For simplification on my end, things relating to FE5 chars will be mostly
off-screen for this story, at least until we reached the end of FE5's part). Also, for
clarification, the battle shown here is based more on FE4, where you have the troops
near-constantly marching, not the battle in FE5 (that game chapter happened prior to
Leif and Nanna showing up in this story). Also, also, Eleri and Mareeta wear
feather/winglet ornaments like Nanna as a nod to the accessory Fallen!Mareeta gives
during that Forging Bonds event.

The 'dropkick', by the way, is a move seen in professional wrestling and it's believed
that the current form (i.e. what most think of when the word comes up) was created in
the 1930s, and was supposedly inspired by kangaroos (unless my research is lying to
me, which is totally plausible because I wasn't devoting a lot of time to this). So, I
figured that in this case, it's more of Riona playing with words, hence the hyphen in
the word and Shanan's response.

Ares protecting Seliph comes from the Fuyuki manga, though that manga compressed
Chapters 7 and 8 together, so it's actually Ishtar he's protecting Seliph from. At base
stats, Ares is actually capable of tanking a hit from Bloom (taking Mystletainn into
account, Bloom deals like… 32 damage to him, and Ares starts out with 40HP). In
fact, he can tank a hit from Ishtar with his base stats (just one, though, so if she
activates adept, he's dead).

In-game, the boss convo between Bloom and Tine stops at Tine's apology, but I
brought in a little of the conversation they have prior to Tine entering the field and a
reference to the boss convo they have in the next chapter. (Also, because it's been
asked a couple of times and I don't know if the characters are ever going to care, but in
this story, Hilda's just a noblewoman from Velthomer, and… well, in my copy of the
game, she doesn't have Fjalar minor blood? Don't know if I got a weird copy or what,
but between that, and the fact that Ishtore and Ishtar don't have Fjalar minor blood in
game, I'm just going with her not having Holy Blood. She's also not related to Victor,
which I know is a fairly popular theory. She's just an evil person. [Yes, I know, a
remake or something will likely prove this wrong, but this is what I'm sticking with])

Also, standard warning whenever Riona does stupid things with animals. *Don't*
approach wild animals! (Though, really, the coyote would've been more likely to run
away before even being spotted.)
Interlude - Threads

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Interlude - Threads

*Alster is ours and, thankfully, Leonster endured long enough. Bloom escaped, but with the worst of winter fast approaching, we decide it's best to just… let him do whatever while we desperately attempt to help the people. Food stores are low, hunting is sparse… not to mention that many lost their homes. Winters are considered 'milder' here in the Manster District than in Isaach, but that doesn't mean that people can go without shelter. Particularly since the weather is prone to rain (but not outright storms, thankfully!).*

*There's a lot to do before we can push forward. But, we're glad to do it.*

At first, I wasn't sure why I had woken up. It wasn't yet late enough for Hestia to need to head outside again, and there was no screaming or anything that hinted there was some sort of emergency. Just me curled up with Seliph, with him holding me tightly even while fast asleep. Dopey as it sounded, I couldn't help but smile at his sleeping face, just because. I wasn't sure why it had an effect on me, since I'd seen it many times over the years. Even as close up as this. Maybe it was just an extension of how he always seemed to make me smile? And, just like my feelings, I had become so used to it that I never noticed? Possibly. Either way, I smiled and I absently ran my fingers through his hair, careful to not pull on any tangles I found. I didn't want to wake him. I just wanted to play with the strands a bit, before dozing off in his arms again.

But then came a knock on the door and I realized that it had been that sound that had woken me up. I pushed myself up a bit with a frown, wondering just who it could be. None of the Tirnanog group, because they would've just walked on it. None of the rest of my friends, because they would've just walked on it. None of the rest of my friends, because they would've said something. Especially when there was a third knock, a little louder than the last two.

"What is going on?" I whispered, voice still a bit raspy from grogginess. Hestia emerged from where she'd been sleeping in the bathroom, yawning loudly before padding to the door. "She's in no hurry…" I tried to sit up fully, but Seliph suddenly yanked me down to hold me even tighter. "Seliph?" He groaned and buried his face in my neck. I squirmed a bit from how ticklish it felt. "I think we need to get the door."

"If Hestia's not worried, I don't see why we can't sleep more," Seliph grumbled, all but pinning me to keep me from sitting up. I had to laugh a little, because I happened to agree, and I hugged him back, letting him curl up against me. "You're comfy." Still, there was a fourth knock, and it was definitely insistent. I heard Hestia scratching at the door curiously, though thankfully, she hadn't actually opened it yet. "Ugh…" He sighed and propped himself up to kiss me sweetly, and I couldn't help but hum in delight. "Were did we leave our robes again?"

It took a bit to find the robes, as well as Seliph's sleeping pants and my nightgown. But Hestia helped us out and so, we were able to open the door before there was a fifth knock. However, I had to say… our guests were unexpected. It was Inanna, who rubbed at her eyes to try and stay awake, as well as one of the younger children, an orphan who had been among the refugees and now had nowhere to go. They clung to Inanna's hand tightly with hands that shook, half-hiding behind her with wide eyes. For some reason, there was no sign of Eresh.
"I'm sorry… I know it's late…" Inanna yawned, rubbing her eyes more insistently. Seliph leaned against the door frame to listen, and I petted Hestia to keep her from darting off in curiosity. "Or early. I don't know. Time shouldn't exist during sleeping hours."

"I quite agree," Seliph replied, laughing a little. Though I could see the exasperation in his eyes, and in how his smile was a bit thinner than normal, I knew he was doing his best to not let Inanna or, worse, the scared child know. "What is it? Hestia hasn't woken us yet, so I'm assuming no one is dying."

"I'm not too sure, really, but…" She gestured at the younger child. "There's apparently some strange noise in one of the rooms? Anat and Sandas didn't hear it in theirs, but everyone in Miri's room is frightened. I left Eresh with them to reassure them." Good choice. Eresh was quickly becoming as adept as Hestia when it came to comforting, a good thing given how many traumatized children we watched over.

"A strange noise?" Seliph pushed off from the frame and crouched to better look 'Miri' in the eyes. "Can you tell me what sort of noise it is?"

"It was some… some scratching?" Miri mumbled, her voice trembling. She clung tighter to Inanna's hand, with enough strength that Inanna winced. "Scratching… crawling… it reminds me of the sounds of the priests hunting while we hid under the floor. Hoping to not get caught." I frowned and caught Inanna's eye. Her sad eyes and slight nod confirmed it. Her village had been Hunted. I was curious as to what exactly had caused the sounds, but… well, it didn't matter. "It's…"

"In that case, we should see to it ourselves," I answered, gently nudging Hestia forward. She instantly pressed herself to Miri's side, licking her hand to soothe her. I understood now why Inanna had decided to get us, despite the unholy hour. If the sound triggered memories of a Child Hunt, then they might not calm until one of us leaders saw to it. And aside from some of the adults, only Seliph and me were here in Alster for the time being. "And if it is a mean ol' priest, we'll beat him up." I grinned at Miri, and she tentatively smiled back, clutching at Hestia's fur. For his part, Seliph sighed, shook his head, but made a point to ruffle Miri's hair reassuringly. "Is it just that room?" Inanna nodded, smiling sleepily. "Okay, tell us anything else you can think of on the way? No matter how insignificant it might appear."

While I'd intended to just hear more about the 'scratching' noise, Miri accidentally took it as a prompt to talk about the day. Which I could complain about, especially since it helped her noticeably relax. Inanna chimed in with details of her own, and Seliph and I made sure to ask questions to keep the conversation going (after exchanging a bit of an amused look). Hestia, of course, did her best to be as cute as possible (not very hard at all) and be the support Miri needed to feel perfectly safe. And help Eresh with the same thing when we actually arrived at the room in question, which… definitely had more children than usual. Seemed like those in Sandas and Anat's room had decided safety in numbers would make everyone feel better.

"Oh, Your Highness, my lady!" Roxana blurted, rushing over to us, with her caracal at her heels. Unlike Inanna, she was wide awake and a little frazzled, probably because she was the oldest in the room. Despite that, though, I was pleased to see that her nightgown finally fitted her properly, though I knew that had more to do with Maliya gathering all those with some form of sewing talent to take things in than Roxana (and the other refugee children) being able to eat themselves back to a healthy weight. "I'm so sorry for disturbing you…" She bowed apologetically, and I glanced around the room curiously, noting Anat and Sandas were talking with some of the others, while Neith and Mursi did exactly what Hestia and Eresh were doing. I knew giving them the animals was a good idea. "We've been trying to locate the sound on our own, but…"
"You're so quick to bow," Seliph teased, laughing a little. He smiled warmly when she tentatively glanced up. "It's fine. I'd rather be woken up than to hear later that you all had such a restless night." That was half of a lie. He would have felt bad, but he also wished he was asleep. We'd been up early for meetings. "So please, don't apologize."

"But…"

"Hey, Prince Seliph, one of the kitties scratch you?" Anat asked suddenly, startling all of us (and stopping Roxana's half-formed protests). She yawned and rubbed her eye sleepily, clinging to her doll (the one 'borrowed' from that village girl) to make sure she didn't drop it. Neith twined about her legs, trying to get her attention, probably to get help with the sniffling girl next to her. "You had red marks on your back…"

"I do?" Seliph replied, a note of surprise in his voice as he brought the collar of his robe down so that he could try to look himself. I purposely busied myself with making sure Hestia wasn't scaring any of the children to avoid blushing because… ah… I knew where those marks had come from. I knew very well where they had come from. "Huh. I suppose a kitty-cat did scratch me. But I'm fine, Anat. Promise."

"If you're sure…" She yawned again, this time making a little noise. "So early…"

"I wonder if it's the same one that sometimes scratches Mursili," Sandas mused, absently petting Mursi the same way he stroked a younger child's hair. It was kind of an amusing mental image, even if I felt like I might die from mortification. Especially as the other children became curious. Inanna and Roxana even shared a confused look as they helped Miri settle back down into her blankets. "Actually, I think I've seen some others have.-"

"Kitty-cats can get over enthusiastic in their affection," Seliph interrupted with a smile. It almost hid his faint blush, but he disguised it by conjuring up some light-globes to make it easier for everyone to actually see. And to chase away the shadows where 'something' might be hiding. "Now, you all haven't been able to find the source?"

The answer was 'no, they had not', since the children who normally slept in this room were too frightened and the ones who came in had prioritized making everyone feel better while Inanna and Miri had gotten Seliph and me. So, Seliph and I wandered the room, making a good show of checking everywhere to help reassure everyone that things were safe. So, when the noise did sound again, a strange scratching sound, no one was afraid, but it was easy to 'hear' why they had been originally. It traveled weirdly through the room, making it hard to narrow down the location. But, thankfully, wolves had good noses and as soon as Hestia was sure the children would be fine without her comforting bulk, she assisted in the search and I opened one of the small storage closets in the room (since the room itself had been used for storage before being converted into a room for the children). And was promptly tackled by a furry armful of leaping… well, not impossible, because it was me and these things tended to happen to me. Still, I could be forgiven for being a little surprised.

"So… uh…" I began, desperately trying to form coherent words and coming up short. In my defense, most of the room was like that. Seliph even tiptoed over to poke the stripped side of the bundle of fuzzy fur happily chuffing in my arms, to confirm it was real. "Okay, who hid a tiger cub in the closet?"

Things were a little… okay, things were a lot chaotic after that. From the children wanting to coo over the adorable cub, to reassuring the soldiers that all was well, to organizing things… it took quite a while for Seliph and I to actually meet Shanan and Oifeye (the only other 'leaders' in Alster currently) in Oifeye's study to actually discuss what the hell just happened. I had to say, though,
that Oifeye's long-suffering groan was *hilarious* to hear.

"Why does this keep happening?" he complained, rubbing his eyes. He was seated at his desk, with papers all over the place, and giving me a dark look. "Well, then again…"

"I've got Mursili and Niamh looking into how the hell a *tiger cub* snuck in," I reassured quickly, biting back a bit of a laugh. I just couldn't help but find this all terribly entertaining, particularly since the cub was curled up in Shanan's lap, as happy as can be. "Current theory is that the guards saw a wild animal and just assumed things. Which is bad. Very bad. There shall be much scolding." I had to muffle a snicker when Oifeye groaned again, completely exasperated by all this. "I've also got them looking for more, which is why Hestia isn't here. She's helping them." And likely would head to the children's room to continue providing comfort. Just because the scare turned adorable didn't mean it hadn't been a scare, after all.

"We don't *need* more!"

"If one snuck in, then more could've," Seliph pointed out, leaning a bit more against the wall. Like me, he was struggling to not laugh, though I supposed we could blame Shanan. He was so hesitant about the cub that it was just cute! He even sat stiffly on the floor, like he was afraid even relaxing might jolt the cutie! "We also need to keep in mind that we could have an angry, full grown tiger prowling around." This time, Oifeye just let his head fall to his desk with a distinctive 'thump'. "I do agree that there's quite a few, though…"

"Honestly, we should take it as a sign of how bad things are," I pointed out, my own good mood fading as I thought about it. I scooted closer to Seliph to lean against him and fussed with the hair hanging by my face. "Wild animals normally *avoid* humans. If they're coming so close that we keep getting things like this…" Then it meant that either the animals were edging closer to humans in the hopes of food, or that humans had to go farther out for adequate hunting and foraging (and, thus, exposing impressionable baby animals into thinking humans were 'normal'). "Ideally, the little one has a mama that's looking for him, but given the last few, we can't assume that." We… also had to consider the possibility that he'd been abandoned, but he seemed a little too old for that. But it could also be my instinctive objection to the thought of parents *abandoning* children, even animal-parents. "We might get a few more incidents like this as winter claws in."

"But hopefully, the efforts we're making now, and plan to make in the spring, should help with the food problem." Seliph gently bumped his head against mine reassuringly, and I smiled up at him. "And then we shouldn't have more baby animals joining us. Though considering the 'collection' of orphans we've picked up…"

"It's certainly an… interesting problem," Shanan murmured, hesitantly petting the tiger. He chuffed and pressed his head more firmly into Shanan's hand, and Shanan smiled softly. "I'm reminded of when... oh, gods, what was his name? I can only think of the ridiculous nickname Quan gave him. Or was that you, Oifeye?"

"Are you talking about when Gandolf or whatever his name was massacred his own people to get to us?" Oifeye asked softly, slowly straightening so that he was sitting properly. Both Seliph and I tensed at the name. We hadn't heard *much* about him, but we'd heard enough to know what they were talking about. "I remember. Blood everywhere. The infirmary overfull with the injured and the dead. We had animals then too."

"And afterwards, many of them stayed with us in Evans. And remained in Evans when we moved to Agusty." Shanan slowly relaxed as he continued petting the tiger, who had his eyes all scrunched up in pleasure. I had to grin at the sight. "I wonder if they're *still* there?"
"Could be. Verdane certainly hasn't been a friend of the Empire. I wonder if we could get a message to them..." Oifeye frowned thoughtfully and scribbled something down. "But yes, I do remember. I suppose something similar will happen here?"

"I... wouldn't be too sure on that," I said slowly, my good mood once again faltering as I thought of the children. Inanna, Anat, and Sandas were definitely staying with us. They had said as much, and I doubted any amount of arguing would change their minds. And the others, like Roxana... "We can try, but many of them are so grateful that they insist on helping. And, to be frank, we do need that extra help."

"Not to mention that many of them feel like they need to be a part of this, in order to move through their own pain," Seliph added softly, closing his eyes. He and I had talked about this just yesterday, truthfully. "The very young, I'm sure we can convince, but..." The rest would stay. To help. To 'fight' in the only way they could. To move forward and find their own answers to the complicated mess of a world we lived in.

"...Well, it won't be the first time a child brattishly insisted on staying with the army," Oifeye noted with a half-smile and a pointed look towards Shanan. Who just as pointedly ignored him. Both Seliph and I had to chuckle at that. "We'll figure it out. There's still also more of the District to liberate. They could want to stop at Manster." That was quite true. "So, since I doubt Shanan was paying attention, can you explain again the precautions set up?"

Shanan half-protested being used as a 'reason to repeat things', but the four of us did laugh and Seliph and I explained again what all had happened. During that, Mursili arrived with a reassurance that the children were doing well (and that Hestia was with them) and a report, confirming our suspicion on how the tiger cub had been able to just waltz on in, though how he had ended up locked in a closet might forever remain a mystery. Closest guess we had was that the children had been playing hide and seek earlier and might've left it open after using it as a hiding spot. No other tigers had been found yet, cub or otherwise, but everyone would be on the lookout. As it was, though, there was no reason not to head to back to bed and, after checking in on the children to make sure they truly were fine, Seliph and I did just that.

"The others are going to laugh themselves silly when they return and hear about this," I 'complained', unable to keep from laughing. I was actually a little glad we'd have a silly story to tell them, since we were all neck-deep in trying to help the western half of the district recover enough to survive the winter. "Though, I do kind of wish it had happened when... you know... the sun was up?"

"Please don't remind me," Seliph groaned. And then yawned because it was still a ridiculous hour to be awake. "Hestia's with the children, right?"

"And they had already taken her out with the other animals, yes." Though, now I was reminded of Anat's comment and I couldn't help but tease. Just a little. "Also, did you really have to say those marks on your back were caused by a kitty-cat?"

"Of course. One with sharp 'claws' at that." Seliph smirked at me before taking my hand and gently kissing it. Followed by him kissing each one of my nails. My face went red, but I had to smile. "And I think I shall look on them fondly, because of just why they're there."

"Just fondly?" I glanced around to make sure no one was around before quickly kissing him and grinning at him. "Well, if you happen to catch the kitty who caused them... I'm sure she wouldn't mind making sure you were more than fond? Or maybe adding a few?" With that, I 'escaped', running back to our room, glancing back only once to make sure he caught the joke and implication. Seliph lingered back for a moment, to regard me with a lovingly sweet smile before he
grinned and chased after me.

It was fine if we stayed up late. We didn't have any morning meetings tomorrow.

The next morning, one other tiger cub was found, a sweet and quiet girl who had ended up in the stables. There was no sign of an adult tiger anywhere, sadly, so it was decided that the tiger cubs would simply join the rest of the animals that stayed with us. Or, rather, they would stay with Shanan as both firmly attached themselves to him. It was hilarious adorable, or at least, I thought so. And made me remember what Lewyn had said about Od's blood and animals… if I didn't think Oifeye would give me a lecture from hell, I'd be tempted to see if I could get some for Larcei and Ulster. Just because.

And it did make for a good distraction when all of us finally got together a week or so later, for a War Council, alongside the stories everyone else brought. Like the children who ended up falling into the moat at Darna because they were trying to dance like Lene and Ares had to fish them out (and Sarabi jumped in to 'help'). Or Arthur and Tine sharing how well Melgen was recuperating, now that they didn't have so many refugees. And, of course, the tales Leif and Nana shared about how Leonster and the nearby villages were beginning to thrive again.

But, unfortunately… not everything shared was good. For instance, Diarmuid and Yuria had to help a nearby village move to another one because, despite everyone's best efforts, there was no salvaging their fields. Fee and Iuchar had traveled to check on some villages no one had heard from in a while, and found nothing but corpses and ruins. Lester and Patty had escorted Lana to nearby villages who were filled with the ill and injured, breaking almost every staff they had brought and using every dreg of the medicines with them. Larcei and Ulster led some bandit hunts, but no matter how many were slain, even more seemed to bubble up from the depths to replace them.

Then, of course, came the news I had known would be coming. Though Salem himself had declined speaking to us directly (too nervous in crowds and a want to help Linoan, Sara, and the other healers in the infirmary to free up both Lana, Nanna, and Yuria for the meeting), he had told Leif everything he knew about Julius and the Loptyrian Empire. And Leif laid it all out methodically, so that there were no doubts. Julius had been, essentially, the first sacrifice of the Loptyrian Empire. And, just like the other sacrifices, there would be no saving him.

"So, essentially, the only victory this war will have is right over his corpse," Ares summarized once Leif had explained everything. He was, as he had been before, seated at the window with Lene next to him, away from everyone. But I didn't miss how his eyes focused on Seliph, watching him closely. "Can you do that? You're softhearted with complete strangers."

"...I will save my little brother, as I will save Jugdral," Seliph whispered softly, keeping his gaze on Ares. Though he spoke with conviction, his hands shook and he leaned heavily on me. But… but I was glad I had warned him ahead of time, because it meant he'd had time to think about this. And it meant that he had only needed one of us (me) to support him, leaving the others to support Yuria (who was shaken about her twin) and Tine (who had known it was coming, but still found terribly bitter because of how much he meant to her loved ones). Which they did, in two large groups. The only ones actually at the table were Seliph, myself, Leif, and Nanna. "The latter is my duty, as a prince of the realm, and one that I have always known."

"And the former?"

"It is my wish, as an older brother. And…" Seliph's voice cracked and his eyes shone with the tears he refused to shed. "If that is by blade, then so be it."
"...I've said this before, but I feel like all of you forget you're human sometimes." Ares sighed gustily, while Lene smiled and bumped her shoulder against his arm. "You're allowed to scream about how unfair it is, you know. And I swear that if you're going to say something like 'it is nothing different than what others go through', I'm throwing something at you." Since that had been Seliph's response, he kept silent. "We need to give you lessons in being selfish."

"I fear I am too selfish as it is, though." And a pillow flew right at Seliph's face. I only caught it because Lene had signaled a warning to me a split-second before Ares actually threw it. "I... where did that even come from?"

"Lene brought pillows because the window is cold, but I'm used to worse." Ares smiled at Lene before focusing back on Seliph. I tentatively glanced at everyone else, but Leif winked and Nanna smiled reassuringly and pointed to the groups. This was, at least, buying more time to make sure everyone was okay. "But you're allowed to be angry."

"I am, but..." Realization dawned in Seliph's eyes and he smiled. "Ah, I get it now. Ares, this isn't my first time hearing about this. I've known for... however long it's been since we reclaimed Alster."

"Really?" Ares frowned and raised a brow, radiating skeptically, but he just laughed softly when Seliph pointed to me. "Ah, yes, how could I think otherwise? Given how often Riona eavesdrops."

"You make it sound like it's on purpose!" I protested, sulking. And giving Seliph a bit of a better hug because even if he knew already, it was still... "In this case, I... uh... actually, I can't think of how to phrase this without making it sound like I looked for Salem. Which I didn't."

"Salem told me that he and you had talked," Leif added softly, smiling reassuringly. He raised a hand to get Ares to look over at him and Nanna. "He had nightmares of his... departure from the priests and was taking a walk to help himself relax again." The pause made me think that the departure had involved a lot more violence than departures normally warranted. "He ended up crossing paths with her while Hestia was... being Hestia." There had never been so accurate a phrase. "I figured that she had, at least, told Seliph when I learned that. Though, not anyone else?"

"Ulster knew, because he knew something was off with me, but..." I shrugged, smiling sheepishly. "We were in the middle of an operation. A big one. Then we focused on recovery and..."

"I imagine it was hard to speak of. Especially since it gave new meaning to his request to 'save' him." Leif was perfectly right, and I almost hated it. My heart ached keenly at the memory. "Feel a bit better, Ares?"

"I do, actually," Ares confirmed without the slightest bit of hesitation or embarrassment. He glanced over at the groups, frowning. "Maybe I should've brought Sarabi in after all." Or Hestia. But Hestia was helping comfort some patients in the infirmary, and Sarabi was getting a bath with some of the other animals. Inanna and Roxana had insisted. I just hoped they wouldn't lose too much blood from scratches. "Regardless, yes, I do. I figured this was them being them again. And no, you can't say anything because you're like them too. Just a bit lesser." Ares frowned and Leif immediately raised his hand in surrender. Which got laughs out of all of us. "The amount of babysitting you all need is ridiculous sometimes."

"Ares has been fretting terribly as soon as your report started," Lene 'whispered'. Which wasn't even close to a whisper, only some sort of mockery of it. But it made Ares glance to the side, now embarrassed. "Careful. He's probably as much of a fretter as Finn and Oifeye."

"No wonder he and Father get along so well," Nanna teased, not bothering to pretend with 'quiet'. 
Hilariously, Ares's face was turning a little pink. And Lene drew attention to it by poking his cheek. But Nanna was nice enough to distract. "Ah, everyone…"

"Everyone wrapped their head around that?" Lene smiled warmly as everyone began dispersing from the groups at last. But it was all to stand around the room instead of by the table as was 'proper'. Couldn't blame anyone. "I'm going to say right now that any and all speculation is going to be put on hold until later! Otherwise, you'll get all wrapped up in it and forget about the present!"

"Wow, we could've used you back when we were children," Diarmuid immediately teased, grinning playfully. Yuria leaned against him, scrubbing tears from her face, and he absently used his sleeve to help her. "But, then again, you would've met Ares much later, and what a travesty that would've been."

"Almost as much of a travesty as not saving the fun tales for now, because going from all the sads to another sad really didn't help anyone," Patty added cheerfully, even bouncing to show off her energy. She was grouped up with Iuchar and Larcei by the far wall, and her energy almost hid how Larcei was grinding her teeth in frustration and how Iuchar whispered reassuring things to help her calm down. "That said, I do have a question that might be important to keep in mind if nothing else."

"I don't think that'll count for 'speculation' in that case." Diarmuid looked to Lene, and she made a show of thinking before nodding. That let everyone else get settled in their new places, including Ulster coming to Seliph's side to support him and give me a bit of a break. And let me hold Seliph's hand, which quickly turned into Seliph just absently playing with my fingers, tracing shapes on my palm and whatnot. "So, Patty?"

"The Tome of Loptyr." And whatever good mood that might've been sparked fled like a mouse before a cat. "Do they have it? The stories say that no one knows what happened to it in the aftermath, so, maybe they took it or something?"

"That is…" Leif began, frowning. He stopped himself, though, and shook his head before turning to Nanna. His eyes were dark, but it was hard to read anything other than that. His expression was blank as well. "You should say this."

"...Yeah, probably," Nanna sighed, clasping her hands in front of her. Sensing something was off, Lana left where she'd been with Lester in the corner to come to Nanna's side and rest a supporting hand on her shoulder. Nanna smiled at her in thanks; Arthur joined Lester in the corner, leaning Fee and Tine at the wall by the window, with Tine looking so resigned as she rested her head on Fee's shoulder. "The answer is… yes, they do have it." Well, that was just great. "But… but they didn't take it after the final battle of the Holy War," Nanna paused, either to gather her thoughts or to give us time to prepare ourselves. Or… who knew. "Leif? I… I don't..."

"Yeah, okay." Leif smiled wanly before looking at everyone. Taking care to meet everyone's eyes at least once. But then his eyes focused solely on Ares. And I had a terrifying feeling of just why that was. "It was in Agusty. It seems like the royal line was tasked with hiding the tome, a secret passed down only from ruler to ruler."

"But Chagall killed his father before being told, so he didn't know and, thus, didn't protect it as he should've." Nanna's hands shook in front of her, and she looked down to try and hide her face. Lana moved so that she had her hands on her shoulders, a supportive half-hug. "So, they took it from the vault then." And then she fell silent as the full weight of the words hit us. Truly, truly hit us.

They had been involved with Agustria's civil war, hadn't they? Just as they had been involved with Verdane's attack on Jungby. All for… for their plot. All for their goal. Cause chaos in Verdane,
location of the Spirit Forest, to find Deirdre and capture her (and only failing then because she fell in love with Sigurd and left with him and the army). Then, they did the same thing in Agustria, to gain the tome (and successfully kidnap Deirdre). They had... they had... what else had they been involved in? The destruction of Isaach? The devastation in Silesse? Just how much... how much...

They hadn't needed Arvis at all. Not for anything but fathering a Major Loptyr. No, but they had played on his ambitions and trust issues to secure their Empire and make sure he played his role well. The 'king' of the board, moved about as a piece just like everything else. Just like... like our parents. Sigurd, our parents, the army... everyone we ever cared about, positively or negatively, had been nothing more than pieces on a board, played brilliantly by the Loptyrians.

So, what about us? Were we also pieces? Were our victories just some plan, a way to get rid of 'inconveniences' without getting their hands dirty? Were we just... just...

"Wonder why they waited so long." Iuchar's quiet musing startled me from the spiraling thoughts, and I jerked my head up towards him to see him surprisingly thoughtful. "Why did they wait until he was a teenager, or almost a teenager?" he repeated, sounding almost absent. Like he was simply thinking aloud. But the question was surprisingly good for grounding... well, for grounding me, at least. I still wished I had Hestia, though. "Wouldn't a baby have been easier to manipulate?" Lene frowned at him, no doubt for the speculation, but surprisingly, she held her tongue, some sort of suspicion blooming in her eyes. Good suspicion, not bad. "So, why?"

"...Maybe because of Duch... of Aunt Alicia?" Tine whispered hesitantly, her voice shaking a bit. When all eyes turned to her, she half-hid behind Fee, who held still so that she could. "It's just a thought, but I know that she and Manfroy hated each other, and Manfroy really hates Conall for being her son. And I remember Ishtar telling me about how she always warned them about Manfroy."

"In other words, despite all their planning, a single person delayed things significantly. Perhaps this is even why there are these... oh, I don't know... flashes of his old self amidst the violence? The young prince having enough sense of self to resist what is happening? And, thus, delaying things further?" Iuchar smiled, though it was a little meek. "Admittedly, it's simply speculation, but I feel like when you think of people as anything but people, you forget how they can forge their own miracles. You see it all the time in stories, but even stories craft the heroes into something larger than life." He laughed sheepishly, reaching up to adjust his headband. "So... uh... point, point... I totally had a point here..."

"Basically, you're trying to remind everyone that even if the Loptyrians meticulously planned everything, you can still stand up and flip the board," Lene summarized, nodding in agreement. Her eyes gleamed in triumph, and I was impressed she had figured it out so quickly. "I was thinking of reminding the group that they always get really antsy when everything seems to go to plan, because no strategy survives first contact with the enemy, but I like what you're saying better." She laughed and looked at everyone with a smile. "And even if they're playing, aren't you all the group that has used enemies' expectations against them? Repeatedly? So, no getting bogged down in what-ifs, okay? Think too far ahead in the dance, and you're just going to get your feet tangled."

"...I'm repeatedly reminded of how lucky we are to have everyone," Seliph murmured after a moment, smiling a bright smile. It instantly made everything feel a lot lighter and the world better, though that could be my heavy bias. "You're both quite right. So, back to the present. Is there anything else that should be discussed?"

"Hmm... oh, right! Ares!" Lene poked Ares's arm to get his attention. And then kissed his cheek to make sure she had it. Not a single one of us could keep from snickering when he instantly smiled
at the gesture of affection. "Back at Darna, you were mentioning those prisons or whatnot you had to escort Loptyrian Priests to as part of your duties with Brams. And that you thought you should bring it up to the others?"

That certainly changed the subject, and the room became lively as talks focused on that. Everyone more or less stayed where they were, only coming near the table when we had to look at a map, but plans were drafted, to be refined after confirming things with scouts, while Leif and Nanna promised to talk more with Salem and Sara about other places of interest. And Patty volunteered to head an exploration of the Yied Shrine, just to see if there were more things (and to see if there were any items that Inanna, Anat, and the other Loptyrian children had left there). All in all, it ended up being the perfect way to end the meeting, because we felt like we were actually doing something instead of being trapped by our own anxieties.

"Ah, Riona!" As we were all leaving to settle whatever we had to settle before our next set of duties (and travels in some cases), Shanan called out to me. He raised a hand to make sure I saw him down the hall, as if he'd be hard to miss with two tigers at his side. Menis, the girl, sat quietly on his right, while Alexander, the boy, happily skipped about his feet while staying mostly on his left. "Sorry, but I'd like your help with something," he explained. "You mind?"

"You don't even need to ask, Shanan!" I laughed, beaming. This… I couldn't help but like it when he asked for help. Both because it felt like he was acknowledging how we were all getting stronger, and because it meant he was relearning to not do things alone. "Explain on the way, okay?"

One step at a time. That's all we could do, at the moment. I needed to remember that.

Ares remembered the rough locations of five different spots he had escorted Loptyrian Priests to. Salem knew of two more, while Sara knew of one that her grand… that Manfroy had visited fairly often in the past. It took the scouts a bit to confirm the locations, but eventually, all eight entrances were mapped out. Combined with Patty's expedition to the Yied Shrine, that made for nine exploration groups to plan out. Which, surprisingly, involved even more logistics than scouting groups. Mostly because we had no idea what we'd find, even more so than usual.

"I still maintain that being so deep underground is one of the worst things ever," I grumbled, covering my mouth with a scented cloth Maliya had insisted I carry before heading out on this expedition. And gods, I was glad for it. Even with the scent being faint due to time, it made breathing bearable in these mold-encrusted halls. "I feel like once the continent chose to drive the Loptyrians here, everything became inevitable." If only someone could've reached out sooner… "Ugh… no time for such thoughts. I'm moving forward."

I ended up being one of the leaders sent off for exploration, one of the closer ones that had a higher likelihood of people or prisoners, according to Sara. After all, it was the one Manfroy frequented. There was a worry of him ambushing us, again, but that was why Ares had insisted on traveling with me. If any of us were going to be ambushed, it would probably be me (because Seliph and Yuria were remaining in Alster for this).

"You done conversing with yourself?" Ares asked, barely glancing at me as he broke another locked door with all the ease of brushing something off a table. Inside we had blood, blood, and blood and mold ridden books that were impossible to even pick up without them falling apart. Again. "I'm beginning to think they just have a fetish or something at this point. This is the tenth room we've found alone that's been like this."

"Look, the last thing we need is the mental image of Manfroy having sex," I groused, scowling at
him even as we continued down the hall. I'd had everyone split up in groups once we had gotten to the main interior, and Ares had insisted on staying near me (especially since Hestia was back at Alster). I could only hope the groups led by Mursili and Niamh were having much better luck. "I mean… since Sara is around, we know something like that had to have happened at least once, but…"

"Then don't mention it!" Ares scowled at me before covering his own nose and mouth with one of the scented cloths. "Ugh… the smell is even getting to me, and I've dealt with things like this before."

"Mercenaries scavenged ruins?"

"More like battlefields. To reclaim Lord 'So and So''s most prized sword that he left on the battlefield while fleeing and leaving his men to die. That sort of thing." We passed by another door and Ares just kicked it open this time instead of breaking the lock first. But the inside was… actually different. But… uh… "We certain that some lack of morality wasn't accidentally bred into the Loptyrians at one point?"

"Inanna. Anat." Though they were an immediate counter, I had to admit that Ares might have some sort of point. After all, the room we had opened up was like some demented version of an infirmary. Except the bodies were tied up on long slabs of stone, cut open and their organs for spread out all over the place. Like they'd been studied. The meticulous notes, written in an even hand and set carefully to the side, away from the blood, confirmed such suspicion. "Why would they do this?" Even if it was to study the bodies… based on the blood splatter, they'd been alive when first cut open. Why not just cut open the dead? I knew from Inanna how they viewed corpses, so… "Let's… gather the bodies and…" I passed by one, a woman not much older than me (which already hinted they were not from 'Child Hunts') with one of her legs messily stitched up, as if it was simply to 'close' the leg instead of actually heal. I smelled the infection and almost gagged… until I realized something.

I smelled infection.

As far as I knew, the dead didn’t… exactly… "Oh, please no…" Please, let me just be mistaking the smell for rot or something. Please...

"Why do I have a bad feeling about what you're about to say?" Ares, meanwhile, was gathering the papers. I almost protested, but I bit my tongue. If it was here, then maybe we could at least use the information to save people. Even though at my core, I wanted to just burn it all because of how it was most likely obtained.

So, instead, I leaned in close to the girl, ignoring the rank smell as I rested my ear against her chest. It moved, and there… there was a heartbeat. "She's alive."

"Of course she is." Ares immediately ripped off his cloak and passed it to me. Something relatively clean to wrap her in. "I'll check the others. You administer first aid to her."

"Got it."

Ares found one other alive, a young boy whose arm was twisted around and around again, before someone had allowed it to 'sit' and heal wrong. He was so far into unconsciousness that he didn't so much as twitch as I re-broke the arm in an effort to properly set and bind it. For the woman, I had to rip out the stitches to clean the wound and purge the infection. She, at least, feebly whimpered and jerked from the pain. In fact, she even opened her eyes once. Just once, and they were so bleary that I wasn't sure she saw anything, but I made sure to smile at her. Just in case. Then it was back to tending to her wounds, as well as the boy's.

"This is going to be fun telling Inanna about," I whispered at some point while I worked. Ares just
grunted in response, helping me when I needed it and basically turning the entire room upside down to see if there was anything hidden. And reading through the notes since he only really needed one hand to pick up things. "I wish I could hide it, but that would be worse."

"I am beginning to wonder how she's so moral, considering what I'm reading here," Ares noted, ripping the ropes off of one corpse so that he could set them down gently on the floor. And then kick over the table they'd been strapped to. "It's like the one, or ones, who did this didn't even think of them as human."

"Perhaps a generational thing?" Inanna was among the first Loptyrians in a hundred years that could grow up in the sun, without fear of the flames. "Or… well, perhaps there were different 'sects' or something? Like how we have countries? They used to live underground. I found it very hard to believe that there were underground ruins spanning the entire length of Yied."

"You know; that's a good point. And each one could've taught their people something a little different. Like fables. Or how approaching a bear really should get you eaten, but you apparently never learned that." I snorted a laugh, startled by the joke. Especially since I hadn't encountered a bear in quite a few years. "That could be something to ask Inanna, then. Or, perhaps Salem would be better. Could be that the lines between groups blurred once they were allowed to travel freely."

He turned to face me, nodding to the two survivors. "Think they can handle being carried by us? Or should we go with some sort of sling?"

"I… honestly, I have no idea." I sighed and looked at the two. I didn't even know they'd make it back to the sun, much less anything else. But, I had to try. I couldn't just write them off or anything. That was another reason why I couldn't be a healer, as Mom was. "We should've brought one of the healers with us."

"Then we'll get them. Everyone has been marking their paths, after all." That was true. "I think we should at least carry these two out of the room, though. If they're going to die, they can at least die in a place slightly different from where they were tortured for knowledge." Ares glanced at the papers he still held. "...I would like to think that the information can be used to help the healers work more efficiently."

"But, if we find them, then those who did this… will die." I made sure to catch and hold his gaze. I hoped… he would get what I was asking. "No second chances or anything. No mercy, save for a quick death."

"I'll make sure you don't forget." He smiled slightly, yet softly, and I smiled back, relieved. Because even with my resolve, and even with my acknowledgement that it was okay to keep things 'simple', I knew the chances were high that I, and the others, would fall into old habits. That was just… how I was. Painful as it was to think, it was likely something I would have to be aware of until the day I died. "I'll take the boy."

We both moved the two as gently as possible, taking care to give them as much support as we could. I fussed over how we laid them down, mostly because I just… I didn't want to leave them. Since they were alive, that meant that someone had recently been here. For all we knew, they could still be here, and if they were, then… but I wasn't sure how best to carry them and, honestly, if they didn't have internal damage of some kind, I'd do… something. It was a bit hard to think, really. Well, for me. Ares was already heading down the hall, though at a very quick pace. I lingered and fussed, while he actually went and did something. Really showed the difference in maturity there…

I sighed and made myself stand, reminding myself that I had to keep moving. But before I could take a step, I heard something… weird. Very weird. It almost sounded like a flute. No, not even
'almost'. It was a flute. I was sure of it. And the source was somewhere in the room, so I returned, even though I was reasonably certain that there could be no one playing a flute there. Still, I heard it and I looked around slowly, wondering if maybe there was some sort of device that was playing it? I mean; I wasn't sure how that would work per se, but there were stranger things in the world. And it would've made more sense than an invisible person playing a flute. Which was what it appeared to be, as I saw no one. No one and nothing, besides what had been here when Ares and I first stepped inside.

At least, until I noticed something that had definitely not been there earlier. There, underneath one of the few tables Ares hadn't turned or kicked over (mostly because it was wedged into the corner), was a feather. A pure white feather, the same size as a pegasus's, and far too clean to have been in this room from the start. But it was also not something Ares and I could've tracked in. So, it was... terribly strange. And because I was a curious one, instead of running like a smart person, I instead got on my hands and knees and crawled under the table, looking for some sort of clue. I found one instantly; the floor shifted under my hands. A quick brush of the dust and I was easily able to find a door. It took a bit of finagling to actually get it to open, because it was heavy, but I managed and found a staircase, heading down. And though I knew I shouldn't, knew that I should at least wait (if not go and catch up with Ares), I crawled down, moving carefully to lessen the chances of me slipping. After all, a hidden staircase under a place like this? Made me think that... that there could be people here.

I still had to scowl when I made it to the bottom of the staircase and found the source of the flute at last. Lewyn. He was casually leaning against the wall, playing a song that I thought I might've heard Fee hum a couple of times. It was pretty, but annoying. Him being here was annoying. He was supposed to be helping in Leonster (which was very far away from where we were) and if he had somehow gotten down here before Ares and me, that meant there were more entrances than I doubted we had time to look for. And I was prepared to yell at him for just appearing without telling us (because I doubted he would've left a note or something), but the words died when he opened his eyes and I realized something even stranger than the flute and feather and him being here. The Lewyn I saw looked more like the Lewyn I had seen in the pictures than the one I had come to know personally. Eyes dancing with good humor, a touch of a smile on his face even while wearing a serious expression... hell, even his clothes were different. Still subtle on the elegance, but somehow livelier. Like it was put on for sheer fun and the wearer intended to live up to the intention.

He gestured for me to follow him, not saying a single word (which was also very weird), and I... well, followed. Because this was all weird. This was all very weird. So, in silence, we walked and, slowly, I began smelling the distinct iron smell of blood. The nauseating smell of mold, dirt, and other things piled on top of each other because no one bothered to clean for gods knew how long. Surprisingly, no death, though. Nothing like rot. The closest was the smell of infection. And that last one hinted to where he was leading me before I snapped my fingers to create a small ball of fire and confirm everything with my eyes. Dungeons, just like I'd originally suspected. Dungeons, with people within. Living people who hissed and whimpered at the fire.

"Easy, it's okay," I reassured, rushing to the closest cell. I smiled at the people within, a group of three of indeterminate ages. They were too thin and filthy to try; I could count their ribs through the rags they wore as clothing. "I don't know how long you've been down here, but I... I'm one of the Scions of Light. One of Prince Seliph's." Felt weird to use that title to address myself and even weirder to use a title for Seliph. But the fearful hope that flooded their eyes made it worth it. "I'm here with a group. We're going to get you out of here." Even if I had to melt the locks, but providing Ares came back soon, I wouldn't have to. "I'm going to check the other cells, okay? Rest and try to relax. You're leaving this hell today. I promise."
I turned to address Lewyn, to ask how he knew about this place or if he conveniently had keys, but he was gone. Just… poof. Gone. What the… did he do something with the wind? I mean… Ugh, he could've at least stayed to help a little. Would it have really killed him? But I supposed it didn't matter. Not really. I could yell at him later, so instead, I focused on the people trapped here. Walking to each cell, reassuring them individually that yes, help was here. Yes, this was real and certainly no dream. Not all looked to me with hope or anything. In fact, some looked at me with heartbrokenly dull eyes, eyes that whispered 'why could you have not come sooner?'. Eyes I had no answer to, and my heart keened as I thought of who all had probably died. And how long they'd been here.

"Hmm? So, you're the one breathing life into this hole?" Only one of the prisoners talked to me, a woman with long and tangled green hair and matching eyes. She held two children protectively against her, and used one of her legs to further shield them. Her other leg was mangled, broken a dozen times and left to set until it was twisted and incapable of holding any weight. "Hmm… strange," she continued, studying me closely. I glanced around, and noticed this was the very last cell, right up against a wall. No other entrance in sight… how had Lewyn gotten in here, then? "You look like Alicia."

"Pardon?" Well, that sure as hell got my attention. I feared I'd snap my neck with how quickly I focused back on her. "What was that?" I asked, mostly because I wasn't sure I'd heard her correctly.

"Could be the lack of light, but you look like a friend of mine. Alicia." The woman leaned a little forward to get a better look at me, and I thought of the stories I'd heard. Of the green-haired, green-eyed dancer who helped Mom in the infirmary so much, who was good friends with her and Lewyn and Erinys. Who had disappeared after leaving Lene at Darna, which wasn't very far from here… "What's your name?"

"It's… it's Riona." No way. There was just no way. "Caitriona, but I go by 'Riona'. I…" My voice cracked as the pieces slowly slid into place. "I am the daughter of Alicia and Chulainn. Their eldest."

"Oh, well, that'll explain it." Sylvia smiled, and the smile was just like the ones in all the pictures. "I knew something good would happen today. Glad to see my intuition was right."

I was probably going to put this down as the gods apologizing for what happened at Belhalla all those years ago, because holy hell.

"I'm going to be sick…" I groaned, dropping the papers I'd been reading and leaning back in my chair. I rubbed at my eyes as if that would somehow erase the memory of what I'd read, but of course, there was no such luck. "How do people even think this way? I don't think I'll ever understand…"

Ares had found me down in the dungeons not long after I'd realized Sylvia was there and, while lecturing me about being on my own, he'd broken the locks and we'd gotten everyone out. Due to the former-prisoners' conditions, it was decided we would rest in Darna for a time, which also gave ample time to read through all the various books and papers Mursili and Niamh's groups had recovered. Something I'd dove into immediately after sending a message off to Alster informing them of our delayed arrival (and of Sylvia's survival). Some were histories, some were detailed theories of spells, some were various bits of knowledge (such physics, a study of the stars, even in-depth discussions and observations of the wildlife), some were medicinal in nature (not just the body either, but the mind, based on the notes for herbs and concoctions that helped those whose anxiety overwhelmed them on a daily basis or who heard/saw hallucinations)... things that were almost startling to read, considering how most of my encounters with Loptyrians go. Things that
told me that Inanna, Anat, Salem, and Sara… that they weren't 'exceptions that proved the rule' or anything. Things that reminded me of what Patty once said Dew told her, about how the 'nice' and 'moderate' Loptyrians were killed or twisted because of who was in power, but they existed.

Then you had stuff like what I was reading at the moment. Things that weren't actually written by Loptyrians, but (based on the continued use of 'heretic' and 'Cursed God') were likely written by the people of the desert. Books and notes confiscated (stolen) from villages and abandoned churches. Books that detailed how… how the Loptyrians hadn't been the only ones doing human experimentation. And I used 'experimentation' loosely because I couldn't see any reason for doing them besides a lust for torture.

"You okay, Riona?" Sylvia's voice was a strangely soothing combination of lively and calm, even with the clunk of her cane punctuating each word. "Your pretty face is all scrunched up," she commented, carefully leaning over my shoulder to peer at my face. Her hair had been so tangled that we had to cut it short, but she took it with grace. As much grace as she did her crippled leg, which I thought would've shaken her more since she had been a dancer. But, then again, who knew how long it had been? "Read something sad?"

"More like read something that I never will understand." I sighed gustily and swung myself forward to better look at the papers. "Plus the moral and ethical concerns of even reading through to see if there is anything that can be used to help people, considering just how the information was obtained." I knew that, pragmatically, I should use anything I could to protect the people who trusted me, but…

"I'd say that you don't make that decision on your own. Talk to Ares, for instance, or wait until you're back in Alster and bring it up then." She smiled sweetly at me, and I nearly laughed at myself for once again forgetting that I was part of a team and overthinking myself into circles. Gods, you'd think I’d know better by now. "Besides, you've been cooped up in here all day. With no sunshine. You're a delicate flower, you know."

"I don't think anyone has ever described me as 'delicate' before." Still, this time, I did laugh and stood with a stretch and a squeak. "Surprised Mursili or Niamh hasn't gotten me yet."

"Mursili was, but I had a request, so I offered instead." She hooked an arm around mine and led me out of the room I'd been studying in. "I'd like to visit Claude."

"Oh, of course!" That should've… that should've been one of the first things I'd done! Though, she had been very tired due to everything, and even now, I worried about her stamina and general health. The arm around mine was unnaturally bony and I half-feared I could see the crevices of her elbow joint. "Should I carry you?"

"Mmm… no, not yet, at least." She laughed, a bright and beautiful one, and looked up at me with dancing eyes. "I want to stretch my legs a bit more!"

"If you're sure." I couldn't help but marvel at her cheer. Particularly since I'd done my best to fill her in on all sorts of details on the way between here and the prison. Meaning she learned just what happened to most of her friends: death, death, and more death. "I'm impressed that you can smile so…"

"Dancers are good at smiling, and I've a lot to smile about." She shrugged and wobbled a bit on a staircase as we stepped outside. I lifted her slightly to make it easier on her. She wasn't used to her cane yet, and… well, these steps were still a bit unsteady. Darna was still rebuilding, after all. "Not all of my friends are dead. All of their children are alive and doing well. I'm not in that stinky cell anymore. You told me that Lene is alive and well." Yes, but we didn't know about her son at all...
"So many people are healing… yeah, with scars, but healing is healing. They're no longer bleeding until there's nothing left to bleed." She laughed and waved at some people passing by, who were carrying large baskets filled with colorful cloths. They laughed and waved back before bowing at me. I made sure to smile. "I could focus on the sucky stuff, but that won't do me any good. Life sucks, but that doesn't mean I can't find joy in it anyway. I learned that as a child."

"I… I see…" I'd remembered Shanan once telling me of Sylvia's incredible resilience, but to see it firsthand was just… amazing. I had no other word for it. "Well, I suppose when you put it that way, there is a lot to be grateful for."

"That's something you should keep in mind too." Though her eyes still danced, there was a seriousness to her expression as we walked down some lesser used paths to Claude's grave. I worried about how maintained they were, but the main streets were crowded and that seemed much worse. "I won't say you shouldn't think on the dead and those you couldn't save, but you should always remind yourself about the good you've done as well. Otherwise, you're just going to get caught in a dark spiral to nowhere."

Like earlier, with the papers… "Why am I getting this lecture?"

"I saw your brokenhearted expression when you were carrying the corpses out." ...Ah… well, that was… something I couldn't deny… some had been so young… "Sigurd always had that problem too. Seeing the negative, never quite realizing the positive. It was endearingly frustrating, that he never realized just how brightly he shone. Even at the end." I bit my tongue just in time to keep from snarking about 'yeah, fires are bright' because… well, I knew what she'd meant. "Well, besides the fire, I mean." Besides, she supplied it herself. "Ugh… I forgot just how big Darna was!"

"We're not much farther." I did have to smile at the subject change. "I wonder if the flowers are still there."

The answer ended up being 'no but yes'. The flowers Tine and I had left weren't, but new ones had replaced them. And whoever had replaced them had made sure to tie them into little bouquets with ribbons. A small incense burner flickered with a quiet flame, its smoke carrying a faint scent of lavender that lingered around the grave like a warm blanket. And there were even small letters tucked carefully into a covered box, which hadn't been there last time I'd been here. Though I knew I shouldn't, I took a quick peek, and saw the first one was from a mother, thanking 'Father Claude' for saving her little girl from the plague all those years ago.

"Hey, Claude, I made it," Sylvia whispered, sitting down in front of the grave. Her good leg was tucked under her, while her other one was stretched out next to her. "And, guess what? Lene's okay. You probably already knew that, of course, but I wanted to say it anyway. Quite lucky, really. I knew leaving her at a covent or whatever was risky, but they were gaining on me. Wonder if you gave her your luck, to make sure she'd be okay. I know I wished mine would go to her and Coirpre, for their safety." She closed her eyes and smiled. A bright and warm smile. It made my heart ache, looking at it. "I miss you. I miss everyone, truthfully. But, don't worry. You know how tough I am. I'll keep on living, for everyone."

She didn't say anything else aloud, just let herself feel the wind blow. Let the smell of the incense and the flowers waft over her. I fussed over the grave, making sure there were no weeds and that the box of letters was in a safe place where no water would leak into it. Just little things to give her as much time as she wanted and needed. I honestly should've just left, but I was worried about her health. I hoped Claude wouldn't mind; I didn't think he would. At least, based on the stories I knew.

"I love you, Claude." With those words, Sylvia opened her eyes and she smiled at me. "Mind helping me up?" I was at her side in an instance, and we soon got her standing, though we… ah…
almost forgot her cane. "Whoops~!"

"That could've been interesting," I teased, helping her steady herself. I then held still until she tugged me down the path, ready to leave. "We could stay a little longer."

"The living cannot carry the weight of the dead. Their backs will snap eventually." She looked up at the clear sky with bright eyes that practically sparkled. I half-wondered if they were unshed tears, but I couldn't ask. "And I have my memories. Those are more important to me than his grave. I just had to see it. I'll visit again when everything is settled."

"I… I see." Growing up as I did, with the people I did, she was just… I thought of Shanan and the guilt he carried. Oifeye's regrets. Aideen's sorrows. The nightmares we all had. And here she was, 'dancing' through life still. It was baffling, really. But, I did… like it. A lot. "I wish I could think that way."

"It's got its downsides. Trust me. And I've *years* of experience with it." She looked at me with a bright grin. "But, don't worry. I'll help from now on, okay? I'm sure you all need another adult around."

"Gods, tell me about it…" I had to laugh, and she soon joined in. And though she didn't look back at the grave once, I did. Just a quick peek.

For a blink, I thought I saw Claude's ghost standing there with a warm and loving smile. But then the image was gone, and I had no proof at all that he'd been there in the first place.

A few days later, we left for Alster. The former-prisoners came with us, just for better medical care, so the journey was slow. But that simply gave Alster plenty of time to prepare for our new arrivals, so I didn't mind. And I minded even less when I saw that Shanan was back from his own expedition, and that Uncle Finn and Aunt Lachesis had returned from Leonster. Because it meant they could greet Sylvia with Oifeye, and I got to watch that happy reunion.

"My gods, you can't be Shanan! Shanan is supposed to be tiny!" Sylvia laughed as Shanan lifted her out of the wagon we'd borrowed from Darna. Someone would take it back with extra supplies in the next couple of days. "You're all big!"

"Yes, I got that growth spurt, just as I said I would," Shanan replied, barely setting Sylvia on the ground before hugging her tightly. She hugged him back, clinging a little. "I can't believe you're okay…"

"I'd say the same, but I knew you all were fine. My intuition said so!" Still, Sylvia began crying tears of joy and relief, and she rubbed at her eyes when Shanan released her. Just seconds before Aunt Lachesis slid up to hug her. "Yikes, tight! Ribs exist, Lachesis! Why do you always forget ribs exist?"

I lingered back, helping the others in the wagon disembark and get them to soldiers who would escort them to… wherever they would be going. It was just… nice to watch, really. Uncle Finn and Oifeye did try to hang back a bit, to give Sylvia room to breath, but she jumped on Uncle Finn (well, hopped) to hug him and that just dragged Oifeye into the mess of hugs and laughs. I wondered if they'd act the same if (when) we saw Dew. I'd like it, because it was just so wonderful to see their smiles. To see the hope they hadn't dared to hold onto was actually answered.

Lene's bright laugh caught my attention, and I saw her rushing up to greet Ares before helping to move things inside. She looked at Sylvia curiously, and for a moment, I held my breath. But then
she shrugged and headed inside without a backwards glance and I realized that she... she hadn't recognized her. Not at all. And at first, I wondered why, but then I remembered how... well, I didn't think any of the adults had brought up Lene's parentage to her yet. And, if that was the case, then her only images of her mother, of Sylvia, would've just been the vague memories she had. Even though she once had told me she had learned dancing not just for money, but also in the hopes that she'd somehow come across her mother... even though her mother was right here... "No, no, it's fine!" Sylvia's laughing voice... I barely heard her through the storm of my thoughts, but when I looked over, I saw her smiling, even as the other adults looked worried. Aunt Lachesis and Uncle Finn in particular. "Of course she's not going to recognize me," she continued to reassure, and with a heavy heart, I realized what they were talking about. "She was all little! I'm just glad to see that she's fine, just like my intuition said. There's no need to push."

"Are you sure, though?" Aunt Lachesis asked, clinging to Sylvia's arm. I knew, knew, she was thinking of her own reunion with Diarmuid. The pained look in Uncle Finn's eyes hinted to the same. "I mean..."

"She's alive. She's well. She's happy. I could want for nothing more. Particularly since, you know, I left her behind." Though Sylvia smiled, she said the words firmly with a distinct edge to them. 'End of discussion.' "I am curious about Coirpre, though. I know Claude would've gotten him to some sort of safety before getting caught, particularly since no one made any mention of a little boy or the Valkyrie Staff, but..."

Discussions continued, with Oifeye and Shanan taking over so that Sylvia could have the change in subject she wanted and so that Aunt Lachesis and Uncle Finn could calm down a little. But I couldn't blame them, because I was upset. After all, Sylvia had only 'left behind' Lene to protect her, just as the rest of our parents did. But I bit my tongue as I realized something. I... we had grown up knowing what had happened. We had known our parents didn't truly abandon us. Aideen, Oifeye, and Shanan... they had made sure we had known. They had made sure they had loved us, that we hadn't done anything wrong. They had made sure we knew that if our parents could, they would've come back for us. And, hell, we saw it too, with the ghosts of our parents and with Aunt Lachesis and Uncle Finn (who never left-left, but had still longed to see us).

But Lene hadn't had that luxury. She hadn't had caretakers to tell her just why her parents weren't around. No one to reassure her that yes, she had been loved and that war was just terribly cruel. To her, her mother just... just left her and disappeared. And while that meant Lene hadn't been hunted by soldiers as we had... while that meant she had stayed safe from that particular danger, it had led to her having a lonely, rough life filled with its own sorts of dangers. Anger... anger would be expected. Even if Lene had wanted to meet her, anger really would be more than expected. And I couldn't help but wonder if what Sylvia really wanted was to avoid that anger for the time being. Because even if she was resilient, she was still healing and...

"Riona!" Lene pounced on me with a big hug, kissing my cheek in greeting. "You shouldn't stay outside so long," she teasingly scolded, taking my hand to lead me through the busy courtyard. I caught sight of Sylvia watching us leave with a smile. "You'll get a sunburn!"

"I put on lotion before we marched off today," I protested, forcing myself to relax. Even if I wanted to somehow intervene or get involved, I had no idea how. And there was a lot to do. So, honestly, it might be best to just... just do as I did. Be Lene's friend, and be ready to support her whenever the truth did come out. "I think Larcei would've kick me if I hadn't."

"Lana too! We had a few try to be all strong and confident, only to pass out from sun poisoning just a couple hours ago." Oh, yikes, Lana was going to be in a mood. "Hestia's with her to sweeten her
temper a little."

"What? No Ulster for that?"

"Sadly, Ulster is still out and about. I think she's cranky."

"Aw, my poor little sister! I must rectify that with books!" We both laughed at that, and almost walked inside. However, just before we did, a small shadow darted over my feet, and I looked up just in time to catch a brief glimpse of a dragon before it disappeared behind a cloud. I frowned at it, narrowing my eyes. Dragons didn't normally fly this far north, though. Not unless they had a rider… and the two dragon knights in Leif's army were in Leonster, which meant… which meant that had no doubt been a scout. Maybe with the excuse of delivering a letter to Ares from their princess, but...

"...That's the second one I've noticed this week." Lene's voice was quiet as she looked up at the sky with me. "Retaking Leonster, conquering Alster… the other nations are noticing."

"Yeah…" I watched the skies a while longer, to see if our scout would come into view again. But they didn't. Just a quick pass by… hopefully not something in detail. Noticing, watching, but hopefully not planning… "Have you reported it?"

"Not yet. Thought I'd wait until either I saw a second one, or until Lewyn got back from Leonster. But, of course, Lewyn's still there." She made a face, but I had to bite my tongue to keep from yelping. If he was there, then how the hell was… "Let's head inside. Ares mentioned you all found some morally dubious things too. We'll want to organize it before calling a Council, right?"

"Yeah…" Thousands of questions streaked through my head, but I shook my head and focused on the present. It was all I could do, for the moment. "We will."

I just had to hope that I could wrangle some answers out of Lewyn whenever I next saw him, and pray that Travant didn't strike while we were trying to recuperate. I wasn't sure any of us wanted to think of what to do with him, and Thracia, yet. I certainly didn't.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Notes: Haha… been a bit? Three Houses has consumed my life (and, well, life stuff happens). But anyway, here we are? Why tigers? You can blame a mental image that wouldn't leave me alone. 'Menis' is a greek word for 'wrath', and, iirc, it's one of the first words (if not THE first word) of the Iliiad, specifically describing the wrath of Achilles. Ayra's Japanese name (Ira) is literally the Latin word for 'wrath' (though I think I've read something about it also being a diminutive for 'Irina' and 'Irene', which mean 'peace'). As for Alexander… well, you had Alexander the Great and all, but more importantly… 'Lex' is often a nickname for 'Alexander'. Yes, he named the tigers after Ayra and Lex. (Look, I promise that not every char is getting a pet or anything. Promise! I just get weird ideas while sick, and I've been sick)

Here's the fate of the last of the Gen1 chars, Sylvia. Aside from dropping Lene off at an orphanage in Darna, nothing is known about what happened to her in-canon, so I went with this. I wanted a bit of a contrast with Lachesis and Diarmuid's reunion. The Loptyr Tome having been hidden in Agustria is mentioned in Manfroy's oneshot in
Memoirs of the Lost.

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