Ranger of the North (DEAD)

by BakaSmurf

Summary

Currently being rewritten as Northern Star.
Ain't that a Kick in the Head? Part 01

Have you ever been woken by a very bright light being suddenly shone in your face, like a flashlight? Well if you have you know the sensation isn't a pleasant one, seeing as how your eyes will more than likely be adapted for the dark, thus making the sudden burst of light discomforting, if not somewhat painful. You'll also know that it's a great way to ruin someone's morning and really piss them off if they're the type with a short fuse. I would be the type with a short fuse.

Without even opening my eyes the first thing I had done was toss my spare pillow at the source of the light in hopes that it would simultaneously alert them to my being awake as well as somehow kill them for disturbing my slumber in such a thoughtless manner. Unfortunately, I must have missed, being that the light hadn't even wavered to indicate that the jerk with the light-stick had been hit or dodged it, causing me to feel the need to lift my head and cuss them out as an alternative to ending their life with cotton-stuffed sleeping aids.

There wasn't anybody there. In fact, the source of the light seemed to be a green sphere that didn't look entirely unlike a miniature version of the Sun floating in the middle of my room.

After a few moments of dumbstruck surprise, my mind had managed to spool up enough to allow me to realize that this was probably a dream; however seeing as how Colonel Sanders hadn't popped up at the end of my bed as I willed him to, giant bucket of finger lickin' good chicken in tow, I could be sure that I was very much, in fact, awake, and that there was actually a miniature green Sun (or would 'star' be more appropriate here?) hovering in place in what appeared to be the absolute centre of my room.

At this point, the rational portion of my mind tried to take over and come up with an explanation that didn't sound crazy. Broken light fixture? There aren't any wires to indicate that it's a light bulb, and my room is lit by a pair of miniature white fluorescent light tubes. Cheap magic trick? I don't see any threads or rope to hold it up in the centre of the room, and my roommate isn't the type to play pranks. Ball Lightning? Well, that would seem to be the most logical explanation, however seeing as how I don't seem to be suffering from a rather unpleasant case of the deads at the moment, not to mention the fact that it's hovering in place while ball lightning moves around, that one goes out the window as well.

Well shit, seems that my rational mind is out of ideas. Guess that leaves the nutso portion. LEGIT MAGIC! Yeah, never mind, not sure why I thought to consult THAT part of my consciousness for this situation.

However, that left me without any kind of rational explanation as to what the phenomenon currently occurring not 5 feet away from me was. However, I couldn't help but notice that the pillow I had thrown was nowhere to be seen. Maybe it really is a mini-star and my pillow was incinerated upon making contact with it? No, if it were a brown dwarf it would be, well, brown. Plus I've never even heard of a green star before, now that I thought about it...

Without any better ideas as to what to do, I reached over to my desk, whose side is right up against my bed, grabbed a loose penny and flicked it towards the sphere of light. Much to my surprise, I saw the coin enter the light, but not come out the other side. "The fuck?" I couldn't help but let out an astonished whisper. Was it a wormhole of some kind? Had the copper minted face of Queen Elizabeth II just travelled to the other end of the universe, or to another dimension altogether upon passing the light's Event Horizon?

At this point my body was mostly acting on its own as I reached over to the other side of my bed that
was up against a wall, and unsheathed my sword - a Zombie Tools Hellion which I kept nestled between said wall and bed - and in what was admittedly a really, really dumb move started inching it towards the star/ball lightning/portal without thinking about what would happen upon poking it with the end of the blade.

To say I'd come to regret this decision would be an understatement of gargantuan proportions.

The feelings of regret, panic, and stupidity that washed over me as I felt the blade suddenly being tugged into the light were immense, why, you ask? Well simply put, I found myself unable to release the hilt of the sword, it was as though it was suddenly super-glued to my palms and fingers. I felt myself being lifted off of my bed as the pulling sensation increased in strength, I had also noticed that the light seemed to be exerting its pull on everything in the room, as anything that wasn't nailed down started to skid towards it in a rather unsettling fashion.

I wasn't given much time to ponder the consequences of my actions, or even cry out, however, as I was suddenly jerked forwards into the sphere and had a rather violent sensation of vertigo overwhelm my senses, causing me to reflexively slam my eyes shut before suddenly feeling my back make contact with what I could be sure was hard Earth due to the familiar sensation of grass prickling the exposed portions of the backs of my arms and neck, not to mention the sudden feeling of cool air on my flesh.

At this point, I couldn't help but allow a rather displeased groan to escape my lips. While sure, it hadn't actually been painful, I felt like I had just unexpectedly been rather violently flipped head-over-heels several times in a row. If I didn't have a strong stomach I might have thrown up over the ordeal.

There were a few moments of silence as I allowed myself to remain sprawled out on the ground with my eyes held shut, mostly because I didn't want to risk further upsetting my innards and wind up losing last night's dinner, but also because I was admittedly scared shitless of where I would find myself upon opening my eyes due to the unmistakable stench of smouldering grass (and mint, oddly enough). I was obviously indoors not fifteen seconds ago, but now I could feel the cool air of a light spring ('twas the middle of winter the last time I checked) breeze softly lapping at my flesh in addition to the previously mentioned grass; then I heard talking.

It took me a moment to place it, but I could be sure it was French seeing as how my high school art teacher was from Québec. I allowed my eyes to shoot open as I sat bolt-upright, surprisingly not immediately regretting it, as my gut seemed to have calmed down in the few moments I had spent laying upon the grass.

It was bright, the middle of the day, maybe a little after 12:00 PM, I was sitting in what appeared to be a smouldering circle in the grass, and I couldn't help but blink in surprise at what else I saw. A short, slender girl with wavy waist-length strawberry blonde hair staring right back at me with a dumbstruck expression plastered on her (actually surprisingly attractive) face.

She was pointing what appeared to be a baton at me. As far as I could tell, she was just as surprised to see me here as I was to be there. I took a few seconds to look her over; she was wearing a well made slate cloak held in place by a star inscribed clasp over a white dress shirt and a slate skirt, on her feet seemed to be some kind of black leather dress shoes worn over a pair of black stockings that reached up to the middle of her thighs accompanied by what appeared to be a red leather holster held in place at her hip by a black leather belt.

To make the image clearer, her clothing didn't look totally unlike a stereotypical Catholic school girl's uniform, save for the cloak and holster, that is.
After a few more seconds more speaking occurred, yes, most definitely French. It would be downright embarrassing if I weren't able to recognise my home county's second official language when I heard it being spoken on top of not being able to understand it, to begin with. At this point I allowed my head to swing side-to-side and get a look at my environment, there was a crowd gathered around me, all dressed similarly to the blonde-haired girl, albeit with the men wearing slacks rather than skirts.

The contents of my bedroom seemed to have also made the trip with me. My desk, television, clothing, everything strewn about randomly as if it'd all be thrown around by an earthquake, which was a little disconcerting.

To be perfectly honest, I was very confused. Aside from all the crap I had in my bedroom when I was pulled into what I am now beginning to suspect may have been a portal, I didn't recognise a damn thing around me.

In fact, as far as I could tell I had landed in the middle of what appeared to be a high Medieval or early Renaissance castle courtyard. Had that thing punted me back in time? At that moment it seemed to be the most logical explanation, however, the uniforms the people that I made an educated guess to be students of some kind were wearing didn't look like any historical Medieval/Renaissance outfits that I recognised. Actually, upon thinking about it, they kind of looked like some kind of cheap modern Harry Potter knock-off costumes, complete with bloody wands of varying styles. Where the Hell had that portal dumped me?

Suddenly a rather... Let's say, 'blessed' bronze-skinned red haired girl that was wearing a uniform which appeared to be identical to Blondie's (save for the fact that she had a popped collar, her ample cleavage on rather prominent display and wore a pair of thigh-high chestnut leather boots) stepped forward and seemed to address the smaller blonde-haired girl in an astonished fashion, Blondie reacted in a startled manner as though she was so stunned by my presence (she hadn't taken her eyes off of me at least since I had started paying attention) that she had forgotten about everybody else.

I couldn't blame her. If some big hairy Canadian brandishing a kopis had suddenly appeared in a flash of green light in my Medieval/Renaissance-era French courtyard I'd be more than a little taken aback as well.

There were another few moments of silence before Tits McGee suddenly burst out laughing before letting fly with another string of French words I didn't understand as Blondie glared at her and started to turn red. It didn't take a genius to figure out the Titty Monster had likely said something rather insulting towards the much smaller and more modestly dressed girl. Were I to guess I'd say that these two weren't exactly the best of friends. Luckily the rest of the class seemed to be too transfixed on me to even notice the spat going on between the two girls, let alone laugh at their antics.

As the two girls shot what I'm sure were very unladylike insults in French back and forth at each other I had taken the chance to rather cautiously upright myself (and praise almighty Atheismo that was so tired I had fallen asleep the previous night fully dressed) and grab my U.S. Army-inspired fatigue jacket, which had luckily landed within arm's reach of me, putting it on and swapping my sword between hands for each sleeve as well as slipping my feet into my steel-toed sneakers.

As I took a standing position and got another look at the people around me I noticed that aside from the students there was a single adult, a middle-aged bespectacled man (that looked very strangely familiar...), he seemed rather surprised, given the way he was staring at me.

Chesty LaRue made a sweeping motion towards me as she continued to make what I'm sure were disparaging remarks towards Blondie, then she looked more than a little startled when she actually turned to look towards me.
A few moments passed in silence as she looked me up and down before muttering something towards Blondie while crossing her arms in a way that put emphasis on her chest and gave me a look of- Wait a minute, is she checking me out? Wow, considering how very, very oblivious I am to the advances of the fairer sex she must be acting comically unsubtle for me to notice. To say this isn't what I was expecting would an... Understatement, to say the least.

My train of thought was cut short, however, as Blondie suddenly shrieked what sounded like a command based on the Drill Sergeant-esque tone she (attempted) to take on with it. Busty Saint Claire was startled by the shouting and gave Blondie a look that was none too pleased. There was a pregnant beat before Boobie Lady spoke to Blondie in a rather condescending tone with a smug look on her face.

The familiar man I surmised to be a teacher (or cult leader, based on his robes and fucking spear) addressed Blondie as well.

There was yet another beat as Blondie turned to me and seemed to steel herself for something before she suddenly started taking rather large steps towards me, closing the two or so metre gap between us very quickly followed by waving her baton/wand around a bit whilst reciting what sounded like a chant, and before I knew it she had grabbed the collar of my jacket with both hands and pulled me down into a... Okay, now I REALLY wasn't expecting this.

It took me a few moments to process what was happening and lift myself back up and out of her reach while shoving her away from my person, much to her surprise. "What in the bloody fuck do you think you're doing!?!" I momentarily forgot that they spoke French and she probably wouldn't understand my English outburst. Still, I'm the type of guy that takes things like kissing very seriously, and what the hell did she think she was doing stealing my second like that without any forewarning?

She seemed a little perturbed at my response to her unwanted kiss and muttered something in French in what sounded like an indignant tone as she crossed her arms and blushed lightly. Just as I was about to get into asking if any of them even spoke English there was a very sudden and very severe burning sensation on the back of my left hand that caused me to drop my blade in surprise. Letting out a pained gasp I jerked back and brought my left hand up to eye-level and saw some kind of runes literally burning themselves into the flesh on the rear of the aforementioned hand with no apparent explanation as to why.

Just as my mind started to process what was happening I suddenly felt my entire body grow light. Too light, before my vision quickly darkened and I saw the ground rushing up to meet my face...
I awoke with a start, taking an excess of air into my lungs as the events that preceded my falling unconscious earlier on came rushing back into the forefront of my mind. This ceiling is unfamiliar, not drywall, but wooden planks. I allowed my head to gently roll from side-to-side to get a look at my surroundings; panel-lined walls, and 17th(ish?) century decor. There was a weak light peeking in through a window, the setting sun.

How long had I been out for? Where am I now for that matter? "Vous êtes enfin réveillé?" Ah- Oh great, more French. I decided to pull myself up from my laying position to locate the source of the high-pitched voice attempting to address me. Sitting in a rather nice wooden chair was the small blonde girl from earlier, the one that forced a kiss on me-

Wait, I'm laying on a bed.

"Normalement, je n'aurais jamais permis à un homme que je ne connaissais pas de dormir dans mon lit, mais, avec tout ce que s'est passé aujourd'hui, les serviteurs ont été bien trop occupés pour récupérer vos biens-Si ce sont réellement vos biens- de la cour et, puisque vous n'etiez pas blessé, il n'y avait pas cause pour vous envoyer à l'infirmerie..."

This isn't her bed, is it? She didn't bring me here to... Did she?

"...On m'avait promis qu'on aurait au moins apporté un lit avant la tombée de la nuit pour que vous n'ayez pas à dormir sur le plancher; maintenant que vous êtes réveillé, par contre, je suppose que vous allez pouvoir monter vos chose vous-mêmes."

No, no, don't be stupid, think and be rational, this isn't some shitty bargain bin ecchi anime or manga, bringing someone to a bed is common courtesy when they've passed out.

"Allez-vous dire quelque chose? Je sais que vous pouvez parler, vous l'avez fait avant de perdre connaissance plus tôt... Vous parlez picard, pas seulement englisc, non?" Shit, she's still trying to talk to me...

"Uh... Non French, English?" She didn't seem to understand me, based on her expression. "Eeen-glish! Do you speak it?" The girl gave an exasperated facepalm. I'm guessing no English... Suddenly the girl stood, walking to the door with much gusto and beckoning me to follow as she opened it. Guess it isn't like I've got much of a choice...

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It was the older bespectacled fellow from earlier, he motioned for us to enter his office, as I guessed it to be. I was so focused on the absurdity of my situation that aside from the very much real and living American Bald Eagle resting on a perch placed upon his desk along with the spear from earlier leaning on the wall behind said desk I failed to register most of what I saw in the room when I stepped inside.

Being the awkward introverted fuck that I am, I opted to remain standing near the door while Blondie took a chair in front of Glasses' desk. Unsurprisingly it seemed to make the two a little uncomfortable. The man motioned towards a chair, I shrugged.

Blondie and Glasses first exchanged looks followed by a few words, followed by Glasses standing and approaching me, albeit slowly, making sure to make a show of drawing a... Wand(? It certainly looked more dainty than Blondie's steel nightstick) from his robes, likely to avoid freaking me out.
What is this place some kind of wizard school on top of everything else? Is he a professor intending to cast a spell on me? He used his free hand to point to his wand, then his mouth, then an ear... Maybe he's saying he's going to cast a translation spell or something?

Whatever, I'm sure that if they wanted to hurt me they'd have done it when I was out. I spread my arms out wide, universal body language for 'take your best shot.' Not exactly the proper terminology, but he seemed to get the message. Shifting to a confident stance as he raised the wand, and recited an incantation.

The sensation was... Odd. Like nothing I'd ever felt before in the literal sense, to the point that I'm not even sure how to describe it. What, not satisfied with that? Well fine then. It felt blue.

What, still not satisfied? Well fuck you, you don't know what it's like trying to describe what the process of fucking honest to God magic altering your perception of language feels like, and that's the clearest I can make it, it feels blue, oh, and it tastes loud. That doesn't make sense? Well deal with it, because that's the best way I can think to describe it.

"So, did it work? Can you understand me?" Ah, I understood him that time. To be honest, I had to fight the urge to giggle and bounce in place like a school girl, what with having just had actual real magic been cast on me, allowing me to understand a language of which I previously only knew the most typical basic infantile terms like 'Hello' and 'Yes.'

"Empirical evidence would suggest as much, would I be incorrect in assuming that you're a teacher or figurehead of some description?" ...What? I have a well-developed vocabulary, and if I have reason to believe someone I'm speaking to would understand show-off speak I'm going to damn well show off... Which, based on his deer-in-headlights expression, he did not.

"I... Suppose I should try a more powerful translation spell this time."

"So it failed?" Blondie seemed incredulous.

"No, no, it worked, that is not the expression of one that does not understand the words being spoken to them... I had simply assumed that he would speak like a commoner and used an accordingly weak translation spell to save on Soul. It seems that he has some form of higher education that allows him more complex speech that is at least equal to the language used by a Noble." I couldn't help but notice that their mouth flaps didn't match up with their words, it was like watching a poorly dubbed 70's kung-fu movie, except the dubbing was occurring in real time with real people.

The spell must work by... Intercepting(?), I suppose, spoken words and swapping them for English equivalents for my sake, it's likely that it works both ways... Which begs the question of why it's working from my perspective but not theirs... Bah, magic, no point in trying to work out the method behind the physics-defying madness methinks, probably best to just roll with it, for now at least.

Blondie blinked, followed by an ever so slight smug grin. "So Kirche was right, he is a Noble. I knew that a commoner would not own that many exotic weapons." She stated while now looking me up and down with appraising eyes. Hold on, 'commoner'? Oh, shit. That's right, Renaissance, caste system (is that the right term for the whole Nobility/Peasantry thing? Bah, what I wouldn't give for Google right now)...

Honesty may be a virtue, but fuck that noise. Methinks it would be best to lie as best as I can to ensure I don't wind up being treated like a piece of furniture or whatnot.

"Well, he could be either that, a scholar, or simply an unusually educated peasant that just happens to possess a variety of swords-" Blondie rolled her eyes at that last suggestion. Glasses didn't seem to
notice. "-although his being a commoner or man of the cloth seems unlikely based on his impressive physical build, clothing, and the way he carries himself in general; not to mention that he is clearly quite well fed."

Oi, let's see YOU keep from putting on a few extra pounds when it's -30c on an average day eight months out of the year and the most affordable food where you live is the unhealthiest shit known to man! And I'm not even that overweight! It's barely even noticeable when I'm wearing a loose shirt!

"Mm... Perhaps a squire or young knight?" Actually, 5' 10" is impressive? First time I've ever heard that. Luckily the pair seemed to be assuming me to be a Noble on their own, good. That means less work on my end, just need to refrain from correcting them in this regard.

Glasses tapped his chin in a ponderous fashion before speaking up again, addressing me directly. "Hold still please, this time I shall use a translation spell usually reserved for scholars." I nodded in understanding, he seemed pleased with my response. He repeated his earlier incantation (or maybe he changed it and I just didn't notice) and I felt a similar, but much more... 'spicy,' though not unpleasantly so, I suppose the word would be, sensation in the fore of my brain. "Now-" He started. "Let us try again, shall we?"

"I suppose that it did not occur to you that you could have simply requested that I speak in a more simplistic manner?" Glasses' eyes widened ever so slightly before he let out a hearty chuckle. "It did not, as a matter of fact. My name is Stephan Tyrone Colbert, Alchemy and applied Fire Manipulation professor here at the Tristain Academy of Magic." ARGH, I KNOW that I've heard that name and seen his face before, but WHERE? Colbert gave a small bow with a wide smile. Ugh, it might be best to simply not think about that for now.

Anyways, as I mentioned before, Nobility is clearly a big deal here; falsifying my background to make myself appear to be a Noble myself may be the best course of action for the time being. "Jophiel Pholus van Cazonium II of the Citadel of Springfield, gateway to the Great White North of the Grande Constitutional Monarchy of Canada."

I introduced myself with an identical light bow, stringing together my parent's birth surnames as well as throwing in an important-sounding 'van' for good measure in order to make my name sound more impressive than it really was; not to mention the hilariously glorified bit about Canada, just in case. Unfamiliar with local customs? Monkey See, Monkey Do, 'nuff said. "And-" I started, turning to Blondie as I did so. "Would the lady be willing to introduce herself?" She stiffened somewhat at being addressed before standing and taking on a regal posture.

"I am Louise Françoise le Blanc de La Vallière of the Brimiric Monarchy of Tristain." She stated with a slight curtsy. She's cute... Rather, beautiful. Though short she was obviously not underdeveloped.

"So, with introductions out of the way, I'm sure that you have plenty of questions Mr... Cazonium?"

"Pholus, and I am only 21, hardly old enough to be referred to as 'mister,' I mean sure, I have been too preoccupied to groom myself properly for a few days, however I sincerely doubt that would be enough to make me appear to be that old." I pointed out.

"21? You're only 4 years older than miss Le Blanc than, I presume that you have some form of higher education based on your manner of speech?"

4 Years? She's 17? So a young woman then. "Well, actually-"

Colbert responded with a mildly nervous chuckle. "Ah, my apologies, I simply find myself somewhat overwhelmed by the presence of a human Familiar." This time I blinked in confusion.

"Familiar?"

"Ah, yes. Joseph- Oh, I apologize, that's not right, is it?" Colbert gave a light chuckle while sheepishly rubbing the back of his head.

"It is alright, 'Joseph' sounds close enough to 'Jophiel' to not bother me to any significant degree; feel free to refer to me as such if you find it more comfortable." It would make me more comfortable at the very least, should have gone with a name that doesn't belong to an Archangel serving below a God I don't believe in.

"Oh no, I wouldn't want to embarrass us both by constantly misidentifying you." Gods damn it. "Anyways, to keep things short, as the day has already ended and I am sure Miss Le Blanc would like to get to sleep soon so that she may be prepared for classes tomorrow, you have been summoned and bound to miss Le Blanc as a spirit Familiar. A Familiar is a being that is summoned when a Mage comes of age to serve as their guardian and companion, now, the odd thing about you is that... Well, a human has never been summoned in all of recorded history, making you quite the oddity-"

Colbert paused ever so slightly.

"-In more ways than one. If you do not mind, may I see your hand? I need to see the runes that appeared after miss Le Blanc completed the ritual so that I may fill out the proper paperwork."

I simply held my hand out in response, clearly he knows about the runes, and I'm more than a little curious about them myself.

Colbert took my hand and studied it rather intently. "Can you tell me anything about the runes, such as why it hurt so much when they appeared? And also, what exactly being a 'spirit Familiar' entails? I would hate for you to liken it to slavery, as that would be downright barbaric beyond reproach and call for an unfortunately violent response on my part, with my culture's views on slavery being what they are." His face snapped up and locked eyes with mine for a few seconds before he started looking me up and down again, very carefully this time and with a hint of gravitas that was not there before.

"Now, let's not get too hasty Jophiel."

"I'm not, which is why I am giving you a chance to better explain what you mean when you say I am 'bound' to Le Blanc. I am not overly fond of violence, but make you no mistake when I say that I will die before I allow myself to be forced into unwilling servitude." It is during times like these that I am thankful for my superb poker face, hopefully Colbert wouldn't call my bluff, although I'd also be happy to find that I'm worrying about nothing to begin with.

"As I said already, you are the first human being to be summoned as a Familiar in all of recorded history, typically a Mage will call upon an animal, magical or otherwise, that will happily serve their master once the ritual is completed and the runes appear, and by the way, the pain is an unfortunate one-time side-effect, you need not worry about it occurring again. However, based on your response to the idea of being, 'enslaved,' which I assure you is not the case here, things will not be as simple as that."

Colbert said that last line with more than a little exhaustion in his voice as he released my hand.
"The day has been long for me as well, so I must ask your forgiveness as I simply opt to make this quick, is there a way that we can come to an agreement that will place you in miss Le Blanc's service? A contract of some description, perhaps? And before you say anything, miss Le Blanc-"

He stated, not giving Louise the chance to speak up as she clearly wanted to.

"...This is an intelligent human being, and simply expecting him to obey the rituals that demand he serve you unquestionably as an animal might would be, quite frankly, unethical and foolish for reasons he quite literally just stated. Not to mention that he is clearly a foreign Noble of some kind, and the Founder Brimir's word is very clear on the enslavement of one's fellow man. Noble or otherwise."

She didn't look even remotely happy, and I decided that it would indeed be best to refrain from correcting the two on my apparent 'Noble' status. Also, going to have to remember to ask about this 'Founder Brimir,' a religious figure of some kind, surely.

I spoke up at that point. "Before I agree to anything, I would ask for information on where I am, the local culture and customs, and if it would not be terribly inconvenient, a crash course in the local history."

Colbert raised an eyebrow at the term 'crash course.'

"I am requesting a brief summary of the local history." He give an unvocalized 'oh' response. "However, if now would be inconvenient for yourself and Le Blanc, I would be willing to wait until tomorrow to discuss the terms of the contract. It is, as you have said, rather late." Colbert gave Louise a tired look.

"I'm willing to wait." She stated dejectedly. "The servants were instructed to bring your belongings to my quarters earlier, so you can spend the night there. Your own living quarters will be decided along with the rest of the contract tomorrow." I looked back to Colbert, awaiting his response.

"Very well, we can discuss this further tomorrow evening, after the day's classes are done. It will give us all plenty of time to think over what has been discussed here." I nodded in agreement. I wasn't all that tired myself, given that I spent more than a few hours unconscious earlier, but I could see that neither Colbert nor Louise relished the thought of continuing this discussion tonight.

"If we're done here-" Louise started. "I'm going to retire to my quarters... I presume that you remember how to get there?" That question was directed at me, I nodded in response. "Very well then, I doubt that you're tired all things considered, so I'll leave the door unlocked so that you may get in whenever you decide to return. Now, I bid you both a fair night."

With that she stood and proceeded to curtsy before taking her leave, rendering myself alone with Colbert for a few moments before I decided to try familiarizing myself with the castle's layout before it got too dark to see, I gave him a small nod on my way out the door-

"Oh, just a moment Lord Jophiel, if you'll please." Oh, what now? "I nearly forgot to cast detect magic on you again, if you don't mind. I personally do not doubt the veracity of your claims, however I'll require this information to finish filling out Lady Le Blanc's paperwork." Clearly he was just asking to be polite, as he didn't wait for a response before casting the spell.

Following a bizarre tingly sensation focused primarily the Familiar runes, there were a few moments wherein Colbert just stared at me for a few moments with a look of dumbstruck awe on his face, followed by his casting the spell again.
"Impossible..." He stated just on the edge of earshot. "Even more than the Headmaster..." Okay, now that really piqued my interest. Several seconds passed as I waited, expecting him to elaborate on his statement. "Oh- I apologize, it's nothing." Oh what horseshit. "It really is late, so it would likely be best for you to get some rest if you can. Sleep well Lord Jophiel." Although I rather wanted answers to his clear shock, I was starting to feel somewhat tired, so it would be best to try getting some exploration in before hitting the hay for the night.

"You as well Professor."

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By the time I had realized we had not gotten to discussing the runes beyond 'you not slave; pain not come back' I was already a good fifteen minute's walk away from Colbert's office, surely enough time for him to have left for his room for the night. Guess that'll have to wait until tomorrow as well I mused to myself as I continued to simply wander quite aimlessly. It wasn't like there were maps of the castle pinned to the walls, so I didn't have much of a choice in that regard.

My stomach gave an unhappy grumble, which reminded me that I hadn't eaten yet that day, or even had anything to drink, I wonder where the kitchen is- My thoughts stopped short as I noticed a pleasant humming coming from around the corner I was approaching, sounds like a woman's voice, a maid, perhaps? Maybe she'll be able to-

My thoughts were cut off as I suddenly felt something soft and fluffy, not to mention dusty as fuck connect with my face accompanied by a light "Eep!" right before I started sneezing quite violently. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" It took me a few moments to re-gather my wits and realize that the maid had inadvertently shoved a feather duster in my face as I turned the corner. As annoyed as I was I doubt it was intentional. Once I'd stopped sneezing my brains out I was able to take notice of the maid, she was still apologizing in a panic, best to calm her down.

"Bloody Hell... Hey, hey, it's okay, it's okay! Relax!" I stated, taking a hold of her shoulder to stop her vicious repeated bowing that threatened to tear her upper half from her lower half if she continued it for much longer.

She seemed quite taken aback, with more than a little fear in her eyes. She was cute, very cute. Beautiful even. Her features belied mixed Asian (I'm guessing Japanese) and western European ancestry framed by a practical but still cute bob cut, very exotic. I couldn't help but notice that she was quite shapely, creating quite the contrast with the more modestly developed Louise. "Did you do it intentionally?"

"N-No milord!"

Mi'lord? Uh... That's right, playing the 'foreign Noble' angle, so sure, why not. "Then relax! Yeesh, no harm no foul." I stated as I bent down to pick up the duster that she had dropped in her panic for her. "Here, you dropped this." Her eyes snapped to the duster, then to my own eyes, then back again, then- "Oh for- Here!"

I took a hold of her hand and placed it on the duster, then manually closed her fingers around the handle.

"Could you point me towards the kitchen... or food preparation area, as it would be? I haven't eaten or drank anything today." How old of a term was 'kitchen'? I hope I wouldn't have to explain modern terminology every other sentence to the locals. Beyond that, to be honest, I was surprised that a dehydration headache hadn't kicked in yet, my throat was dry as a mother fucker though.
"Um..." Quite the jittery little thing, isn't she? "Y-yes, here, I'll lead you there. Please, follow me."

"Thank you." With that we were off, myself following fairly close on her heels. She kept glancing back at me with a pensive expression on her face, whipping her face back forward any time our eyes met. I'm not going anywhere sweetie, and you're going to hurt yourself and/or walk into something if you keep rubbernecking like that.

We walked for ten or so minutes with the maid continuing to glance back at me every couple of feet before we reached the kitchen, which was largely abandoned by now. I have to say, it's going to take me a while to get used to all this antiquated stone architecture. "Okay, so what won't the staff miss?"

"Uh, well, I could prepare something for you..." Wow, this girl is sweet. But no, I'm she has other duties to attend to.

"Oh no, I wouldn't want to impose-"

"It wouldn't be an imposition!" Wow, that was pretty strong-willed of her, not what I've come to expect in the 10 or so minutes I've known her. "I-I mean, I'm done for the day, so it's not like you'd be distracting me from anything..." Ah, there's the kind of reaction I would have expected from her.

"Are you sure? I'd really rather not inconvenience you-"

"I insist! Please, take a seat, I'll prepare you a bowl of vegetable soup." Well, shit, it isn't like I really had any other plans, and a proper dish would be nice after eating dollar ramen and kimchi for the past month... Yeah, it couldn't hurt. Although I have no intention of just sitting around waiting to be fed, there ought to be something I could do to help.

"I'm not really the type to just sit back and accept a meal without having earned it somehow first, if there's anything I can do to help then I'll have to demand that you tell me, I won't be able to accept any food you present to me otherwise." The girl seemed taken aback by my statement, a light smile played across her face pretty quickly though.

"H-here, you can chop up the vegetables while I prepare the broth." She pointed me to a chopping board that she'd already laid the veggies out on. Carrots, celery, pea pods, and off to the side, barley. Alright, that's a pretty safe combination.

"Joe." I started suddenly, the maid gave me a confused look.

"Excuse me?"

"My name, it's Joe. Jophiel Pholus van Cazonium II."

"O-oh..."

"...This is the point where most would give their own name in return, ya know." Little awkward, isn't she? As though I'm one to talk, though, I'm uncomfortable meeting other guys my age and wouldn't be doing even as half as well as she is.

"Ah- I'm sorry-"

"Sorry? That's a bit of an odd name. Did your parents lose a bet or something Sorry?" Clearly, she wasn't expecting my snarky comment, she seemed to get the message, though.

"S-Siesta Horie..." Siesta Horie? Spain and Japan by the sounds of it, and isn't 'siesta' Spanish for nap or something? Spain isn't all that far from France... Actually, I'm still not entirely sure where I
am. Somewhere in France, surely, so maybe the question should be when am I instead? Hm, whatever, no point in worrying about that now. Colbert is supposed to fill me in on everything I'll need to know tomorrow anyways.

"Siesta? I've never heard of that word being used as a name before... It seems to work well enough, I suppose. One of your parents is from Spain, I take it?" Siesta was giving me an extremely confused look now.

"I... I'm afraid I've never heard of... 'Spain,' before, but are you saying you've heard my name before now? Would you mind if I asked what it was being used for?" Wait, she hasn't heard of Spain before now? How... No, that makes no damn sense, Spain has existed as a nation alongside France for a very long time, it could have even been considered a super-power in the middle ages and age of enlightenment...

How could she not know the ethnic origin of her name? Is she uneducated or something- Wait, she's a servant girl in the damn middle ages, of course she's uneducated; only nobles were granted history lessons in that- This era.

I responded somewhat uncertainly. "Um, well, 'siesta' is the Spanish word for 'nap.' So I'd assumed that one of your parents must be Spanish. I suppose I was wrong." There was a brief silence, guess she doesn't know how to respond to that. "So where are you from?" She perked up a bit, a question she can actually answer now?

"Tarbes, a small village near here famous for its wine." There was a wistfulness to her voice. Homesick? "It's a lovely place, especially during the summer, well, except for..." Her voice trailed off, with more than a hint of depression leaking in. She seemed to notice that I caught onto that, with how quickly she immediately brushed it off. "Oh, it's nothing really. No place can be perfect, right? Um, well, what about you?"

Huh, guess it's fair to ask... Although I'd really rather not talk about that hole, to be honest. "My home country is called Canada, a constitutional monarchy. 'Tis... Very far from here, anyways, I don't have many good memories of my hometown and I'd rather not drag up unpleasant memories, sorry." A flash of concern played on her face. She seems nice, but I've only known her a few minutes, and frankly my life isn't her concern, best to change the subject. "How old are you?"

Well, she isn't dumb at least, being that she seemed to get the message. "About 17. You?" Hm, she'd be legal in Canada then- NO, bad brain! You're better than that, suppress those damned hormones like you're more than capable of doing!

"21." Alright, that was a pretty poor attempt at keeping the conversation going... Maybe it'd just be best to let it putter out and work on the soup in silence.

---

Only with great sadness did I swallow the last mouthful of broth. Never before had I consumed a bowl of soup so good, surely she had used something akin to MSG? Would they have something along those lines, magic MSG perhaps? "Oh my, that was absolutely splendid. Truly, I haven't had a serving of soup so divine in all my life," And that was the damn truth, how she managed to make something so simple taste so stellar is beyond me. "Never before, have I been so upset upon finishing a meal, I hope you've no intention of making feeding me a regular occurrence milady, my will could not overcome my desire to gorge myself, and I fear that my waistline could not handle it."

I had been gazing longingly at the bowl the entire time, my heart feeling hollow now that I could no longer keep consuming the nectar of the Gods Siesta had oh so selflessly prepared for me. I finally
redirected my gaze to the young girl to notice that she had turned a rather distinct shade of red at my praise... Perhaps I had praised her a little too highly? It was just a bowl of soup, albeit a rather heavenly one after all...

Her eyes were firmly affixed to the floor when she spoke back. "Y-you praise me too highly milord, 'twas but a simple bowl of soup..." Oh, I didn't make her mad, did I? Damn, why must I be so terrible at interacting with women?

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you-"

"N-no, that's not it at all!" Whoa, are these strong-willed/meek mood-swings going to be a common thing with her? "I-I mean that I'm just not worthy of the praise you give me, I am but a humble maid."

"And the best cook I have ever encountered based on this bowl I just finished licking clean. Why are you not working in here rather than doing menial labour?"

"Um, well, to be honest I would rather work in the kitchens, but cleaning pays a little better if one is willing to work the entire day with a minimum of breaks, and my family really needs every guilder we can get, being that life has been more difficult than usual as of late."

She's awfully... Open, in regards to her personal life, considering that she met me less than an hour ago and I had all but blown her off when she'd asked about mine not an hour ago. Do I really come across as that trustworthy, or is she overly naive? "That's unfortunate. I pray for good tidings to befall your family, Siesta. If they are anything like you then they surely deserve it."

She somehow managed to turn an even deeper shade of red at this statement. At this rate a new section named "Siesta Red" would need to be added to the colour wheel. Man, I must really be overdoing it. Note to self; Tone down the praise, being new to the whole 'friendly and charming' thing is no excuse for falling into the cake and flailing around in a blind panic. "I d-don't know what to say... T-thank you milord." I found myself at a loss for topics to discuss, and beyond that it really was getting very late, going off of what she said she really ought to have gone to bed already.

"Well, I suppose I should let you go, you have a busy day ahead of you tomorrow, correct? If it wouldn't be too much trouble might I ask you to point me in the direction of an exit? It's rather quite hot in here, and I'd like to cool off in the wind for a spell before retiring to my quarters for the night."

That was a deliberate understatement, it was hot as balls in the kitchen, and my heavy autumn jacket wasn't helping matters much.

"Just follow this main hallway and you should arrive at the gates to the main courtyard milord."

Siesta pointed down the hall somewhat sheepishly for... Some reason.

"May your dreams be pleasant milady." With that I took my leave, I could have sworn I heard something resembling a high-pitched wine, like what one would hear being emitted by a boiling tea kettle shortly after closing the kitchen door behind me, but chose to ignore it in favour of getting outside before I passed out from heat exhaustion.

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But by sweet baby Jesus was the feeling of the cool night air on my flesh heavenly. Dropping the jacket at my feet I sighed in satisfaction as I closed my eyes before raising my face to the sky. Honestly, apart from the time travelling and having to act the friendly high-born (how extroverts manage to be so overly friendly and charming ALL, THE, DAMN, TIME, was beyond me. I haven't been so tired after just trying to talk to someone for a long time. But that aside?), this wasn't
such a bad day all things considered.

...Well, I ate well if nothing else. Smiling at the prospect of ending the night with gazing upon the moon's ever present lonely beauty I allowed my eyes to slide open to take in the glory of the Earth's lonely neigh-

Lonely...

I don't...

Two.

Two.

There were two moons in the sky, a red moon and a blue moon, surrounded by a completely alien set of stars.

That wasn't a portal to the past. It was a portal to an entirely separate planet.

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I don't know how long I was standing there for. Five minutes? Ten? An hour? I haven't the faintest clue. Frankly, I'm not even sure that I've been thinking at all after the shock of the pair of moons clearly visible in the night sky. The implications were staggering. I'm not on Earth anymore, I'm not even in the fucking Solar system any more. Hell, thinking about it, I may not even in the same god-damned dimension as Earth. Admittedly, that made a certain degree of sense, considering the whole fucking functional magic thing, but still, I hadn't really given it much thought until now...

It took me far longer than it should have to gather my wits, my stuff was gone from the courtyard where I'd been summoned. Guess the servants managed to get it all up to Louise's room after all. I absentmindedly picked my jacket off the ground and tucked it in the crook of my elbow. It would probably be best to just cease thinking about this for tonight, just get back up to Louise's room, and get to sleep.

I can deal with this bull shit tomorrow.
I sat on the edge of my queen bed, staring at Louise's sleeping form and out the window at the almost Disney-esque marble-brick castle walls, the sun peeking just over the nearly picturesque battlements. I hadn't been able to get a decent rest after last night's revelation, much to my chagrin, and had spent the past 30 or so minutes reflecting upon my situation after dressing myself.

I absentmindedly scratched my chin, wondering if I'd ever get to talk to Rose again. If not I could at least be content with knowing that we parted on good terms. Never the less, I found myself tearing up if I thought too hard about it, and I'm sure that Louise doesn't want to wake up to my tear-streaked face, so I'd decided to avoid considering Rose for now, at least until I had adequate privacy to allow myself to mourn my seemingly permanent and sudden separation from my best friend.

Then a thought occurred; my netbook. The entire contents of my room were brought with me when I was pulled into this world, so it should be here as well, right? I gave the room a quick scan, and found what I was looking for, the netbook was conveniently resting next to my triple solar panels. I couldn't help but grin with mild satisfaction at seeing that. The 2.5 lbs panel generated and held (with the accompanying power pack, at least) enough power to charge the netbook's battery about 4 times before running dry, plenty of time to entertain myself each day should I have the time to spare, and more than enough energy to charge my Vita at the end of each day.

The Xbox could only run for maybe two-and-a-half, maybe three hours. Still better than nothing. I stood from my bed, crossed the room and opened the netbook, grinning wildly upon seeing the familiar power indicator light up. I took advantage of the boot-up delay to quickly set up the solar panel on the window sill, ensuring it was secured in place with generous strips of the Gorilla tape I kept in my bug-out bag which had been conveniently near the netbook as well, upon returning to my computer I saw in the lower right portion of the screen a small indicator I certainly wasn't expecting to ever see again. An active internet connection, a strong active internet connection.

I could not help but hesitate for a few moments, I could feel excitement wanting to rush up, but knew better than to allow it. Certainly, the computer was just glitching out a bit, interference from the dimensional slide, most likely. Hovering over the internet connectivity icon seemed to confirm my suspicions for a moment, but only a moment.

- [NULL]

Internet access
-

I could feel myself getting excited again, but wanted to prevent that and started directing my mouse to my Firefox browser to open it up to confirm that it was a particularly disheartening glitch when all of a sudden I was kicked in the teeth with irrefutable proof that my wi-fi card may just be the greatest in existence.

"Avast has been updated!" An upbeat feminine voice chirped from the mercifully quiet speakers...

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M1858 New Model Army, percussion caps, smokeless powder... Heh, thank you, Remington Arms. If I turn out to be stuck here I might as well take advantage of my world's knowledge in order to make a living. There's also no telling how potentially having access to a revolver could come to be of
use. Totally going to gather as much information as I possibly can to sell the scholar angle as well.

What time is it? ...Okay, just realised that the clock on this thing isn't synced up with this world and is, therefore, useless until I can fix that. Anyways, it might be best to touch up on my knowledge, start spreading simple ideas such as boiling surgical tools and eating utensils before using them, utilising vodka as a disinfectant (assuming they have potatoes), water purification as well, etc...

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...And with that, I set the netbook into sleep mode.

A small groan pierced the dawn and called my attention towards Louise. Guess she's about to wake up then. Might be best to close my laptop and what not, ensure that I don't give her tech shock or anything.

The cute groans picked up in volume, indicating that Louise was close to waking. I realised that a few tears had fallen from my eyes when I was searching the web, was I really that affected by having internet access? I wiped them as best I could and forced my emotions back down to normalcy. Wouldn't want to freak her out first thing in the morning. I had just finished making myself look as presentable as I could without a mirror (I wasn't sure that she'd appreciate waking to find me using her's) when I heard a light shriek followed by a clearly distressed demand. "W-w-who are you, what are you doing in my room?"

I quickly turned around and held my hands up in an amicable manner, best to defuse the situation before it began with a clear and concise explanation, as she was clearly not the morning type. "I'm Jophiel, the man you summoned yesterday, you allowed me to share a room with you for the night because I had no sleeping arrangements for myself, remember?" It took a few moments, but the shock eventually faded from her features, allowing her face to relax into a more gentle position.

"Oh, the foreign Noble, right..." Her expression soured somewhat quickly again, though, accompanied with a noticeable red tinge to her cheeks. "I-I wouldn't normally share my room with a strange boy, but you didn't have anywhere else to stay, and I summoned you so the responsibility fell on me..." She was clearly more than a little embarrassed to have had me sleep in the same room as her... Which makes sense, from what I could see the local culture seems to be about at the late age of enlightenment, maybe early modern. This type of arrangement would normally be taboo. Best to get out and allow her some privacy.

"Well, I'll leave the room and allow you some privacy so that you may get dressed in comfort."

"W-wait!" Oh, what? Why would she want me to wait? "Y-your eyes, they're bloodshot..." Oh, crap. Of course, she'd notice.

"It was merely this unusual sleeping arrangement, I assure you! It is highly unusual for an uncoupled pair to share a room where I come from, so I was somewhat uncomfortable and found it difficult to achieve a state of rest." A total lie, but she didn't need to know that I was crying over the internet.

"I see... It's unusual here as well, but due to the circumstances-"

"I appreciate the gesture, make you no mistake milady, that is all."

"Well... You know, if you weren't able to get to sleep, you can lie back down and try to get some rest once I've left for my classes, it isn't as though you have anything you need to do until the school day is over anyways." That... Is a fair point, maybe I'll do just that, I certainly feel as though a great weight has been lifted off of my shoulders knowing that I still have an internet connection...
"You have my gratitude Miss le Blanc, now if you'll grant me leave, I shall wait outside your door so that you may dress and prepare in private." I stated with a slight bow, the girl gave a slight nod of her head, to which I followed up by turning, heading out, and closing the door behind me. I sighed as I slumped down against the mirror-smooth granite brick wall next to Louise's door, being an introvert was making having to play up the friendly Noble act real tiring rather fast.

"Oh, my-my, what have we here?" I opened my eyes to see that it was the tall dusky-skinned red head from yesterday that had picked a fight with Louise. Was her room right across from Louise's? Oh my, how perfect. "A strapping and thoroughly exotic young man leaving le Blanc's room first thing in the morning, clearly worn out and with bloodshot eyes? Has my little Louise finally taken a page from my book and loosened up a bit?" She asked playfully, much to my chagrin.

I straightened my back and puffed out my chest as I prepared to rebuke her presumption. "I am not that kind of man, and I take offence to your insinuation! Miss le Blanc had merely selflessly offered to allow me to sleep in her quarters as I had not my own due to my sudden and unexpected appearance. I am tired because I am unused to sharing a room with a woman and was uncomfortable as a result." That sounded appropriately high-strung.

She paused for a few moments, I decided to take the opportunity to get a good look at her... Some kind of fantasy Middle-Easterner or Indian, maybe? The bright red hair and chestnut brown eyes might indicate mixed ethnicity, although given that this seems to be a fantasy alternate universe of some kind there's really no way to tell for sure...

The sultry woman gave me a bored look for a few more moments before her eyes widened with realisation. "You're the man she summoned yesterday! Oh my, I'm surprised that I failed to recognise you after you left such an... Impression, on me." She looked me up and down with appraising eyes as she had yesterday morn- Er, evening, a predatory glint in her eyes sparkling to life alongside a pleased grin. "Mmm... You certainly are quite the male specimen, aren't you?" She stated in a seductive tone as she took a step closer to me.

She didn't seem particularly bothered by me attempting to back away from her.

"Up until now, I had been the tallest student in the academy, even if one were to count the boys. It's really rather quite sad how diminutive Tristainian men tend to be. Although to be fair, I'm even a little taller than most men back home in Germania. It's really quite nice to meet a man that isn't a staff member that I don't have to look downwards at to address."

I- Wait, what?

"That's your real hair, isn't it?" What is this- I don't... "I've heard of some Nobles that colour their hair unnatural tones using dyes to make themselves stand out even more from the crowd, but there's always supposed to be tell-tale signs of it, like their roots growing in their natural light tone, but you clearly have recent growth on your face that's as much a deep earthen dark as the rest of your hair... I've only heard of such an exotic shade in fairy tales."

Dark hair- Fairy tales?

"Coupling that along with your equally dark eyes and completely alien facial features... You must hail from a truly far-off place. Yes, from even beyond Rub Al'khali I imagine." Exotic? Did she just call my dark brown hair and eyes, the second most common hair and eye colour combination on Earth exotic? Wow, this really is a bizarre place if she's telling the truth. Also, is she hitting on me without even knowing my name? Have I been cornered the resident school bike?
"KIRCHE!" I jumped as the door next to me slammed open and Louise leapt between myself and the tall voluptuous woman I surmised to be named Kirche. "He isn't one of those shameless boys like the kind you're used to associating yourself with! He's a proper gentleman that respects the boundaries of marriage, so leave him alone!" She was rather worked up, although to be honest I couldn't help but feel complimented that she would leap to defend my honour so readily.

I attempted to slide away from the two so that we would not be stuck up against the wall, and mercifully, I succeeded. "Oh little Louise, you just want him all to yourself, don't you? Don't be so selfish, I'm sure he has enough stamina to be shared." Kirche playfully teased the smaller, more modest girl. "Mm, you had him locked in your room all night too, I wonder what you-"

"Kirche." I started, stepping between the two with a stern glare. "Back off."

A few tense moments passed before she finally obliged with a giggle. "It's been a while since I've encountered a man that's willing to give commands like a man as well..." Kirche wistfully stated, giving me an approving look. "You know, le Blanc, I've been utterly convinced that you were really a magical blunt, a Noble in name only, not worthy of attending the most prestigious magical school in the land, much less being my rival." I could feel Louise tense up even in my loose supporting grasp, that sounded pretty bad- "I'm glad that you've proved me wrong."

Louise almost jumped at that statement, I couldn't see her face, but Kirche was giving Louise a rather warm smile.

"Now," Kirche began as she started walking down the hall. "You'd best hurry along now, we're going to be late for breakfast at this rate." Louise nearly jumped out of my hands, clearly surprised by the statement. "It was nice to meet you..." Kirche started as she stopped to turn and look at me. It took me a little longer than it should have to realise that she was waiting for my name.

"Jophiel."

"Jophiel... A name from beyond the Sahara. Fitting. I am Kirche Augusta Frederica von Anhalt-Zerbst. You be sure to take care of my rival now, it wouldn't do for a Le Blanc to lose to an Augusta with nary a fight." With that she sashayed around the curve of the tower, leaving Louise and myself standing on our own.

She turned to look at me briefly, turning a shade of pink before averting her eyes. "Um... I apologise for Kirche's behaviour, she does not represent the whole student body..."

I shrugged it off as I responded. "I believe you, there's always one bad apple in the bunch."

"Well... Thank you, then. I am sure your next impression will be less bad." Louise made to turn and leave but paused briefly to make one final statement. "I shall let Mr Colbert know that you're resting, so you should get to bed while you have the chance... And that stuff on my window sill, I imagine it is important but... I'll talk to the Professor about arranging for your own quarters. I shall be on my way now."

I had one question first. "What did she mean by 'from beyond the Sahara'?'" Louise rolled her eyes.

"The Sahara is a mythical place beyond Halkegania that the Founder is said to have visited at some point. She was just trying to sound dramatic." Oh, well, that explains that.

"Okay, thank you for the clarification. I'll see you later." I turned, entered the room myself and closing the door behind me before Louise had even disappeared around the tower's curve, allowing myself to slump down on my poorly positioned bed before I drifted off I made a final, bemused
statement. "Boy oh boy, aren't we off to a good start..."
I did my best to smack the fatigue out of my head, I'd only slept for a few hours, don't want to fuck my sleeping schedule up after all. Just need enough energy to get me to the end of the day.

After dolling myself up somewhat (shaved, trimmed things, combed and straightened the fuck out of others, applied a reasonable amount of body spray) I slipped my nicest white silk shirt and black jeans on to try and not stick out so much compared to yesterday, aside from the Hellion and Bowie each strapped to either of my hips at least.

After ensuring that my Vita was secured in place in my breast pocket with the camera positioned to see everything in front of me I left for Colbert's office, if he wasn't there I'd make my way to the kitchen and nick something the staff wouldn't miss, a fruit and vegetable or two, nothing major. I caught a few stares and whispers as I made my way through the fortress (it has enormous exterior walls, fuck you, it's a fortress) towards the tower Colbert's office was located in, which I was able to find with the help of a friendly, if clearly inexplicably intimidated butler (that's what male maids are called, right?).

Actually examining the locals, I couldn't help but notice that Kirche may have been telling the truth, I've not seen a single strand of dark hair (Siesta aside, oddly enough) aside from my own amongst the academy's population. Maybe attempting to blend in is a lost cause with that in mind.

I strolled past a foppish blonde boy with a disproportionately low voice (hey, pretty boy, wanna trade voices? It would certainly make it sound less unnatural when we open our mouths) and a moderately pretty, small, light-haired brunette girl sitting together on a bench near a small statue garden, he was spouting off some overly dramatic nonsense about how she was a blooming rose or something, I didn't really pay attention as I passed them by, none of my business after all.

I think she made a comment about me being Louise's Noble Familiar and the guy wondering aloud where my cloak was... I'd assumed that it was part of the school uniform, guess it's actually a symbol of nobility than. Definitely gonna have Colbert fill me in on as much as possible once I get the chance.

Fortunately, it seemed that Colbert's classes were done for the day, as he was indeed in his office and seemed to be working on something resembling chemistry.

I hadn't actually bothered to look around the office the previous night, the Eagle that I had surmised to be his Familiar was still perched on his desk, his spear (really, what does a Wizard need a spear for? Does it function as a combat staff of sorts?) was propped against the wall behind him, various beakers and bottles lined the walls, there were poorly cleaned blast markings all over most surfaces and some of the furniture, and it stank of various chemicals and reagents such as brimstone of all things.

There were also dozens of what seemed to be down-scaled engineering prototypes, the most notable things being what I surmised to be a crude wooden bicycle, a vaguely modern tank-shaped carriage complete with a renaissance-era cannon mounted on it, and what appeared to be a very primitive WWII-era fighter plane hanging from the ceiling by strings. Is the local tech more advanced than it first appeared, or is Colbert a veritable Da Vinci/Archimedes/Tesla way ahead of his time? I suppose only time itself will tell.

"Colbert?" I'd saw fit to invite myself inside, and the frustratingly familiar man seemed to be completely engrossed in his work, being that it took me all but shouting at him to finally catch his
attention.

"Oh, good evening mister Jophiel, miss Le Blanc informed me that you were to be sleeping in this
day to account for your being unable to sleep last night, I take it that you're feeling better now?" He
seems a fair bit more light-hearted today compared to when we last spoke, I suppose he really was
quite worn out than.

"Well, enough. I couldn't help but notice those small models you have strewn about this place, are
you an engineer as well as an alchemist?" Colbert gave a small laugh and sheepishly rubbed the back
of his head.

"Only in my spare time, and never anything too serious. Just simple little projects I find interesting."
My eyes wandered over to the crude model tank as he made that statement. Nothing too serious, huh.
"Most people don't really bother to pay much attention to the models, I think you may actually be the
first to have commented on them aside from Headmaster Osmond." Headmaster Osmond? First I'd
heard of him, gonna have to ask about that as well I suppose.

"Well, it's just that I recognise a fair amount of the models as fairly crude versions of vehicles and
such that are mass produced where I come from-

"W-what!? Did you just say that my models are... "Mass"-produced in your lands!?!" Whoa, when
did he close that three-metre gap between us?

"Uh, yes, this one looks like a crude version of what we would call a 'bicycle,' and that a 'tank,' and
that an aeroplane." Colbert's eyes lit up like fireworks. I probably wouldn't be learning about the
local land today after all.

"Please, you must tell me all about these 'bicycles' and 'tanks' from your land!" Oh great, might as
well just bring my bicycle here if he wants to see- ...Aha!

"How about I do you one better? My personal bicycle came along with me when I was pulled into
here through the summoning portal along with a lot of things from my land that don't seem to exist
here. If you can get me something to eat I'll bring some of the stuff over here and-

"YES! I shall have a servant inform the kitchen immediately!" And with that, Colbert was out the
door and shouting for a servant as he went charging down the hallway in a dead sprint. Guess I
should start hauling some stuff over then if nothing else he'll surely get a kick out of the netbook.

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Hauling the various things I'd imagined that Colbert would want to take a look at proved fairly quick
as I did so by utilising my bike between Colbert's tower and the main castle. Luckily the cobblestone
roads were damn near mirror smooth, making them rather pleasant to ride over; which made sense
considering that this is a Noble magic academy.

The amounts of surprised looks I received as I passed many of the students by while riding the bike
was mildly amusing. Siesta was one of the few I whizzed by, she had quite a look of wild wonder in
her eyes for the few moments she was in my forward-facing field of view as I waved to her in
acknowledgement. I'd like to stop and tell her about it, but my meal was likely to arrive at the office
shortly, and I was quite hungry.

After closing the main door behind me I hopped off of the bike and began to carry it through the
halls and up the stairs leading to Colbert's office, luckily there was more than enough room to fit all
of my stuff on a single workbench with the bike itself being laid to rest against it.
I opted to catalogue the stuff I had brought over while waiting for Colbert to arrive.

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I clapped my hands as I had finished cataloguing the collection, yes, this would surely be enough to occupy Colbert for the day. Certainly, he'd be more than willing to lend me a hand on getting my bearings on this strange world after all of this.

Upon unclasping my hands I heard light footfalls passing through the open doorway, much to my surprise it was Siesta carrying a covered tray. "Oh, Siesta. You're the one that was assigned to bring my meal here?" The raven-haired teenager seemed slightly startled and met my eyes for only a few moments before averting her gaze and turning a very slight shade of pink, for some reason I couldn't determine at that moment. "Had I realised you were on your way here I would have stopped and offered to carry the tray for you, I apologise." Siesta's eyes shot open and lit up right before she starting half-shouting.

"I-it's alright milord! 'Tis far from a great load, and I can see that you had more pressing matters to attend to anyway!" I smiled lightly, it was nice to know somebody so friendly already. I noticed her eyes drifting over to my bike, obviously.

"Are you interested in the bicycle?" She cocked her head slightly in a confused manner, not understanding the unfamiliar word. "This thing that I was riding when I passed by you a few minutes ago." I stated while placing my hand on the seat. Her eyes grew somewhat wide and her smile widened ever so slightly.

"W-would you really be willing to tell me about it?" I was a little confused myself at this point, why wouldn't I? It isn't like it would be a big bother, and she seems like a pleasant enough person to have around.

"Would you be willing to wait for Professor Colbert to return? I brought all of this junk here, to begin with because he wanted to hear about it." The girl looked ever so slightly disappointed, but her smile picked up quickly enough.

"Absolutely milord."

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It had taken Colbert but a few moments to arrive after Siesta agreed to stick around. The moment he set eyes upon the miscellany strewn about his largest workbench he looked as though he would suffer an aneurysm. "Incredible, amazing! It's just as I, no, it's even better than I had imagined it!" He'd descended upon the bike like a ravenous wolf onto an undefended rabbit kit. "Is this all metal? It must be expensive, but durable... My, this isn't just any metal, but aluminium! Pure aluminium! Such opulence, look miss servant, how rich must this man have been in his homeland to possess such an extravagant form of engineering made from so precious a metal?"

Siesta had joined Colbert in examining the simple $200 bicycle with the same awe that someone from my world would an advanced stealth jet fighter, it was downright adorable, the way they reacted to humble aluminium. Little do they know it isn't quite as precious as they'd believe. In fact, the girl had previously been fingering the frame with all the intense curiosity of an infant, but now appeared almost afraid to touch it. I couldn't help but chuckle somewhat at her imagined predicament.

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"It was working this morning..." Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to let myself get so worked up, but the internet connection was gone.

This distressed me greatly, to put it mildly.

"There is no need to get hysterical Mister Jophiel, well disappointing, I'm sure that whatever the issue is, it will eventually work itself out." Bullshit, technology doesn't work like that, least of all technology made by Microsoft. Although I couldn't help but feel some appreciation towards Colbert for attempting to calm me down.

"I suppose there isn't anything I can really do about it now at any rate..." 'Ye Gods I hope that this is just a temporary problem, there was so much information I really wanted to acquire just in case, breech loading firearms, a method for producing pure steel, maybe directions for making a combat harness come to the forefront of my mind... Not to mention that I wanted to try to make contact with Rose if I could... "Well..." I started as I shut down and closed the netbook, thoroughly crestfallen. "I suppose that's all there was to mention then. Any other questions?"

"Many, many more good sir!" Colbert responded gleefully. Siesta seemed to find his easily excitable nature endearing if the smile plastered on her face was anything to go by. "However, the day is late, and Lady Le Blanc should be here to discuss the terms of your contract shortly."

Ah, that's right, forgot about that entirely.

Forgot to even think up the terms of the contract... Shit. I'd better consider that as hard as I can before she gets here-

"Professor Colbert? I have arrived, is Lord Jophiel yet here?" Ah, crap. "Oh, hello there. I hope you slept well." The short blonde girl curtsied aristocratically. Well, she seems quite well-mannered if nothing else.

Agh! No no, focus, confound it, what will my demands be? A room! Yes, and 3 square meals per day at minimum, and...

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"So, to simplify everything mister Jophiel has requested... He would like to be treated as a full-fledged member of the student body." I blinked in surprise. Thinking through it, I suppose that I basically did just request that in a really long-winded manner, hadn't I? "In addition, he will be treated as a partner in an 'equal, symbiotic relationship,' as he put it." Well, it would have saved us a good 15 minutes had I just put it like that, to begin with. "Well, unfortunately, I cannot make any promises in regards to the student status... That would be entirely up to the Headmaster, not myself or Lady Le Blance."

Ah. Well, of course.

He continued. "Although, to be fair, your situation is rather quite interesting, so I'm not sure... I'll bring it up to him, and be sure to put in a good word for you, if nothing else, you're a Noble, if a foreign one, and really should be treated as one after all." Louise nodded in agreement. Praise be to Atheismo that she wasn't being argumentative over this. "Either way, at the very least I shall attempt to get separate board for you by tomorrow night, it would be unfortunate for yourself and Lady Le Blanc to be forced to sleep in an arrangement most uncomfortable for both parties for longer than necessary." But damn is Colbert one of the most reasonable men I've ever encountered in my life, let
alone here.

"Professor." Louise spoke up in an attention-grabbing manner. "The room to the immediate left of mine is yet unclaimed. While I understand that it would be unorthodox for a man to have quarters in the girl's wing, I would prefer to have my Fam- Partner, nearby on the chance that I may require his assistance post-haste after school hours." I found it oddly relieving that Louise caught and put so much emphasis on correcting herself there.

"Hm... Yes, you make a good case. Considering the circumstances, I believe that I may be able to work something out with the Headmaster."

I hadn't noticed how tense Louise was beforehand, but she immediately appeared as though quite a heavy load had been lifted off of her shoulders. "Thank you, Professor." No smile presented itself on her lips, but she did sound sincere when she said that. "So, that aside... It seems as though we will not be able to finalise this contract today if we are to require the headmaster's approval." Colbert solemnly nodded in response.

"I apologise Lady Le Blanc, but I haven't the power to make these arrangements happen on my own."

"Actually-" I started, catching both of their attentions. "-This seems like it may be a good opportunity for a trial run, so to speak." Both of the magician's eyebrows peaked in interest. "If it would not be too great a bother, would you mind if I accompanied you on your regular schedule tomorrow miss Le Blanc? It would allow me a chance to see what to expect out of being in your employ."

She paused for several moments, considering my proposal. "Very well. I would like to know what manner of behaviour to expect out of you myself anyways." Seems reasonable enough, suppose I have tomorrow planned out then.

"Obviously we shall behave as though the contract has been finalised over the course of the day. Better to act with honesty than to act like we think we want each other to act and produce false preconceptions on what to expect out of this partnership." Colbert nodded in agreement, and I internally cringed over how difficult consistently speaking in such a refined manner was getting. Or was it the flagrant lying? Eh, not important at the moment either way.

"I suppose that we are done for the day here then?" Colbert inquired to Louise and I. I gave an affirmative nod, which Louise seemed to take as her cue to stand and make for the door after giving the Professor and myself each a polite curtsy and farewell.

"Professor Colbert?" I started, catching his attention after Louise shut the door behind herself. "Would it be possible to arrange for me to spend the night in the servant's quarters tonight? I find sharing a room with a lady I am not wed with... Uncomfortable." Blatant filthy lies, I could not care less about sleeping in the same room as a girl due to having a rather weak (compared to other guys, at least) sex drive. Just didn't want to make Louise herself uncomfortable unnecessarily.

"Oh, well in that case you may feel free to sleep here in my office tonight, I keep a small mattress and basic comforts tucked away for when the time escapes me and I find myself too tired to make it back to my quarters proper." The kindly older man stated as he opened a cupboard and withdrew the aforementioned sleeping supplies from it after using his magic to levitate his desktop clear (Magic in action! So fucking cool! But don't let it show, you're a Noble, not a commoner!) of the various nick-knacks populating it to the corner of the room, placing the mattress and bedding atop it, clearly intending for me to use it as an impromptu bed frame. "Was there anything else you may require for the night?"
"Directions towards the nearest lavatory would be nice." I stated in a droll tone. Colbert simply moved to what I had assumed to be a broom closet and opened it, revealing what I could only describe as a porcelain proto-toilet with a proper wooden toilet seat, although it lacked any sort of visible flushing mechanism.

"This is a recent invention of mine, it is enchanted with a special localised Earth spell of rapid decay in the last 3 inches of the bowl, any... Er... natural 'waste' that passes this point will rapidly decompose into dust in mere moments, thereby minimising the need to clean and keeping any unwanted smells marginalised."

Colbert seemed to notice my thoroughly impressed expression and continued on with what seemed to be a sales pitch he'd been working on in his down time.

"Mrs Longueville helped me with the magic, though the bowl itself was my idea. Honestly, chamber pots are so unsanitary and simply unsightly. Although the materials used in this model are rather expensive, I hope to one day see this in every family home. I have simply yet to come up with a good name for it..."

"How about 'toilet?'" I offered in what was meant to be a sarcastic manner, not realising that he wouldn't understand the intent due to this being the first toilet in this world.

"Toilet? Hmm... 'toilet...' The word certainly does roll off the tongue rather easily, so to speak. I like it, how did you come up with such a name Lord Jophiel?" Colbert asked, his interest obviously piqued.

"Well..." Ah, fuck it, couldn't hurt to be honest with him here. "That's what we call this device where I come from, although our version lacks magic and therefore uses a system involving pressurised water and piping to flush waste into a predesignated river to dispose of it." His eyes became unto dinner plates, indicating a keen interest in pursuing the topic further, unfortunately(?), my lack of sleep was starting to catch up with me, and my body picked that particular moment to force a rather obnoxious yawn out of my maw.

"Oh, that's right, you didn't sleep well last night... Well, it would probably be best that I leave you for the night. Wouldn't want you to pass out where you stand as I am prone to doing." The man stated with a sheepish laugh. "Oh, one last important thing before I leave though." He stated before he shifted his voice into a rather stern tone. "Do not drop anything important in the bowl of the toilet, and whatever you do, under absolutely no circumstances are you to attempt to reach into the bowl, regardless of what you may have dropped into it. Understood?"

I understood the implications clear as day. I nervously nodded as I looked over Colbert's shoulder towards the now seemingly less inviting proto-toilet.

"Now, I'll leave the lavatory mage-light on for the night so that you won't accidentally trip over anything should you find yourself in need of some midnight relief. Sleep well my good sir! Come Sam." Giving me a cheery wave as he passed me by, Colbert shut the door to his office behind him after his Eagle Familiar quickly glid over and perched itself on his armoured shoulder, leaving me alone with the suddenly far more dangerous-seeming porcelain throne.

I approached the device cautiously and peered into the white void. Nothing, not even a thin layer of dust on the bottom of the immaculate bowl. Hm. Does that mean that it would also serve as a sort of 'super' trash bin? No need to buy garbage bags, just toss your waste and forget about it... Now I was curious to now just how well it really worked. Placing my had over my stomach I had to acknowledge that I while I had been able to void my bladder in the common lavatories (i.e. broom closets with chamber pots and incense burners) I hadn't the will to drop a deuce in any of them...
Unfortunately, going by the pair of buckets of standing water with the pile of rags near them I quickly figured out what I was meant to wipe with. Glancing around nervously, only then did I realise that I hadn't noticed whenever it was that Siesta had left. Girl must be skilled at slipping away unnoticed. Unfortunate, I would have liked to have at least said good night to her.

After redirecting my attention, several more moments passed as I held a one-way staring contest with the magic toilet, weighing my current options, as they were. "...Eh, fuck it. Can't hold it in all night as well. Might as well see if this baby works as advertised." I stated to nobody in particular as I shut the toilet closet door, gathered my courage, and moved to undo my belt buckle...
Mister Sandman Part 01

I had awoken that morning fairly early due to Colbert’s makeshift bedding being rather uncomfortable, although sleeping on the hard desk would probably turn out to be good for my posture.

The sun was only just peeking over the horizon and had yet to cross over the fortress walls, leaving the entirety of the courtyard almost completely dark save for the “mage light” (as I’d learned they were called) lamp posts illuminating the primary pathways that led to and from the towers.

After utilizing Colbert’s disintegration toilet once again (the thing isn't exactly safe, but I think that I'm going to have to request that one be installed in my room-to-be, as I ain't squatten' over no chamber pot) and tidying up the place so as to remove any trace of my presence I set off to find Louise.

As I sauntered down the academy halls I pondered what to do were she not yet awake. I suppose that I could head down to the kitchen again and get something to eat for myself- Actually, no. If I'm going to be following Louise around today to get an idea of what to expect out of guarding her, including how eating arrangements would play out, I shouldn't gorge myself ahead of time.

Probably best to just hang around the front of her room until she eventually wakes up on her own once I get there.

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Turns out that I would be waiting for a while, as Louise hadn't woken until a good half-hour after I'd arrived at her door. I’d briefly entertained the idea of checking out the room that was set to be assigned to myself, however it seems that unused rooms are kept locked. Makes sense, prevent squatting, vandalism and such.

I opted to entertain myself by playing Persona 4 while waiting until Louise eventually stumbled out her room (again, clearly not a morning person), greeting me as cordially as was possible when still pretty well half-asleep.

Nothing much worth mentioning occurred on our way to the dining hall aside from the occasional under-the-breath murmur as we passed by other, slower students, eventually making our way to our destination without incident.

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I have to say, the Alviss Dining hall sure is... Opulent. Polished black-and-white diamond-patterned flooring, basalt and marble most likely, mirror-smooth marble brick walls, lacquered... Cherry wood? I dunno, it kind of looks like cherry wood... Anyways, cherry wood support beams, panelling... The chairs are probably either some kind of rosewood or are just stained. Wood isn't really my area of expertise...

"Well-" Louise started, derailing my train of thought. "Here it is, the pride of the academy, any commoner, nay, any noble would be ecstatic to merely step into the Alviss dining hall, let alone spend their meal time here. The structure was crafted thousands of years ago by the Founder Brimir himself, and the amenities were crafted mere decades ago, all by only the most skilled craftsmen gold
could purchase."

Is it just me, or is her speech coming across as a little more casual than it was before?

"The dining hall is rivalled only by the most opulent of royal halls, and none have the distinction of having been built by the Founder himself." Religious propaganda; were I to guess the entire structure would be a couple centuries old, at the most. The styling of the wood panelling and support pillars seems to match up with the style of the various chairs and tables and what have you... Although, to be fair, wood accents could be replaced, and would almost certainly rot over the course of a few centuries.

The brickwork itself may be rather on the old side, the Romans and Greeks have relatively intact 2000+ structures still sitting about where they built them, perhaps if these people never suffered from a dark ages cultural recession of their own such an ancient building being so well maintained wouldn't be that far-fetched.

"I do not doubt it. I dare say that this dining hall nearly rivals many of my people's constructions in mere architectural accomplishment alone. I am rather impressed." Although I meant that as a compliment, Louise seemed to take my statement as more of a challenge than anything, which may be a good thing, I imagine that cultural posturing is practically the national sport among nobles.

"Oh? Really, how many of your people's buildings can claim to be over five stories in height?" Oh ho, at least she's making it easy for me in this case.

"My people have buildings that exceed one hundred and fifty stories in height- without any manner of magical reinforcement, I might add." Granted, I was cheating; the Burg Khalifa wasn't built by my culture, but dammit I'm trying to impress them here and they don't need to know that! Louise's eyes narrowed in a sceptical fashion.

To be fair, that would sound like an obviously bullshit claim to someone born into a world with early modern tech levels; luckily, I have proof on my computer- and currently resting in my breast pocket to back up my claims.

"We also possess technology that allows us to capture an image of the world exactly as it would appear to the human eye and view it as one would a painting. Back in your room, I have a device that has dozens of these images on it, of cities and creations that would leave you stunned for hours. In fact, I have one such device planted right here in my pocket, if you would like a demonstration."

"I certainly would like such a demonstration." The dusky-skinned red head known as Kirche suddenly spoke up from behind me, interrupting the conversation Louise and I were sharing. "Such fantastic claims, and alleged proof? I am beginning to believe that you really are from the realm of the fairies, if you speak the truth, that is." She had something of a teasing tone to her voice, although a fair amount of anticipation was audibly detectable.

"Alright then." I started after loading the video recording app on my Vita. "Smile." Kirche seemed confused for a moment, but quickly assumed a pose that put emphasis on her chest in what was a rather transparent attempt to woo me.

I'll give her credit, any man from around here would (and ho, are) pant at her in a blatant display of unhardened hormones, seeing that amount of skin from such an exotic beauty would likely be all but unheard of.
Unfortunately for her I come from the internet age on top of having a rather weak sex drive, to begin with. This is utterly tame compared to what I'm used to seeing... Anyways, I suppose that's enough footage. Louise looks like she's attempting to explode my head with her mind anyways, and I don't want to risk the possibility that she's actually capable of doing that.

Kirche seemed disappointed that the impromptu photo shoot was over... She seemed to forget about her disappointment the moment I played back the footage for her and Louise both, though.

"Utterly amazing..." Louise was transfixed on the Vita's screen, likely less about Kirche's on-screen antics and more that she was watching what is likely the first video and audio recording that's ever existed here on-...And I just realised that I don't know the name of this planet. Bloody heck, I really need to get around to arranging that history lesson with Colbert. "I can't stop looking at it..."

"Oh ho ho, am I really so fetching, even to you Little Louise? That would certainly explain why you never so much as peek at the boys around the academy..." Kirche had circled around my back and was now squeezing Louise between her breasts from behind. My ward-to-be started kicking and squirming in an attempt to break free from the notably taller redhead's unwanted hug.

"T-t-t-t-that isn't what I meant at all! His moving painting thing was what I was talking about! Now let me go, you shameless harlot!" I'm beginning to think that Louise may be trying to act more mature than she really is when interacting with me, as kicking and screeching really isn't the reaction of a mature individual when placed in an unwanted hug. "I said let go!"

"Lady Augusta." I stated to Kirche in an 'angry authority figure' manner, getting across exactly what I wanted without actually saying anything. She exhaled with a disappointed sigh as she released Louise from her pillowy vice grip.

"One of the downsides of a mature man I suppose, he won't countenance any childish behaviour in his presence." She didn't look terribly disappointed, though. If anything I was kind of getting the feeling that she was deliberately attempting to bait me into acting all authoritative over her... I suppose having a man actually do something other than grovel at her feet is something of a novel experience for her. Hopefully, Louise won't wind up suffering for her amusement too much.

"Now, if you two are quite finished with such childish antics..."

I started, the two girls having disengaged from each other, Louise now staring at her feet in an embarrassed manner, Kirche looking as if she couldn't give any fewer shits that she just called the attention of nearly half of the dining hall to herself and her smaller blonde compatriot.

"I don't have any pictures of my culture's constructions on this device, which is known as a Playstation Vita, or just Vita if you'd prefer, but I just wanted to show you what we are capable of to give you an idea of what to expect." Kirche was thoughtfully rubbing her chin, Louise nodding somewhat with her eyes still fixated on her shoes.

"Wait, so that artefact, it can... 'Paint,' images both in still life and in motion?" I was a little surprised that Kirche was the one asking me questions about it, also, artefact? No old magic here honey.

"Yes, it can. Also, it isn't an artefact. This is far from a one-off device and absolutely no magic was involved in its creation or function. Just pure electricity at work here." I stated while shaking the Vita somewhat for emphasis.

"What was that you just said?" Louise spoke up this time, confusion plastered on her face now. "I've
never heard of this... 'Electricity' before."

"Neither have I. This should be interesting." Kirche seemed more than a little interested in what I had to say on the matter, this... Could get complicated.

"Ah... Well, you know what lightning is, I presume." The two girls nodded, I also noticed that several of the students whose attention had been grabbed by Kirche earlier were rather blatantly listening in on our conversation.

I suppose eavesdropping isn't considered to be terribly rude here. Or these students are just ill-mannered. Probably the latter.

"My people have learned how to not only capture and control lightning, but create it ourselves without magic." Both girls eyes widened substantially. That would be something of a huge claim, to be fair. "Now, this lightning we create, we can store it in what we call 'batteries,' or 'capacitors.' I am unsure if there is a real equivalent that you would have to help you understand it better... Tell me, do your people have a, let's say natural 'energy' source that powers your magic that can run out and require time to recharge before any spells can be cast again?"

"Soul." The girls stated simultaneously, glancing at each other for a split second after doing so before redirecting their attention back to myself. That'll simplify the explanation considerably.

"Ah. Well, these batteries run off the same basic concept that your 'Soul' does. This Vita uses electricity to function, and should it run out of electricity it would be little more than a glorified paperweight until its batteries are recharged." Louise played with her hair as she contemplated my oversimplified explanation of how batteries work, Kirche lightly chewed on the tip of her thumb as she herself considered my story.

"Jophiel..." The sultry redhead started, a look of anticipation spreading across her features as she did so. "I've gathered that you are a foreign Noble, so I'm curious... Obviously, the Founder could not have granted your people our magic, so I find myself curious about your people's magic. Could I be so bold as to ask for a demonstration of your people's surely exotic spell casting?"

A dozen faces shamelessly lit up as they turned and began to stare at me outright. Oh shit, I hadn't thought this entire thing through, had I? Fuck fuck fuck fuck, need an excuse, a good excuse, erm... Oh! Okay, it's somewhat far-fetched, but probably my only chance to get out of this.

"I would, however... I come from a very, let's say 'particular' bloodline. My family has been so utterly transfixed on producing the most powerful wizards, that's what we call mages in my land, possible."

A dozen eyebrows raised.

"Unfortunately it turns out that this fixation on producing powerful spell casters has resulted in... Well, I could cast a spell, but even the weakest spell I can muster would level the entire dining hall outright, probably killing everybody inside, us included. So unless we find ourselves in a very dire situation I wouldn't count on seeing a spell out of me anytime soon."

Louise's eyes widened enough to create the illusion of a pair of dinner plates, surrounding students that were eavesdropping on our conversation began exchanging nervous glances and whispers, while Kirche herself looked quite... Bemused. Crap, I don't think she's buying it...
"Oh, is that so?" She stated as a wand was deftly produced from within her sleeve, and I felt a particular tingling sensation on the familiar runes, much like with that spell Colbert cast on me yesterday. Kirche unexpectedly jumped back, with a dumbstruck look now plastered on her face. "Sweet mother of-" She just stared at me for a few seconds. Uh... "Okay. I believe you." Louise now looked even more surprised than she did previously. What the hell just happened? Should I-

"Who do you think you are!?" Our conversation was cut short by a shout suddenly echoing throughout the room. "You would dare to lie in such a despicable manner?"

After quickly scanning over the heads of the sitting students I found the source of the shouting, it was the blonde fop from yesterday that had been wooing that pretty brunette girl and... Siesta?

"You villainous little siren! Clearly, you need to be reminded of your place!" I had disengaged from Louise and Kirche and began quickly moving towards the pair once I'd realised that he was being very aggressive towards the girl. I didn't like where the confrontation seemed to be going and immediately moved to break it up once I'd noticed the man-...Nay, the boy raise his hand in preparation to strike the terrified looking maid.

Say what you will about misogyny or what have you, I am not going to tolerate a man moving to hit a defenceless woman much smaller than himself, especially a woman that I actually like. I reached out as quickly as I could (I actually moved a fair amount faster than I thought I could, adrenaline already?) and grabbed his wrist before he could slap Siesta.

He whipped his head around and levelled a glare at me. That I was several inches taller and more sturdy built than him hadn't seemed to dissuade him from looking ready to murder me.

"Where I come from it is considered extremely dishonourable to strike a defenceless woman without a very, very good reason. Tell me, what justification do you have for attempting to hit this maid?"

"She revealed him for the shameless dog that he is!" Another student suddenly shouted from the crowd that very suddenly formed around us both.

"He's been disloyal to his lover! Taking advantage of a first year that mistook him for a decent man!" Another voice from the other side of the crowd.

"And now he's trying to attack the female servants! Coward!"

"Lies!" The blonde fop angrily shouted in his own defence. "I am an Armand! The most honourable family in all of Tristain, how could any of you take this commoner's word over my own!?"

I twisted my head around, searching for guards that would surely be present in the hall. There a few quite close, yes, but they were just standing, sharing uncertain glances with each other. Why? What, are the guards not permitted to restrain the bloody students? What good are guardsmen that won't even step in when an altercation like this occurs?

"Katie admitted to having spent several nights with you while under the impression that you were unclaimed you shameless dastard, and many have seen you gallivant about the school grounds with her anytime you believed that Montmorency wasn't looking!" Looks like this little bastard was about to harm Siesta for ruining his 'fun.'

I wasn't happy at the moment, but it would be best to defuse the situation as best I could. Don't want to build a reputation as the kind of person that goes around picking fights, even if for a good cause.
"Calm yourself. The evidence is clearly stacked against you. Acting out and attacking those around you isn't going to help your case." That seemed to only anger him further.

"Who do you think you are Familiar!? Unhand me, immediately!" I understood the jab easily enough. It seems like this douche was looking for a fight. Fortunately for him, I've little desire to get into a scuffle for any reason, probably best to use Siesta as an excuse to get the hell out of dodge before the situation escalates.

The crowd had begun shouting insults at Guiche in earnest the moment he referred to me in such a dehumanising manner, and I immediately released the shit's wrist and moved to take Siesta by the arm and lead her away from the dining hall.

"Siesta, come." The maid was visibly quaking where she stood, her eyes had become unto watery saucers. I took her by the crook of her elbow and made for the entrance way with all due haste, instincts informing me that an unwanted confrontation was about to break out that I wanted no part of.

I heard sudden screams and shouting emanate from the crowd behind me in addition to a peculiar grinding sound followed by shouts of "Familiar!" coming from all directions just before I-
...What? Where...? What happened? Where am I? It took several moments, but I became lucid enough to realize that I was laying down on a bed, lightly covered with a sheet, staring at an arched marble ceiling about two stories over me. Odd, the last time I remember feeling like this was that time I passed out in high school and came to on the floor-

Oh.

Shit.

Well, considering the situation I was in before I lost consciousness, it would probably be best to make sure everything is still working, aside from having a dry throat, being rather hungry and supremely stiff I didn't feel any pain to speak of, but that could be because I just haven't tried moving yet.


Anyways, no neck pain. Aside from the aforementioned stiffness everything seems fine. I opted to remain laying in bed for several minutes while I got my bearings. Lots of beds and cabinets. Chamber pots, stacked linens, bandages... Medical wing for certain. Although I'm not in any pain that would indicate that something bad happened to me.

From what I can recall Colbert mentioned before that I wasn't kept in the medical wing when I lost consciousness during the summoning ritual because I wasn't actually hurt... That I'm here now and, well, naked under this sheet is... Rather disconcerting.

A few moments passed before I decided to look around and see if my clothes were within arm's reach, and just my luck they were folded up on a bed directly across from mine on the other side of the room.

This sheet is tucked under the uncomfortable, probably straw-filled mattress, would probably make a shit tonne of noise were I to try wrenching it out in order to use it as a make-shift chiton to reach the clothes while protecting my modesty from Louise were she to wake up after I stood, which knowing my luck she would.

It would probably be best to wait for her to wake, wouldn't want to bother her after all. Might as well just relax, I'm probably going to be here for a while.

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I had been chugging from a water bucket I had found sitting on the floor in front of Louise after determining that it was just straight water and not contaminated with piss or whatnot when the girl finally decided to wake up. Took her long enough, was starting to get rather bored just sitting here in the nude looking around the otherwise uninhabited wide-open medical wing.

"Morning mistress. Sleep well?" The blonde groggily stared at (or rather, through) me for several moments before her mind spooled up and kicked her back into the waking world.
At that point she emitted a distressed-sounding squeak before literally jumping on me and locking me in a hug that caused the bucket I had been cradling to fall over the opposite side of the bed, spilling water all over the muted grey tiled floor before she gave another distressed squeak as she leaped away from me and nearly tripped over her chair in the process.

"I- I'm sorry! I just- Are you okay? Are you hurting anywhere? Should I go get the nurse? Should I-" The girl was launching questions at me at a breakneck pace, after a few seconds I actually could have sworn that the translation spell was struggling to keep up, or her speech really was just devolving into panicked French-toned gibberish.

Seeing no immediate end to her stammering I reached up and firmly placed my hand over her mouth rather than attempting to shout over her nonsensical blabber.

"Calm yourself." I stated in a firm, but unharsh tone. Several more moments passed after I removed my hand from her mouth and she visibly fought her emotions down to force herself into a more composed state.

"I apologize, I just-" She was looking rather distraught, I would have to be a fool to not have come to the conclusion that something bad did in fact happen back there by this point. Best to clear things up.


"What happened... That spineless little roach of a man-! Ugh!" Suddenly she was fuming, I could see this taking a while if she was going to be running hot the entire time.

"Louise." I started with a genuine mild hint of annoyance this time. "Calm yourself. Now, I ask again, what happened?"

She took a ragged inhale. "Guiche Armand de Gramont, the craven coward, he... He attacked you when you attempted to escort the maid away from him. Transmuted one of the granite bowls on the table into a misshapen lump of jagged bronze and launched it at the back of your head with enough force to-"

She started growing pale, not a good sign.

"There was so much blood..." Okay, REALLY not a good sign. A hand instinctively shot up to the back of my head to find the horrid scar and huge bald spot that would surely be present... Only to find nothing. No crudely done stitching, no detectable indents or bumps, shoulder blade-length hair completely intact... Is she pulling my leg?

"You say I was injured... Why is there no wound on the back of my head?" The girl looked up with some surprise painted on her face.

"...Because Mrs. Lamperouge is a skilled Aquaurger? Do your healers leave visible scars when they mend wounds?" Aquaurger? Water manipulator? Why did I hear that in Latin of all things? "...Jophiel?"

"Ah- Sorry, it seems that the translation spell is... Malfunctioning. I heard you say 'Aquaurger' without any translation." Louise gave a muted nod.

"I'll aller get Professeur Colbert." Yup, spell's failing. Didn't think it would run out, so to speak. Oh,
before she leaves...

"Clothes." I stated loudly as I pointed towards my clothing on the other side of the room. Louise took but a moment before she moved them to the end of my bed for me. "Thank you." With that she left the room and myself to dress in private.

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"Ah, Seigneur Jophiel!" I turned to the squeak that came from the entrance behind me just before I finished buttoning up my shirt. Siesta, good, I was wondering what happened to her. Seems well enough. "Es-tu bien?" Wait, wha- Oh, right. Translation spell is running out of juice. I held my hand up in a halting motion, pointing to my mouth with my opposite hand.

"No translation, no French, don't bother." She seemed quite confused for a few moments... Did she not notice that my mouth flaps haven't been matching up with my words until now? Must not be a very perceptive girl.

I raised a single finger to her, universal body language for 'wait a moment.' She responded by looking at the ceiling for a few seconds before looking back down at me in confusion. I face-palmed, opting to instead direct her to the chair that Louise had been previously occupying.

She began fidgeting after a few moments after claiming the seat, however we couldn't communicate at the moment so I opted to mostly focus on stretching and limbering up after being bed-ridden for who knows how long.

She watched me fairly intently on some of my more exaggerated stretches, especially when I dropped to do some push-ups. 12, good Lord, more than halved my efficiency since I last tried push-ups... What, a month ago? I hope I'm just weak from having layed in bed for... However long I was lying in bed for. In fact, I should probably start working out to some extent.

Maybe the guards would have some sort of training regimen I could partake in? I had relocated to take a seat at the end of my bed, I certainly felt weak. The water had helped, but I was still hungry as all fuck, which the incessant groaning of my plus-size gut kept reminding me.

"Oh quit your whining you tub of lard." I stated as I gave my gut a light smack. "You could do with a little starvation." I looked up to see Siesta giving me quite the perplexed look. ...I had forgotten she was sitting there.

At that moment I was glad that she couldn't understand what I had said, talk about embarrassing. Not to mention conduct unbecoming of a Noble. I must have blushed ever so slightly, as she started giggling lightly eventually.

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Some time had passed since I'd decided to try working out a bit to loosen up my joints in earnest, and Siesta had taken some time to clean up the spilled water once she'd noticed it. I wasn't certain, but it almost seemed like she gave me a look of disappointment for not having pointed it out to her when she initially arrived...

Shortly afterwards Louise returned with Colbert in tow, he gave a look of relief and chuckled once he'd noticed my ill-fated attempts to do crunches. He didn't waste any time in re-casting the translation spell, thereby bulldozing down the language barrier that had rebuilt itself between myself
"Well, I assume you're feeling relatively well if you're attempting to exercise." The kindly man chuckled again. I presume that you will be quite hungry after spending three days and nights in a coma, so why don't we-

"A WHAT!?" That got me to leap to my feet rather quickly, everybody in the room seemed to jump at my sudden shout as well.

"Did Lady le Blanc not inform you- Oh, well how could she have when you couldn't understand her... Well, anyways, I assure you, it is nothing to be concerned with at this point. Lady Lamperouge is at the top of her class, she's completely healed many men that have suffered minor brain damage before, even if your cognitive faculties were damaged you can be rest assured they've been fully repaired by now."

Is- is he saying the water mages here can repair fucking BRAIN DAMAGE? Holy Mother of Christ, that would be an amazing aid to the people back on Earth... That actually raises a lot of questions, does that mean they can restore or replace brain cells? Fuck, does that mean mages can correct malformed brains and 'cure' mental retardation!? I'm going to have to drill Colbert for information on this topic later on, if I ever make it back to Earth this knowledge could help more people than could be counted...

"Now, as I was saying, you must be quite hungry, no?"

"Well-" My stomach decided to speak for me at that moment, erupting in an embarrassingly loud growl, almost as if it was intentionally attempting to respond to Colbert itself. Colbert and the girls had a brief laugh at my expense. "Okay, I wouldn't say no to some food at the moment. However, first..."

I turned to Siesta, now being able to speak to her I wanted to ensure that she was alright.

"Are you okay Siesta?" She seemed somewhat surprised to be addressed, not sure why, you'd think that she'd have figured out that I like her considering I wound up in a coma for her sake.

"I- y-yes mi'lord..." She seemed... Ashamed? What, does she blame herself for what happened?

"Let me guess; you think you're responsible for what happened."

"She IS responsible for what happened!" Louise suddenly cut in.

"Louise, don't be ridiculous, I'm sure it was a misunderstanding. The fop probably took offence to some perceived slight or-"

"No, she approached him when he was with Montmorency and Katie and called him out with a stupid malicious grin on her face the entire time!" ...Okay, now that doesn't sound very good.

"Siesta?" I turned back to her, well, based on her expression Louise was telling the truth.

"I- I was just tired of seeing him get away with toying around with so many girls around the academy so often, I didn't think that he would get so..." That doesn't explain the shit-eating grin though.
"And what about that stupid grin everybody is saying you had plastered on your face before he started shouting at you? What about that!?" I interrupted Louise by slamming my fist down onto the a bed-side table, causing everybody to jump in shock and... Ah, wow. Certainly wasn't expecting for the top of the damn thing to break cleanly in half.

Incidentally, the runes on the back of my hand were glowing ever so slightly... And my hand isn't in any noticeable pain. Okay, what in the hell is going on around here? Anyways, focus. Best to play it cool, act like it was nothing...

"That's enough Louise. Let me handle this." The blonde nodded slightly, shock plastered on her face. Redirecting my attention to Siesta, I could see that she looked more than a little afraid. "So, you genuinely intentionally provoked Lord ...Gramont?" I finished with a quizzical look towards Louise, who shook her head lightly. "Armand?" She nodded in confirmation. Okay, so his name is Guiche Armand, moving on...

It took several moments for Siesta to nod, still quite fearful.

"That was remarkably moronic of you, how you could have possibly thought that provoking such a confrontation would have ended well?" Aside from allowing her head to hang in shame, Siesta didn't respond. "You really are a teenager, aren't you..." In all honesty, this was far from the stupidest action I've ever seen from a bored teenaged girl.

Still, based on what I'm hearing the action was remarkably mean-spirited in nature, which I wouldn't have expected out of her.

"Professor, has Siesta's transgression been appropriately dealt with yet?" Colbert shifted his stance somewhat.

"Well, in all honesty, until now none of the staff could actually confirm Ms. Horie's involvement in the incident, the students that had witnessed it all gave conflicting reports, most insisting that she hadn't even been present until you were attacked..." Ah, is that so... Sounds to me like most were trying to protect Siesta from punishment.

I sincerely doubt that was out of the kindness of their hearts, more than likely everybody just dislikes Guiche and were trying to get her out of punishment as some form of thanks for getting him knocked down a couple dozen pegs.

...Should she be punished for this? Probably, but aside from this I actually like this girl, although this could be a harbinger of further disruptive behaviour on her part...

Y'know what? I shouldn't be worrying about this. At the end of the day this isn't my decision to make anyway. "Well, Professor, now that you know what happened for certain... What do you intend to do?" The bespectacled man pinched the bridge of his nose in plain frustration.

"In all honesty, I wasn't worrying myself with this issue, and the rest of the staff actually seemed fine with assuming that Lord Armand had been simply attempting to scapegoat the maid, to say this complicates things..." I could feel the poor fellow's frustration from here. You know what? Fuck it.

"Then let's just pretend we didn't hear of this." Louise and Siesta both seemed quite taken aback by my statement, for understandable reasons.

"But she nearly got you killed! Because she was bored! She should be punished!" Louise made her
opinion very loudly known.

"I understand what you're saying Louise, but honestly, Siesta only intended to humiliate Armand, which any of his peers would agree he was deserving of based off of what I've heard. The only reason that I wound up getting hurt was because I got myself involved in a situation that had nothing to do with me. It also seems quite clear to me that Siesta regrets her actions, am I incorrect?" I directed the last question at the culprit herself.

"Y-yes mi'lord! I s-swear, I will never act out of turn again! I'll always remember my place from now on!" Wha- Oi, now wait a minute, that's not what I-

"Good! You're lucky anyone is even considering letting you off after what you did! Honestly, you should lose your job at the very least!" Louise decided to start shouting again, to which Colbert gave an exasperated sigh, furrowing his brow in the process.

"That... Does not seem like a just outcome, Lord Jophiel." I could not help but sigh in annoyance myself at that statement. Granted, he was right, Siesta had genuinely made a severe mistake and gotten somebody hurt in the process. Just letting her off the hook because she seemed regretful would be-

"Ah! Looks like we arrived just in time, you seem to be in good health now Jophiel~!" I spun on my heel to see Kirche walk through the door with two other girls, one I recognized as the brunette Guiche had been leading on, and a blonde with some truly impressive drill-hair I did not recognize at all. "Oh, and if I am not mistaken, this is the maid that-

Kirche cut herself off once she'd noticed Colbert was present with a look of surprise on her face.

"-rushed to your side when that coward Guiche attacked you out of the blue. My, what a kind and dutiful girl!" The red-head clapped her hands together and rested her cheek on the side of them in an exaggerated display... Well, I suppose we know who has been looking out for Siesta now.

"Lady Kirche..." Colbert gave an even further exaggerated sigh. "I know what actually happened, Miss Horie has confessed to having provoked Lord Armand." Kirche visibly deflated at that statement.

"Oh." She didn't seem to know how to respond to that.

"Unfortunately, Lord Jophiel seems to desire that she be shown mercy and be spared from punishment, although Lady Louise would prefer that the girl at the very least be released from her contract for her transgressions, while the rest of the staff have been fine with simply assuming that you and the other students had been speaking the truth and Lord Armand was attempting to scapegoat the maid..."

Ugh...

"This entire incident just became a fair amount more complicated. I'll have to bring this up to the headmaster, he will decide how best to handle this entire situation. For now, Lord Jophiel, I would recommend that you head to the dining hall, 'tis nearly time for the morning feast, and going by your stomach's loud and constant protests, you could do with something to eat."

True enough.
"I will attempt to meet with you there should my meeting with the headmaster not claim a significant portion of my time." With that Colbert about-faced and marched for the door.

I called out to him to address a rather important issue first though. "What of Guiche, Professor?"

Colbert stopped, twisted his body to face me, and stated in a dour tone; "He's been in the academy dungeon since he attacked you. He's to be escorted to the capital by an academy representative where his parents are to meet his self and the representative about his future here at the academy and the degree of his punishment."

Knowing how... Vengeful Noble families could be when they were still a thing on Earth, I don't think Guiche being severely punished on my behalf could end very well for me. It may go against my better own somewhat vengeful nature, but I don't want to risk having an entire noble family place me on their shit list.

"I would have it be known that I do not want Lord Armand punished on my behalf." Colbert's jaw dropped in dumbstruck surprise, and I could feel the eyes of everybody in the room boring into the back of my skull. "I forgive him for his actions and bear no ill will towards him for allowing his emotions to overcome him while being verbally assaulted by half of the student body."

Colbert didn't seem to know how to take my declaration. "I... Shall inform the headmaster and ensure that your will is known." With that the older man turned and set off for the Headmaster's office.

"*Sigh*...Siesta..." I redirected my attention to the maid, but wasn't of what to actually say to her, all things considered.

Silence reigned for a long half-minute as everybody focused their attention on the raven-haired maid, who now looked ready to burst into tears. I was about to try saying something comforting when she suddenly leap up from her chair and ran out of the room and past Kirche's companions while shouting

"I'm sorry!" Honey, if anyone should be apologizing it's me, I came out of that incident fine, whereas you might now lose your job. Christ, I hope I didn't just screw that poor girl over...

"...So, Jophiel." Kirche started awkwardly. "Katie and Montmorency here wanted to see you, probably to demand a favour out of you for having saved your life." The tall red-head stated in a joking tone of voice.

"That's not true!" The blonde spoke up quickly and angrily. This one must have really high-strung, knowing Kirche that was a deliberate attempt at getting a rise out of her.

Taking a closer look at Drill-Girl, her platinum blonde, easily mid-back length hair was arranged in impressive hollow drills that framed her face fairly well, there was a fairly large magenta ribbon stuck in place on the back of her head that didn't look like it actually served any particular purpose beyond aesthetics. Her face was sharp, almost Nordic, and speckled with faint freckles. Fairly cute for a girl of her age. So this is Guiche's alleged paramour...

"Uh, Montmorency, I think that she was jesting." The brunette, Katie I imagine, stated with a somewhat bemused expression painted upon her... Uh, cute, but plain(?) face... Plainly cute? Cuteness? Plainly plain? She doesn't look like she'll turn out to be an unattractive woman, but even so, she seems like the type that would just blend into a crowd... Odd, you'd think that a Noble would want to, I don't know, stand out in a crowd?
"Oh." Montmorency- God that is a long name, isn't it? Erm, she visibly relaxed a fair amount after Katie made that statement.

"Ahem-" Katie cleared her throat in an attention-grabbing manner. "Lady Katelyn O'Neill of Dublin, pleased to make your acquaintance milord." Katie- Katelyn introduced herself as she curtsied, she's well-mannered at the very least.

"And I am Montmorency Margarita la Fere de Montmorency." ...She's named after her family's lands? I've... Never heard of that before.

My stomach decided to interject once again with a particularly obnoxious growl, which visibly threw off Montmaran- Montmero- Momo, and caused all gathered to chuckle at my expense.

"Okay, we can finish introductions after Jophiel has had something to eat. He has been in a three day coma, so continuing to deny him sustenance would be tantamount to torture I think." Louise spoke up, being the first to gather her wits and cease chortling at me. "Let us head for evening dinner, before we are beset by ever more distractions."

With that Louise spun on her heel and began marching towards the dining hall, not bothering to await a response from any in the room. Not feeling any particular desire to continue to starve myself, I quickly fell in step beside her with the other girls following closely behind.
I had never eaten a reptile before, and I'm not entirely sure what kind of scaly monstrosity it was that I just finished shoving into my mouth, but fuck me if it wasn't utterly delicious. Eating without utensils also felt quite... Unhygienic. I hadn't stopped to consider that Halkeganian culture may not have developed forks and spoons.

Suppose I'll be introducing those to them as well then. Glad that I have those packets of plastic utensils for Colbert or whoever to work off of as a template for more traditional steel- Wait, what would the utensils be made from? Steel would be expensive and prone to rusting and would need to be oiled and everything after every use. Maybe not a concern for nobles that could just get their servants to do so for them, but... Iron? Solves the price issue, but not the corrosion issue.

Aluminium is a precious metal here, so no for that, gold falls under the same category... Maybe bronze or brass? I don't think platinum corrodes much at all, and it should be effectively worthless at this point in their level of cultural development. I mean, hell, it was used for buckshot in Russia for a while, it can't be THAT rare, right?

Are patents a thing in Halk? I see an opportunity to get filthy rich here at any rate...

...Platinum'll probably be stupidly rare knowing my luck. Oh, wait, is platinum a heavy metal...? Ah fuck, this plan is coming apart at the seams.

Well, I'll have to find something highly resistant to corrosion at any rate. Colbert should know, being an alchemist himself- Wait, he's a FANTASY alchemist. Potions and all that. Probably doesn't even know what the periodic table is... Gods, I should have looked this up when I still had an internet connection.

Actually, now that I consider alchemy here... I didn't actually get to ask Colbert any questions about it last night- Uh, a few nights ago. Is alchemy here equivalent exchange, or just straight creating potions from magical plants and shit the Elder Scrolls style? If it's E.E. that could be hella useful, I would love to be able to effectively "pay" to have more Dr Pepper and Coca Cola created here. Would soft drinks cost more or less than just straight water? Water is healthy, soft drinks typically aren't... Or would be more of a volume of ingredients thing?

Ugh, I should focus on confirmed things for now, which... Isn't much, now that I think about it. I need to corner Colbert and get some answers out of him sooner rather than later. I'm not liking how little I know about this place.

...Y'know, looking at one of the relatively intact creatures I had just been wolfing down that was still being nibbled on by some of Louise's classmates a table over, it kind of resembles a Dodongo from the Legend of Zelda Ocarina of Time... "My my, eyeing our classmate's meals so soon after finishing your own? Don't we have quite a voracious appetite my darling." Kirche stated in a playful tone, eliciting an inexplicably sharp response from Louise.

"Of course he's eating a lot, he's been in a coma for the past three days! Anybody would be hungry enough to eat half a Dodongo to themselves in that situation!" I suppose she misread the tone behind Kirche's- ...Wait, did she just- Are these actually legitimately fucking Dodongos? Is... Is this a Zelda-verse world? That would certainly be an interesting twist to this entire situation. Unless the translation spell is just filling in whatever it was she really said with 'Dodongo' because it's what I
recognise them as... Magic is weird.

"I think that you would like a proper Germanian feast if you enjoyed the Spiced Dodongo so much, my Darling Jophiel. Hot spices are quite extensively used in our lands, and Dodongos themselves are common enough that catching one for slaughter would not be terribly difficult." Now that sounds like a fine plan. "I do not understand why you simply refuse such fine wine in favour of simple apple cider, though... Is there some cultural reason behind your apparent distaste for the noble's drink?"

"I just don't like alcohol," I stated curtly, not wanting to dwell on the subject if I could help it. "Now, back on topic, I believe that it was mentioned that these two ladies are to thank for my life?" I motioned towards Momo and Katelyn as they each shoved a handful of Dodongo meat into their mouth and chugged a cup full of wine... Katie must be having a tiring day then. Or she's just an alcoholic. Hopefully, it's the latter, she seems pretty young by North American standards to be addicted to wine.

"Um, yes. That was us. But please, think nothing of it. We only did what any responsible Noble would in the same situation." Momo, she attempted, the keyword here being 'attempted' to sound regal when she made that statement. I'm guessing that she's rather on the childish side and is having to actively fight against her natural impulses to not be seen as... Well, childish.

"Well, where I come from only the lowest of the low would not show appreciation to those that had saved their life." Momo began fidgeting uncomfortably, and Kirche chose to speak up for her.

"I find it strange too, but in Tristain it seems to be considered rude to give praise to one for doing what is 'expected' of them. 'Royal subjects of Tristain are to be utterly selfless in their service to their nation and fellow man.' Louise says that from time to time, and she's effectively a princess in her own right, so she probably knows what she's talking about. So it might be best to leave it be so far as Montmorency is concerned. Katie is from Hibernia though, so praise her as much as you will."

She finished with a suggestive wink... That's right, the age of consent here must be rather low considering that 10-year-olds would regularly get married in the age of enlightenment. Not sure about most other guys, but I can't possibly 'NOPE' hard enough at that idea. Probably best to just pretend to have not picked up on the suggestion.

"Ah ha, no, that's quite alright, please, think nothing of it Lord Jophiel." Guess Katelyn is humble herself beside that.

"Well, if you both insist." I shrugged, both nodded their heads. "Now, on that aside... Louise?" I started as I turned to face the young blonde seated to my left that had been quietly nursing a goblet of wine after her earlier snap at Kirche. She raised her eyebrows in an inquisitive manner. "You are royalty?" She gave me a blank stare for several moments before an expression of horror was suddenly plastered on her face as she nearly leapt from her chair in an unexpected panic.

"Nonononono! T-that's not what Kirche meant at all! My parents are a Duke and a Duchess, and we're related to the Royal Family by blood, but I'm not a princess!" There must be a significant punishment for pretending to be royalty going off of her reaction. Makes sense, all things considered. Colbert has been respectful to Louise, but far from as subservient as one would expect out of a vassal of royalty.

I threw my hands up in a placating manner. "Okay, okay, calm down. The translation spell must have re-worded Kirche's statement poorly, no need to get so worked up." She visibly deflated and exhaled a breath she seemed to have been holding in worry. "However, still, the daughter of a Duke.
That makes your family only one step down from the royal family on the social ladder, right?"

"Well... Yes, although we don't hold any real practical power outside of our own lands aside from whatever we're afforded by the local lords. I cannot make any special demands of the academy staff for example." Louise stated as she re-took her seat at the table. She had garnered a few looks from her classmates when she leapt from her spot, but they seemed to lose interest quickly enough when nothing came of her outburst.

"Your family must be especially well-acquainted with the royal family if you're related by blood on top of being so high up on the hierarchical ladder." I stated my assumption aloud, she offered a confirmatory nod in response.

"I was the Princess's playmate from a very young age. Her Highness spent much more time in my own family's manor than she did the Royal palace growing up." A light smile played across Louise's face as she made that statement with more than a hint of wistfulness in her voice. So, personally acquainted and likely the best friend of the crown princess... Whose name I still don't know.

Good lord for such an avid RPG player I am really sucking at information gathering IRL. Probably doesn't help that the locals aren't acting off of a script and dropping exposition on my head unprompted at the drop of a hat like an Elder Scrolls NPC would. It might be best to find Colbert and arrange for that history lesson to happen as soon as possible. Preferably tonight if at possible.

Seems that Kirche and Louise began discussing the royal castle itself while I was thinking to myself. Taking the break in conversation to stand and excuse myself I left the dining hall to find the alchemist before something else shiny caught my attention and distracted me from actually learning the basic facts of this world like I should have on day one.

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"-And that wraps up the need-to-know facts of Tristain and Halkegania in general! I must say, it's nice to have an audience that pays such rapt attention to lessons compared to my usual students. Lady le Blanc aside, most only pay attention to my classes half the time!" Colbert finished as he ended his notes on the blackboard planted on the wall behind his personal office desk.

Okay, I've got the most important stuff down, for now, made notes for future reference and such. The planet itself is called 'Alfheim,' which sounds rather close to the old Norse 'Alfheimr,' which translates to English as 'Elfhome.' It's more than likely just a coincidence, but I couldn't help but notice that the old Nordic tribes referred to Earth as 'Midgard...'

It doesn't strike me as terribly likely, but considering that Colbert had mentioned and focused somewhat on the literal pointy-eared 'Elves' that live in the 'Holy Lands,' which seem to be situated where North Africa would be on Earth's map, I can't help but consider the possibility that they might have been right and this planet may literally be the plane of the Elves as the Norse believed it to be. Although there are holes in the theory, such as the presence of humans... It seems to be worth considering. Something to think about, at any rate.

Anyways, the ruler of the Kingdom of Tristain -this nation- a hereditary absolute monarchy, is Queen Regent Marianne de Tristain, the late King Henri de Tristain passed away a while ago, leaving her to rule the kingdom on her own. Their only heir is Princess Henrietta de Tristain, named for her father, and Louise's childhood friend. Very interesting news, wouldn't have expected the little blondie to have friends in such high places. I wonder if she's capable of pulling favours? It could prove to be hella helpful at some point down the line if so.
Anyways, back on nations; Tristain (fantasy Belgium/Scandinavia, near as I can tell) is bordered by the hereditary constitutional monarchy of Germania (fantasy Germany, obviously) to the east (Just to note, holy fucking shit, a bone-fide republic in the pre-colonization early modern era!? That alone made me quite interested in Kirche's homeland, gonna have to try and corner her {in a heavily populated public area that is} to get more information out of her) and the hereditary absolute monarchy of Gallia (fantasy France) to the South. The absolute monarchy of Albion (fantasy United Kingdom)... Well, this is where it gets complicated.

It seems that the Brittanian Isle is a literal flying region that for the most part floats along a fixed path around the "Sunset Ocean," which is what they refer to their equivalent of the Atlantic Ocean, and near coastal Tristain.

According to the translation spell, it hovers about 2400 metres above sea level on average. How anybody, or hell, anything could live that high up in the atmosphere is beyond me, but then again magic and all that. Albion shares the Brittanian Isle with the crowned republic of Hibernia, which as far as I can tell is probably fantasy Ireland. I know next to nothing about ancient Ireland, so I have nothing to go off of for how that place would be, other than the fact that it is also a republic, which just leaves me dumbstruck.

Two republics, one of which is a major world power? I've gotta say, things are looking up for this fantasy Earth knock-off.

Back on topic, there's also Romalia, a Papacy near as I can tell, an obvious stand-in for the Papal States situated where Rome itself would be on Earth, complete with a Pope. A Brimiric Pope. Victorio or something like that. I dunno, I don't give a shit about my own world's religions, so my eyes kind of glazed over for a bit when Colbert started on about that.

Basically, the rest of the known world was under the dominion of the Elves, who in this dimension seem to be rather on the hostile and alien side towards humanity.

Colbert wanted to give me rather in-depth information on the founding of the Brimiric nations, but I could already tell that this information would be heavy tainted by "clarification" by the church and just had him give me the abridged version. Basically, it all boils down to: "The Founder Brimir did fucking EVERYTHING. BRIMIR, FUCK YEAH!"

On that note; I couldn't get anything terribly informative about this "Brimir" character. Plenty of myths, legends, and suppositions, but nothing that was backed up by actual evidence. I kept my mouth shut and nodded along respectfully, of course, but showing respect towards a kooky religion is going to get to me quickly on top of needing to act the friendly noble all the time.

Before Colbert went on another tangent on how amazing Brimir was I opted to cut him off in order to determine something rather important.

"Colbert, how advanced are Tristain's firearms?" The man seemed rather taken aback by my sudden inquisition, but responded back quickly enough.

"Flintlock muskets very rarely make their way to Tristain due to a very low demand for them. Although a choice few noble families including the Armands insist that they can see the potential behind them, and most agree that they are indeed shockingly powerful, their exceedingly low rate of fire compared to the average line mage's spellcasting speed makes adopting them as official military weapons difficult to justify to all but Germania, who have substantial amounts of men to arm with
both matchlock muskets to allow for staggered fire alongside pikes to keep hostile infantry and even mages that might break their firing lines at bay."

Huh.

"On top of that, Germania has a monopoly on quality black powder, which in a way makes up for the primitive firing mechanisms utilised by their musket men." Well shit, that is absolutely wonderful. Praise be to Remington Arms, for they have provided me with my stepping stone into the good graces of the Tristanian nobility!

"Okay, I have something for you, Colbert. Not entirely sure how you'll take it, however, there's only one way to find out. Either way, I'm certain that given time you'll see it for the game changer that it can be for not only Tristain but the world at large." With that, I withdrew a pair of folded up sheets of printer paper from my back pocket, the first; transcribed blueprints for a Remington revolving black powder pistol. The second; the formulas for black powder, smokeless powder, percussion caps, and plans for rifling and the minie ball.

Colbert gazed over the blueprints a good long while. I saw a multitude of expressions play across his face, ranging from horror to elation and everything in between. "Lord Jophiel-"

"No need to be so formal, Jophiel is fine."

"This is amazing!" The older man's voice cracked as he nearly jumped from his place in joy. "These- These ideas, these diagrams, these concepts... So brilliant! I cannot believe anyone thought of these before now! These blueprints and formulas, they would be worth so much to the right person! A single man could wield the power of an entire Germanian musket squad!" So, 'twas a good idea to introduce him to these. Great. Now, onto the next step.

"I want you to build one for me." Colbert stopped his joyful spinning and levelled a shocked stare at me. "Assuming you're capable, that is."

Colbert looked me up and down carefully once more, his face stern and serious. "Might I ask why?"

I rose an eyebrow; with a sarcastic edge I stated: "Am I to defend Louise against magic threats with my short sword?"

A few moments passed in silence. I couldn't read Colbert's expression, the man must have a history in politics of some kind, I'm not sure who else would need to be able to utilise such a superb poker face in an early modern civilisation. Well, that's not true, I can think of a few things, but politics is the only legal thing I can think of at any rate.

"I am an engineer, not a gunsmith."

"You seem to be a fast learner."

"I do not possess the ability to smith firearms."

"You can't acquire them?"

"...I may be able to. I could solicit the Headmaster, but I'm not sure how he would respond to the idea."
"Are you willing to ask the Headmaster?"

Again, silence.

"Why are you asking this of me?" The older Pyrourger asked coarsely.

"Thus far, you seem to be a man of vision. The only man I've met that could even begin to comprehend what introducing such a weapon to Halkegania would mean. The only man that I feel I could entrust these plans to knowing that he would make the right decision when it comes time to determine whether to hide these plans or spread them."

Colbert gazed down upon the sheets of paper in his hands for a long while; I could practically hear the gears turning in his head. "...I cannot promise anything, but I shall speak with the Headmaster at the first opportunity."

Colbert met my gaze. I simply bowed my head respectfully to him, and he returned the gesture before quickly turning and heading out the door, not bothering to close it behind him. I could not help but wonder if I had made a mistake in handing those plans to him. He seems like a good man, and he's clearly taking the idea deadly seriously.

However... I am introducing relatively advanced firearms to a world still making low-spread use of early matchlock muskets. Having a few revolvers on my person would almost certainly prove to be exceedingly useful in a world with functional combat magic, who knows what I'm going to encounter while serving as Louise's personal guardian? If nothing else, these could wind up saving my and Louise's lives.

Attempting to consider the long-term consequences of my actions would almost certainly be pointless in the long run, prediction isn't my strong suit. I suppose that only time will tell.

Let's head on back to the dining hall, see if I can catch up to Louise's little group.

---

I did find Louise where I had left her, laughing with her group of friends about something or other. I opted to leave her be and take a rest in my personal room after spending too long fucking around with this annoying noble persona that was really beginning to grate on me.

I hadn't even considered that I hadn't yet acquired a key to my room from anyone before I attempted to turn the doorknob... And it glowed dimly for a second before I heard the locking mechanism disengage. Huh. I suppose it must have been magically attuned to me or something. I'm not even going to wonder how that works, if only for the sake of my own sanity.

Pushing the door open, I emitted a relieved sigh to see all of my garbage present. Seems that the way Louise's room is arranged is standard for the academy, as my bed and desk were placed where her's were, there was also additional furniture that I most certainly did not recognise as belonging to me when I looked about the room.

A few wooden chairs, a dresser, chest, a... Chamber pot. I never did get to talk to Colbert about getting a 'Disintegratoilet' installed before I was clocked into a coma, did I? Fuck. Gonna have to ask him about that as quickly as possible. Anyways, a fairly large room, rather nice all things considered.

I gave the solar power shit a long ponderous look, before deciding to just leave all of that piled in the
as it was for now. As much as I would like to turn my computer or 360 on and lose myself in a game for a while, forget about all of this nuttery if only briefly, I shouldn't do so just yet. Mental escape can be important, but I need to focus on this situation as it is and ensure that I have all my shit in order.

I meandered over to a small table positioned under the window sill that had all my blades arranged on it. Everything was there as far as I could recall. Machetes, knives, the swords... I wonder if I should get the mall-grade great sword polished and sharpened and all that in order to wear it around as a symbol of prestige? It looks really nice, so it could be worth a try if nothing else. Maybe get the sheath re-upholstered even. I'll ask Colbert-

...I really am relying on Colbert a lot, aren't I? I should see if I could find somebody else to go to for shit like this as well, it wouldn't be fair to dump every single one of my issues on him. For now, I'll just ask him for directions in regards to the sword and try to figure that out on my own.

For now, I suppose I could pass the time by honing the edges on my blades. If nothing else it'll probably get me less undue attention than if someone walked in on me in the middle of playing Metal Gear or something.

---

As I just finished touching up the edge of my saw back machete I heard the partially opened door to the main hall creak ever so slightly followed shortly by a few quiet knocks. Pulling the filtration mask from my face I responded with a curt "Yes?" Louise pushed the door and opened it the rest of the way and gave me a surprised look for a few seconds, glancing back and forth between myself and the blade, she wound giving me an incredulous look.

"Is it commonplace to sharpen swords in one's bedroom in Canada?" She stated as she crossed her arms over her chest... Ah, yeah, okay, doing this while sitting in my rather high-end bedroom might not have been the best idea. I didn't even think as to how I would clean up the steel dust... Well, I do have a dust buster. But still, dumb move on my part.

"Uh... N-no, I'm not sure what I was thinking, sorry..." I sheepishly stated as I stood, marched to the table and deposited the machete and whetstone onto it.

"Going to have to get a mage to levitate that metal dust out of the room... Well, anyways. I was just wondering what happened to you earlier. You just disappeared out of nowhere in the middle of dinner." Fair enough question.

"I left to locate Colbert and learn of some of the histories of Halkegania and how the local culture works. Information and general knowledge are held in high esteem in Canada, as a result, I wasn't overly fond of not even knowing the name of the land's monarch." I think that was a perfectly acceptable reason to leave for so long.

"Ah, I see. So, that took up the entirety of your evening then?"

"Well, not quite. I've spent the last hour or so honing my blades while pondering everything I've learned. Maintaining my swords helps me think. It calms my mind and allows me to focus on things without my thoughts wandering." I probably shouldn't do that, though, I've cut myself a few times because I stopped focusing on the damn blade. Swords hurt!

Louise looked me over for a few moments, before nodding silently, seemingly in understanding.
"Well, okay then. I suppose you have as much a right as anyone to be by yourself at times." She remained quiet for a long while after that, fidgeting about occasionally. "I've been a social pariah ever since I arrived at the academy and failed my first attempt at practical spell casting." ...What?

"I can't cast spells. I've never been able to. Any attempt I make just results in explosions. I've been ridiculed effectively ever since I arrived." That... But hold on a moment.

"But I saw you laughing with Kirche, Momo and Katie. That doesn't strike me as-"

"Many of my classmates have begun treating me better since you arrived. Kirche hasn't stopped teasing me, but now I can see that her teasing was never malicious, to begin with, although I never realised it. She's always been trying to push me into trying to learn magic harder in her own stupid, unhelpful way."

A small grin played across her features somewhat.

"Katie and... What was it you called her? Montmont?" A giggle escaped from Louise in spite of herself. "I'm not sure that she would appreciate that little pet name, especially since you've only just met her. It does suit her, though. Well, anyways, they've never spoken to me either, not that I could blame them. However, they were never cruel to me like many others were, but they simply couldn't afford to associate with me."

Afford to... Ah, right nobility. To damage their social standing would be tantamount to suicide.

"But since I'd summoned you, especially since you stepped in and were injured attempting to defend a helpless maid that as far as everybody knew you were completely dissociated with... I wondered aloud why everybody was getting so worked up about you, a mere human... Do you know what Mr Colbert said to me in response?"

I shook my head.

"The Founder Brimir was but a mere human before he defeated the Varyag and saved all of Halkegania, Lady le Blanc."

Louise fell silent for a long while after that. I wasn't sure how to take any of this. I mean, I haven't even done anything yet, and already Louise's quality of life has improved by my mere presence. And on top of that... It almost seems like an implication that they expect 'great things' out of me. I find that worrying, but... If just being here has made things easier for Louise... Well, that kind of takes the edge off of having been taken from my world without my consent somewhat. Honestly, things could have gone much worse than they have, at any rate.

"Thank you, Jophiel." That snapped me out of my introspection. "Even if you don't end up agreeing to be my Familiar... You've made things better for me already. Thank you." She gave me a wide, beaming smile.

"Hey now." I stated as I closed the gap between us and proceeded to tussle her hair vigorously. "I haven't even done anything, don't go thanking me yet! And don't your people consider it unseemly to thank others?" Louise gave me a long, harrowing stare, and it took me longer than it should have to realise that I'd just begun to tussle the hair of a noble teenaged girl.

"Ah!" I cried out as a tugged my hand away from her head in equal parts fear and horror. "I- I'm
sorry! You just gave me that beaming smile and got all sappy and my brotherly instincts just sort of kicked in there..." She continued to stare at me, I couldn't read her expression at all.

The silence was deafening.

"...I've never had an elder brother." Um... "I've always wanted one, though." She had one of the most sincere smiles plastered on her face that I'd ever seen. "I'll let it go this time, but my hair is off-limits, next time you mess it up, I'll make you regret it!" She stated with a cocky and determined grin on her face.

Well, this relationship sure has taken an unexpected turn. But ya know what? This girl seems to be doing a good job of sparking my hereto underutilised brotherly intuition... I just might be able to work with this.

"Heh heh, sure thing. I'll try to keep my hands to myself from now on."

She straightened her back, puffed her chest out, and crossed her arms pridefully. "Okay, you'd best get to bed early then! The Headmaster couldn't officially take you on as a student, but you're going to be allowed to attend classes alongside me as my academic assistant, and I won't have an assistant of mine slacking off on the job!" Oh- Does this mean that I'm going to get to attend legit magic classes? FUCKING SWEET SAUCE!

"Yes, ma'am!" I started with only half-faked gusto as I fell into attention and saluted her in response to the command.

"6:00 AM, I need time to make myself presentable in the morning." I suppose that's a command to wake her up. Luckily my digital watch has an alarm function, so that should be easy enough to do. "Now, the sun is starting to set, do whatever you may need to quickly and head to bed, you've managed to win my favour, you don't want to know what will happen should you fall out of it!"

She declared with an over-the-top pointing motion to my face. With that, she spun on her heel, marched out the door, and shut it behind her. She's been nice thus far, I don't see how she could be anything other than pleasant, but I suppose I'll just take her word for it and try not to anger her.

...Well, that went surprisingly well. I can only hope that the rest of my time here goes just as swimmingly too.

My stomach gave an unhappy grumble, and only then did I realise that eating so much of that spiced Dodongo, a creature from a different world entirely, may not have been the best idea when there was common beef and pork also available. I glanced over at the chamber pot in the corner of my room and pondered my options. "I wonder if I'd be able to make it to Colbert's office in time..."
Can you Find it in your Heart? Part 01

The sound of my watch's alarm going off woke me with a start. Unfortunately, my insomnia chose to act up last night and I was forced to take a sedative to fall asleep (I'm also going to have to seriously ration those, what with not having a way to replace them).

As a result of that, I woke in a thoroughly unpleasant state of drowsiness and muddled thoughts, which also meant that I had a momentary panic attack upon realising that I didn't recognise my surroundings before all of my mind's cylinders decided to fire up and allow me to recall what's happened lately.

I opted to swing my legs out from under my covers and just quietly sit and rub the gunk out of my eyes for a few minutes before I reached for the watch sitting atop my beach wood bedside drawer and stopped the incessant beeping.

I also attempted to switch on the lamp sitting on the aforementioned drawer while checking my alarm clock for the time before remembering that they weren't actually powered. Old habits and all that. I looked at the watch instead in order to determine the time. 6:13 AM.

I looked out the window and based on the red tinge just peeking over the battlements I deduced that time must, in fact, pass at an identical rate here compared to Earth. I was glad I had asked Colbert for help in determining the time to set my watch to yesterday before his impromptu history lesson.

I hopped to my feet, taking little heed of the somewhat chilly wood-panelled floor as I marched over to my school-appointed dresser, pulling out my favourite bright red v-neck t-shirt with the tribal wings on the chest to wear under my fancy pin-striped black dress shirt as well as an as-of-yet unworn pair of well-fitted black jeans with equally black shin socks.

Both colours were rare and expensive in pre-modern societies, coupled with the master-grade (to pre-modern people, at least) stitch-work and supremely closely-woven fabrics I would come across as a practically-minded noble more than anything.

I couldn't help but excitedly wonder how Louise's classes would be. With luck, they'd be something along the lines of the lessons portrayed in the Harry Potter movies, practical demonstrations with genuine magic in action, artefacts breaking the third law of thermodynamics and conservation of momentum and everything for maximum brain-'splosion on my part.

I stopped for a moment and eyed the aluminum soda tab chain necklace I'd made that week I had no internet access back home that was hanging on a random hook I'd decided was for jewelry, and deciding that aluminum being a precious metal here would make wearing it less of an embarrassment and more of a symbol of extreme wealth.

With my clothing in order and my super-fancy high-class aluminium necklace clasped around my neck I traipsed over to the door, slipped on my heretofore unused black sneakers (I'd prefer to use my trusty, somewhat beaten up hiking shoes, but appearances are important here) and headed out to wake up Louise.

---

...Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that I'd spend the next 10 minutes ceaselessly knocking on her door to wake her up since her door didn't unlock for me and she's evidently a heavy sleeper.

Finally, I began to hear stirrings on the other side of the door; heavy thumps and high-pitched
utterings before the latch finally opened and she opened the door to reveal...

Herself wearing nothing but a dress shirt which while buttoned up was long enough to cover all the important things. Honestly, at a distance, she might look like she was wearing a short dress. Coupled with her unkempt bed hair it came across as more cute in a 'daww' way than it did sexily. "Wha- Oh, Jophiel? What time is it?"

I brought my wrist up to my eyes to check my watch, "6:45." I stated curtly. "Good morning by the way." The blonde-haired shorty mumbled something that sounded like 'morning' before taking a few moments to rub her eyes.

"Why are you here so early? And why didn't you just come inside to wake me up?" Her speech was coming out as somewhat slurred, she really isn't a morning person, is she?

"The door was locked, and you told me to wake you at 6:00, so if anything I'm late." I stated matter-of-factly.

She looked quite confused. "Why would..." She stared at the wall behind me for several seconds before continuing. "Oh, I must have misspoken, classes don't start until 9:30, I apologise for making you awaken so early needlessly."

She stated in an apologetic tone, I shrugged it off. Nothing wrong with getting up early in the morning.

"And of course the door wouldn't open for you, you're a boy and aren't a staff member, I'm surprised I had forgotten about that." The underdeveloped girl stated in an exasperated tone. "We can thank Guiche for that." That caused me to raise an eyebrow.

"We can?" I inquired as I stepped in and closed the door behind me.

"Mnhm." She about-faced and began for her dresser. "Other boys have come into the girl's dorm before him, Kirche made sure of that, but none were stupid enough to be so flagrant about it and get caught, multiple times at that."

Throwing her dresser doors open she reached in and began rifling about.

"Others would at least have the sense to levitate themselves to their partner's room under the cover of night, he tried to just blatantly march into several girl's rooms using the front door before the sun had set, eventually the prefects-"

Why did I hear that in French? The translation spell couldn't be failing again so quickly... Could it maybe be substituting specific words for the fanciest version of it that I know over time? That would be neat if true.

"-had little choice but to tighten security. I'll see if I can try to convince the Headmaster to allow you unrestricted access to my room, but I'm not sure if he'll allow it, even if you are technically my Familiar." As she finished she pulled a strangely-shaped piece of white cloth from a drawer within the dresser itself. It kind of looked like an hourglass-shaped piece of lacy fabric with four ribbons hanging off of either side of both wide ends, followed shortly afterwards by a pair of black stockings with what looks like a garter belt- Oh. OH.

I spun on my heel and stared at the door that previously faced my back. It makes sense, they wouldn't have modern elastics, so women's undergarments would sort of have to be tie-ons if they were to be form-fitting to any degree. "Should I wait outside?" I projected my voice at the door so she would be able to hear me clearly on the other side of the room.
"Eh?" Several seconds passed... "Ah! Um, yes, that would probably be for the best. Actually, you should return to your room and properly prepare yourself for the day, I appreciate you attempting to be punctual, but while your clothing is perfectly acceptable, your hair almost looks... Messy, as it is." She sounded hesitant when she made that statement.

I hadn't even thought about my hair, not smart, that.

"Actually..." She interrupted my thought process. "Of course your hair would seem unkept, nobody has thought to assign a servant to aid you for such things."

Wait- Ah shit.

"To expect a Noble to take care of such luxurious hair on their own would be ridiculous, even I have someone come by every other day to ensure my hair is well-maintained and presentable." More silence. I don't like where this is going, I don't want help maintaining my hair, I'm not a child, damn it!

...But I can't really refuse now, can I? Nobility doesn't do those kinds of things themselves, it's what servants are for. It would punch a fairly significant hole in my cover story if I were to do anything... Well, needlessly 'labour intensive,' so to speak.

"We shall see if we can arrange something with the Headmaster when we speak to him in a few hours." Damn it, suppose I'll just have to grit my teeth and- wait a tick...

"We're meeting the Headmaster today? When?" I heard the sounds of shifting fabric for a few moments before she spoke up, has she decided to just start getting dressed with me in the room instead of waiting for me to leave?

"...Yes, did I not mention that?" More shifting of cloth. Yup, definitely getting dressed.

"No, you mentioned classes."

"Oh. Um, I apologise, it's quite early..." Boy, she really isn't a morning person, is she?

"Tis' alright, we need to finalise the contract anyways." I stated as I waved my hand to my side. Staring at the door was getting old. And shouldn't I be getting more excited knowing that a fairly cute girl is getting dressed not 3 metres behind me, complete with stockings and a garter belt?

I mean, I know my sex drive is weak compared to most other guy's, but come on, she doesn't look or behave THAT young... And suddenly I could feel a headache inexplicably coming on.

"Um, Jophiel?" She sounded uncertain.

"Yes?"

"This may be somewhat, well, inappropriate... In several ways." Oh, crap. "But, I'll have to wait for my assigned servant to come if I wait, and I don't want to have to undress for her or traipse about my room in my underwear for 3 hours... Could you tie my garter belt for me?" I just had to jinx myself, didn't I?

Why would she ask something so... Well, forward of me? We only just met, and-

"I suppose your silence is a 'no'?" Uh, damn it, might as well just get it over with, might earn me some brownie points at the very least.
"Will I see anything inappropriate if I turn around?" Not going to just spin on my heel and piss her off by getting a full-frontal view of her so early.

"Well, I'm wearing undergarments and my undershirt, and my back will be facing you..." That might be okay if I weren't an ass man. Turning around I saw... Huh. Nothing. I don't mean that she was actually naked or anything, she just looked...

Well, by all means, her shirt was hiked up, and her posterior-length hair pulled over her shoulder to completely reveal her back, it looked like she was holding the shirt up in the front with her mouth, which revealed her waist somewhat.

Without her shirt covering her torso I could see that she had a subtle hourglass shape that revealed her feminine nature, and the frilly, girly, almost lingerie-esque underwear only further accentuated this. By all means, she legitimately looked attractive as she was. But I felt nothing in the way of 'stirrings.'

I mean, yes, I have a relatively weak sex drive compared to most other guys, but I'm not asexual by any stretch of the imagination, and I can even see a fair amount of appeal in smaller-framed girls. Although short, slender and kind of modest chest-wise, she was clearly not a child, in fact, she was unarguably beautiful. But... No, nothing. Weird.

I closed the distance between us and took the ribbons she was holding up behind her back for me to grasp, velvet? Sure does feel like it. Almost feels like silk, actually. Odd, they shouldn't have silk from what Colbert has told me about their geographical presence and hostility towards the elves that occupy the lands where silk worms would be located.

"Is this velvet, or silk?" Louise had taken to holding her shirt up for me with her hands now that she needn't hold the ribbons for her garter belt herself, she shifted a tad in a surprised manner.

"I'm sorry?" She stated in a confused tone.

"This material, it almost feels like silk, a luxury fabric of my people's. It's made from a material produced by a specific kind of insect larvae." I explained as I finished tying the ribbons in the vein of shoelaces for lack of any other known methods for tying things. I gave one final, gentle tug to ensure it was tight enough to hold, but not enough to become uncomfortable. "Done." She dropped the sides of her shirt as if they were on fire.

Taking a deep breath, Louise turned her head around to face me, her face was tinged pink. Well, at least one of us had a proper reaction to this, at any rate.

"Your people wear clothes made from insects?" It seemed like she was attempting to keep her voice level, but there was an audible amount of disgust present in her voice. Misunderstanding, much?
"You aren't wearing any of this... 'Silk,' right now, are you?" That sounded more than a little judgemental.

"Silk isn't made from insects. It's made from a thread-like material certain larvae produce when they make cocoons... I think, I'm pretty sure that's how it's made. Anyways, you've seen me wearing a silk shirt. The beige buttoned one." She seemed somewhat surprised.

"That was silk?" I nodded. "That... Is a very nice shirt. I've heard several other boys openly stating their envy of it." She absentmindedly gazed off and out through her window. "...Do you know what kind of insect it is?" She sounded somewhat hopeful, that was a quick turn-around.

"Trust me, Louise, if your people had access to them, you would be draped in nothing but silk all the
time." She gave me a forlorn gaze.

"That's unfortunate." She sighed as she reached for her slate-grey skirt. It may come across as a little inappropriate, but I just have to say something...

"Don't white panties with a black garter belt and leggings kind of clash?" She stopped dead, her blush coming back in full force with a look of shock on her face.

She emitted a strange noise, almost akin to a very brief tea-kettle whistle before responding. "W-what does it matter!? It isn't like anybody-" She glanced at me with a look of embarrassment on her face. ",-else will see them!"

...Fair enough.

"N-now, to answer your earlier question..." She started as she slipped on her skirt, buttoning it up under her shirt, thus completing the classic school girl look. "Yes, it's velvet, made from Syracuse wool." That doesn't sound like anything I recognise.

"So, it's sheep wool?" Somehow I doubt that. It's far too silken for that.

"Sheep? No, it's..." She paused, raising a finger to her lips as she pondered her response. "I think I may have to answer your question with a story. Do you mind?"

"Absolutely not." I stated with enthusiasm. Any new information on this place's culture is good information.

"Well, I'll try to keep it brief anyways. A few generations ago there was a group of sailing mage adventurers from Romalia, the city of Syracuse, to be specific." I nodded in understanding. Their Rome must never have fallen if they're still using the original Latin names.

"They were famous for mapping much of the coast of the Sapphire Sea in spite of the overwhelming majority of it being uncontested Elven territory, and as a result confirmed that Brimiria -the Holy Lands- do in fact exist as they were described in the Holy Texts, or at least the coasts do; not that anybody doubted the texts, of course."

She paused to take a breath.

"Anyways, at one point, they travelled nearly as far as is possible to the east of the sea before the adventurers decided to stop and attempt travelling inland. As the story goes, the adventurers that left were gone for two days, and the men that remained on the ship at the coast began to grow unsettled."

She cleared her throat before continuing.

"They were close to raising anchor and returning to Romalia for fear of being discovered by Elves, their fellow crewmen assumed lost before the land crew came fleeing from the forest bordering the coasts in full, all carrying something small in their arms and audibly shrieking all the way from the coast."

...They must have been screaming comically loud for that.

"The boats they had used to reach the land were where they had left them, and they all made a quick escape, utilising wind and water magic to forcibly propel their boats at rather unsafe speeds back towards the ship. Shortly after the crew was pulled onboard the ship what they were fleeing from emerged from the treeline... They were Elves, of course."
If anything Colbert told me was true those men couldn't have possibly escaped from Elves, their magic is allegedly so ludicrously powerful that a single Elf could easily, contemptuously destroy an entire battalion of trained and experienced Mage Knights.

"Colbert has told me of the Elves, the story is a lie if they claim to have escaped from even a single Elf." I stated curtly.

"That would be true if they had been fleeing from adult Elves." She stated with a giggle and a grin.

"Wait. They were running for their lives from children?" I asked incredulously.

"Children with sticks." She chortled. "Adventurers have encountered lone Elven children while making excursions in their territory before, from every encounter it's assumed that young Elves aren't actually capable of Spirit Magic."

"Then why did they flee?"

"They saw Elven children, it really wouldn't be all that unreasonable to assume that adults would be nearby as well, right?" That was true, I suppose.

"They escaped, though, so there couldn't have been adults."

"There weren't." She confirmed. "They wouldn't have escaped had there been even a single one. The adventurers that went inland were mocked mercilessly for fleeing from children armed with sticks while screaming like frightened children themselves. But in fairness, they could not have known there weren't any adults." She finished with a shrug.

"Better safe than sorry." I agreed. "However, you didn't really answer my question."

"Hm? Oh!" She blushed slightly at that. "Um, well yes, remember how they were all carrying something?"

I gave a confirmatory nod.

"Well, they were young goats of a breed we had not encountered before then. The adult goat's hair was noted as being remarkably velvety, so they decided to take enough of the young kids to try forming a breeding population, as their fur seemed, well, luxurious."

Louise idly touched a spare lone legging which seemed to be made from the very material she was describing.

"Obviously they didn't capture enough kids to actually form a breeding population, so they had to return a few times after demand for the goat's wool grew exponentially. Eventually, they caught enough to sustain the goat's population, after a few allegedly close calls, that is."

She ceased rubbing the stocking and pulled her wand's holster from the dresser and began fastening it to her leg.

"Eventually they decided to name the goats after Syracuse itself, for lack of any better ideas. The goat's wool became extremely popular as demand continued to skyrocket, and eventually the goats starting spreading all over Romalian farms, and now Syracuse wool is the single most desired animal fur in all of Halkegania. All of the finest clothing is assured to have at least some Syracuse wool incorporated into it."

After ensuring that her holster was in place, Louise proceeded to her bedside table to acquire her
wand, slipping it into place on her hip.

"Most of my personal clothing is largely made from Syracuse wool, a perk of being the daughter of a Duke and Duchess." She finished with a cocky grin plastered on her face. Interesting story, at any rate.

I lifted my watch to check the time. 7:15. Still plenty of time to get my hair in order. "Well, that was interesting. Though I suppose I should get my hair in working order." She nodded in agreement before moving to her desk and pulling out the chair.

"Well, sit down then." She stated as she opened a drawer and pulled out a hairbrush and- Wait. "No objections!" She shouted suddenly, dramatically pointing her fancy brush, probably made from polished cattle horn and boar bristles at me. "You helped me with my garter belt, this is the absolute least I could do in return! Now sit!"

I grimaced, although she did have a point... And she probably has more experience with making really long hair look good then I do, considering that I only occasionally bother to even straighten my hair, usually just keeping it tied back in a 'Samurai Ponytail' as TVTropes refers to the style, or far more rarely I just leave it undone altogether and rock 'Barbarian Longhair' instead, as I am now.

I quietly and hesitantly took a seat across from her mirror, and she immediately set about tugging her fingers through my locks. "Wow, your hair is nearly as thick as big sis Cattelya's! Heh heh, that just means that it'll look nearly as lustrous when I'm done with it!" I could feel my heart sink as a sensation of dread overcame me.

"Um, if you don't mind, I'd appreciate it if you would just make my hair presentable-"

"Nonsense!" She started with great enthusiasm. "By the time I'm done with you, you're going to be fabulous!"

Oh, Gawd.

She giggled in a half-manic manner, enthusiastically combing her fingers through my hair to break any tangles before she started using the rather stiff brush.

I've made a grave mistake.
"...And so, with this-" The Dumbledore/Gandalf-looking Headmaster known as Osmand spun the vellum parchment 60 degrees to face himself again, clearly trying his hardest to not stare at my hair as he did so. "-the contract is finalised."

He stated as he signed his own name on the bottom of the document under Colbert and the bespectacled chestnut-haired secretary Miss Longueville's own proof of witness signatures.

"You are now, officially, in Lady le Blanc's employ Lord Pholus."

Louise gave a very audible sigh as she dropped her noble posture and sunk into the over-cushioned armchair she had claimed in front of the Headmaster's desk a good two hours previous.

Meanwhile, Colbert gave his own less exaggerated sigh of relief and Miss Longueville gave no noticeable reaction of her own off to the side of Osmand's desk at her own much more modest workstation. Guess even after that little hairdressing session she was still quite tense over the whole situation.

Incidentally, I was at a loss when it came time for me to do her hair. To say I wasn't expecting for her to want some big dumb guy that clearly doesn't know anything about advanced haircare to touch even a single strand on her head would be an understatement, especially after she'd just threatened to make me regret it if I ever did touch it again the previous night.

For lack of any better ideas, I tied her hair up in prototypical tsundere twin-tails. She seemed to like them, declaring them 'adorable,' plus they suited her well enough I suppose.

I just wish she hadn't gone to so much effort into teasing my hair and making it all shiny and voluptuous, though. Loosely tying it back with an oversized fancy red velvet ribbon only added insult to injury, I look like a bloody ponce! At least she didn't try to shave off my goatee or pluck my eyebrows, this is embarrassing enough as it is, even if Kirche and a few others seemed to very much approve of the over-done hair style.

I'm amazed Louise was able to work so well so quickly at any rate, though, even with the thick, nearly poultice-esque weird hair-care potions that seem to fulfil the duties of scented shampoo and conditioner here that worked ridiculously fast sans water. She had also claimed that the potions would cure my 'little' dandruff problem, for a few days at least. Seems like she was telling the truth on that too, couldn't find a flake of dead skin in my hairline after she was finished and permitted me to look myself over in a mirror.

Couldn't help but wonder what else they would have in the way of potions. Totally looking forward to Colbert's Alchemy class.

Anyways, what was I on about before? Oh, right. Meeting with Osmand. "So-" I started, breaking the oddly extended silence. "Has Lord Colbert-" Colbert gestured noticeably with his hand, seemingly to grab my attention.

"Please, there is little need to treat me so formally Lord Jophiel."

Is that so? "I shall have to state the same to you then Colbert."
His eyes grew ever so wider, as did Louise's and Osmand. Longueville continued to look utterly disinterested. "Very well then, Lor- Ah, Jophiel." He finished with an unsure shrug. A bit of an odd reaction...

"It is not terribly common for Nobles to request formalities be dropped altogether unless they are speaking with close friends or family." Osmand stated as he leant back into his luxurious leather-backed armchair, crossing his fingers over his belly as he did so.

"I am not a common Noble." I stated matter-of-factually. Longueville cocked an eyebrow off to the side in her corner, although she hadn't redirected her gaze from her numerous piles of vellum documents.

"So it seems." The elderly man stated as he unlinked his fingers and moved to stroke his beard as if he was some kind of ancient Japanese martial arts master. "So, you were saying before the interruption?" Colbert grimaced guiltily somewhat out of the corner of my eye.

"Yes, has Colbert informed you of my declaration of forgiveness of Lord Guiche de Gramont and request that he not be punished on my behalf?" I shifted uncomfortably somewhat, my ass was beginning to feel the pressure of 200 pounds bearing down on it for two hours straight without reprieve.

"He has." Osmand continued to sagely stroke his beard. "Also a supremely strange move from a Noble by our standards outside of stories meant for the young."

Er, how should I handle this? Be honest, just say I don't want to get on his family's bad side? It probably wouldn't hurt for people to believe me to be a rather moralistic person, though, good P.R. Never hurt anybody before. Feck it, can't see how everybody thinking me to be a great person could be a bad thing.

"Forgiveness is a virtue." I started with attempted, and seemingly convincing candour. All gathered save for the gloomy secretary gave me a warm grin and approving nod. On the topic of forgiveness, my mind drifted to Siesta. The Darwinian levels of stupidity she demonstrated back there reached award levels, but fuck it, she's gone out of her way to be nice to me and that's more than can be said about most people I typically meet. "On the topic of forgiveness-"

"The maid, Siesta I believe her name is?" The elder wizard cut me off. I nodded nervously. "Colbert has brought her involvement in the issue to my attention, however, the overwhelming majority of those that witnessed the event assert that she was uninvolved until you were injured, and Lord Armand has not mentioned her once. Academy rules state that she should be punished... However-"

The Headmaster ceased the incessant stroking of his beard and leant forward conspiratorially, gesturing for the three of us to lean in as well while the secretary blatantly and shamelessly rolled her eyes at the movement. We all proceeded to lean in regardless. He started in a hushed, but somewhat frantic tone,

"-I do not care for the thought of punishing such a ridiculously pretty, shapely and exotic young woman!"

Louise did not bother attempting to hide her shock and disgust, Colbert looked as if he were fighting to not slam his head into the Headmaster's desk, while I only barely managed to fight back the urge to guffaw like a Hyena. I'm well aware of the dirty old man stereotype, but wow, never actually met
a man that would just wear his perversion on his sleeve like that before.

He continued, shamelessly. "The le Blanc family is famous for their integrity and strict honesty, if the lady Louise were to assert that the maid had no hand in the matter it would be enough to seal the matter and assure all that miss Siesta is innocent."

Louise looked positively aghast and began sputtering in a matter that suggested she was on the verge of exploding. That was enough to cause the urge to laugh to very quickly dissipate. Damn.

"Forgiveness is a virtue, is it not, Lady le Blanc?" Although she ceased sputtering, she did appear as though she was struggling to not boil over.

"You would ask that I LIE!?" The venom in the tiny blonde's voice sent a chill down my spine, Colbert had retreated into the cushiony safety of his armchair and Osmand seemed to struggle to not follow suit.

"O-of course not my oh-so-radiant lady! Simply, in the name of mercy, bend the truth! It is clear that miss Siesta's safety is very important to Jophiel! Could you not consider it a favour for a friend?"

Louise's glare redirected to me fast enough to create the illusion that the shift was instantaneous. Ice water being poured down my back, she has a pants-shittingly terrifying glare. The glare grew significantly less intense, and she eventually settled on a somewhat uneasy expression.

The tiny Noble flopped back into her chair grumpily, and she silently pouted for nearly a full minute, neither Osmand nor I shifted from our positions, frozen in place like a pair of deer in headlights save for our eyes, which kept shifting wildly between Louise, Colbert, and each other.

"...Fine." She breathed the word, barely audibly. Wasn't expecting that, to be honest. Colbert seemed to share my befuddlement, however, Osmand seemed downright joyful.

"Thank you, Lady le Blanc! To demonstrate such mercy, you are truly a credit to this academy's student body!" By the Gods man, have you no shame? Louise herself hadn't reacted much, she just continued to fume silently, with that same pouty expression plastered on her face. Although I was bothered by how distressed she seems to be, I have to admit that she looks just like the prototypical anime tsundere right now, the resemblance was absolute, amusingly uncanny. "So, miss Longueville, did you get that?"

"The dark-haired maid with the nice face and big tits is not guilty." She stated with a remarkable lack of tact as she continued to take notes with her inked quill. I'm guessing miss Longueville either isn't a Noble, or this school employs a remarkable amount of strangely informal Nobles. I caught Louise direct a glare at the secretary, who continued to appear largely uninterested with the entire situation.

"Excellent! So the case is closed then-" Okay, I'm pretty sure that was a modern saying. Just how exactly does this damned translation spell work? "-and Miss..." He trailed off, holding the 's' for a fairly significant amount of time while staring at me and gesturing with his hand- Oh!

"Horie." I finished for him.

"Miss Horie is not-guilty! That is quite good, it would be terrible for student morale to lose such a kind and thoughtful servant, after all!" The old man clasped his hands together and greedily rubbed them together. Uh... I'm beginning to wonder if Siesta is safe here after all-
"The Headmaster does not touch women younger than 25." Longueville spoke up suddenly, almost as if in response to my introspection. "He'll look and fantasise without shame, but he would never touch them." I stared at her for several moments in confusion, did she just read my- "I noticed how worried you looked when the Headmaster began acting like a pervert. He is, but he does not grope women that do not give him explicit permission to do so..." She trailed off with a look of distinct annoyance on her face.

"Miss Longueville!" The ashen-haired beardy McPervo stated with a start. "If I remember correctly, you invited me to grope you when we initially met yourself!" Longueville herself grimaced somewhat at that statement.

"Yes, I did." She stated as she set aside a sheet of inked vellum to dry. "I simply did not think that you'd be so overt and frequent with your attention. My rear feels as though it's been assaulted by a nest of angry bees some days." I... Don't really know how to think about all this. I glanced over at Louise, she looked thoroughly displeased with the entire situation, our eyes locked, and we shared a moment of considerable discomfort. Yeah, I feel your pain, Louise.

"Can we move on?" The twin-tailed blonde spoke up in a tone that suggested it was more of a command than a request. Osmand, oddly, seemed to snap back into his seat as if he was responding to a military superior. "I have classes to attend, and Mister Colbert has work of his own to do." She clearly wanted this meeting to end, understandably so.

"Erm, yes Lady le Blanc. Anyways, as much as I would like to allow miss Siesta off the hook-" Great, translation spell is making the ancient fantasy Arch-mage dude talk like a character out of a freaking Shrek movie. "-we simply cannot have her thinking that she can get away with this sort of behaviour unimpeded. Therefore her typical monthly pay shall be quietly docked by half for a period of one month." Oh shit.

Siesta's family relies on her income to make ends meet. If she isn't pulling in as much money as she should be... Crap. "Headmaster."

"No." Wait, what. "I should be firing her, Lord Jophiel. She instigated a conflict between her betters and nearly got a foreign noble killed. What if your people learned of what happened? If they are anything like our people military action could be a possible reaction to the situation."

Damn it, I'd better try to clear some things up- Osmand held his hand up in a halting gesture, seemingly cutting me off before I even started.

"I'm not interested in any arguments you have to the contrary Lord Pholus. Miss Siesta is lucky this is the extent of her punishment, this is settled and I will hear no arguments otherwise."

...Guess that Osmand wouldn't have wound up in such a high station without being able to demonstrate some degree of authority in spite of acting like a buffoon from time to time.

Osmand continued. "So, I believe that everything is in order?" Colbert and Louise exchanged looks before giving a confirmatory nod. "Very well, let us end this meeting then. We have little need to remain here any longer."

The Headmaster reached under his desk and pulled up a large, Gandalf-ian smoking pipe as well as a small, brass container embossed with what looked like cartoon stars with big goofy grins. Then he removed the cover that seemed to have been shaped to produce a friction seal and the nearly overpowering odour hit me. Where in the hell did he get his hands on pot? Doesn't it come from
China or something? They shouldn't have access to it with that many Elves between Halk and whatever the Elves call their version of China...

"Headmaster... Where did you get cannabis from?" I inquired, making little attempt to hide my confusion. He looked up in surprise, seemingly not having expected me to ask, or-

"You know of this herb?" He asked incredulously, I nodded and he seemed very surprised now.

"Enough to be very, very surprised that you have access to it." He just stared and blinked for several seconds before leaning back and giving me a ponderous look.

"You called it, 'cannabis,' I believe? I know next to nothing about this herb; it is provided to me by a man who claims to have 'contacts' and refuses to elaborate further on the matter-"

"A-HEM." Louise made no attempt to make her displeasure as she cut the Headmaster off and glared daggers at me. Er... Guess it's time to wrap this up then.

"...Let us continue this conversation later, Lord Osmand." I gave the elderly fellow an apologetic half-smile, he shrugged his shoulders.

"Before we all go about our days, Lady le Blanc, your request to have Lord Pholus be granted free run of your quarters is denied. I understand where you are coming from, but just imagine for a moment what the gossip amongst the students, and some of the less mature Academy employees would sound like were it to get out that an exotic young man has access to your bedroom anytime he pleases."

Now that's-

"Compounding that with the fact that you have been spending time with Lady Augusta recently and share a corridor with her as well..."

...A point I hadn't considered.

"'Tis a bad idea. You will simply have to deal with having to manually unlock the door for him yourself." Osmand finished authoritatively as he scraped the cup of his pipe out with a small length of wood.

Louise grimaced but gave a confirmatory nod. Eh, having to wait outside for her doesn't bother me all that much anyways.

"So, with that, unless somebody has something else to add...?" Osmand glanced around the table at all present in the office, when nobody spoke up he waved us off and turned to ask Miss Longueville about the budget for the servant's quarters as we all stood from our seats and sauntered out of the room.

---

"Well, it is good that everything worked out so well!" Colbert cheerfully spoke up as we finally reached the landing of the tower, breaking the awkward silence that had hung between the three of us since we left.

Louise gave an exaggerated sigh and grumbled something about the Headmaster's lack of shame
while Colbert gave a nervous chuckle and I stretched my back out, reaching high above my head before dropping my hands back at my side on the pommel of my hellion. Louise watched me during the motion and her eyes fixated on the sword as I finished.

"Jophiel-" She started, much curiosity seeping into her voice as she did so. "-I'm been meaning to ask you about your sword...s." The blondie finished somewhat awkwardly.

I raised an eyebrow, noticing Colbert's own raising as well in anticipation. "Oh? Which ones?"

"The curved ones. The one on your hip-" She stated, pointing to the hellion currently resting in its Kydex scabbard. "-and the larger one that curves in the opposite direction back in your room." She must mean the katana than. Well, guess I'll humour her about the hellion at least. The katana could wait.

I drew the hellion from its scabbard, little more than a slight rattle accompanied the motion, then proceeded to hold it out towards my new charge for her to more closely examine it. She took the grip gingerly and her eyes grew somewhat wide as I released what little hold I had on it. "It's so light..."

She stepped away from us and made a slow, deliberate downward chopping motion with the sword, seemingly testing its weight.

"And it's so..." I could tell she wanted to touch the blade but restrained herself from doing so. Guess the people here would know better than to try fingering the blade of a high-carbon steel blade as opposed to people from my world who wouldn't hesitate to mark up the blade with their filthy Cheetos-encrusted fingers. "What metal is this made from?"

"5160." I shot back reflexively, omitting the 'steel' bit as it sort of goes without saying.

"Fiftionesickstsy?" She looked somewhat confused, at which point I realised they wouldn't be familiar with modern steel terminologies. Drat, best correct myself before-

"Fiftonesickstsy, an exotic name for an exotic metal!" The comedy news anchor look-alike started, interrupting my chain of thought. "Look at the patterns on the blade, I've never seen anything like it before! Not to mention the scabbard! What creature would such a rigid leather have come from?"

Uh, seems like there've been a few misunderstandings here-

"Oh, but look at the time! I really must prepare for my next class, my apologies Lady le Blanc, L-Jophiel, I shall speak to you at a later time!" He stated as he suddenly bolted off and turned the corner, leaving the both of us somewhat surprised at how quickly he moved for a man of his apparent age.

"Uh... There seems to have been a misunderstanding." I awkwardly stated, catching Louise's attention in doing so.

"How so?"

"The sword is just mono steel, there isn't anything particularly special about it." The girl furrowed her brow in apparent frustration, much to my confusion.

"Bah." She stated suddenly, motioning to hand the blade back to me. "I'm more curious about the thing's cultural significance than I am what sort of weird exotic metal it's made from anyways." I
cocked another eyebrow in further confusion at this statement, the implication being that Tristainia isn't aware of steel? Well, anyways...

"Don't you have classes to attend?" I asked as I re-inserted my sword into its scabbard. Her eyes turned very wide and her eyebrows reached new heights with that statement.

"Oh no, you're right! Look at the time, I'm going to be late! I have to get back to my room and get my books and quill and ink quickly!" The small girl started to run- ...Actually, no, to call what she was doing 'running' would be an insult to the concept. I leisurely walked up to her and noticed that she was actually panting pretty heavily...

"Louise, if it's that important don't you think you should actually run to your room?" She stopped and glared daggers at me.

"I AM running!" Like hell you were.

"That was barely a jog, Louise." She looked upset at my statement. What, was she so pampered that she doesn't know how to properly run, or is she just THAT unfit? ...Actually, now that I look at her she is REALLY skinny. ".Can you not run properly?" She looked away, an expression of embarrassment plainly painted on her face.

"I- It's difficult to run in heels!" Wait, she's wearing- Oh, she is. They aren't very extreme or anything, but still. Whoa, she can't be more than 5'3" with those. She really is tiny, isn't she? Suddenly I felt a surge of what I can only describe as brotherly instincts surge up in my gut as I imagined the tiny girl being late for class and being reprimanded for it. Well, can't have her being late for school because she's ashamed of her height, can we?

Louise's expression of anger was quickly replaced with one of great surprise as she let out a mildly distressed squeak as I reached down and grabbed her in a Princess cradle. "W-what are you doing!?" I locked eyes with her and gave her a playful grin.

"Making sure my little sister gets to class on time!" I stated as I launched off of my heel and started running down the mercifully vacant hall, Louise burying her face into my shoulder and constantly emitting distressed squeaks the entire time.
I rubbed my still sore nose and breathed heavily through my mouth after I set the twin-tailed blondie down in front of her classroom, her study gear in hand. She'd nerd smacked me in the face after I'd set her down in front of her room, seems she'd never been carried like that before and didn't appreciate suddenly bolting down the school's halls at top speed and beaned me in the nose in her initial half-panic.

She'd apologised, and once she'd returned from her room even sheepishly asked that I carry her to class as well, but on my back this time. Once again I'd felt sudden brotherly urges flare up like a nuke went off in my chest and I was bizarrely compelled to oblige her. She'd admitted that it was exciting and a little fun and gave me puppy dog eyes when I set her down for the second time while apologising for smacking me. I, of course, forgave her, I just couldn't stay mad at such an adorable face.

She'd wanted me to attend class with her, but brought to my attention that I'd be dropping in the middle of a long and complicated class with no prior knowledge of the subject matter, and as far as Halkeganian language was concerned I was illiterate, meaning that I couldn't even just take notes for her to study herself. I was really looking forward to attending magical classes too.

Shit be disheartening 'yo.

For a moment I tried to ponder why I'm so very uncharacteristically getting all brotherly and shit towards Louise despite only having known her for a few days now, though when I tried to press the matter in my mind I suddenly developed a rather unpleasant headache and decided to put off on thinking about that for the time being.

With nothing else to do for the rest of the day with both Louise and Colbert occupied, I decided to see if I could find Siesta. I was worried about the girl, plus I think I have a method that could work to negate her upcoming financial issues if my hunch is correct. It'd better work, at any rate. Don't want to find out I'm hauling around this shopping bag full of empty soda cans for nothing.

---

It didn't take long to find her, the first servant I'd run into basically flagged me down and directed me towards her without my even asking. She must be looking for me as well then.

I'd been directed to the servant's 'village' towards the main academy gates, which seemed to consist of a collection of small, almost pre-fab looking solid stone structures built around a small but pretty fountain like a proper village centre would be around a well.

I'd thought they were painted concrete at first, but upon approaching one it became abundantly clear that they were in fact solid fucking stone, marble by the looks of it. Must have been the work of Geourgers.

The houses all had simplistic, but well-made wooden doors with door knobs similar to those in the academy itself. No locks from what I could see and the doors were all adorned with numbers... At least I think they're numbers. I still can't read and haven't seen any examples of their numerical system, but there are unique markings on each door never the less.

I'd run into another servant and they'd brought me right to Siesta's 'apartment,' as it were. Apparently, they were usually shared between two or three same-sex servants but the headmaster seemed to take
a particular liking to her and made a point to give her an entire room to herself. Well, guess her being pretty and his being a pervert had some perks after all then.

I'd had to wait a good minute before she'd answer after I knocked, and she seemed pretty well dumbstruck to see me standing there.

"Hey-o!" I started with a cheerful, only somewhat forced grin and a wave. "I was worried after the way you bolted off yesterday, plus I have good news for you." The exotic raven-haired teen's tense expression brightened ever so slightly at that statement. "The Headmaster decided to limit your punishment for the incident with Guiche to halving your pay for a month."

She started off looking quite excited, then looked particularly disheartened once I'd finished my statement.

"I know you said that a lot of your pay goes to your family to help with their financial struggles, but I think I have a solution to that." The conspicuously silent maid gave me a quizzical look. "Would you mind if I came in?"

The raven-haired beauty looked somewhat conflicted for a moment before stepping aside to allow me entry. I stepped in and immediately rounded back on her as she shut the door.

"How much is aluminium worth here?" She stared at me for a good long while before finally speaking up.

"A single aluminium amulet could feed my entire family for a month if sold to the right merchant." She stated in a tired tone. "The metal is worth more than gold and is phenomenally rare from what I understand... Why?" Just what I wanted to hear!

I squatted in place and dropped the shopping bag on the floor, reached in and pulled out a vibrant red Coca-Cola can, she seemed entranced by it as she lightly knelt in place herself, likely due to its colouration, which amused me considerably considering how the cans are just throw-aways on my world.

"These cans are made of pure aluminium, aluminium that's been coloured on top of that as you can no doubt tell. And I'm giving them all to you." There were a few moments of Siesta nodding absently followed by her eyes shooting open like a pair of saucers as she processed what she'd just heard. She slowly redirected her gaze from the can to me, shock painted on her features plain as day.

"W...What...?" Her voice was so quiet as to be only barely on the edge of earshot.

"Your family would suffer were you to not pull in your average wage for a month, right?" I asked rhetorically. "Well, you're such a nice girl that I can't imagine they deserve such a thing to befall them, and I can certainly spare the expense, so these are for you."

I lifted the bag and gave it a rattle.

"Talk to Colbert, I'm sure he'd be willing to help you get a good price for them, and don't be afraid to let him know these are from me, okay?" I gave her a wry grin, she blushed and lowered her eyes, which seemed to catch on my soda tab necklace.

"L-Lord Jophiel, is that necklace of aluminium as well?" I nodded in a confirmatory manner. "Ah, such luxury, what it must be like to be a Noble..." The exotic girl stated as she closed her eyes and clasped her own cheeks wistfully.
...Y'know, actually taking the moment to look around her house, it's completely spartan. Does she have any luxuries aside from the small pile of books on her bedside table-? Wait, books? Does she know how to read? Hot damn! I think I may have just found a new study partner! Anyways, the poor girl seems particularly entranced by the necklace. Maybe...

I reached behind my neck and undid the clasp holding the necklace in place, once it was undone I moved to put it on Siesta. She still had her eyes closed and was in la-la land when I did so, causing her to give a startled squeal when she felt my hands brush against her neck. I noted that her skin was especially soft compared to my own.

Gonna have to work on that, supposed to be a noble, not some sun-baked peasant.

Once the clasp was in place I retracted my hands and gave her a wide, only mostly forced smile. "There we go, wouldn't do for such a pretty girl to have no nice jewellery of her own, now would it?" She'll also probably be more willing to help me study now that I've given her something as well!

She had a vacant expression on her face as her fingers traced the spot where my hands brushed her neck, moving onto the necklace itself after a few moments. She looked positively dumbstruck. Well, there we go, my good deed for the day!

"Well-" I started as I stood from my position. "I'm going to go see if I can join in on the guard's exercise regiment today, better to start sooner rather than later if I'm gonna drop this gut," I stated with a chuckle as I lightly smacked my slightly protruding stomach.

Doing so would probably only encourage the likes of Kirche, but eh, while that's never going to happen it admittedly does feel rather damned nice to have such a looker be so openly attracted to me, so having to 'suffer' more of her flirting wouldn't be the worst of punishments for working out I imagine.

"Hope you enjoy the rest of your day Siesta." I finished with a smile as I waved and took a few steps past her to make for the door-

"W-wait!" The girl suddenly shouted as she quickly stood from her kneeling position and spun to face me. "Uh-u-um..."

She clasped the necklace and cast her face at the floor, leaving me unable to see her eyes past her bangs.

Several moments passed, and it was getting a tad awkward just sort of... Standing there. Was she- "MybirthdayisinafewdaysandIwouldreallyliketospenditwithyouifyoucansparethetimeohnoI'msorrythatwasstupidofmi'lord!"

...What.

As suddenly as she had belted out that verbal paragraph she dropped her torso into a deep, inexplicably apologetic bow. I'm confused, did I hear her say something about a birthday? Was she inviting me to hers? Drat, time to clarify. "Are you asking me to come to your birthday?"

I heard the girl whimper somewhat before she spoke up in a barely audible whisper. "Y-yes, I'm sorry mi'Lord." Sorry? For what? I mean sure, I actually kind of hate parties of any kind, but... Well, I wouldn't mind having this girl as a friend, so it would be impolite of me to decline. I guess I'd just have to grit my teeth and bear with it for a few hours when it comes time.

"Sure, I'd love to come." I stated. Her entire body grew extremely tense, and it took her an exaggerated couple of seconds to raise her head enough to look me in the eye. "What day is it on?"

Again, she looked dumbstruck. I suppose I was supposed to be a Noble, and attending a commoner's
birthday party could be seen as behaviour very uncharacteristic of a Noble, but fuck it, she's nice and if anyone criticises me I'll just gouge out their fucking eyes with a folding knife.

...I really need to find a way to blow off some steam soon, don't I?

"U-uh..." Siesta finally began making noises again. "N-nine days from now, m-milord." Duly noted.

"Okay, I'll see you then. Have a good night Siesta." I gave a final wave as I unlatched the somewhat primitive door and practically jumped out the stone cabin before she could catch me again. I really needed to get my mind off of things, and making my everything hurt with a good afternoon of exercise would do just the trick methinks. Now, which direction was the guard's faculty in again...?

---

"Is there something amiss, Noble sire?" The guardsman I assumed to be the local captain spoke up after I'd approached him as he drilled his men. In all honesty, I don't like being addressed as if I were these people's 'better,' if there was anybody that wasn't above the common man it would be myself. Gonna have to just suffer it, for now, I guess.

"No, I simply have an inquiry to propose to you. Before that, however; my name is Jophiel Pholus van Cazonium." I stated with a simple bow.

"Captain Jacob Keyes, Tristain Academy of Magic First Foot Infantry Guard division." The broad-shouldered older looking man curtly stated as he gave a well-flourished bow of his own, complimenting his over-designed sky blue uniform. Huh. Name's the same as the Halo character, but he doesn't look anything like him. Almost resembles a young Charles de Gaulle, actually. "Now, about your inquiry?"

"Yes, I would like to know if it would be possible for myself to partake in your guard regiment's training exercises." The man's narrow eyes widened somewhat. Suppose he wasn't expecting a Noble to ask permission to roll around in the dirt with the 'lowly' guards, so to speak.

It took Keyes a few moments longer than it should have to gather his wits and respond. "Might I ask why you would make this inquiry?" In response, I made a show of lifting my hand and slapping my somewhat plus-sized gut without changing my stone-faced expression at all.

A good deal of the gathered guards that had fallen into what I assumed was Tristain's equivalent of at-ease attempted and mostly failed to not snigger and wheeze in amusement.

"...Well said." Keyes stated as he obviously only barely restrained himself from grinning if his suddenly tensed face was any indication. "Is being well-fed not attractive in your lands?"

"Oh, being well-fed is considered a good thing, being fat, however, is not. Plus I've recently signed a contract to serve as the personal guardian of one Lady Louise le Blanc, thus I would like to achieve peak physical fitness to best perform in my duties if at all possible." Keyes nodded in understanding.

"If your intent is to become physically fit it would be best to treat you as I would any of the regular men under my command, would this present a problem?" I shook my head side-to-side slightly in response.

"Absolutely not, in fact, I would expect nothing less than to be treated as any other man under your command, so long as I am exercising with you, at least." The hardened man gave a pleased grin and motioned towards the lightly-dressed guardsmen still standing at attention.

"Then fall in line, and set your jacket aside, it will only slow you down for the upcoming drills."
gave a confirmatory nod as I shed my jacket and tossed it on a nearby... Scarecrow? Whatever. I scanned the assembled men as I fell in line and failed to find the two guardsmen that had been present when Guiche attacked me. Wonder if they're still employed here, all things considered.

I also noticed a fair amount of women in the crowd. Magic must be something of an equaliser between the sexes if women are being allowed to serve in any capacity alongside men; good to know that gender discrimination may not be a thing here.

Well anyways, I've got better things to consider at the moment, hopefully by the end of the day I'll be too tired to be stressed out by everything that's happened since I became a Slider; exercise usually works fairly well I find, and something tells me I'm going to get a lot of it this afternoon. Future Me will probably not appreciate this later on, but fuck that guy, he's a whiny bitch anyways.
In retrospect, I should have changed into one of my rattier shirts and pants for that.

My favourite shirt was absolutely soaked through, and my pants were coated in dirt. If nothing else it at least signalled to Keyes that I'm not used to exercising, which would be typical of most young Nobles I imagine. He also seemed to get a kick out of ordering someone of my 'status' around like a common guard. Hopefully, my willingness to tire myself out will get me on his good side.

Incidentally, it totally worked, I'm way too tired to be annoyed at everything that's happened recently. Mostly I can really only focus on how damned overworked my limbs feel. Future me is really going to be unhappy about this at any rate, but like I said, fuck that guy.

I spent a good couple dozen minutes just laying there, listening to the wind and chirping birds and watching that big-ass blue dragon occasionally fly overhead. Watching it pass over for the tenth time caused me to realise that there was a metric fucktonne of other various mythological fantasy critters spread over the academy, and I've been trying rather hard to not notice them, and mostly succeeding at that.

I knew that most people would think I'm a fucking idiot for actively trying to not notice fantasy critters that aren't on my dinner plate when most would probably kill for the opportunity to see a real-life dragon or griffon or some-such, but oy you filthy cock-slap, how well do you think you'd take it if you were to bump into a fucking Beholder on your way to the food place after waking up from a multi-day coma?

Probably not very fucking well I imagine, I know that I would have shat myself had my bowels not already been empty when I literally walked into that fucking thing.

Anyways, that aside considering it I should probably get used to seeing shit like that. Familiars can get pretty damned weird from what I understand, the aforementioned beholder being a prime example of that.

Besides, if I were honest I was starting to feel pretty bad about consistently and blatantly ignoring that lamia girl Familiar that kept trying to excitedly say hi to me knowing that I'm from a 'far off place' as well. But fuck me, man, seeing a half-human-half-animal IRL is unnerving as all fuck! I really need to get used to it, though, continuing to pretend she doesn't exist is starting to make me feel kind of racist- Or would 'speciesist' be more appropriate here?

Bah, I've been an asshole at any rate, and I should try to correct that. Don't want to send the wrong message. Also want to make sure she isn't being mistreated as well, come to think of it. I lied about my social standing, and have the education to back up my claims, from what little I'd asked she's been rather honest about being a tribal girl with no formal education to speak of. Wouldn't want her to be treated poorly or taken advantage of because of that...

Although from what I've seen most everybody but her partner has ignored her, seemingly as freaked out by her as I have been. Guess lamias aren't common or even known here then. She must be lonely as fuck all things considered...

Man, I really have been letting my frustration get to me and make me into an inconsiderate dick, haven't I? Well, I have a proper outlet now, at any rate, so hopefully that'll be marginalised compared to recent days from now on.
For the eleventh time, the big blue dragon passed overhead as it circled the academy main tower. I allowed my mind to shift down as I simply rested on the ground and birds continued to chirp off in some vaguely undefined direction.

"My oh my, sleeping in the dirt like some sort of canine? Whatever would Little Louise think were she to see her high-born Familiar in such a compromising situation?" My eyes creaked open to see the mischievous grin of a familiar dusky-skinned red head staring down at me, her chestnut eyes making no attempt to hide her amusement at finding me passed out in an academy field.

"Don't care, tired." I wasn't sure if the sun had shifted position noticeably. I lethargically withdrew my Vita from my pants pocket to check the time before just as lethargically depositing back into the aforementioned pants. Yup, I'd been out for about an hour and a half. Still plenty of time until Louise's classes were over I believe...

Actually, that begs the question of what Kirche is doing here if classes aren't over.

"Don't you have classes?" She shrugged as she removed her cloak and set it on the ground to sit on it without dirtying her bottom and serve as something of a cushion, pulling her legs up against her chest after what was clearly an attempt to give me a clear view of her panties which I swear I did not take advantage of.

"Professor Colbert's Pyrourgy class, but I'm so far ahead of everybody else there that he's okay with me taking a class off every once and a while to dedicate to practising the water element, which I'm not doing so well at." She stated, her previously mischievous grin shifted into an exaggerated pout.

"...And you're accomplishing that by sitting in the middle of a field with my fat ass, how?" The pout intensified.

"Fishing for compliments is unseemly for a Noble gentleman. And are you going to report me to a prefect?" I sighed, so she's the type to skip out on classes as well.

Eh, so long as she doesn't make a habit of it, I guess.

"Oh stop with that sour face, I really was practising, I just burned through all my Soul doing so and noticed you were laying out here, and since I can't keep practising today then why not try to take advantage of an opportunity to bond with the resident exotic foreigner a bit?" The mischievous grin returned in full force. Well, not like I have any reason to disbelieve her...

"I'm okay with you being here as long as you aren't lying about not being able to keep practising." Her expression once again shifted to a hurt puppy dog look.

"You think I would lie to you?" Boy is this girl ever laying it on thick...

"As much as I'm enjoying this little back and forth, I am rather tired at the moment..." I let that trail off pretty obviously there, she seemed to get the message as she simply opted to look at me, or so I assumed, I had shut my eyes for a good couple of minutes and was just laying there, enjoying the silence. Eventually, she seemed to feel the need to break the quiet and speak up.

"Jophiel, there's been something I've been meaning to ask you..." I opened my eyes and looked at her again to notice she had a transparently concerned expression on her face. I remained silent, waiting for her to continue. "Did you come here willingly?" ...What.

No, really, what? Of all the people to ask me that question- As a matter of fact, why has Louise not
asked me that yet!? Is she even concerned about whether or not she kidnapped me with that summoning- Ow ow ow ow ow fucking OW what the hell is with these sudden fucking headaches!? Ah- Kirche's expression had noticeably darkened, and I'd realised I'd blatantly allowed my face to contort into one of distress.

"You're bad at masking your feelings, you know." Uh... "I knew it. You wouldn't have had that sword drawn unless you had been forced, right?" Well, that's not entirely true, although... "Has she even asked you herself?"

...I- I don't know how to respond to this. Kirche was starting to look rather upset. This didn't feel fair.

"...Jophiel, I know we only just met, and that I don't exactly have the most sterling of reputations in the academy, but you're really clearly not taking all of this as well as you'd like everyone to think you are, if you need someone to talk to, and Louise can't do it for you, I'm willing to."

Jesus titty-fucking Christ, where is all this coming from, and why is she ambushing me like this!? I just managed to get myself to calm down too damn it, and these sudden onset headaches aren't helping matters much either!

I let my head fall back into place on the ground, squeezing my eyes shut as I tried to force the frustration and headache back out of my system. Gods damn it all, I get that she's trying to help, but holy shit. "...Where is all of this coming from, Kirche?" If her expression changed I couldn't see it with my eyes clenched shut.

"...I suppose you got the impression that I'm some sort of brainless hussy that's only interested in the next physical thrill." I didn't answer that, partially because that question was clearly rhetorical and was pretty fucking armour-piercing, to say the least.

Boy, I really have been something of an inconsiderate, presumptuous ass lately.

"I'll admit, I'm rather fond of men, especially exotic ones, but I'm not completely self-absorbed like all the other girls in the academy like to say that I am. Plus I'm one of the school's best students save for the water element, so fuck anyone that would imply that I'm stupid."

I heard her shift around a fair amount.

"It's just- ...You aren't the first boy to not show an immediate, obvious interest in me physically, but you are the first to not run me off after not being interested in me physically when I try to talk to you." I opened my eyes and turned to look at her. She was fidgeting in place, clearly uncertain with what she was saying. "That is- I mean- Oh..." I think I get what she's trying to get at.

"You'd like it for us to be friends?" She stopped fidgeting immediately and locked eyes with me for a few seconds before redirecting her gaze at the ground.

"...Yes."

"Mmn, well so long as you don't cross Louise or myself I see little reason to refuse." I also know what it's like the be friendless, so I'm more than a little sympathetic to her situation. I heard her sigh in relief rather audibly. She didn't say anything further, and I allowed myself to remain quiet and shut my eyes again, taking mental steps to quash my frustration and sigh in relief myself as my fucking headache went away.

Several minutes passed from that point before Kirche suddenly spoke up again. "Oh, have you come to meet Mama's new friend my little Flame?" She must be speaking to her Familiar.
I don't think I've seen it yet, wonder what to expect-

My thoughts cut short as I lifted my head and centred the critter in my vision. It's a Charmander.

No, not some weird fantasy knock-off salamander bullshit, a full-on fucking Charmander from Pokémon. The colour was off, more red with a salmon belly than orange and cream, but even with the more realistic saurian, almost t-rex like proportions and proper scaled skin it was very clearly a Charmander, complete with inexplicably eternally burning tail and upright posture.

I haven't touched a Pokémon game since Ruby version back when I was in Elementary School, but still, fucking sweet!

"Someone seems impressed by you little Flame."

Kirche stated with a cocky grin in my direction as she rubbed her Familiar's head while it gave my shoe an experimental sniff before giving a comical 'blech' reaction, to which the exotic dark-skinned beauty couldn't help but laugh in response.

"He's a beautiful little creature, isn't he? I tried to look him up in the library's bestiary and couldn't find any examples of his species, and the Headmaster himself said that he has never encountered anything quite like him in all his travels, meaning that he's a hereto undocumented animal, and you know what they say about Familiars of an unknown species..."

She trailed off as she pulled the critter with penetrating eyes that belied a considerable intelligence that contrasted with its simple saurian appearance into a loving hug.

"Charmander." I stated as I found myself unable to break eye contact with the beast, it gave an excited yelp, almost as if in response to my statement. Kirche loosed her hug on the 'saur and redirected her attention to me.

"I'm sorry?"

"Charmander. He's a Charmander." Her eyes widened in realisation.

"You know what he is? Is he a creature from your homeland?" She seemed rather surprised and excited. Er, how am I going to explain knowing what he is? Mmm, maybe...

"He's a creature from our mythology, a baby dragon." Kirche froze for several seconds before emitting a squeal that seemed to hurt the Charmander as much as it did me, if his attempt to cover his ear holes was an indication.

"A dragon! A dragon! I've summoned an undiscovered dragon species! A mage that summons an unknown creature is destined for greatness, to begin with, a mage that summons a dragon is destined for even more greatness, to summon an unknown dragon!?" Again, she resumed squealing in a manner that caused both myself and Flame considerable ear pain. "Oh, but wait, he doesn't have wings." She seemed perplexed now.

"They don't get wings until they're fully grown adults, at which point they're known as a 'Charizard.'" I stated in an exasperated tone. I hope my eardrums weren't too badly damaged by that.

"I see..." She stated as she gave her little red lizard an intense gaze that seemed to unnerve him a tad.

At that moment my stomach emitted a growl that caught everyone off-guard. Flame seemed particularly confused, sticking his muzzle in my belly, almost as if he expected to find another creature there.
"I didn't eat this morning, Louise and I went straight to the Headmaster's office from the dormitories to finalise the Familiar contract... I think that it would be wise to head to the kitchens and see if I can't scrounge together something to tide me over until dinner."

With that, I, with considerable effort forced my stiffened muscles to obey my will as I pushed Flame away from my person and stood following by beginning the process of patting myself off.

"Oh, don't be silly my Darling, allow me to help you with that!" Before I could ask what she meant Kirche had drawn her wand from her forearm holster (which seemed to function like a Hidden Blade from Assassin's Creed, fucking sweet!) and finished chanting a spell.

All the dirt, sweat and mud that had caked on and into my clothes, skin, and previously fabulous hair seemingly disintegrated, leaving me feeling a fair bit cleaner than I did since my last proper shower. Holy hell does magic ever kick ass.

"It must be terrible, to have magic so overpowered that to utilise it would wreck devastation on a monstrous scale." Kirche gave me a pitying look. "But don't worry about that my Darling, you can rely upon Kirche the Fervent to take care of you whenever you need her." She finished with a wink and a smile as she finished standing and retrieving her cloak from the ground.

I rolled my eyes at her overt flirtation and gave her a curt thanks in response to the instant magical dry-cleaning as I retrieved my jacket from the scarecrow thing I had previously left it on. She seemed to have invited herself along to the kitchens with me, probably from a lack of having anything better to do.

Well, if nothing else I can say that I'm making friends really quickly on this world... It's just too bad they're only interested in me because I'm faking a charismatic noble persona. I couldn't help but idly wonder how long I'd be able to keep this up, and what the ultimate consequences of my lying would be.

...Maybe it would have been better had I just been honest from the get-go, at this rate I'm going to burn myself out mentally just trying to keep up with the layers upon layers of lies. Although, at the same time I can't be sure that I wouldn't have been treated as a glorified servant, or even slave had I not lied about who I am...

Shit, I don't want to think about this now. I'm having a good day, I don't need to ruin it for myself by overthinking everything. I'll just focus on bonding with Kirche until Louise gets out of classes in a few hours. Hopefully, I'll be able to keep in good spirits until then.

...I wonder if Flame would be amenable to learning a few simple commands?
"Oh ho ho! If it isn't Miss Siesta's saviour! My name is Marteau, head chef of the academy! To what do I owe the pleasure of you gracing my humble kitchen with your gracious presence?" Much to my great elation, it turns out that the head chef is well aware of who I am, is quite fond of Siesta, and very much appreciates how I've been going out of my way to help her. As a result of this, he was willing to fire up the ovens and grill to prepare me whatever I asked for on the spot. Seems word spreads fast around here.

I asked for a simple salad, to which he responded by handing me an overwrought plate full of an assortment of veggies, some of which I couldn't identify, which were slathered in what I'd later discover was a raspberry vinaigrette of some kind. I'll be honest, I wasn't entirely fond of the dressing, and some of the fantasy veggies tasted a bit odd to me, but it was made for me as thanks for providing aid to a friend of the chef, so I'm not going to be a cunt and refuse to eat it. It was filling if nothing else. "Thank you, Marteau."

I'll just let him know later on that I wasn't too fond of the weird sliced purple carrot-things and the other things that looked like red Brussels sprouts. "Come see me anytime you find your belly rumbling Noble Sire, I shall not hesitate to prepare whatever you wish! For any friend of Siesta is a friend of mine!"

After I was finished eating and gave up trying to fight off the servants so I could clean my plate myself I sauntered into the main dining hall to locate the spot Kirche had stated she would save for us. Of course, it was the usual place we would sit at in the mornings with Louise and her crew, and to my surprise Louise and co. where there as well. I'd have made a comment about losing track of time before I realised I didn't actually know her proper class schedule, to begin with. Louise waved me over even though I was already on my way to them as it was.

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Not much worth mentioning happened for the first hour or so of sitting at the table aside from Louise offhandedly mentioning that Soul can be recharged by strong emotions or something, mostly it was just the girls discussing girl things while my eyes glazed over and I occasionally turned down Siesta's insistent offers to get something for me. When did she show up, anyways? And why isn't she off doing her usual routine? She's been hovering around our seats for quite some time now that I consider it...

Anyways, seems that the classes Louise has today are mostly lectures, note-taking and quiz classes anyways, no practical demonstrations to speak of that I was so eager to see, so I really wasn't missing much by missing out on them anyways.

Eventually, attention was redirected towards me. Specifically, Louise was curious about the extent of my education. When I asked for clarification she asked me how much I have in the way of encyclopaedias, probably on account of her and Colbert thinking that I may be a scholar of some sort. I opted to be a smart ass and make reference to Wikipedia. To say that her eyes became unto dinner plates would be an understatement.

"Well, yeah." I started. "What did you think that large tome-like object sitting on my desk was for?" All the girls present were dumbstruck. It was true, to an extent. My netbook did sort of function as a tome that could access the sum of all human knowledge if one looked at it the right way. Not exactly
a lie, more like just stretching the truth for effect.

"You- you're lying! There's no way that's the truth!" Momo dramatically pointed at my face as she made her declaration. The temptation to mess with them was considerable, but I decided against it.

"If I get the chance to prove it to you, I will. Unfortunately, my connection to the internet seems to be acting up lately, if I regain it anytime soon I'll demonstrate it to you." I idly stated as I picked up and looked over one of the marble plates the students ate off of. I was given to understand they were all shaped by Geourgiers, frankly, they looked beautiful. If this is what they were capable of doing with raw stone using magic I ca-

"Wait, inter-what?" Louise spoke up suddenly, breaking my train of thought. Oh, shit, I hadn't mentioned the internet before now, had I? How was I going to explain -this- to them? All three girls were staring at me expectantly. Drat, gonna have to just wing it.

"The Internet is... A thing, that exists in a non-physical form all around us. With the proper tools, one can directly interact with the Internet, which is normally undetectable to us at all."

I started, I wasn't sure how I was doing, but I got the impression that I had to just keep going with it.

"We- that is to say my people created the Internet, we use it to store information in much the same way your people would a library. In fact, it might help to think of it like that, a normally non-tangible library that contains the sum of all human knowledge. With the proper tools, like my Vita, or netbook, one can access that information. Some information is..."

I paused as I pondered how to structure my statement.

"...Locked away, kept hidden where one cannot find it, often times for the good of all, but most is out in the open, and one need only know what they are searching for to find it." The girls all immediately began contemplating their navels as they digested this new information, the pause wasn't long enough for me to really consider how to keep describing it before Louise spoke up again, though.

"But, how could such a thing be created without magic? Our own magic isn't even capable of such a fantastic feat. And 'the sum of all human knowledge?' Surely, you're exaggerating when you say as much?" Eh... Fuck it, I don't want to argue or have to get myself too deep into attempting to explain this shit.

"Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating somewhat, but the Internet does contain most, if not all of the knowledge possessed by Canada and all of her allied nations." I attempted to wave the subject off, hoping that they'd be okay with that and return to discussing girl things while I continued to be mildly annoyed by Siesta's attempts to be helpful as I looked at plates.

"Now that you mention it..." Kirche started as she shifted her position in her seat next to me. "I'm curious about your lands. You've mentioned that Canada is a monarchy, but beyond that, your nation is an utter mystery as far as I know." The girls gathered all nodded in agreement. Oh bother, this was going to be a long afternoon, isn't it...

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I spent a good hour on the relationship between Canada and the States alone, and don't even get me started on NATO. I actually almost dipped into the World Wars and had to stop and inform the girls
that if they'd like a history lesson that they'd have to drop in on my next meeting with Colbert. He was even more interested in Earth history than they were, and I'd rather not have to repeat myself later on.

I actually heard a few disappointing groans from the surrounding tables upon putting my foot down on being done with that; and I made a comment on how surprised I was that eavesdropping isn't considered rude in Tristan, which elicited a few embarrassed grimaces from Louise and Momo. Kirche and Katelyn seemed more entertained by me calling out the eavesdroppers than anything.

"You know so much about your land's geopolitical situation..." Katelyn spoke up this time, the girls all looked fairly impressed, save for Momo.

"It's especially impressive considering just how many nations are involved with Canada, to be familiar with that many..." Kirche was examining me with a critical eye, for what reason I couldn't fathom at that moment.

Louise was staring at me with wide, beaming eyes. "Even I'm not that familiar with the politics of the Brimiric nations..." Meanwhile, Momo continued to give me a sceptical look. I was actually going out of my way to be truthful in this regard, it's quite ironic that this is the topic that causes her bullshit detector to go off, not that she said anything to voice those concerns.

Siesta placed a stone mug filled with a dark, reddish liquid in front of me, again, I was under the impression that she had other duties to attend to besides waiting on me. I motioned towards her before she could back away. "I appreciate the thought, but I don't drink wine." She blinked at me for a second before speaking up.

"It's raspberry juice, milord." ...Oh.

"Ah, well, thank you then." I stated as Siesta returned to her spot at my side, and I sheepishly took a hold of the mug and lifted it to my lips. It was surprisingly sweet. Raspberries are supposed to be fairly bitter, aren't they? I like it, at any rate.

"Oh, my, trouble incoming." Kirche suddenly spoke up as she looked towards the dining hall entrance way. As I lowered the mug and turned towards the subject of her comment and understood immediately. Guiche, flanked by two guardsmen that seemed to be keeping a rather intense gaze on the back of his head. He was bee-lining for us. Great, I'm sure this can only end well.

I re-positioned myself in my seat so that if he tried anything I'd be able to react quickly and draw my sword as I dodged towards the table behind me... Not that I'm sure doing so would help with a mage, but never hurts to be cautious.

The blonde fop came to a stop a few metres from myself, I could see Siesta trembling out of the corner of my eye, but refrained from taking my focus off of the Armand himself. He locked eyes with me and stared for a good half minute or so before he... Dropped to his knees and assumed a position of prostration.

"I am sorry, I have brought shame upon my family's good name and dishonoured a fellow noble by not only attacking him outside of a consenting duel but without justified cause. I have not so much gall as to beg forgiveness for my actions, for I am undeserving of it. I would simply have you know that I regret my actions towards you and all others that I have caused distress."

...Well, that isn't what I expected. Seems the girls have much the same reaction, I'm guessing this
type of behaviour isn't typical of Guiche.

I looked him over as he remained laying on the ground, his arms stretched out towards me. I glanced around, seems that nobody else was expecting to see Guiche do such a thing either.

I'm gonna be honest here, I'm typically a really vengeful, hateful cunt that will hold onto a grudge longer than any reasonable person would; but knowing how important pride is to these people, and seeing the blonde jackass grovelling on the floor, his cracking voice practically dripping with shame...

I dedicated a portion of my brain power to keeping my face expressionless in spite of myself. I was feeling quite smug at the moment and wanted to call him down at the very least... But I'd already set the course for how I'd be dealing with this situation. Best to just try to brush this aside, hopefully, earn a few more brownie points with the school's population; even if it would feel really nice to call down the thunder on him instead.

"I've already spoken with the Headmaster about this situation." I started, projecting my voice so as to catch the attention of as many people as possible. "You will not be punished on my behalf, I forgive you for your crime of passion and bear no ill will towards you."

I adjusted my seated position to a more natural one as I refocused my attention on my mug of raspberry juice. Taking a long swig before scanning my eyes back over to the puffy-shirted noble, who had raised his head and looked quite taken aback, to put it mildly.

"I cannot, however, speak for these ladies that you mistreated prior to our altercation." I finished as I set down the mug. I couldn't help but hope they would turn around and attack him where I had shown restraint, in all honesty.

"Y-you can't be serious!" Momo had leapt up hard enough to knock her chair over and once again, dramatically pointed a finger at me. She seems rather fond of doing that. "T-that b-b-b-bastard nearly killed you! He even admitted he was unjustified in doing so! How could you just let him go unpunished for what he's done? How can you not want to see him suffer!?" Hm, I think that there's a particular Mark Twain quote that would apply fairly well in this situation, how does it go again?

"Anger is an acid which can do more damage to the vessel in which it is stored than to that onto which it is poured." Did I get it right? I'm pretty sure I got it right. Seemed to work, if Momo's reaction were anything to go by. All the girls seemed suitably impressed, at any rate. Well, save for Kirche, who visibly had to resist the urge to roll her eyes at the quote, understandably I suppose. Responding to questions with quotes is pretty damned pretentious, after all.

Several moments passed as I stared into my now empty mug. Eventually, Kirche broke the silence with an amused chuckle. "My oh my, not only a scholar but a philosopher on top of that? At this rate, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that you're a warrior the likes of which entire armies would fall to in battle." I had to resist the urge to sarcastically snort at that one. Yeah, that'll be the day. I redirected my gaze to Guiche, who was still kneeling on the floor, doing his best imitation of a Goldfish out of water.

Okay, I'm already on a roll here... Just one more quote, cheesy as can be and I swear that I'll stop.

"There is a saying among my people..." I stated as I locked eyes with Guiche. "Kneel never before another man, only before a God." I shifted my face so that I was staring at him out of the corner of my eye. "Now, tell me Guiche de Gramont; do I look like a God to you?" A few moments passed
before he seemed to get the message and returned to his feet, his eyes never leaving me as he went
through the motions.

I linked my fingers as I rested my hands upon the wooden tabletop, thinking I'd pretty effectively put
an end to this little 'thing' between Guiche and myself. Katelyn and Momo, who had reset her chair
and sat back down, refused to look at Guiche. Apparently, they didn't care about my little 'anger is
bad, mmkay?' spiel and were intent on refusing to forgive him for his infidelity. I couldn't blame
them for it, honestly. I also got something of a rush of schadenfreude knowing that he wasn't getting
off completely scot-free.

Guiche had hopefully redirected his gaze to Momo, and when she utterly ignored him he looked
particularly crestfallen. You reap what you sow, dumb ass. The blonde fop bowed and uttered what I
think was supposed to be a farewell, I couldn't quite make it out from the way his voice cracked,
before turning to face his escorts. "I am ready to return to my quarters." The guards nodded and
motioned for him to set off a few steps ahead of them again. I was wondering where he was being
held. Guess it would be unseemly to hold such a high-level noble in the academy dungeons,
assuming they have a proper dungeon, that is.

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It took but a few moments for the students spending their off-hours in the dining hall to fall back into
their usual routine after Guiche had been escorted back out. I'd gotten quite a few not-so-subtle
sidelong glances from quite a few of the older students; seems I'd managed to make quite an
impression. Kirche was joking that I was going to be fighting girls and some of the more 'liberated'
boys off with a broomstick by the end of the day if I kept it up, which caused Siesta to visibly tense
up for whatever reason.

Momo was still fuming and Katelyn had downed a few cups of wine once Guiche had left. Louise
was also emitting tell-tale signs of emotional distress of the angry variety. Guess they really were
furious at him after all. Otherwise, the rest of the time spent there passed by relatively uneventfully,
aside from the girls all making little attempt to hide that they were all sorts of impressed by me. I wasn't able to hide a smirk at receiving praise from them, which Kirche seemed to approve of and Louise seemed mildly annoyed by.

Admittedly: I was also feeling more than a little guilty, what with my faking the charisma they
seemed to like so much and all.

Eventually, I'd decided that I was growing tired of all this bulk social interaction and excused myself
from the group, stating that I simply wished to go for a lone walk and have some time to think to
myself. Louise, Siesta and Kirche looked a tad upset at this but made no attempt to stop me from
leaving.

In truth: I was mostly setting off to find that lamia I'd seen around the school a few times. I really was
feeling bad about ignoring her, especially considering that the average Halkeganian's views on
'demihumans' meant that best case scenario she was being ignored by the academy's population at
large, especially since lamias were, in fact, alien to Halk and nobody knew what to make of her.

Hopefully, she was adjusting to her new position as a familiar well enough. If nothing else I was to
understand that the guy that summoned her, who I'd heard from gossip that she had taken to referring
to as 'Darling,' was going out of his way to accommodate her enough for her to become quite
attached to him. Still, couldn't hurt to be on the safe side and make sure she's doing alright. I
understand what it's like to be torn from your home world and thrust into a strange new world with
I smirked in spite of myself. Or maybe I was just hoping to happen upon a kindred spirit with who I could share the frustration of being torn across space and time to serve some noble kid that was expecting a dumb animal instead of you? Well, anyways, the courtyard seems like a reasonable place to check, it's where everyone else is spending their off-time with their familiars, after all.

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I'd happened upon the pair in the apple orchard near the Tower of Earth, the fairly unremarkable chestnut-haired and eyed fellow seemed a mite distressed to have the red-headed lamia girl clinging to his arm and cooing 'Darling' as if on repeat to him. If not for the girl he'd blend in with a crowd seamlessly, so ridiculously average was he.

She, on the other hand... Long, silken, vibrant red hair adorned with a pair of brass hair clips that resembled a pair of 'D's for whatever reason, fair skin, scales as vibrant a red as her hair. Her ears were quite elven in appearance, and the tone contrasted with her fair skin considerably, being of the same colouration as her scales. Her bottom half was quite... Noticeable. I'd guesstimate that she was about 10 feet long from end-to-end, although the way she stood on her tail made her appear to be more 5'4”, which made her seem a tad above the average Tristanian girl from what I'd seen thus far.

Ignoring the more, how you say... 'Bestial' bits of her anatomy, one would be hard-pressed to describe the girl as anything other than gorgeous.

Still, holy fucking hell is seeing a half-snake woman unsettling as all Hell. I'm getting wicked bad goosebumps from just approaching her... Or maybe it's that in spite of allegedly being a 'tribal' girl, she's wearing what appears to be pretty damned modern Earth fashion wear, complete with a graphic t-shirt depicting Big Boss from Metal Gear. I'm not entirely sure what to think of this, how'd I manage to not notice what she was wearing up until now? I mean, fuck, my mental blinders couldn't have been THAT strong, right?

I ceased my march towards the two about three or so metres away from them. They were sitting on a marble bench, and the dude seemed pretty nervous about the attention the snake girl was giving him. Both had their eyes closed, the girl in bliss, the guy in embarrassment. I had to give an attention-grabbing cough to catch their attention.

"Oh, you're Lady LeBlanc's fam-" The fellow started, before he was cut off by the girl... 'leaping(?)' up from her seat, launching him from his seat and causing him to face-plant in the grass as she gave an excited yelp, accompanied by her golden, serpentine eyes lighting up eagerly.

"It's you! I've been trying to get your attention for days now! Wha- Darling!?" She suddenly noticed her summoner's predicament, and overreacted accordingly, picking him up effortlessly in an impressive display of strength and apologising profusely, which 'Darling' attempted to simply brush off.

"It's you! I've been trying to get your attention for days now! Wha- Darling!?" She suddenly noticed her summoner's predicament, and overreacted accordingly, picking him up effortlessly in an impressive display of strength and apologising profusely, which 'Darling' attempted to simply brush off.

"I-it's okay Miia, don't worry about it, I'm fine." Aside from some stray grass blades on his face and in his hair he seemed to be alright. Also, a lamia named 'Miia'? Really? "So, um, Lord Pholus, I believe it is?" He awkwardly attempted to start. Little surprise that he's heard of me. "Might I ask what it is you've approached us for?" Right, good thing I thought this through ahead of time.

"I'd heard that someone had summoned a 'snake woman' in the academy dining hall and that nobody knew what to make of her. In my people's mythologies we have detailed accounts of a type of
creature known as a 'lamia,' a race of demihumans who have the upper body of a human and the lower body of a snake. I was curious to see if this alleged snake girl is actually one of these lamias from our mythology." Miia's face lit up like a Christmas tree.

"So you ARE from the same world as me!" The tip of her tail began wagging pretty intensely behind her, that... Isn't typically how snake tails work, is it? "But... I've tried to say hi to you a bunch of times already, why are you only talking to me now?" Now she had a fairly hurt expression on her face. Er, shit, I don't really have a good excuse ready for that. Uh, c'mon, think fast...

"...You did?" Oh God, that was lame. Her brow furrowed in frustration. Little surprise that she's not buying it...

"Yes, I did! I tried to wave you down a bunch of times already! Why were you ignoring me up until now!?" Her tail was now angrily thumping against the ground... Blast, think quickly, quickly, quickly... I bowed deeply and inexplicably, by the sound of the "Eh?" neither of them was expecting that.

"I-I apologise! I've been so caught up in everything that's happened recently, being taken from my home, thrown into this strange world that I've found myself completely blind to most everything around me much of the time... I cannot apologize enough if I've unintentionally ignored you and caused offence, such was not my intention!" I remained with my top half perpendicular to the ground. Miia's tail had stopped thumping against the ground, and she took on a distinctly softer tone.

"Uh, oh... It's okay. I understand then. Being summoned here was... Pretty scary." I looked up, she was giving me a sympathetic gaze now, I took this as an invitation to cease bowing. "Well, what matters is that you didn't mean to ignore me, and you came here to meet me now, right?" I nodded in response, she was giving me a rather heartwarming smile. "So, let's just put that behind us, okay? I'm Miia Mar! Glad to meet you!" I hoped that I wasn't committing a social faux pas, but I just had to ask...

"A lamia named Miia?" Her expression turned quite embarrassed, and she began sheepishly poking the tips of her index fingers together.

"Mama was never very good with names..." Darling giggled lightly in response, which based on Miia's reaction, caused her heart to skip a beat. I think I can safely go out on a limb and assume that she's being treated fairly well all things considered. Now, I can't help but question her existence. Seriously, she's wearing a modern graphic Big Boss t-shirt, what the hell is up with that? Quickly going over the possibilities I could only assume that she's from an alternate Earth rather than my own, or I have been living under a rock even harder than I thought I was to not know about demi humans becoming known to society?

"Okay, so that aside, Miia?" Her eyes perked up as she gazed at me with a sickeningly sweet smile. By ye Gods is she ever pretty- Gah! No, focus damn it! "I've noticed that you're wearing a Big Boss shirt..."

"Eeyup! Metal Gear is awesome, I'm a huge fan!" The red lamia girl started with a joyful bounce on her tail. Note to self: Do not allow the knowledge that bouncing pretty girls is your greatest weakness, lest it is used to bring about the fall of all mankind. I shook my head in an attempt to un-muddle my thoughts.

"Anyways, I'm curious about, well... Your entire situation. I think I'd have noticed if lamias had jumped out of myth and became a genuinely civilised species at some point." Miia looked somewhat
confused for a few moments before speaking up.

"Um, well liminals were only introduced to human society in... 2012, I think? I'm not all that familiar with the human calendar... But, yeah, it's 2014 now I think, and the Interspecies Cultural Exchange Program started in 2013, so..." ...Okay, if she's right that means that she's definitely from an alternate universe considering it's 2013 back on my Earth.

"Huh, I'm beginning to suspect that we may not be from the same Earth, Miia." Her eyes widened a bit at that statement. "It's 2013 where I came from, and there have been absolutely no mentions of mythological creatures in the media where I come from." She gave me a long, silent stare. Twenty or so seconds passed before...

"Does that mean you're an inter-dimensional traveller!?" She started with a gleeful shout. ...Of all the things to latch on to...

"Inter-what?" Miia's summoner, whose name I still didn't know spoke up off to the side. Uh, great, how will I explain this...

"Planes!" Miia spoke up before I could. "You know like how Brimir ascended to a higher plane when he died, and Hel exists in a lower plane?" Huh, the girl's been doing her homework, seems her 'Darling' is getting it as well. "Well, we're from planes that are on the same level, but are separate from each other, similar, but different in a few important ways, understand?" 'Darling' nodded and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Huh...

"I was under the impression that you're an 'uneducated tribal girl.'" I stated, to which Miia sheepishly rubbed the back of her head.

"Well, I never went to a human school, the lamia education system isn't as good as the human's is as well..."

"But you were educated."

"Not that well..." Miia's ears (wait, those are prehensile?) drooped somewhat in response. "Part of the reason I signed up for the ICEP was so that I could attend a human high school and get a good human education."

The Interspecies Cultural Exchange Program... That's the second time she's mentioned that. Based on context and the name it's clear what it is, I KNOW I'd have heard of something like that if it were a thing on my Earth. I probably won't have to worry about her breaking my cover considering that.

"Hey, I'm curious about you, like your name for starters!" She dramatically pointed (seriously, what is up with these girls and dramatic pointing?) at me, with her free hand on her hip, her glorious, hourglass hips- GAH! Focus, damn it!

"J-Jophiel Pholus van Cazonium the Second." Her eyebrows raised considerably, as if in surprise.

"Are you European?" Uh, what?

"No, I'm Canadian..."

"...Oh. Your name is really..." Her face scrunched up as if she was thinking really hard. "...Long?" Ah... Well, can't expect everybody to have a really well-developed vocabulary. "Aren't Americans
supposed to have short names?" I reached up and scratched my beard, just play up the 'alternate universe' angle I guess.

"I can only assume that it's a difference between our home dimensions." The red-headed snake girl pondered my words for but a moment before nodding in understanding.

"I'm really curious to know about your world now! In my world, Canada is supposed to be really similar to the United... States, I think it's called? We're going to have to meet up later to trade notes!"

Eh... I suppose I wouldn't be utterly averse to that. We're both inter-dimensional captures, so if nothing else she's probably my best chance to have someone to really relate to regarding the whole familiar thing. "Sure, I'd be okay with that." The girl beamed radiantly at my response.

"Awesome! I'll be looking forward to it." She suddenly looked a little surprised before turning to Darling, seemingly intent on asking him something. "Darling, what time are your classes again?" Miia's summoner... Whose name I still didn't know pulled a... Glowy crystal thing from a trousers pocket and gasped.

"Blast! We're late! We have to hurry or I'll get in trouble again!" The young man hurriedly stated as he quickly pocketed the... Apparently time-telling crystal thing.

"Oh no! Let's hurry Darling!" Miia stated as she began slithering- Holy hell is that unsettling- Gah! She's a sapient being, no speciesist thoughts damn it!

Just as 'Darling' looked as if he were about to launch off his foot he paused for a moment while locking eyes with me, a disarming smile on his face. "Oh, by the way, my name is Jacques- UWAAH-MIIA!"

"Dar-ling!" The snake girl cried out as the end of her tail hooked his belt and wrenched him forward, clearly distressed by the thought of her summoner being late for his classes.

"Ah- ah, I apologise, see you around the campus-!" The young, unremarkable man shouted back at me as he was pulled along by the gracefully slithering girl, leaving me standing on my own in front of the apple orchard by my lonesome. Well, that was odd. Nice pair anyways, good to know that the girl is being treated well enough to be clearly infatuated with her new charge. Her apparent high-energy levels would probably grate on me if I spent too long near her at once, that aside I wouldn't particularly mind running into them from time to time.

...Actually considering it, she was almost bizarrely... 'Animated' in the way she moved and acted. Almost like she was an anime or manga character... Whatever, probably not worth getting hung up on.

Moving along, I pulled out my Vita to check the hour; still, a fair amount of daylight to burn through before lights out. With nobody around to talk to I decided to insert an ear-bud into a listening-hole and start groovin' to some music. Something from a fantasy soundtrack, an ambient theme, maybe some exploration music from one of the Elder Scrolls or Ultima games would have been appropriate... But nah, I opted for the redundantly named 'Zero' from Ace Combat Zero.

I simply stood there for a good minute, basking in the glorious Spanish guitar's chords before an errant thought caught my attention and I found myself fishing for a stick long enough to knock an apple or two from one of the many orchard trees to a rather inappropriately epic final showdown theme.
...Y'know, considering it, I have yet to visit the dedicated familiar stables.
Equal parts terror, awe, and joy filled my heart as I remained partially hidden behind a lone hay bale. Yeah, sure, Colbert and Louise had previously assured me that once branded Familiars would never attack anything unless provoked or ordered to by their master... But holy fuck, one would have to forgive me for being a touch intimidated by a fucking oversized Tyrannosaurus Rex just chilling in the familiar stables while other, smaller critters of various shapes and sizes meandered about lazily.

Holy hell was I ever kicking myself for not having thought to have checked this place out earlier. It was labelled a stable, but the word did the building no justice. The main gate alone was massive enough that the Rex would be able to casually enter and leave the building as it saw fit, the rafters had to be nearly four or five stories off the ground, and in terms of sheer ground real estate it had to be at least the size of an American Football field.

I wasn't familiar enough with architecture to know whether or not the ceiling had to have been reinforced with magic to remain architecturally sound, but by Gods, this place was more like a stadium than a mere stable! ...It certainly smelled like a stable, though, even with the many open sections of walls to allow flyers easy entry and exit allowing a cool breeze to pass through relatively unimpeded.

But back onto that T-Rex... From what I recall, dinosaurs would be physically incapable of surviving in our modern atmosphere due to the comparatively exceedingly low amount of oxygen compared to what the dinosaurs lived with. There had to be some kind of magic enriching the air the beast breathed for it to not be suffocating from oxygen deprivation... Or something like that.

The creature simply looked around idly, it almost seemed like it didn't know what to do with itself. Colbert had mentioned to me before that when otherwise 'mindless' beasts are branded with the familiar bond they're granted an 'enriched mind.' Creatures that would previously panic at the sight of their own reflection would suddenly be capable of understanding and carrying out complex orders, understanding spoken human language with no difficulty...

The less intelligent the creature was prior to becoming a Familiar the longer it took for them to adjust to their new-found sapience. By the looks of it, this Dino was still perplexed by it suddenly being truly self-aware, capable of higher thought processes. And apparently math, according to Colbert. Maybe that's what it's doing right now, actually. Standing there, counting the things around it to pass the time now that it has no need to spend its every waking hour looking for food... Incidentally, how is this damned thing going to be kept fed?

I suddenly felt compelled to look around and wonder about all the larger creatures as well, a good few of them clearly being predators that would require a good deal of meat per day. I redirected my gaze to the unsettled-seeming dino. Couldn't help feeling sort of bad for the poor bastard now.

“Majestic, isn't he?” I yelped in surprise as I leapt to my feet, about-faced and instinctively reached for my sword. “Whoa, whoa! I mean you no harm friend!” Another second-year student. Dirty blonde hair, orange of all colours eyes, could probably be considered above-average in looks. “I just noticed that you were admiring my familiar... We've little idea what exactly he is, but we've taken to referring to him as a wingless dragon. Does not make him any less a sight to behold. Plus, you know what they say about dragon familiars...”

“Tyrannosaurus Rex.” His eyes widened in surprise, understandably so, I suppose.

“You are familiar with his species?” He seemed taken aback... Maybe it wouldn't be a terrible idea
for me to lay off on the ultra-knowledge. Although, actually... No. I'm trying to sell the scholar angle, I want as many people as is possible to believe that I'm very, very well-educated.

“Yes, they used to roam my people's lands before a great catastrophe wiped them, and much of their fellow dinosaurs out. It was thought that they were long since extinct. To see one here, alive and well...” I had to resist the urge to squee. A few moments of silence passed before the T-rex's summoner spoke up again.

“What did you say it's called?”

“Tyrannosaurus Rex.” I stated once again.

“Tyrannical Lizard King, huh...” Silence again. “That would be a fair name, I think. King.” I glanced back at the summoner. Speaking of names; might as well get introductions out of the way.

“Jophiel Pholus van Cazonium the Second.” He gave a curt nod.

“Jon Williams of Cambridge.” The name is certainly quite English.

“Hm, Albion?”

“Indeed.”

We just stood there silently for a few moments before the T-Rex, now named 'King,' I'm given to understand, seemed to become aware that I and his summoner were standing there and staring at him. King was now staring back at us, which I found kind of unsettling, least of which just because I realised that I've spent the past couple of minutes flagrantly staring at an apex predator, which in any other situation said predator would take as a sign of aggression. I opted to redirect my attention to Jon and ask him about how he intends to take care of his new IRL Kaiju.

“So, Williams, how do you intend to keep your new Tyrannosaurus in good order? They do require quite a hellacious amount of food and exercise to remain healthy.”

Jon rubbed the back of his neck uncertainly. “Well, I'm given to understand that something about the familiar runes makes larger creatures simply require far, far less nourishment than they would normally, so he'll likely be okay. At any rate, I doubt that he will require more food than the typical dragon, especially if he is land-locked.” He chuckled a tad. “It's rather funny, is it not? A child of the Isles of the Sky summons a dragon incapable of flight... My brothers are going to have a field day with this.”

I don't really have anything to say to that.

“I'll simply allow him to run loose beyond the academy walls when I do not require his presence. Like all other familiars, he's intelligent enough that he'll understand when I explain to him what he can and cannot do while we're separated.” Setting an intelligent T-rex loose in the wild strikes me as a terrible idea, but according to Colbert animal familiars follow their master's orders absolutely, so it should be fine if he covers all his bases. I hope.

I exhaled deeply out of a building sense of fatigue. As awesome as this all was, I was beginning to feel a tad overwhelmed. Methinks it's time for me to just sit down and play a vidjer game for a while. Get my mind off of recent events for a time. I gave Jon a simple wave as I turned and made my way to the primary entrance of the stable. Hopefully, I wouldn't wind up sidetracked or anything when I'm pretty sure I need some me time today.
“Ooooh, the wait is unbearable, hurry up my Jophiel, I've waited too long for this already!” Kirche cried from my bed as she clung to my pillow with an exaggerated pout, her legs rapidly kicking in the air while she writhed in place in a subdued manner. Meanwhile, Louise dramatically stomped her foot on the floor with a scowl marring her otherwise adorable face at the lusty Germanian’s misleading antics.

“Get off of his bed right this instant you painted Jezebel! Have you no shame!?" Jezebel? How would- You know what? No, fuck it, I'm gonna just assume that's something related to the translation spell and not question it.

“Hmmmmmn?” Kirche ceased her dramatic over-acting and gave Louise an amused grin. “Whatever do you mean little Louise? I'm just excited to see Jophiel's 'personal computer' at work, and he's really taking his time setting everything up... Oooohh, stop teasing me with your magnificent tool you exotic stud, I need it noooow~!” Louise continued to curse at Kirche, and I continued to stop digging through my various bags and boxes to pinch the bridge of my nose at Kirche's entirely too blunt attempts at teasing and/or enticing me.

Good fucking Lord, it's like she just can't comprehend the basic concept of subtlety. This on top of the fact that I was hoping to avoid her and for that matter Louise to spend some time to myself... I was having to fight the urge to snap at the both of them for their antics, Kirche for just jumping on my bed the moment she passed through the door frame, rolling herself in my blankets and making a show of smelling my pillows, Louise for her overly aggressive overreaction to Kirche's bullshit.

Note to self... Don't let Kirche in my room from now on. Luckily Siesta wasn't partaking in the absurdities and instead opted to help me look through my bags for the laptop's power cable.

“Is it this one, mi'Lord?” Siesta shyly asked as she held up a cable she'd pulled from a plastic storage tub.

“No, that's for the Vita, keep looking.” I sighed. This was weird, I was fairly certain that I had kept all the laptop stuff together. The power cable seemed to be missing from the other accessories, so I could only presume that I'd had a brain fart and misplaced it at some point.

“Um...” The raven-haired maid started apologetically. “I'm sorry mi'Lord, but there aren't any more containers to look through.” I looked up from my computer bag, and indeed, it looked like Siesta had unpacked everything I had in my boxes and arranged everything quite nicely on the floor around her... Huh. Well, they must be in this bag then. I shifted the contents around, checking the various pockets and what have you. The only cable in the bag was the old component cable for my 360, and the laptop's power cable was nowhere to be found... Oh shit.

I abandoned all pretence of looking neat and tidy and just upturned the bag, dumping the contents on the floor and spreading them in an attempt to find the cable that HAD to be in the bag. I looked back at the contents of the boxes that Siesta had unloaded... No, it wasn't there. But it isn't in this bag either.

...Shit. Shit shit shit SHIT. “M-milord?” Siesta spoke up in a worried tone, which caught the attention of the still bullshitting Louise and Kirche, but I was very rapidly growing panicked as I realised that the damned cable was missing and failed to notice their worried glances and questioning.

“It's gone, it's gone, it's fucking gone, I had it when I showed everything to Colbert, but it's fucking gone...” I was making no attempt to mask my rapidly rising panic. That cable was needed to actually transfer energy to the laptop, without it, the damned thing would be little more than a glorified paperweight once I burned through its current, half-empty charge. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck
FUCK ME- Wait... “Colbert!” The last time I had it was in his lab! I must have just forgotten it there! The girls seemed taken aback by my inexplicably shouting the fire magics and alchemy teacher's name.

I shared my epiphany with them and they all emitted a relieved sigh. So, it'll just be a case of heading down to his office and collecting my stuff. Praise be to Athiesmo, I thought I had something to worry about there.

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Colbert didn't have the missing cable. In fact, he seemed quite panicked himself when I informed him that it was missing and necessary to power my rather vital laptop that he was very much looking forward to having demonstrated to him. He turned his office/lab inside out in the off chance that the cable had, in fact, wound up hidden somewhere in his office. It hadn't.

...Shit.

Louise stomped her foot again, Kirche furrowed her brow, and Siesta lightly bit her finger, all seemed to be rather deep in thought. Kirche was the first to speak up. “It almost seems like a ridiculous assertion to make with the school's security being as otherwise fantastic as it is... But I am beginning to suspect that your ‘power cable’ may have been stolen.” No shit Sherlock. But that begs the question of who would steal a fucking laptop cable, especially here in an early modern period of societal development.

My train of thought was interrupted once I'd noticed that off to the side Louise looked about ready to explode, her knuckles white and her face a rather distinct shade of red. She is breathing, right?

“W-w-w-w-who w-w-w-would d-d-dare- T-t-t-t-to s-s-s-steal f-f-from a-an a-a-ally of t-t-the L-L-LeBlancs-!” Okay, so she stutters really bad when she's furious, duly noted. “I-I-I s-s-shall h-h-have the-their h-h-h-hand f-for t-t-t-t-this!” ...Considering the time period I'm rather worried that when she says that she'll have their hand she means that quite literally.

Although at the moment that doesn't seem like too bad an idea- Ah! No no no, calm the fuck down you fool, we don't need to be catching a reputation as the type of person that hands out overly cruel punishments for relatively (as far as they know) minor crimes.

“I-I-I s-s-shall in-in-inform the-the s-s-school fa-fa-facult-t-t-ties a-a-at o-o-once.” With that the alarmingly fuming blonde spun on her heel and stomped out the door. I should probably try to catch her and calm her down, but... I'm doing a poor job of keeping myself from wishing some rather heinous punishments on the perpetrator at this moment as well, there's little doubt that we'd only wind up getting each other worked up as it is. Kirche chose to speak up next, her voice missing its usual playful cadence.

“I shall attempt to inform as many as I can of the theft as well. The faster we can alert as many as possible the greater our chances of finding the stolen item before it gets smuggled out of the academy.” The dusky red-head about-faced and marched out of the office with a purpose. In fairness it sort of seemed like we were all jumping to conclusions, but fuck me, it wasn't in my room nor in Colbert's office, so what else could have happened to it?

Colbert seemed to be rather deep in thought if his furrowed brow was anything to go by. “It seems like it would be wise for you to return to your quarters and ensure all of your belongings are accounted for, Jophiel. We would not want for it to turn out that the thief made off with even more of your possessions that we failed to notice until it was too late.” A fair enough point. “Now, that aside, Miss Horie?”
Colbert redirected his attention to Siesta, whose back stiffened as if she were at attention.

“If you encounter Miss Noelle I would be most appreciative were you to inform her that I shall not require her services on this day, as I shall be aiding in the search for the Lord Jophiel's missing artefact.” 'Artefact?' The raven-haired maid nodded curtly in response. “Now, if it would not be too much trouble, I would most appreciate it were you to deliver this message to the headmaster.” The elder man stated as he reached into his shoulder bag and pulled out a rolled vellum scroll. “At once, preferably.” The maid cast a mournful glance in my direction before nodding in affirmation again as she took the scroll in her own hands.

“I shall see to it with all due haste, milord.” Siesta started to turn for the exit, but briefly stopped her spin with her eyes set on me. For whatever reason, she chose to give a rather lady-like bow to me at that moment. “Fare thee well, my Lord Jophiel.” With that, she finally completed her rotation and made for the still wide open doorway, much like the other two girls that left before her not bothering to close it behind her. Once she was gone Colbert emitted a rather out-of-place chuckle before speaking seemingly to himself.

“Ah, to desire beyond one's station...” ...The hell is that supposed to mean? Colbert caught the quizzical look I was giving him, he casually waved it off in response. “Oh it's nothing, just remembering something from my own days as a young man here in the academy.” ...Okay, whatever. So, that aside...

“Who is this 'Noelle,' if you don't mind my asking?” Colbert stood from his desk and gathered his spear-staff as he addressed my inquiry.

“She is a maid, from Miss Horie's hometown if I am remembering correctly. She often aids me in my alchemy experiments; very smart girl, a quick learner as well. She is rather a joy to have in the lab most days.”

“I see.” I somewhat awkwardly responded. I was conflicted between keeping up outward appearances and not flipping my shit internally.

Without that power cable, I had no way to access the internet what with my Vita suddenly deciding that it wouldn't pick up that errant Wi-Fi connection as the laptop has, and there was so much I wanted to gather from the web to spread here. From the printing press, simple machinery, eating utensils, to philosophical concepts and governing ideals...

I was far from some infallible repository of knowledge. While my metaphorical well of information is a veritable sea upon first glance, a more discerning eye will quickly notice that the aforementioned 'sea' is only knee-deep at its lowest point. As it is the absolute best I could offer are basic ideas with a concrete foundation to build upon, virtually worthless to any who wouldn't be willing to latch onto any idea that caught their attention and work with it themselves.

If that power cable was really stolen then the fucking wretch responsible may be depriving this developing world of a potential wellspring of information and ideas centuries ahead of their time... The idea made me furious, made me want to lash out and break things. To find and punish them for this horrid transgression. This bastard is standing in the way of potential progression... I wanted to declare that I would not stand for it, and demand that justice be done, but I needed to remain calm. I know how unnecessarily wrathful I can get, it would not be smart to allow myself to snap in this situation.

“Jophiel?” Colbert derailed my head-train, breaking the stupor I had apparently allowed myself to fall into. “I understand your concern, but I assure you, we will find your cable. You have my word.”
It brought me some comfort to see Colbert was taking the situation seriously, not that I should be surprised. He has an inkling as to what kind of knowledge the laptop has access to, a man of his nature would not want such a source of information lost.

“Now, it would be wise for you to return to your quarters and account for your belongings. So go on, get already!” Colbert proceeded to prod me out of his office with the blunt end of his spear. Lacking in anything else to do I opted to take heed of his advice and ensure nothing else had been stolen.

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It did not take me long to determine that everything was in fact where it should have been, what with Siesta's meticulously organised method of search which left everything in easily identifiable piles around my dwelling. I'd quickly moved everything to more reasonable places around the room before sighing to myself.

There was little I could do to aid in the search for my laptop's missing cable beyond what was already being done; plus I really, REALLY needed some time to myself now. I locked my door, hooked up my TV and 360, plugged my headphones into my mini HDTV's audio output jack and settled myself in comfortably for at least a few hours of Peace Walker, probably followed by Persona 4 once the solar battery runs out. Don't care what else happens tonight, I bloody well need to unwind and nothing is going to stop me from doing so.
My now powerless Vita slid from my face as I found myself jostled from my slumber as the sounds of incessant knocking at my door thumped throughout the room. As I forced myself off of my bed I noticed that my fucking everything hurt, likely a direct result of straining myself while exercising yesterday.

I thanked Athiesmo for having the foresight to have me fall asleep while fully dressed before I shambled over to the still thumping door, lazily swinging it open to face whoever had seen fit to disrupt my coma. It was a servant, he had an intimidated look on his face. “What.” I grumbled in my patented Solid Snake morning voice as I wiped the gunk from my eyes and made little attempt to hide my soreness-induced grimace.

“I-I'm sorry to disrupt your slumber mi'Lord, but Professor Colbert requested that I fetch you immediately, he says that something concerning your missing belonging has come up and that you must come to the Headmaster's office posthaste.” Oh, well that was fast.

“Very well, give me a moment, I need simply gather my equipment.” As I turned around to grab my watch, sword, and knife I noticed that it was actually very bright in the room, in fact, by the looks of it the sun was very high in the sky. I checked the time on my watch as I picked it up- 2:24 PM!? How the fuck did I sleep in that long!?

I palmed my face in frustration, then regretted the decision once my arm registered that I was attempting to move it and responded by launching a lance of pain up the offending limb in retaliation. I'd have to pray that this wouldn't be a precursor for picking up bad sleeping habits. Again. I just kicked the damned habit back home, I don't need to get into that bad groove here!

Gah, in case it wasn't obvious my gaming session last night wasn't enough to calm me down even though I played until I passed out. Hopefully, I'll just receive the cable and that will be the end of it, I don't need any complications to come up now, especially since my full-body soreness was going to make me extra crabby on top of that.

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Of fucking course complications just had to come up.

Seems that Katie had chosen to go for an early morning walk through the school's apple orchard and happened upon my missing cable hanging from a branch right on the main trail. To me that implied that the cable wound up there sometime late last night or early this morning, I had fucked around the orchard myself yesterday so one would think that I'd have come upon the cable on my own had it been there when I was present.

Anyways, she turned the cable into Colbert immediately since she'd heard about it from Louise last night. I would have been happy to just leave it at that, but a trio of maids turned up shortly afterwards to assert that they knew who had stolen the cable, which leads us to here and now and this needlessly complicated situation.

“So, Jophiel, as has been established, these three maids have claimed that they know who stole your cable from you-”

“That's right, it was that hussy Noelle!” The commonly-sized maid, Agneta, started, interrupting Colbert as she did so.
Out of the corner of me eye I saw her walking out the Familiar's room a few days ago while I was dusting the hall I did, for a spell I thought she had a rather funny bulge 'neath her shirt but thought nothing of it until this sun-up.” The wiry Alair stated in a... Strange manner I could only assume was the translation spell's attempt at compensating for something like a really thick regional accent.

“Also, I saw her this sunrise, trotting for the apple trees though she was a feared that something were after her she was.” Dagna, the tallest of the trio finished in a way that caused me to worry that the translation spell may already be due for a renewal. I also couldn't help but notice the barely-concealed looks of smug self-satisfaction all three girls had. I take it they don't care much at all for this Noelle.

Osmand sat quietly at his desk, his hands contemplatively folded in front of his face in a manner rather reminiscent of Gendo Ikari's memetic pose, meanwhile Colbert silently paced back and forth behind the three seats the girls occupied, I was standing off to the side of the Headmaster's desk myself, leaning on Longueville's secretary-free desk for support, while Louise had claimed the seat of the desk itself. Silence permeated the room as we four continued to contemplate this new-found information. Agneta chose to break the quiet with her far more neutral accent.

“Well, what's taken y'all so long? Ye' know who did it, ain'tcha gon' send the troops after her or somethin'?” ...For a moment I had to just stop and wonder how in the fuck the translation spell operated. Agneta had the least exaggerated accent of the trio by a wide margin but suddenly spoke in as thick a country accent as the other two did. Maybe the spell tried adjusting the translations for individuals to better match their actual speaking patterns after initially translating their dialogue for the first time?

...I dunno, this translation spell is really fucking weird, 'tis almost as if it's operating on utterly random logic even.

“The bleedin' harlot's 'gon pocket other Noble's goods if'n y'all 'gon keep jus' sittin' 'round 'ere on 'yer hands, ain't she?” ...Okay, you know, while I'm not usually one to jump to conclusions, these three's story was sounding a mite... Suspect, to put it mildly.

Just as I began to consider that the bespectacled Pyrourger placed his hands on the outer shoulders of Dagna and Alair as he leant in, almost conspiratorially between the two. He spoke just as loudly as ever, though. “You know, miss maids... There is something of an issue with your story.” Agneta went pale and Dagna only barely managed to hide a shocked reaction on her face.

“W-what ever d'ya mean, milord?” Not exactly subtle there Alair...

Colbert had a wide smile on his face as he continued on with his statement unabated. “You see, the academy dorms are each locked with a Square-class spell cast by the Headmaster himself, specifically to prevent any random pissant commoner from attempting to break into the quarters of their betters to make off with their belongings.”

I was quite taken aback by Colbert's aggressive choice of words there. I hadn't taken him for the type to seriously buy into the whole 'Nobles are superior' thing...

“Furthermore, on top of that Lord Pholus' own quarters were quite securely locked for all but a single day before he had recovered from his injuries... A single day in which miss Noelle had spent with me, aiding me in my alchemy experiments in my office, an ordeal which had demanded her presence from sunrise to sunset.” All three of the girls had turned pale by this point, Colbert had never stopped displaying that jovial smile of his which now seemed utterly predatory in nature... “And on top of that, well, you'll recall that you three told this very same story to me this morning?”
Dagna nodded in confirmation, the other two seemed to be paralysed due to fear.

“Well, I had noticed this discrepancy and set out to find the two guardsmen that had been assigned to watch over the servants that had been assigned to transfer Lord Pholus' belongings from Lady le Blanc's room that day, and, wouldn't you know it... You three were among the six assigned to this labour that day. In fact, the two guardsmen, Biggs and Wedge I believe their names were, they mentioned that an incident occurred in which Miss Alair and Agneta required the attention of both of them to aid in lifting something quite heavy..."

I can see where this is going...

"...Which, coincidentally, would have created quite an ample distraction for a certain miss Dagna to pocket the first thing she could get her hands on.” The normally Jovial professor's hands remained clasped on the shoulders of the two girls, that unsettling smirk still remaining on his face.

Silence, with the exception of Louise's audibly laboured breathing behind me. Were I to guess, she was on the verge of utterly flipping her shit at that very moment, which was quite unfortunate since, who'da thunk it, so was I. Knowing that she was just as infuriated by this turn of events as I was wasn't helping overmuch in my attempts to remain calm. Remember dude, 'innocent until proven guilty, innocent until proven guilty, innocent until-

“They made me do it! I swear, I did'nay wish to, but they made me milord!” Dagna suddenly shouted at the three gathered Nobles and me. Cracks began to form in the mental damn which kept my wrath in check.

“T-t-they said they'd get me fired 'n lie to me man tha' I'd been unfaithful if I did'nay aid them, I swear on me mum!” My eye began twitching violently. On top of everything else they all attempt to turn on each other the moment it seemed like the gig was up. Not to mention their attempt to throw another maid to the wolves... Colbert looked at the two girls he was still perched between, that disturbingly jovial smile still plastered on his familiar mug all the while.

“Well, riddle me this my fair ladies... As far as you knew, none were aware that you three were involved in this little... 'Incident' at all, and yet you sought the headmaster out to assert that you had seen miss Noelle performing the theft. Now, that strikes me as somewhat... Malicious, so to speak, considering one can find little justifiable reason to attempt to pin the blame on another, generally well-liked maid.” Not a moment after Colbert finished did the girls burst into a deluge of word vomit, each attempting to shout over the other and point their fingers at each other.

No honour among thieves, I suppose. But seriously, the evidence is just piling up against these girls quickly and making things look really, really bad. Even worse, not only are they not attempting to deny these allegations, they are simply attempting to weasel their ways out of punishment. Reprehensible...

“...eir hands.” I only barely managed to hear Louise over the cacophony of noise the three maids were emitting, what was it she had said?

“Silence!” The Headmaster shouted suddenly, causing the maids to jump in their seats and freeze like a trio of deer caught in headlights. After they ceased their onslaught of noise, Osmand turned to my little sister surrogate. Apparently, he’d caught her barely audible whisper as well. “You have something to share, Lady le Blanc?” She was visibly trembling, in abject fury, no less.
“...Their hands. Their right hands, as is the custom in the Duchy of La Valliere. I want them removed.”

...Oh shit. As mad as I was myself at that moment, I could not argue against Louise's desired punishment hard enough.

“I apologise my Lady, but the punishment of the three thieves lies in Lord Pholus' hands, not yours.” Louise grimaced but emitted an anger-relieving breath from her nose, a meditative motion I was quite familiar with myself.

“O-of course.” Louise locked eyes with me, her violet irises betrayed a barely contained fury hidden behind them that all but demanded I repeat her order in my own words. I get it, she's mad, but-

...But...

...But...

...But...

...I... I think I... Should just do what she wants. She's my new little sister, after all, I wouldn't want to make her upset. Yeah, yeah. I... I... She's been through a lot, I don't want to upset her, I should-

GAH! I violently shook my head as hard as I could while clutching my face with my left hand. What the ACTUAL FUCK was that!? My thoughts were- ARE inexplicably muddled, out of god-damned nowhere I found myself wanting to just submit to Louise's will, I just knew precisely what she wanted and felt compelled to obey.

That was... worrying. Very, very worrying.

Shit... Colbert mentioned that a summoner can give their Familiar telepathic commands, but he wasn't sure if that particular aspect of the runes would apply to me on account of being human... Guess we know the answer to that now! “-lus!” Eh? “Lord Pholus, what's wrong!?” Osmand was standing and staring at me with a particularly concerned expression on his face, Louise seemed equally worried, and in fact had stood from her seat, reached across the desk and took a hold of the sleeve of my unused arm.

I'd also noticed that she seemed strained, it seems I'd nearly fallen over in my attempt to shake free of Louise's command and she reached out to grab me, not that she'd have helped much, being the waif that she is and me the plus-size fellow that I am. Good thing I only stumbled somewhat then.

I resettled myself on the edge of the desk. Louise was still grasping my shirt sleeve, the concerned expression still pasted on her face. “I- I'm fine.” I tried to wave it off. Colbert was giving me a knowing look, guessing he deduced what had happened, and Osmand looked uncertain. “Really, I'm okay.” The three maids were glancing between each other, probably hoping to think of some way to get out of the issue with the unintended distraction I had provided. Shit. Gotta figure out what to do about this whole thing.

“Are you certain, Jophiel?” Colbert. Course he'd speak up before Louise did. I simply waved his concern off. We'd address this... Familiar issue, later on, we've got to deal with the maids before that, though.

...Even now, there's a nigglng in the back of my mind, suggesting that I just go through with Louise's desire. Fuck, I'd better end this now before I do something I'll wind up regretting.
How would a convicted thief be punished back home again? A fine at least. They also attempted to scapegoat, what was her name, Noelle? Probation, maybe. All three be shadowed by at least one guard to ensure they don't try anything else, for a time, at least. Or time in confinement. They work as normal, but cannot leave their designated living area, unless escorted by guardsmen at any rate. ...Yeah, that sounds reasonable to me considering the crime. Or, wait... “The maids, do they have a criminal history of any sort?” Osmand, who had returned to his seat, gave me a quizzical look.

“None that could be found by the academy inquisitors when they applied for their contracts.” Huh. That's what they call background investigators here? Anyways, First-time offenders then. Leniency would be fair considering that.

“In Canada, they would be fined and placed on probation. That is to say, they would be confined to their living quarters by guardsmen unless working for a period of time, let us say a month in this case.” Not... Entirely true, but fuck it, I'm going by what I think would be fair considering the circumstances. Louise furrowed her brow, probably in frustration, while Colbert and Osmand contemplatively rubbed their chin and beard respectively before the perverted old Dumbledore knockoff spoke up.

“This fine, it would be paid to you, I imagine?” Ah- ...No, I've still got plenty of aluminium cans to pawn off for gold, I don't need their meagre salary on top of that.

“No, it would be paid to the crown in Canada... Though in this case, I imagine it would be sensible to put the fine towards the academy's coffers instead.” The three maids looked quite pensive, probably hoping the punishment I was planning out for them wouldn't escalate past this point. Colbert piped up next. “I see... And their chastisement?” They paled at that, and Louise visibly perked up at the question. I defiantly crossed my arms over my chest before responding.

“Corporal punishment is considered barbaric and inhumane in Canada, and not only isn't practised in any official capacity by the crown but is outright illegal regardless of circumstances. If their sentence is to be decided by me I will not tolerate any physical harm being brought upon them.” And I fucking meant that. I may have been on the fence before, but after Louise's little... borderline mind rape I wasn't going to be having any of that. I just wasn't willing to run the risk that the entire line of thought may have been influenced by her, to begin with, which could result in me really, really regretting the decision down the line should I somehow find myself free of the bond's influence.

...And all gathered were giving me a rather dumbstruck look, as a quick scan of the room confirmed.

“...I see.” Osmand spoke up first. “Well, as is the custom in our land, you are an honoured guest, therefore your will as directed towards those that have wronged you will be honoured.” Louise leapt from her chair hard enough to knock it over behind her, her face contorted into a flabbergasted expression.

"B-b-but- That's absurd, stupid! Headmaster-" Louise's mouth snapped shut as Osmand gave her a particularly piercing glare. He stared into her eyes for a few moments before speaking up himself.

“This custom is one that was instituted into Tristainian law by the Founder Brimir himself, young le Blanc. You would do well to remember that before thinking to so blithely criticise it.” Louise's eyes lit up with what I could only describe as horror at the implication that she had disrespected who I had gathered was some sort of deified prophet, essentially Moses, Jesus and Mohammad rolled into one.

“I-I didn't-!” She had attempted to begin in an obvious panic but had by all appearances been cut off by Osmand's unbroken glare. Several moments passed before Louise inexplicably settled and sat upon on her own knees... A repentant position, maybe? “...I apologise.” She breathed, almost
inaudibly, her face directed firmly at her own aforementioned knees. Seeing her in the position filled my chest with... I didn't like it, simply put. It didn't help that the pose didn't look comfortable at all either, which I imagine is the point.

I was tempted to hoist her back to her feet and demand that she stop acting ridiculous... But knowing how damned serious about religion everybody was until very recently on Earth stayed my hand. Attempting to interrupt what appeared to be an act of repentance would surely get me in some serious shit, best to not risk it. ...Still, though, I hated how she looked, kneeling like that. Knowing that it was technically my fault as well... Gah. Sorry Louise, I'll try to make it up to you later.

Osmand redirected his gaze to me, giving me a somewhat apologetic look in the process. Whether this was because I made no attempt to hide my distress at Louise's predicament or because he felt guilty for her apparent breach of manners I could not be certain. “So.” He casually started as if Louise wasn't silently chastising herself on the floor a few feet away from him. “Is that the extent of your sentence upon the guilty party?” He finished as he motioned towards Agneta, Alair, and Dagna. The three looked rather... Pale. I wasn't certain how else to describe the emotions that danced across their faces.

“Yes. A fine from all three separately, and time in confinement while escorted by guardsmen for work time.” I was beginning to really want this to come to an end already. Osmand leant back in his generously sized chair, and Colbert stood silently, seemingly at attention at his place behind the three girls.

“It is quite... Lenient, and unorthodox by our standards. But your will shall be done, as was commanded by the Founder upon the day he erected the Tristain Hall of Order.” Osmand produced a sheet of vellum from his desk upon which he quickly wrote what I could only assume was a legal document pertaining to my demands in their strange language that resembled Nordic runes from what I could tell. “I believe that is time enough spent chastising yourself, Lady le Blanc. Besides, I shall require that you witness this document with your own signature alongside Lord Colbert’s as well.”

Louise slowly raised from her kneeling position. Given the way her legs were trembling coupled with her barely concealed grimace I could only guess that pose was a lot more unpleasant than it appeared at first glance. My heart sunk at the sight, I could not help but feel guilty as fuck at her current condition. Definitely not letting her walk down the long as fuck stairwell to the base of the tower on her own considering that.

With a flick of a wand I could only assume he kept hidden in his sleeve, Osmand up-righted the chair Louise had previously been sitting in as she marked her own name down on the document with the quill the headmaster had handed to her, motioning for her to retake her seat as she finished. She silently obeyed as she settled back in her previous place. Poor girl...

Colbert approached the table before signing the documents himself, followed by my signing the documents as well.

The maids seemed uncertain, clearly, they weren't sure about everything that just transpired. Understandable, given the way this world seems to operate they must have been sure they'd be at the very least maimed for their crime...

Still not entirely sure that this situation shouldn't have actually turned out that way, but no, as much of a raging cock as I can be at times I've never been that bad when it comes to my desired punishment for one that's wronged me... Gah, I'll need to think this whole thing with the runes over later, it calls into question pretty well everything involving Louise now. Especially the way I just sort of... Uncharacteristically latched onto the idea of her being my new 'little sisteru,' so to speak.
I glanced over to her as I finished that thought, and briefly felt a pang of concern in my chest as I noticed that she was still grimacing noticeably. Previously I'd have just assumed that my thoughts were natural, but now... Fuck me, I'm going to be second-guessing everything involving the diminutive blonde from here on out, aren't I?

Everyone was unusually quiet for a fair while once that was complete. The silence was actually getting somewhat awkward. Eventually, Osmand used his wand to silently open the door to the hallway, revealing the backs of the two guardsmen that stood on watch in the hall leading to the stairwell. Osmand then proceeded to reach under the desk, all the way to the floor I had to guess, pulling up a shoe as he... Tossed it across the room and nailed a guard in the back of his helmeted head, producing a dull metallic thud and causing the guard in question to yelp and jump in surprise.

He spun with his short sword raised in confusion. Clearly, that wasn't something Osmand did often. “If you would be so kind my good man; these three maids require escorts to their room. Bring them into the hall and have your mate there round up another guardsman from the lower floor to accompany the three.” Osmand spoke as if he catching the attention of the guards by tossing footwear was perfectly commonplace, much to everybody's, the guard's especially, befuddlement.

Eventually, the guard gathered his wits, re-sheathed his sword and beckoned the maids out of the room, closing the door behind them as they left. Once it was just the four of us in the room all eyes were on Osmand, who shrugged in response.

“What? The atmosphere had grown so grim; I was merely attempting to lighten the mood.” ...What. Osmand looked at each of us separately in order before once again shrugging. “Well, at least I made an attempt...” Colbert’s palm met his forehead, and Louise just continued to look perplexed. I myself wasn't exactly sure what to make of that either.

“So...” Colbert hesitantly started. “I believe that was all?”

Osmand nodded before his eyes widened and he opened and reached into a drawer of his desk, withdrawing my laptop's power cable and reaching across his desk to hand it to me, I pocketed the cable as I gave him a thankful nod.

“Okay, anything else?” Osmand shrugged, once again. I'm surprised that's all it took for the sentencing, actually. You'd think it would be something of a bureaucratic nightmare to get through. “Very well. Please escort Lady le Blanc to her quarters, then return here afterwards, Jophiel. I believe there is something very important for us to discuss.” Eh? Is that- Oh, must be in regards to the whole mind rape thing, he'd have had to have noticed that. Louise looked ready to protest being sent away before Colbert spoke up again.

“This is a personal matter, Lady le Blanc, you two are partners, that however does not entitle you to be privy to every aspect of his personal life any more than it does he to yours. Should he wish to share this information with you afterwards he may do so, but for now, I am speaking with the authority of your professor, return to your quarters and rest. Your legs will surely require a respite with the strain they were put under anyways.” Louise grimaced but gave an affirmative nod.

I stepped around the secretary's desk to offer my hand to the little blonde, she rather firmly took a hold of it and retained her grasp after she had managed to stand. I was getting... Unpleasant vibes from her. Guess she pins at least some of the blame for her... 'Chastisement' on me. Unfairly, I'd argue, but I've learned from my conversations with Rose back home that trying to argue with a girl one intends to be close to is a bad idea. I can only hope she isn't the type to get pissy and pull the 'silent treatment' act in retaliation for slights, real or perceived.

I lightly squeezed Louise's hand in a manner I intended to be reassuring, which seemed to calm her...
slightly. I nodded to the two academy staff members as I escorted Louise out of the door and into the hallway, closing the door behind us as we passed through it.

Once the door was shut I released Louise's hand and knelt in front of her with my back facing her. “I'm not going to let you even try to walk down these stairs with your legs trembling the way they are, get on my back, I don't want you to hurt yourself.” She hesitated for a moment before she obeyed me and wrapped her arms around my neck. Slipping my arms underneath her knees I hoisted her up and marvelled at just how light she is for a few seconds before I realised that my aching body really didn't appreciate being burdened by an additional hundred or so pounds of weight and damn well let me know it.

With a pained grunt, I set off down the stairwell with the pint-sized noble in tow.
“...Why were you so lenient on those maids?” Louise finally spoke- Or rather whispered directly into my ear about half-way down the tower, her voice sounding quite dejected. Although I thought I explained my reasoning pretty well, I was expecting that regardless.

“Like I said earlier. We consider physical punishment to be inhumane in Canada. If I have a say in the matter I'm not going to allow people to be harmed, regardless of their crimes.” I can already tell she's gonna have a counter or two ready for that.

“But what if they had harmed someone? Murdered someone? Would you still hold the same views in that case?” Eh... I can see this getting ugly fast. In all honesty, I do believe that some people are just too dangerous to be allowed to live in modern society and that we'd all be better off were they to just be rid of... But I don't think it would be wise to get into that now. Better to just stick to spouting traditional Canadian values at her for now.

“Yes.” I could feel the fun-sized blonde tense on my back. Guess she wasn't expecting that.

“Maiming a person, marking them as an outcast, an individual to be systematically mistreated by all regardless of their societal standing on top of throwing them out to fend for themselves only ensures that they'll continue to resort to crime due to having all other avenues for sustaining themselves cut off by the government itself. The practice of public shaming and maiming only serves to appease base barbaric instincts and ultimately harms society at large due to forcing criminals into poverty outside of their control.”

Her grip around my neck tightened somewhat, nowhere near enough to cause discomfort, but it was still noticeable nonetheless.

“And how can you possibly know that?” Her tone was laced with venom. I had to resist the urge to snort at that weak sauce response. My 'angry girl alert' was going off, and this isn't the best time to discuss this topic, the culture shock will be bad enough as it is.

“This is neither the time nor place for this discussion, Louise.” I could feel that she wasn't happy about what happened today. She sounded quite upset, plus I could just sort of... Feel that she was upset as well. Not just in the traditional sense. It was almost like I could... Feel her emotions myself. It was muted, but there nevertheless. Must be a side-effect, or rather a primary effect of the Familiar bond.

Colbert mentioned that Familiar and Summoner typically- rather, always form a bond breakable only by death. They connect; over time begin to mentally bond with each other. With animals, the typical familiar, the summoned begins to... Think like their summoner, so to speak. Become the way the summoner would like the familiar to act. I'm not sure how this will effect me over time. The thought of being mentally dominated over time... Yes, I'll need to discuss this with Colbert indeed-

“...You're upset.” Eh? “I can feel it. Through the bond. You're mad, at least as much as me...” ...Oh. Shit. Of course, the bond works both ways... “...Are you mad at me, for wanting to hurt those maids?”

“No.” I snapped suddenly, the thought of Louise thinking me upset at her hitting me far harder than I would have thought. Luckily, I could feel her un-tense on my back at the statement.

“Than... Are you upset at the maids?” ...Ugh, fuck it. I might as well be honest with her about this topic. I stopped in my tracks in the middle of a landing between stairwells in front of an unassuming
doorway. I could feel her breathing through our shirts. Her heart was beating rather fast now that I was paying attention.

“...*sigh*... Yes, Louise. I wanted to harm those maids as well for what they did, mostly because my computer can potentially allow me to introduce to your society technologies beyond your people’s wildest imaginations, and their short-sighted actions could have prevented me from doing so. However, to act on such desires... I would not be able to call myself a true Canadian were I to do so.” ...Heh, I guess that's true to an extent. Louise shifted somewhat on my back, pulling herself further up from where she was hanging previously.

“So... You didn't hurt them because it would bring shame upon Canada to do so?” ...Yeah, sure, let's go with that.

“Yes.”

“...I see.” We remained in silence for a little bit. Louise eventually saw fit to break the silence. “When you described Canada as a monarchy, I had thought your people would be similar to ours. The more you reveal about your nation, though... Your people sound so different from us.” She sounded uncertain. Understandably so.

“We are. Very much so.” She tensed up again. Ugh, this sure is getting complicated fast. Not that I didn't expect as much to happen. The only reason things haven't gotten really complicated really quick up 'till now was because I was deliberately avoiding the subject of cultural differences specifically to avoid culture shock... For the Halkeganians and myself, for that matter. Guess it had to come up sooner or later at any rate. Louise didn't speak up again for a fair while, which I took as a signal to keep traipsing towards the girl's dorms.

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Louise slowly unclasped her arms from my neck as I set her down on her bed, she let out a shuddering sigh as she did so. Was she holding her breath? “Thank you, Jophiel.” Louise stated suddenly, which didn't surprise me considering I just carried her all the way from the Headmaster's tower to her bedroom, which was quite a ways to carry a girl, even a particularly light one. Especially when suffering from full-body aches.

“Think nothing of it Love.” Her eyes widened somewhat at that statement... Uh, that's a term of endearment I usually save for Rose, kind of slipped out naturally there, a bit of an odd thing for a Canadian to say, admittedly, but I use it as a stand-in for 'my good friend' so to speak. Best to clear that up immediately. “That's just a saying in Canada that's sometimes used between close friends, I didn't mean anything more by it.” She let out another, this time relieved sigh.

“Your people have a strange parlance. Don't speak like that around Kirche, doing so would cause problems for you I think.” A... Fair point. I'll try to keep that in mind from now on. “Now, I would like to discuss a fair few things with you... However, Professor Colbert was clear in his command, it would be best for you to return to the headmaster's office.” Oh God. My poor legs were already suffering from what I put them through yesterday. I'd be absolutely hating myself tomorrow morning I think...

“Very well, I believe that I will have to take some time to myself after this, my legs were sore beforehand, having to walk up and down the Headmaster's tower repeatedly is doing a rather unpleasant number on them... On the topic of legs, will you be okay?” I inquired, concern lacing my tone as I did so.

“I'm okay now, the repentance kneel isn't meant to cause long-term harm, it's only meant to serve as
an immediate punishment for minor transgressions against the teachings of Brimir by the faithful. It hurts, but it doesn't injure.”

I gave her a sceptical gaze. I'm not really familiar enough with the actual limits of human musculature to determine whether such a stance would actually be safe aside from causing otherwise harmless pain, but still, I didn't like the thought of Louise subjecting herself to something like because of religious beliefs.

“I swear, Jophiel, I'm unhurt. In fact, I think that I may pay a visit to the Grove of Brimir shortly. After I rest.” Grove of Brimir? Sounds vaguely... Pagan. Odd, but then again I am seeing a few Norse influences here and there, so the Brimiric religion may have more than a few Pagan aspects to it. Should ask Colbert about that sometime if I get the chance. “Now, you should return to the Headmaster's office posthaste, they will be waiting for you.” A good point. I gave the tiny blonde a respectful, and unexpectedly painful bow before I turned and made my way out of her quarters.

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“Ah, Jophiel, you took longer than expected- Uh, Jophiel? Are you well?” OH GOD, MY LEGS, MY FUCKING LEGS. WHY CAN’T THESE FUCKERS HAVE MAGICAL ELEVATORS!? FUCK TOWERS WITH STAIRS AND FUCK THE STEREOTYPICAL WIZARD CLICHES THAT RESIDE IN THEM. Colbert seemed more than a little concerned when I stumbled into the office, my legs, and entire body for that matter trembling from over exertion as I did so.

“So many stairs...” Colbert closed the distance between us and supported me with an arm under my shoulder and across my back, half-carrying me to one of Osmand's nicer guest seats. By God were those pillowy cushions the loveliest thing ever at that moment. Osmand stood from his seat and extracted his wand from his robes again, directing a spell at me moments before I felt a sudden, borderline orgasmic wave of numbness wash over my overworked limbs.

“I see that you pushed yourself even harder than the guard captain thought you did, Lord Pholus.” Osmand started with a chuckle. Fuck you and fuck your stairs you shitty Dumbledore knock-off! Er, I mean... Breathe in, breathe out, release the anger, goos fra ba, goos fra ba... “So, that aside, I believe that there is something very important which we need to discuss, Lord Pholus. Namely the Familiar Bond.” So I was right. Hooray, 5 points to Gryffindor. Colbert stepped forward before claiming one of the now vacant seats which previously held the three maids, loudly sighing as he did so before speaking up himself.

“Indeed, from what I could tell, it seemed like Lady le Blanc was, albeit inadvertently, influencing your mind through the Bond.” Osmand nodded his head affirmatively.

“Your eyes glazed over in a manner not entirely dissimilar to what happens when a summoner implores their will upon a particularly intelligent and independent creature, like a Griffon or Fox. The implications behind this are quite worrying, for obvious reasons.” Osmand had dropped back into his seat and settled back into his contemplative Gendo Ikari pose. He was right, by all accounts this meant that, in an unfortunate, unforeseen way, Louise has indeed enslaved me, or that she at least could if she really wanted to.

My face met my palm as I allowed a worried sigh which I had not realised I was holding back to escape from my maw. “I only barely managed to shake free of her will, and I was thinking up excuses to go through with what she wanted before I did as well. This development is... Quite disturbing, to put it mildly.” Colbert remained silent, while Osmand hummed in response. “I'm very worried what this will mean going forward with my partnership with Louise.”

Osmand spoke up first, remaining in his Gendo pose as he did so. “I believe that Lady le Blanc
should be informed of this. She did not seem to realise that she was dominating you, and I have no reason to believe that she would take advantage of this if she knew she was capable of it. She simply is not the type to do so, and her family is well-known for being honourable to a fault. Considering that she has given her word that she has no desire to be your 'master,' so to speak, it would be likely that she would be true to her word even in the face of temptation.” A good argument, I have to admit.

“However-” Colbert started, evidently prepared with a counter to Osmand's points. “-the young le Blanc has demonstrated, repeatedly, that she is prone to fits of hysteria. She holds stoicism in high regard, but she herself is quite emotional in spite of herself. Can we really be so sure that she may not slip in her conviction in a time of great distress and force Jophiel to do something he otherwise would not do willingly? Something that the both of them may come to regret in time?” ...A very chilling argument, I have to admit.

We were all silent for a good long while after that, just thinking about the situation as best we could to ourselves. I was quite cleanly split down the middle, myself. I wanted to trust Louise, but at the same time... If she really wished to abuse the power she holds over me, what would stop her aside from her own, evidently fragile emotions? ...Damn. I dunno what to do about this.

Osmand set his hands down on his desk, his fingers still crossed. “Let us wait, for now, see how Lady le Blanc proceeds without knowing how she can mentally affect Lord Pholus. Should this prove problematic given time, we shall inform her of what she is capable of and hope that she can be trusted to not abuse her powers over Lord Pholus.” Colbert and I glanced at each other, each shrugging as we did so.

“We might as well go through with this idea. I certainly don't have a better one.” I stated in a mildly exhausted tone. Bloody hell is this day taking a lot out of me, and the sun hasn't even come close to setting yet!

Osmand nodded affirmatively. “Very well. Colbert, you plan on interacting with Lord Pholus often, correct?” Colbert gave a terse affirmation. “Then be sure to keep track of his behaviour, we need to be able to recognise it should Lady le Blanc begin to manipulate him so that we can charge the issue as quickly and decisively as is possible.” Colbert nodded in understanding. “Lord Pholus, please refrain from informing Lady le Blanc of the situation until we can all agree that such a course of action is necessary.”

Fair enough.

“And be sure to inform one of us if you believe that she is affecting you as well, we shouldn't attempt to rely entirely on Colbert's judgment when you two have met only very recently and he cannot have a terribly strong grasp on your innate personality already.” Again, fair enough. “Now, I believe that was everything. Unless somebody has a point they would like to bring up?” I've got nothing at this moment. Colbert shook his head. “Mm, I suppose we are finished here then. Hopefully, we won't need to take further action on this subject, but I shall consider further responses to be on the safe side.” Seems fair enough to me.

Colbert stood from his seat, stretching as he reached his full height. “Very well, shall we depart, Jophiel?” I responded by standing, and being quite thankful that my legs hadn't burst into flame as I did so.

I gave Osmand a shallow bow, thanking him as Colbert and myself set off, closing the door behind us while I silently praised their pain-killer magic to the Nth degree.
Aside from a few encounters with Louise's classmates that were otherwise not worth mentioning, nothing much occurred on my way back to my room. I received some practice in the manners department, but otherwise, yeah. Boring trip back.

Once my door was securely shut and closed I withdrew my laptop's power cable from my pocket and went about setting everything up to check... I dunno, things. Internet, games maybe. Stuff. I dunno, I'm tired, leave me alone.

Once everything was hooked up I switched the computer on, several moments passed as it went through the boot-up process and I was greeted by the log-in screen. I sighed in relief as I moved to type in my password...

...

...

...My password?

...

...

...Oh shit.

I racked my brain, thinking as hard as I could, reaching into the deepest depths of my pool of memories... But it isn't there. My fucking computer's password just isn't there. Why-

I blanched as I came to a rather unpleasant realisation. The head injury. Colbert offhandedly mentioned memory loss.

Oh, SHIT.

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I had spent a fair amount of time just sitting there in front of my now unpowered computer, thinking about everything that I could, trying to recall deep, far-flung memories of years gone by. I was relieved to find that all the important stuff was there. My name, my hometown, my childhood... They were somewhat... Fuzzier than they were previously, I think, but they were recognisable. Some things were just gone, though.

Specific names of places, people and things. The big store in my hometown? My first real job was spent working in it; gone. Can only recall that it was there and that I worked there for a long while, but nothing specific beyond that. My first crush? I can recall her face, that my first kiss was with her, and that I got to second base with her at one point, but again, nothing specific beyond that. I can thankfully recall most everything in regards to Rose.

For the most part, Colbert was mercifully correct.

Upon sitting down and just thinking about what I remembered it seemed that the memory loss was pretty insubstantial. But still... My computer's fucking password... That was enough for make me regret my decision to not have Guiche punished in my name. I was concerned that Alair, Agneta and Dagna were the ones that came close to depriving this world of modern- or should I say future tech? At any rate, turns out that Guiche is the real criminal here. And for what? Preventing him from assaulting a small, helpless girl? Holy Lord fuck almighty... I really should have just asked him to be punished. Severely.
...I know that I shouldn't cling to this hatred, but fucking Christ. The printing press, mechanised farming, industrialisation, mass production, advanced medicine, physics, biology, mathematics... FUCKING SHIT-EATING BLONDE CUR! I tried to keep myself calm, however, I could not help but ball my fists and flare my nostrils. The runes on the back of my hand began to shimmer slightly, which distracted me from the whole memory loss thing enough for me to calm down somewhat.

What the hell is the deal with these runes? I keep fucking forgetting to ask Osmand or Colbert about them. I'd look it up myself, but I'm functionally fucking illiterate here. I was such a strong reader normally, to know that there's an entire library full of literally otherworldly knowledge that I just can't access on my own here... FUCK.

...I need to get my mind off of this. I can't get into my computer at all, at least I don't think I can... I can't remember if I can. Son of a- No, no... Change focus. A walk. I'll go for a walk, walking has always helped me calm down. Yes, great, I'll do that.

Standing from my seat I killed the power on my electronics and made for the door, wrenching it open I stepped outside and shut the door behind me, to be quite surprised when I noticed Siesta standing a few metres down the hall, looking quite surprised herself to see me. “Oh, hey Siesta.” My voice had a shaky cadence to it, betraying my rather displeased mood. She grew visibly unsettled when I spoke.

“G-greetings milord.” She gave another lady-like bow. Huh... Nah, can't be bothered to consider why she's trying to act 'high-class,' so to speak. Hm, actually, she can read, right? She had that small pile of books on her bedside table, surely she must have basic reading skills at the very least.

“Siesta, can you read?” She seemed a tad taken aback by that question. Probably not something the average Commoner would expect to hear from a Noble, I guess.

“I... Can read simple, and some advanced runes, milord. Enough that I can understand the story in most novellas.” Hm, so there may be a stumble or two, but she may be able to help me do some basic fucking research in the academy library then.

I attempted to give Siesta a weary smile to disarm her somewhat as I made my request. “Would you object to helping me do some research in the library? I'm sure you've been able to piece together that I'm functionally illiterate as far as the Tristanian language goes, and I would prefer the aid of someone I know and can trust.” She looked somewhat surprised at the solicitation, but a rather pleasing smile found its way to her lips.

“I would be happy to provide any aid that I can, milord. Especially if it's for you.” Lovely.

“Thank you Siesta. Now then, shall we milady?” I motioned towards the hallway behind me which lead to the library. She blushed somewhat at the invitation before quickly closing the gap between us as we set off for our destination, my mood thankfully lightened considerably at the raven-haired maid's sincerity.

Hopefully, I'll finally be able to figure something out about this damned place... Like the basics of the magic system. Maybe look into why Louise can't cast spells. Never know, might be something really obvious that everybody has just so happened to overlook up until now. Maybe.

...Hopefully.
To say that Siesta's literacy was turning out to be something of a boon would an understatement.

Once we'd settled down in the considerable, frankly breath-taking library with its flawless redwood bookcases, tables, cushioned chairs, and large clear windows which allowed ample natural light to fill the immense room, the first thing I had done was have her read a bestiary for me while I hovered over her shoulder, looking at the hand-inked pictures on the vellum pages to get an idea out of what to expect from this world's particularly fantastical creatures.

Notably, the runes seemed to be read from left-to-right in paragraphs much like modern English and seemed to use simple floating dots in place of spaces to donate a break in words. Everything else in regards to the written language was beyond me at that moment.

Though she read somewhat slowly -which I could chalk up to the book using 'advanced' runes meant for highly-educated scholars she isn't used to reading- she seems to be able to get across the general idea of each section at any rate.

I asked that for now Siesta just jump around to show me whatever creatures she thought might be relevant to everyday life. After going over a few honestly pretty boring creatures she finally landed on a particular critter labelled as a 'droog,' which, frankly, awesomely enough, is effectively a domesticated warg/dire wolf! It's the primary mount utilised by humans for travel, burden, hunting, and war all across Halkegania; which leads into the conversation I find myself currently engaged in with the maid at the moment.

"So, they're like giant dogs that are built like bears?" I asked with more than a hint of excitement in my voice. The helpful maid gave a pleased, confirmatory hum with a nod.

"They're also really smart, and mostly really sweet and calm. Unless it's a critter trained for war you can usually go right up to them and bury your face in their big fuzzy scruff and they'll lick you and rub up against you like you're a friend it knew from birth!" The raven-haired exotic beauty stated with an excited hop in her seat.

"These things sound awesome, why hadn't I seen any in the Familiar stables?" Siesta gave me an incredulous look.

"Because they're kept in the droog den by the main gate, not with the Familiars?" ...Ah. Well, that makes sense, made something of a fool of myself there... Gonna have to check that place out later on then. Siesta suddenly giggled in a rather melodic manner. "You're rather cute when you're embarrassed." I gave the girl a surprised look, and she quickly shifted from jolly to horrified. "Ah- I mean-" I quickly waved her apparent concern off in as deadpan a manner as I could.

"Oh no, a pretty girl called me cute, by Gods, this is a crime only punishable by death methinks." I finished with an eye-roll. Siesta stared at me for a few seconds before she jerked her face back towards the bestiary on the table in front of her, a blush playing across her features. What, because I called her pretty? Somehow I doubt that's something she's unused to hearing. "So, what about horses?" Had to admit, I was curious about what role horses play in their society if not as mounts. Siesta blinked before turning to face me again, this time with a perplexed expression on her face.

"Horses?" She asked, her brow lightly furrowed as if the word was unfamiliar to her.

"...Yes, horses, large, four-legged, hoofed equines with a long face, long legs, goes 'neigh' and runs
really fast? Has a mane of straight hair that runs from the top of their head to the nape of their neck, and a similar tail of said hair?" Siesta stared at me for a few seconds in confusion before she spoke up again.

"...Unicorns...? It sounds like you're describing a unicorn..." ...What. She suddenly flipped through a dozen or so pages before settling on a page that depicted a very familiar looking equine creature with a short narwhal-looking horn growing out of its forehead. "This, is this what you're referring to?" ...Do they have unicorns, but not horses? What?

"Well, almost. Horses don't have a horn, but otherwise, it looks similar. We use them in much the same way that your people do droogs." I finished matter-of-factually... As Siesta's eyes unexpectedly lit up.

"You- your people ride unicorns!?" She clasped her hands together afore her breast as her voice damn near cracked. Uh... No, I don't see any reason to be untruthful here.

"N-no, horses don't have horns..." Now she was cupping her own face, and looked quite excited.

"Unicorns, an entire nation of people that ride unicorns as if they were droogs...!" She isn't listening to me at this point, is she?

...Whatever, this is a weird turn of events that I'd like to explore further, but I should probably look up the magic elements to see if I can't start the process of figuring out why Louise apparently can't use proper magic. Might be best to start off with the summoning ritual. Knowing the element of that particular spell should make figuring out Louise's element easier. I mean, according to Colbert all human magic is elemental, so the summoning ritual must have an accompanying element that Louise must be aligned with if she properly cast that spell.

"Siesta." I started as I poked her nose, which caused her to jump in surprise as she was shaken out of her dream world. "While I would love to remain on this topic, I want to look up the summoning ritual next. Should make determining Louise's elemental affinity easier if we know which element the ritual itself corresponds to." Siesta gave me an excited nod after a few moments of consideration.

"That's a good idea! I don't really know about magic myself, but we'll probably figure something out by researching the summoning ritual itself!" She stated as she stood from her seat, closed and hefted the book before hauling it to the bookshelf from which we acquired it to begin with. Upon completing this she began scanning the various sections for a book which would allow us to engage in further research. ...Hm, maybe we'll even find something on my runes- AHA!

"Siesta!" The girl jumped at my sudden shout. Didn't mean to startle you love, but by Jove, I'm not going to forget about this now! "Can you read my familiar runes?" I shouted as I lifted my fist to her face, the runes facing towards her. She looked quite perplexed before she gingerly took a hold of my hand and focused her attention on it.

...
try and remember to actually ask Colbert or Osmand about them next opportunity then.

"Don't sweat it Love, was just curious about whether you could read them for me or not." I gave the runes an annoyed glare. Stupid runes, being all difficult to read even for the natives...

"W-what...?" Hm? As I glanced up I noticed that Siesta had turned a distinct shade of red. Uh... Misheard me, I guess?

"Don't worry about it, I just keep forgetting to ask Colbert or Osmand about the runes, just wanted to know if you could read them for me right now, that's all. No hard feelings for not being able to read stupid runes." I finished as I rubbed my rune'd fist. It really did look like somebody had branded me... That could lead to some uncomfortable questions back home if I ever- ...Ugh, sudden onset head ache. Fuck, let's just focus on helping Louise for now. "Found the book yet?" Siesta, who had redirected her attention to the bookshelves, and was still an inexplicably notable shade of red, nodded in affirmation.

"Y-yes, milord." She stated as she slid the considerable tome out of its resting place and hefted it in her delicate little hands. "S-shall we continue our research, m-milord?" Don't much care for it when she plays up the 'subservient maid' bit, but whatever.

I gave her a curt nod and a light smile as I took the heavy tome from her and set it on the desk we had previously claimed, pulling the chair she had probably habitually pushed back into place for her as she shyly re-claimed the seat with myself once again stooping over her shoulder. While I certainly appreciate the aid, with Siesta's admittedly barely adequate reading ability something told me we were going to be here for a long while...

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Several hours had passed since we'd started researching in earnest. I'd spied Colbert inexplicably walking out of the library with Osmand's secretary, Longueville I think her name is, in tow an hour or so into the study session. I couldn't help but give him an encouraging grin as I caught his eye on his way out, notably he looked quite pleased with himself. Good for him, unfortunately, I couldn't say that Siesta and I were having the same degree of luck.

Everything we found in regards to the summoning ritual pertained to how to perform it, and how awesome Brimir is for having created it. Otherwise... I'd have thought to ask Colbert about it, but I guess that isn't happening tonight, considering the lady on his arm. "I'm sorry Lord Jophiel..." Siesta gazed up at me with an apologetic gaze. I gave her a grin I intended to be encouraging.

"It's not your fault that there isn't any real useful information about this topic in these books. Besides, I sincerely appreciate the help. Thank you Siesta." I finished as I moved my hand from the back of her chair to the girl's shoulder. She blushed sheepishly at that. Girl must not be used to praise... That kind of depresses me. I'll be sure to heap it on thick from here on out if that's the case. "I'll also be sure to mention that you were helping me today so you won't get in trouble for not attending to your usual duties." She smiled brightly at that statement.

"A-actually, about that, milord-"

"Think nothing of it." I finished as I gathered up the last tome we'd been reading through and returned it to its original resting place. I checked my watch... Six-thirty in the afternoon. Still, a few hours to burn today... Well, I'm sure Siesta is growing tired of having to attend to the whims of a random foreign noble by now, best to let her go for the rest of the day. "Alright, I don't think I'll need your services for the rest of the day, so do as you will. See you later Siesta." I stated with a wave as I made for the door.
She seemed quite surprised at my sudden release of her services, and I quickly hopped through and closed the main door behind me before she got the chance to be all selfless and insist on continuing to follow me around the rest of the day without concern for her own needs. Girl deserves more credit than she gets methinks...

"Oh, Jo...? Uh... Nice to see you again!" I turned towards the source of the lively voice coming from my right down the hall... Miia the Lamia. Hm, hadn't really thought much about her since yesterday. Only then did I realise that I kind of wanted some time to myself... Bah, whatever, couldn't hurt to try and make as many friends/allies as I can here, plus I really need to build up a tolerance for lots of social interaction anyways.

"Greetings Miss Marr, I trust the day has been treating you well?" I started with a weary smile. She responded by beaming back at me, confidently resting her hands on her generously proportioned hips.

"Yup! Darling's been busy all day so I've just been exploring, there are lots of really cool things around here, like that big building holding all the animals! Have you been there yet?" She half-shouted with an ecstatic grin. I simply nodded in response, either she was already tiring me out or I was more worn out than I thought I was. Suddenly a loud growl filled the hallway, and Miia's face turned a distinct shade of red as she crossed her arms over her belly. Was that- "Human portions are really under-sized for Lamias..."

...Huh, looking that fairly significant tail, that makes some sense. If all of her major organs are in her human parts that tail must be pure muscle, which I'm sure would demand quite a bit of food intake to power, so to speak. Hm, what do you know, I've got a hungry Lamia in search of friends, and I just yesterday found myself in the good graces of the local head chef. I'd have to be a fool to not capitalise on this opportunity.

"Well here, come with me to the kitchens, the head chef seems to like me and told me that he'd be willing to fire up the grill anytime I ask. I'm sure he'll be willing to do the same for you if I put in a good word." I stated as I motioned for her to close the gap between us, her face lit up like a firework.

"Really!?” Heh, now that's a face that any man would fall for...

"Yeah, come on, it sounds like your stomach is about ready to start eating itself." She gave an excited cheer as she slithered- Jesus tap-dancing Christ, ah- I mean, right... As she rushed up to my side and matched my strolling speed as I attempted to ignore the goosebumps that had just emerged on my arms, which were thankfully covered by my long sleeves. "So, Miss Marr-"

"Miia!” The girl cheerfully interrupted me. "Friends call each other by their first names!” ...Heh, I feed her when she's hungry, suddenly I'm her friend? Well, suppose that means she's easy to please. Lucky me, usually expect to have to suffer a bit before I get into someone's good graces.

"Very well, Miia; do you have any particular requests for the chef in mind?” Her brilliant smile somehow managed to get all the wider as she nodded her head vigorously.

"Meat! And eggs! Lots and lots of eggs!” Hm, eggs? ...I've heard of a few kinds of snakes that eat eggs, but I couldn't recall any specific names. Guess she must be a monster girl version of one of those kinds of snakes... Incidentally, I know of a few snakes that have red scales, but not any red snakes that have a diamondback pattern- Is that a rattle? Holy shit, I wouldn't have expected this bubbly girl to be literally venomous...

Actually, Lamias are supposed to have their origins in Hellenic Greece, right? Are rattlesnakes even native to the old world? ... Might ask her about that later.
"Are you going to get anything for yourself Jo- Uh..." Heh, having a hard time remembering my Biblical pseudonym, eh?

"Joe is fine. And yeah, something light. Maybe some leftover soup. Trying to get in shape." I casually stated as we neared the stairwell leading to the base of the tower.

"Right, Joe!" The snake-girl happily started. "Getting exercise is always good, I'll be cheering for you to succeed and get all big and buff then!" She finished with a giggle. Heh, yeah, that'll be the day... Sure, would be nice to put on some proper muscle, though. Well, I'll get there eventually now that I'm working out with the guards. Hopefully, at least.

Hm, ya know what? It'll take us a bit to reach the kitchens, might as well ask about her physiology now, if only to pass the time. "So, I've noticed that you have a diamondback scale pattern and a rattle... Are you venomous?" Only then did I realise that I just might be stepping over a line of some kind, fortunately, if her bubbly response was anything to go by I hadn't managed to offend her.

"Yup! My tribe are, what do humans say... Ambush predators! We disguise ourselves and wait until something gets real close before we leap out and bite before it tries to run off! It's so exciting! Mm, I haven't been hunting in a while y'know..." Her mouth hung open for a bit as her head lolled back in what I can only assume was a nostalgia-fuelled bout of bliss. ...Hm, her canines don't seem to be any longer than the average human's and don't really look like they'd serve well as hypodermic needles...

"Retractable fangs?" I piped up. She nodded excitedly, opened her mouth wider, followed by a pair of thin, almost transparent needle-like fangs descended from her gums in front of her primary teeth, between her canines and incisors. They were about twice the length of her canines, rattlesnakes don't have retractable fangs... Neat. I had to admit, as unsettled as I was getting over just how different she was compared to a human, she was still fucking awesome!

Hm... I wonder...

"Where are your venom glands located?" She retracted her fangs, closed her mouth and directed a gorgeous smile at me. I couldn't help but blush in spite of myself. Gotta admit, when I see that distinctly human face and forget about her more bestial bits I can't help but feel immensely jealous of 'Darling' for having caught her affections.

"They're where your tonsils would be!"

...Huh, so lamias -venomous lamias as least- have venom glands in place of tonsils. Fascinating...

"...You know, it's really nice to have met a human that isn't afraid of me. Back home so many people acted like they were afraid that I'd try to bite them when I was meeting the Cultural Exchange representatives, or would try to avoid looking right at me... Even here a lot of people are like that if they don't just ignore me. Even Darling is a little put-off by my appearance, he tries to be nice, but I can just tell... Well, Even you seem a little weirded out by me, but you're also really... Well, you can't fake a grin like that." The red-head stated with a wink.

Wait, grin-? Only then did I realise I'd been grinning like a smitten fool.

Embarrassed, I tried to force my face back into a neutral expression, only to find my muscles defying my will. Mutinous dogs, the lot of you! "I'm sorry if I'm getting a little forward since we just met, it's just-" A slightly sorrowful expression played across her features as she considered her next words. "You're nice, and you don't treat me like I'm really dangerous. Darling is really nice and all, but I'm glad you're here as well. I feel a lot less lonely already." Her happy expression returned full force as we reached the base of the stairwell and made for the main gates leading to the academy grounds.
Heh, her cheer sure is infectious, if nothing else. Yeah, this is progressing pretty fast, but... Glad to know I'm doing good for at least two people by the mere act of just being present at any rate.

I reached up to scratch the back of my neck as an errant thought stuck in my brain. Speaking of Louise... I wonder what she's up to now? Hm... That's right, she said she was going to be visiting some sort of religious structure. No idea where that would be. Guess I'll just piss about with Miia for now.
Nothing of any particular note occurred after the brief conversation regarding Miia's venomous nature, mostly just mindless banter, and some one-sided gossip I wasn't actually interested in from Miia.

"Ha ha! I thought that the meal you ate this morning wouldn't have been enough when you've got so much body to sustain! Come, come! We've got some freshly butchered boars just here in the next room over, you show me which cuts you want and I'll cook up for you a proper meal for a big girl!"

At any rate, Marteau, though visibly unsettled by Miia's presence, was clearly going out of his way to be as welcoming to her as he had been to me.

"Um..." Miia looked somewhat uncomfortable at the prospect. "I don't want to get anybody in trouble..." A bit of an odd turn-around, considering how excited she was by the idea of getting more food to eat not 10 minutes ago.

"Don't be foolish little lady, you're the ward of a Noble! If someone is to complain about you needing to eat, then they are to complain about your Darling, and nobody is going to complain about a boy of his stature if they know what's good for them!" Hold on, what? Is Darling actually from an important family? Hm, gonna have to ask about that later on. "Now come! You will show me which cuts of pork you like and I will prepare them for you, as many as you need, such a pretty young lady is not going to go hungry on my watch!"

Miia was once again gleefully smiling, she redirected her gaze back to me in an appreciative manner. You're welcome milady.

With Miia and Marteau in the next room -picking her favourite slices from the plus-size beast as she gleefully cheered at the sheer amount of meat on display- I sauntered over to a few simmering pots of leftover soup from the mid-day luncheon; which evidently was consumed by the servants over the course of the day after the formal meal.

Nobles don't eat leftovers, after all.

A manservant was periodically stirring the pots with a small stack of marble stoneware bowls standing on a nearby counter. I noticed a pot of vibrant red viscous liquid and couldn't help wondering what it was if not tomato soup, which wouldn't be possible what with tomatoes being a new world crop. "Beg pardon, my good man." I started, catching the attention of the fellow tending to the soups. "What manner of soup is this?" I inquired as I motioned towards the pot of simmering red liquid.

---

Oh God, why must I be so curious and open to trying new foods? My poor stomach... The red liquid turned out to be made from some sort of starchy, tuberous, mildly sweet and tangy potato-like vegetable native to Hibernia, it didn't taste bad, per sé. However, my poor Earth stomach isn't handling being assaulted by this bizarre extra-dimensional food very well. I really need to focus on more familiar foods from here on out.

"That was great! Did you enjoy your meal, Joe?" The lamia girl asked from across the small spare table we'd been seated at in the back of the kitchen, not wanting to get in the way of the servants still setting up the dining hall for dinner.
Not only had she eaten maybe 4 pounds of meat all to herself, she'd eaten a dozen hard-boiled eggs
and a small bowl of the same red potato soup. Guess she has a stronger stomach than the average
human... I just weakly grinned and gave her a thumbs-up in response. She smiled and gave me a
thumbs-up back. Gullible, I suppose. Or I'm doing a better job of masking my emotions than I
thought.

“So... I've been wondering.” She spoke up but seemed somewhat uncertain.

“Please, speak your mind.” I motioned for her to continue. Rather than do so she glanced around
conspiratorially as if she was worried about being overheard by someone else...

“Can we finish up here and discuss this somewhere more... Private? I'm... Worried about what would
happen if someone were to hear us.” Okay, the bubbly energetic girl is being serious. Great, this can
only go well.

“Very well-” I started as I fished a small tube of Pepto-Bismol caplets from my breast pocket, getting
ready to pop a pair to calm my weak Earthling innards. “-let's clean our dishes and head to the
summoning grounds. I'm given to understand that they tend to be abandoned when they aren't being
used for summoning.” She nodded nervously as I swallowed the pills, praying they'd kick into gear
before my guts decided an evacuation of the extra-dimensional foreign material was in order.

---

As we neared the summoning grounds I could see that the ground where Louise had summoned me
was still mildly singed. Growing back well enough, but the spot was quite visible at a distance.

...Bit weird being here, actually. The place where I popped out of the summoning portal and
slammed into the grass. I could feel my chest tighten briefly before the runes tingled for but a
moment as such thoughts were suddenly... Muted.

...Huh. Doesn't take a genius to figure out why I haven't been feeling as strongly about this entire
situation as I should have been. Sudden headache... Yup, fucking runes are muting my negative
emotions about the summoning, and punishing me when I try to push the issue in my head... Well,
you know what? No, fuck you runes, I ain't going to stand for this shit.

I grasped my hand and glared at the runes, which had begun to shimmer slightly, and focused on it.
Focused as hard as I could. It felt like a long shot, but if I could exert some degree of control over it,
even a little...

...

...

...

Holy fuck is this headache- Migraine getting bad. But no, this fucking glorified cattle brand isn't
going to control me.
Finally, after what felt like minutes the runes began to dim before they ceased glowing altogether, the migraine fading along with them.

...Heh, I did it. That was unexpectedly easy, actually... Must have something to do with the runes not being designed to have to grapple with the human consciousness. I'll have to bring this up to Colbert, and Osmand for that matter. They'll surely be interested in this development. “Um, Joe...?” I turned to face the lamia girl that had been following me... I'd honestly forgotten about her there. Heh, sorry 'bout that Love. “Is everything okay? You suddenly looked like your hand caught fire.” ...Not an inapt description.

“The Familiar runes had been making an effort to control my thoughts, prevent me from thinking freely about certain things by hitting me with a real bad migraine anytime I'd think about my home or how I was basically kidnapped... I'd decided that I'd had enough of that and willed them to stop that shit.” I stated as I lifted my rune'd hand and flexed my fingers into and out of a fist. “Didn't actually think it would work...” Her eyes lit up as I finished my statement.

“Seriously!? The same thing has been happening to me! How did you do it?” She started, just as she moved to clutch her head and whimper in pain. Damn, okay, I can help her with this.

“Fight through the pain, don't give in, resist it, you are the boss, make the runes know that!” Tears were forming in the corners of her eyes, she looked hesitant, but she clenched her teeth and eyes shut, and I could see her visibly trying to will the runes into submission as I just had.

Two minutes, before she gasped and opened her eyes. I let her catch her breath and wipe the pre-formed tears from her face before speaking up. “So, you win?” She grimaced, but a handful of moments later slowly nodded with a determined look shining through her eyes.

“Finally, I can think of home without getting a headache...”

“Colbert and Osmand are definitely going to want to hear of this.” I stated with a definitive tone as Miia gingerly rubbed her temples with her forefingers. I glanced back over to the spot which I and probably Miia for that matter had first set foot... And tail, I suppose, on this new world. My mind was awash with dark thoughts: of those I'd left behind, of the life I'd previously known scarcely a week previous, of the world and technology I'd never get to see again...

...Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to fight off the rune's influence after all. My mood had darkened considerably now that my mind wasn't driven to other things whenever it neared a topic as sour as my summoning and Earth. Blast, only now have I realised that the rune's influence may have been a blessing in disguise...

I allowed a weary sigh to worm out of my mouth. I turned to face Miia and based on the dejected expression on her face she may be holding the same opinion at the moment... Probably best to change the topic, keep our minds off of saddening things. “So, what was it you wanted to talk about in private anyways?” She directed her gaze at me with some slight surprise, before her eyes widened. Guess she'd forgotten about that.

“...Joe, did you feel... That?” The lamia girl asked with an exaggerated shiver. In response I gave her a quizzical look, not understanding what she was referring to.

"Um, never mind. Anyways, right... Y'know how the people here worship that, 'Brimer' guy?” She asked with a nervous scratch to her wrist.
“Brimir.” I curtly corrected her pronunciation.

“Right, Brimir... It looks like we're probably going to be here for a long time, right? Well, humans-And, well liminals too I guess, in the past we were really, really mean about religion, right?” Understatement of the fucking century right there Love. “Well... I'm worried, we- Well, I don't worship him, and I don't see myself converting any time soon, but... Will I be burned at the stake or crucified for being a... Heretic?”

...That's... A very good question. I'm an atheist, and that wasn't a good thing to be in historical Europe... Shit, I hadn't seriously considered that before now, unbelievably enough. I had been staring off into space considering the quandary, and eventually, I caught her face in my peripheral vision. If she was worried before, she looked downright frightened now. “...I hadn't even thought of that until you brought it up... For now, I think it would be smart to just... Go along with their worship if they begin to push it on you- On us. Go through the motions, try not to anger or otherwise insult their beliefs.”

Miia looked uncertain but nodded nervously.

“I'll... Try to bring up the topic with Louise tonight, see if we'll need to tip-toe around the subject going forward.” Again, she nodded nervously. “I'll let you know tomorrow what I find out... I can't recall ever seeing you in the dining hall during meal times, now that I consider it, though.” She shrugged.

“People stare at me when I try to spend time in a crowded place. I don't like it, so I try to avoid places with lots of people.” ... Understandable.

“Well, let's try to meet here again just before lunch time then, alright?” She gave a confirmatory nod and grunt.

Silence reigned between the both of us as we each just stood there, lost in our own thoughts, now free of the blinders which prevented us from realising just how mournful our mutual situation was. I turned my back to the girl to face the fortress walls in the distance. Why? I'm not certain, at the moment I simply did, distracted by the dark thoughts which now infested my mind, offering little in the way of respite.

Miia was the first to break the awkward quiet. “Do you think we'll ever see our homes again?” I didn't turn to face her, nor did I answer her. What would I say? Assure her that we would find our way to our respective Earths one day, put all this behind is, tell her that we would likely never see our homelands again and that we'd best forget our past lives, embrace and acclimatise to Halkegania? Everything about this... Fuck me, I really shouldn't have fought off the rune's influence in retrospect. Fucking 20/20 hindsight bullshit.

I glanced at my watch, 7:30. Been with Miia for about an hour now... It's getting close to the end of the day. Would probably be best to part ways with her now. “Think Darling would be done with his business yet?” I asked over my shoulder. She contemplated her navel for a moment before responding.

“...Probably, yeah. I guess I should head on back to see if I can spend the rest of the day with him. Later, Joe.” The red-headed girl slithered off back towards the academy building proper. I opted to hang back for a while, staring at the summoning circle for a bit.

“...Should probably try and find Louise.” I sighed as I about-faced and headed in the same direction...
that Mia had towards the main building.

---

Couldn't find her, or Colbert for that matter. Fuck it, heading to bed early tonight, I'll talk to Louise about the religious shit tomorrow morning.
Woke up to my watch's alarm going off, got only barely enough sleep, gonna be cranky by nightfall. Blast.

Anyways, after dressing myself and all that I set off to wake up Louise, who based on her usual sleeping patterns would still be sleeping in spite of herself. Only had to knock a few times before she answered with a most obnoxious yawn and a scowl this time. “By the Founder Jophiel, it's a holiday. Why are you waking me up so early?”

“...It is?” She stopped rubbing her eyes for a beat before she face-palmed in response to my confusion.

“Oh, Gods... Did nobody tell you? It's The Day of the Founder, all students and staff have the day off.” She looked somewhat annoyed, she wasn't directing her glare at me, though, so at least it seems that I'm in the clear as far as that goes.

“Uh... Sorry, I suppose I'll let you head back to bed then-”

“No. I'm already up... We haven't really spent any proper time together. Let me get dressed and we can spend the day getting to know each other like we should have a while ago.” She was surprisingly articulate for this early in the morning... Was she really still sleeping when I knocked on the door?

“Do you need help getting dressed?” ...What? It isn't as though I'm attracted to her for whatever reason, probably the familiar bond's influence. Might as well extend the offer if there's no risk of me accidentally perving on her. She shook her head in response.

“No, there's no rush. I'll just wait for my personal maid to come- What time is it?”

I glanced at my watch. “7:00 AM.”

“Okay, my personal maid should be here in fifteen or so minutes... I'll just lay down and wait for her to arrive.” I shrugged in response.

“Allright, I'll be in my room.” She just grunted in response as she shut her door. I turned around and glanced at Kirche's door... Doubt she's the type to wake up early on a day off. I'll just spend the next fifteen minutes gussying up I guess.

---

An hour later Louise finally pushed my door -which I had left ajar specifically to allow her easy entry- open and invited herself inside. I was sitting at my desk with my back to the window, checking over my notes on the world such as it was, and she claimed the edge of my bed, inexplicably with a gasp. I quirked an eyebrow at her, and she blushed slightly in response.

“I apologise, I just... Didn't expect your bed to be so... Luxuriously soft. It's even better than my own...” Uh... She's a Duke's daughter, right? One would think she'd be used to beds on par with what you'd expect royalty to use...

Were beds from the early modern era really so bad in comparison to properly modern beds?

...Based on the way she just let herself flop back and is currently rolling herself up in my blankets,
I'm going to have to guess that yeah, my bed is just that nice compared to what she's used to. “Ah... You must be a prince, to have such a fantastic, opulent bed- Ah- Is this gold thread bordering the checkers!” ...Heh, not used to seeing this side of Louise. Wouldn't mind seeing more of this sort of endearing behaviour out of her. Anyways, I had a mission to accomplish.

“Louise, I'm curious... What's your people's stance on... Non-believers?” Louise stopped rolling on her belly, before turning on her side to peer directly at me, still cocooned in my green checkered blanket. She stared at me for a few moments before finally speaking up.

“The Founder's laws offer protection for righteous non-believers. Those that adhere to the Founder's ideals and do no blaspheme. So unless you go around actively blaspheming and making a mockery of the Founder's laws none will bother you... At least, none who wish to keep their family's honour intact, especially since you're from a far-off, unknown land and can't be expected to know of Brimir and the Old Gods.” I see, so Miia and I should be- Wait...

“The Old Gods?” Louise nodded once with a proud expression on her face which gave me the impression that I was about to receive an education on the local religion... And began squirming in place, before she began to emit some mildly distressed noises... “Uh, you need some help getting unwrapped there Mistress?” She gave me a defiant look for a few seconds before she redirected her gaze to the window.

“Yes...” Heh, such a sheepish expression on her face. “And don't call me that.” That caused me to pause briefly as I was standing. Uh? “I'm not your master; we're partners, so don't use subservient language like that with me.” I chose to not comment on the hypocritical nature of her ordering me to not speak to her as if she were my superior, instead sighing and acknowledging her command as I stood from my seat, closed the gap between us and began unwrapping her, which caused her to blush quite brilliantly in embarrassment.

How'd she manage to get herself wrapped so tightly up by just rolling around? It took about a half a minute, but I'd eventually got her free. She attempted to sit with her back ramrod straight on the edge of my bed, her embarrassment visibly creeping its way across her face, which she'd attempted to cover with a dignified noble's look. Heh, it's almost like she's deliberately attempting to endear herself to me.

“So, the Old Gods?” I repeated my earlier inquisition. She responded with a grin and reached into her blouse to pull free a disc-shaped talisman which glistened with a silver sheen quite wondrously in the morning sun, embossed with a tree and three triangles- Wait a minute... “Yggdrasil... And the Valknut?” Louise had taken in a breath, seemingly to begin a religious spiel, and seemed surprised by my interruption.

“What?” She looked confused at my statement.

“That symbol, it looks like Yggdrasil, the world tree. And the triangles superimposed over it... Looks like the Valknut, the symbol most associated with the Allfather Odin of the Nordic pantheon.” Louise stared at me silently, her face no longer betraying any emotion. It was somewhat... Unsettling.

“Can you tell me more of this... Allfather, and Yggdrasil?” The girl's unsettling gaze had given way to genuine curiosity. Perhaps, but I'd rather not spend our entire free day here in the dormitories.

“Later, perhaps? I doubt that either of us wishes to spend much time here in my room when we've the entire day to ourselves.” Louise ponderously rubbed her chin before nodding in response.

“Okay, and in fact, now that you mention it; I was thinking of riding for Bruxelles for a spell of shopping today. I find myself running low on scented soaps, and my clothes are getting somewhat...
Well, they must be shrinking, as they fit me less and less with each passing week inexplicably.” She finished with a pout as she crossed her arms over her chest. Either she was dangerously skinny in the months before I arrived... Or she's still growing. Hm, maybe the little mistress won't be able to pass for much of a little sister for long?

“Bruxelles is Tristain's capital city, right?” I asked quite simply. Louise nodded in response.

“Indeed, the largest settlement in all of Tristain. The royal castle is visible from all corners of the capital, painting a most storybook picture no matter the angle you gaze upon it.” Well, she sure did look proud of her nation's capital. “Hm, I wonder... How large is Canada's largest city?” Louise asked me with an expectant, almost cocky look on her face. Heh heh...

“Toronto has a population of about, two-and-a-half million, I think it was?” Louise's mouth hit the floor as she jerked back in shock, so to speak.

“T-two and a half... Y-you're attempting to trick me, aren't you!?” Louise seemed quite dubious, for once.

“Why? How many people live in Bruxelles?” She didn't respond to my question, just staring at me in shock for a handful of moments...

“W-we should leave within the hour, i-if you wish to travel to Bruxelles this day, that is...” She rather poorly attempted to deflect my question... Perhaps she feels embarrassed comparing her capital to Toronto because of a significant size difference? Brussels was never all that big back on Earth, especially in the early modern era, compared to modern cities at least. Eh, I'll just let it lay as it is.

“I would like to see the nation's capital, yes.” She emitted a relieved sigh, before standing and addressing me again.

“Then prepare yourself for a journey of several hour's ride. A carriage would take the better part of the day to arrive, going by droogback will grant us time enough to browse the markets at our leisure with time to spare for a return trip. A water skin and small ration would be wise. I shall redress myself for travel and make arrangements to borrow a droog for you. I do not intend to make any significant purchases, so we should not require a dedicated pack beast.” Louise made for the door, her heels lightly clicking against the wood panelled floor with each step she took.

As she neared it she stopped and turned to address me a final time before setting off to make arrangements for our trip.

“If you might happen to have anything of worth from your lands which you would be willing to part with, my family is well-acquainted with a pawnbroker that will be willing to give you a very fair deal.” Hm...

“I hear that aluminium is worth quite a fair amount here.” I stated with a cocky grin. Louise looked quite taken aback, or rather, dumbstruck.

“...Perhaps I actually should arrange for a pack droog to accompany us after all...” She wearily sighed as she made way for the hall and left me on my own. Heh heh... Alright. Better find Miia and give her the good news before I get ready for the trip.

---

Ran into Miia with her Darling as I was nearing the men's dormitories. Informed her of the protection offered to respectful non-believers; to say she was relieved would be an understatement. She gave me a hug (and just to note, holy FUCK it felt like she was going to crush my ribcage! Girl's
terrifyingly strong) and she and Darling were on their way. After that nothing much worth
mentioning happened as I returned to my room and prepared for the trip.

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“So, you ready?” Louise cheerfully chirped from the side of the massive, awesome dog-like beast as
she stood before what I guessed was the droog den.

She had changed her outfit to what looked like a practical yellow sundress accented with white lace,
a white waist belt and a red neck ribbon coupled with a pair of sturdy white trousers and tall, laced
leather boots which didn't look entirely unlike the pair Siesta seemed to favour. Her hair had also
been pulled back into a low, scrunched up ponytail not entirely unlike my own, save for her fringe,
which I presume would make it easier for her to shield the luxuriously silken mane with her hood.
She was still wearing the standard academy cloak along with the new, admittedly cute yet practical
get-up.

“Y-yeah...” I trailed off as I redirected my gaze at the massive creature towering at her side that was
panting and wagging its tail with an excited fervour only found in canines. Dire St. Bernard would
be the most appropriate description for the animal methinks. A burly, bear-like powerful frame and
deep brown eyes that betrayed a considerable intelligence made the critter all the more intimidating.

I want to pet it so bad!

“Hm, I can see you're impressed, as you should be! Mother had Sleipnir bred specifically for me as a
congratulatory gift at my acceptance into Tristain academy. He's intelligent, brave, and while he can't
run as fast as some other thoroughbreds, he can run far longer than the average droog. He's the
perfect travel steed!” I approached the great beast as Louise finished her boasting and offered my
hand for him to smell. He gave me a few experimental sniffs before giving me a friendly lick. I
wiped my now utterly slimy hand on my tough old fatigue jacket as I addressed Louise herself.

“So, what am I to ride?”

Louise paused for a moment as if she were weighing her options in her head. “I imagine your people
don't have droogs, so you'll probably have to ride a pack beast trained to follow a leader that won't
try to take off on its own.” Seemed logical. “Come, I've already done the necessary paperwork to
borrow a mount for you, we simply have to pick a particular animal.” Louise beckoned me to follow
her to the den as Sleipnir- Incidentally, that was the name of Odin's horse, right? Cool name.

Incidentally, 'den' was an apt descriptor. The beasts seemed to have a large bed of straw they were all
piled up on, rolling around and playing and what have you, typical dog stuff. There were all sorts of
breeds with about as much variance as one would expect from dogs, notably all older European
breeds.

The bigger ones like Louise's Dire Bernard could be reasonably compared to a Kodiak or Polar bear
in size, with thick, powerful, bear-like bodies and limbs. The smaller ones, such as what I could only
describe as a Dire Spitz were about on par with a Panda, were more dog-like in their proportions.
Still massive for a dog, but probably what one might consider being equivalent to a pony or donkey
compared to the larger breeds that would be horses. They were notably probably too small to be ridden by any but the smallest of people.

“Hey-hey, Fooooorm UP!” Louise suddenly shouted, and the beasts all disentangled from each other, forming up as if they were soldiers responding to an officer's command. Clearly, they were all very well trained. Colour me impressed.

“So, have a particular doggy in mind for me?” Louise stepped forth and began looking the animals over.

“You're going to need a bigger one to support your size... There are a few heavy pack hounds. They have a reputation for being plodders, but they know to hop along and keep up when they're falling behind.” Louise stated as she approached what was obviously a dire Irish- Or rather, Hibernian Wolfhound. He reminded me of my first crush's Wolfhound... What was his name? Aslan? I remember it was an odd name even for a dog... Eh, whatever.

“I wouldn't mind taking him. Seems like a rather chill dude.” I stated as Louise gave the Wolfhound a pat on his immense muzzle.

“Cu? Hm, I suppose he would be a fairly good dog for a first-time rider.” Louise gave the big lug a scratch under his chin as she gave an affirmative hum. “Alright then. We'll just get a servant to equip him for the journey and we'll be set. You all ready?” She asked as she turned expectantly, her hands on her hips.

“Swords, iced tea, knives, some trail mix, a bag full of aluminium cans... Yup.” Louise shook her head as she sighed.

“Are those really aluminium?” Still going on about this, eh?

“Yes, Louise. The cans are really aluminium, as is my bike.” I stated with a weary sigh.

“...The pawnbroker is probably going to believe you're royalty.” She stated as she gave Cu a scratch behind the ears. Well, aluminium really was worth more than gold before rather recently on Earth-I stopped as I came to a realisation... How much are those cans and necklace I gave to Siesta worth? ...Well, suddenly her basically shadowing me since that day makes a good deal more sense. Suppose we'll find out just how much I gave to her once we reach the pawn shop. “Oh, finally, a servant.” Louise derailed my train of thought. “Boy, prepare this droog for travel with a rider, we're travelling to Bruxelles and need him equipped. Chop chop!”
“Hehehehehehe...” Louise turned to give me a perplexed look. Understandable, until today she hasn't really seen me giggling like a schoolgirl.

“Stop that. Behaving like a child ill suits you.” Ugh, why can't I just be allowed to act the fool every so often? “So, that aside, now that you’ve acclimatised yourself to remaining upright on your steed...” Incidentally, riding a droog wasn't entirely unlike riding a horse, at least in the realm of sitting on the beast while it's led by another, experienced rider.

Most notably the 'saddles' that the creatures were equipped with were rather on the primitive side. Little more than a quilted blanket, not unlike a gambeson. I'd asked about this and Louise was quite confused... Seems that the Halkeganians simply never had the need for more elaborate stirruped saddles as the people on our Earth had. Shock cavalry had never become a thing, plate armour having never been developed due to the borderline excessive focus on magical warfare.

On top of that; droogs have a noted tendency to... Well, go berserk in melee skirmishes. Being on one's back when this happens usually ends badly for the rider. Dedicated war droogs are intended to operate on a semi-autonomous level, encased in padded and/or iron maille armour, then directed at an enemy and unleashed in their general direction, cue complete and utter havoc. It wasn't entirely unlike how the Romans used war dogs, actually. Only on a much more horrifying scale due to droogs being as large as a bear, every bit as strong, twice as ferocious, and twice as fast.

...Okay, not twice as fast, but they're notably at least as fast as thoroughbred horses in short bursts, which is more than good enough on an open battlefield. Basically, droogs simply don't serve in the same capacity that horses did on Earth battlefields for a number of reasons. Louise expressed an interest in horses, and I promised to tell her of them later on. We were supposed to discuss religion, after all.

“...Hey! Are you even listening to me!?” Ah- Oh shit, I completely zoned out there...

“Um, no, sorry... I was distracted pondering how droogs are used on the battlefield.” I stated with an apologetic frown. Louise glared at me for a few seconds before she huffed and redirected her gaze back towards the road.

“Boys.” She stated in an annoyed tone. Uh... Okay. Whatever, moving on.

“So, we were to discuss the 'Old Gods?'” A few seconds later Louise acknowledged me with a backwards glance.

“I believe we left off on the ‘Allfather Odin’ you'd mentioned?” Ah, yes. The Valknutt and Yggdrasil.

“Your pendant, the two symbols on it closely resembled the world tree; Yggdrasil, and the symbol of death often associated with Odin; the Valknutt. In old Norse mythology Odin was the creator of everything and presided primarily over death, language, healing, royalty and battle, among other things. He wielded a spear which went by the name of ‘Gungnir,’ and often times wore a tall, conical, wide-brimmed hat along with a simple, unadorned cloak.”

I tried to call upon more but found myself struggling to do so.

"That's what I can recall of him off the top of my head if you'd like to know more I would have to consult my library,” I stated as Cu briefly broke into a partial sprint to close the widening gap.
between him and Sleipnir.

I really disliked it when he did that. No stirrups. Had to tighten my legs around his waist to not roll off whenever he did so.

I continued as Cu fell into a spirited march next to Louise and her mount. “Now, the world tree, Yggdrasil; It's supposed to be what connects the nine worlds of creation together. Midgard, the world of the humans; Alfheim, the world of the elves; Jotunheim, the world of the giants; Asgard, the world of the Gods and Valhalla; Helheim, the world of the dishonourable dead, or people that just weren’t warriors I think. Those are the five I can recall off the top of my head. Norse mythology has always been something of a passing interest at best for me.” Louise seemed rather interested, to put it mildly.

...She was oddly quiet after that for a fair amount of time. Why- “Jophiel... Midgard, according to these old beliefs... Is it your world?” ...I see, so she caught on to that.

“Colbert has informed me that your people refer to this world as Alfheim, if that's what you're getting at.” Louise stiffened, particularly in her shoulders. “In all honesty... While I hadn't put a great deal of thought into it before now...” Her eyes grew considerably, as if in fear... Might as well get it over with. “Until you summoned me, there was a single moon in the night's sky.”

...More silence.

“...A single, lone white sister to Midgard. Small, yet serene in the night sky of the cradle of humanity. Of the land which Brimir called home.” That sounds like it came from a story.


“It... Isn't. I... I saw it. In a dream.” ...Well, this just got interesting.

“What sort of dream?” I asked, even as I noticed Louise begin to tremble ever so slightly.

“I-it was... It was strange. At the time, as I experienced it, it felt real. So very real, so much so that I was almost afraid when I awoke in my own bed, confused to no longer be on that strange boat...”

She took a shuddering breath, her small frame shaking even as she did so.

“I was a man. A young man... On a strange, long boat bordered all along the bow by archaic round shields, accompanied by a dozen others sailing on the open sea. The others, they looked so barbaric, yet they addressed me as their king. It was night, the moon, the one moon hung high in the skies, shining brightly upon the sea, providing only just enough light to make out the deck of the ship. Most were sleeping. Those that weren't, were solemn, making little attempt to hide their discontent at the seemingly hopeless voyage to find a new homeland for us and our kin.”

Intriguing...

"There was a particular man at my side. He was clearly many times my elder, large, at least as large as you even. Wizened features, strong arms, but kind eyes. He was assuring me that... That the Allfather... Odin... That the men were wrong, that Odin and Thor would guide us to our promised land, and that those that doubted would be punished by the gods were they to not repent for ever having doubted me..."

Louise fell silent after that. Going off of what she was saying... That was a Norse expedition, probably one to sail to the Americas in hopes of finding fertile lands for farming on which to settle.
There's no way she's making this up, but why would-

“His name was Andreas. He... He called me Brimir.” I almost hadn't caught that, Louise barely breathed the sentence out... Understandably so. If Louise was having some sort of vision of the past - and considering the whole magic thing she most certainly was- Brimir was a Norseman, a 'Viking...' From my world. Midgard... Earth.

...Interesting, if nothing else. Not sure what else to make of that at the moment... Although going off of the way she was now full-on trembling, this was troubling Louise a good deal more than I'd have expected.

“W... What does it m-m-mean? I'd just thought i-it w-w-was a s-s-stupid d-dream. B-b-but now... M-Midgard...” ...I... Don't know how to react to this.

I mean, this didn't mean much of anything to me, but Louise grew up with this religion, to have a vision-like dream about the religion's figurehead, then to have an outside-context person come along and confirm elements of that story, virtually unprompted... In a story this would be the first signs of a 'chosen one' type of scenario, wouldn't it? I suppose that makes me the Lancer to Louise's Hero then? ...Hm. Normally I'd never put stock in such story-telling conventions in real life, but considering this entire situation...

Yeah. Something tells me it wouldn't be a terrible idea to get myself some armour, and shit for the revolvers Colbert should be working on. Bullets, powder, oil... Actually, I'll talk with Colbert before I go about spending money on such things. Still not sure which calibre he'll settle on for the guns. Though... A flintlock or two wouldn't be a bad idea to hold me over until Colbert produces a fieldable prototype. I certainly don't want to risk being caught with my pants down, after all. “...I- I'm sorry, I shouldn't be going to you for this, you aren't of the faith, you wouldn't understand...” ...Well, she isn't wrong. Still...

“You're right, I don't understand, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be afraid to come to me if you need someone to talk to. Often times people just need to vent, just talk about their concerns to lift the weight of their problems off their chest. I've been told that I'm a good listener, so if you need someone to just listen don't hesitate to come to me.” Louise turned to face me, her already large eyes were positively doe-like now. She emitted a shuddering sigh as the trembling lessened.

“T-thank you Jophiel...” Figures that the first time Louise tries to open up to me about a problem I have nothing to offer her but an ear. Damn it. Such a great Familiar I'm turning out to be, huh?

“...I've been dreaming of the Founder often since I've summoned you. That was just the first... What I've seen, it doesn't match up with the stories the Church teaches as truth.” She seemed nervous. Hm, easy enough way to explain that to her.

“Research has been done into this subject... The easiest of experiments is to have a line of honest people, let us say, fifty. The person on one end must whisper a statement into the next person's ear, only loud enough for them to hear, and they must repeat this process down the line until it reaches the person on the other end.”

Louise seemed interested in what she was hearing.
“The statement or story was always notably different when it reaches the end of the line. Sometimes to the point that it is unrecognisable. This happened every time, without exception, regardless of the people partaking in the experiment.” She seemed rather shocked at this.

“B-but you said the people doing it were honest!” Confusion etched across her delicate features. Heh.

“They were, but that's just how human beings and human language works. We alter a word here or there when we recount a tale, something that seems utterly innocuous at the time, and nobody bats an eyelash. Now, apply this effect to a story told over the course of thousands of years by potentially thousands of storytellers...”

“...And it will be virtually unrecognisable compared to the original tale.” Louise finished, understanding the point perfectly. “So... You're saying, that the history the Church teaches... May have been mistold over the generations and misremembered because of it, not through maliciousness, but because we make minor changes to tales over time without meaning to?” I gave a nod in response to her inquiry.

“Assuming that your dreams are in fact visions, you may be witnessing the long-forgotten truth of Brimir's arrival in Halkegania. Based on your language I'm assuming that he came from Midgard- Or as my people call it, Earth?” She nodded herself, then turned pale.

“But... What does that mean?” I shrugged.

“Dunno. You'd have to consult a religious authority on the subject. Although if they're anything like the religious are in my world, that would be a terrible idea.” Louise cocked her head to the side and gave me a ponderous stare.

“Why?” Hm, what, going to tell me that religious absolutism isn't a thing here?

“The religious on Earth have a noted tendency towards blind faith and murderous fury towards any that would dare to imply that their holy texts are anything other than the absolute truth. Wars have been declared over religious conflicts.” Louise seemed quite taken aback, oddly enough.

“W-How? How many religions exist in your world?” ...Y'know, now that I consider it, I hadn't thought to ask the same question in my time here. Should fix that shortly.

“Far more than I could ever be bothered to catalogue. Each having more conflicting beliefs than the last.” I stated with a shrug. Though I suppose I could mention the big American one at the very least. “In North America, the continent upon which my home nation rests; Christianity is the single largest religion in Canada, at least 60% of the population subscribe to the belief. The next closest at about 20...ish% are the non-religious, those that hold no faith in any Gods at all. The rest are small enough to not really be worth mentioning in the grand scheme of things, but are very varied in their beliefs.” Louise seemed surprised.

“So, Christianity is your nation's official religion?” I shook my head in response.

“No, Canada has no state religion. Much like our allies in the United States of America: we the citizenry tend to hold a firm belief in the separation of church and state, meaning that the church holds no real power on the governmental level, even if there is no explicit law forbidding it.” Now Louise seemed VERY taken aback. “Freedom of worship is an important aspect of our culture. So long as nobody is hurt, and no attempt to force one's beliefs upon others is made, any are allowed to openly worship anything they will unimpeded.”
Louise seemed quite shocked... Understandably so, considering Tristain is a theocracy. I'd imagine that the concept of free religion would be quite alien to them. She didn't say anything for a good while after that. Guess that would be a lot to take in, huh?

...Thinking back on our conversation, it's been pretty scatter-shot and unfocused, hasn't it? Sure doesn't feel like I've been participating in a carefully constructed artificial video game or movie conversation at any rate. This one has been full of about as many de-rails as a typical conversation I'd hold back on Earth for damned sure. If nothing else the rapidly changing topics seemed to get her mind off of her distressing dream, which was relieving.

... Continued silence. Guess Louise is all talked out then. I wouldn't mind resting my sound flaps for a tad myself... Still not sure whether or not I should buy a pistol while we're in Bruxelles. Should probably ask Louise about it later.

---

Finally, we crested the hill that Louise eagerly affirmed would allow us a fantastic view of the city of Bruxelles, and- Oh, wow. She wasn't kidding when she described it as picturesque. Looked like an image ripped right out of a Disney story.

The city had tall walls, perhaps four or so stories tall all around the settlement's boundaries. Hewn from the same white marble as the academy's fortress walls. Outside the walls were mostly farmlands, with some fenced-off areas near the entry gates that I'd assume were guard outposts.

There was a fair amount of traffic operating around the area, serfs, merchants, soldiers, all sorts of characters. Beyond the farming, lands were forests and fields that wouldn't look out of place in Europe, as was to be expected. Aside from a few strange veggies and fruits, the flora was pretty Earth-like here on Alfheim. Anyways, from what I could make out from here blues seemed to be a popular tone for roof tiling, giving the town a fairly calm vibe from a distance.

... Have I mentioned that the entire city was really small? Like, maybe 40,000 citizens small? I could see why Louise didn't want to compare Bruxelles to Toronto now. Anyways... “You weren't joking. Bruxelles is gorgeous.” Louise gave a cocky grin to my left with a prideful huff. “So, we should have plenty of time to browse goods, right?” Louise glanced at the sun before responding. “Plenty. I'd say we have 4 or so hours to trade in your aluminium goods for ecu and purchase goods before we have to leave to return to the academy before nightfall. Unless you'd like to spend the night at an inn, that is. Then we'll have all day to browse for wares.” The blonde sarcastically finished as she urged her mount forward. ... Y'know, now that she mentions it...

“Would that be a bad idea?” Louise turned around to face me, with a blank look on her face.

“I don't think you understand just how terrible the bedding inns use is. They're stuffed with straw. Straw. Have you ever slept on a straw mattress Jophiel- Oh, I can't even finish that question with a straight face, you're obviously high nobility, of course, you haven't.”

Louise wheezed her out assertion as she attempted to restrain her face from contorting in humour.

“Trust me, partner, you don't want to know what sleeping on a straw mattress feels like. You have to
curl up just to fit on it, and that's for me! With as big as you are they'd probably have to push a
d second bed up against the first just so you have enough room to not fall off when you're sleeping.
Especially since you're used to properly-sized beds.” When would Louise have had to sleep on a
straw mattress? Gonna have to remember to ask her about that later on. Anyways...

“There are no inns with quality bedding in all of Bruxelles? In Canada, you can't find an inn that has
less than adequate bedding for an affordable price.” Louise turned to give me a glare. Almost as if
she took that as a... Challenge. Ah, crap.

“Humph! Well, Bruxelles will surely have a fine inn with reasonable prices, and I will find one for us
to spend the night at!” Suddenly the thought of spending a night away from my lovely modern queen
bed was a most dreadful one. Shit.

“Y-ya know, that's okay. I'm sure you're right-” Louise glared harder at me.

“I. Will. Find. A. Fine. Inn.” ...Fuck me and my big mouth. “Now, we'll go to the messenger post
before anything else. Send a letter to the academy explaining that we were forced to spend the night
in the city and may not arrive back at the academy until after tomorrow's luncheon.”

“But your studies-” I attempted to grasp at any reason to not spend the night in the capital.

“I'm ahead of my peers in all my classes, I can more than afford to miss a half day of school work.”
She was grimacing... I really shouldn't have provoked her national pride. 'Specially considering that
she's just a step down from being full-on royalty herself... I suppose I pretty well asked for this. Well,
it'll be an experience, at least. “Now, let's go. We'll ask around the royal road market after sending
the letter... Actually, we'll ask around after selling off your goods first. Then we'll...” Fucketh me...
“THOSE CANS ARE WORTH HOW MUCH NEW GOLD!?” I could not help but cringe at Louise's sudden shriek. But holy hell does she have a powerful set of lungs for such a small girl! Francois the broker seemed to be just as pained as I was at that moment, nearly knocking his glasses off of his face as he lifted his hands up to cover his ears.

“M-my lady, please calm down! I merely gave the good sir a conservative estimate based on the materials and quantity alone-”

“CONSERVATIVE!?” My ears! My poor ears! “Do you realise what he could purchase with that kind of money!? He could buy a noble title in Germania, and an estate to accompany it!” You'd think I'd be happy about this development, but it's sort of difficult to feel anything other than pain after having a stun grenade go off right next to your fucking ear. “Do you even have that kind of money on hand to pay him with?” The broker ran his hand through his greying ginger hair before continuing.

“Well... No, however, we would be happy to work out a payment plan over time, and your family knows that we are a trustworthy organisation, my lady!” Louise seemed pensive before she turned to give me an unsure look.

I grumbled in annoyance before speaking up. “So... If you're quite done screaming like a-” Just at that moment the front door to the building was kicked in, followed by a pair of city guardsmen charging in with their weapons at the ready.

“What in the Founder's name is going on in here!? We heard a woman screaming in distress!” The mailled men shouted as they brandished their bronze-headed spears at us. Silence reigned for a couple dozen seconds before Francois and myself turned to gaze at the strawberry blonde. She turned a particularly bright crimson at the attention.

“I-I'm sorry, that was me. I was just... There is no trouble here, so please-” Louise glanced up, and turned an even BRIGHTER shade of red. I redirected my attention to the doorway to notice the citizenry that had gathered up around the now busted open door and windows to see what was causing the commotion. “...Please, everything is fine, so just leave us be.” She was doing a remarkable job of keeping herself calm, considering how badly she stutters when she'd gotten worked up previously. The guards looked uncertain at Louise's assertions, glancing at myself and the broker nervously.

“...If you are certain milady-”

“I am! So please...” Her voice noticeably trailed off at the end there. She must be horribly embarrassed considering her typical demeanour. The guards finally backed out of the building and ushered the townsfolk to go about their business. Several uncomfortable moments passed as nobody seemed certain of how to pick the conversation back up.

“So...” I started awkwardly. “If Louise can vouch for your trustworthiness I would be glad to sign a contract with you, assuming the conversion rate is fair.” Louise just nodded her head vigorously in response. “Alright, then first thing's first, take the cost for the repair of the doorway off of the first payment, otherwise I'll take what you can give me right now.” Louise's eyes widened at my statement, but she offered no argument.

“Very good sir, I'll just go and collect the documents that shall require yours and lady Le Blanc's
signatures, and preferably her family seal.” I motioned for the man to stop as he stepped towards a back room.

“If possible, I'd also be curious to know if you'd know of any local businesses which I might be able to invest in. For profit, of course.” The man's eyes lit up and Louise gave me a surprised look.

“Ah, such a wise young man! Well, for starters, we would not turn away such a wealthy investor...” I turned to Louise, she still had a surprised expression on her face.

“...Father has already expressed a willingness to provide any aid he can to you, I'm certain he would be glad to help with the finer details of such an investment, especially with a business the family is familiar with.” Well, that's- Wait, he has? She seemed to catch the surprise on my face. “I exchange letters with my family bi-weekly under normal circumstances. Griffon mail is fantastically fast, and we've been sharing letters almost thrice a week since I summoned you.” I noticed Francois' eyes widen considerably at Louise's statement at having summoned me. Understandable, I suppose, but back to business...

“Fantastic. So, expect correspondence with the Duke shortly then.” Francois grinned like a mad man at the statement.

“Excellent good sir! Is there anything else I might help you with?”

“Yes, actually. More businesses in which to invest would be nice.” The man pondered the topic for a few moments before speaking up again.

“There is a fine inn not a stone's throw away from here which would be good to visit methinks. Still relatively small, yet business has been booming for them as of late. It would be wise to invest now while they are still small and would be eager for partners, get your foot in the door early.” Hm, that sounds like a good idea.

“Excellent, anything else?” Well, my mood was brightening with every passing moment.

“Well, nothing off the top of my head, but I believe that there are a few smaller businesses in the Blacksmith's Avenue which aren't yet associated with the major guilds which would most appreciate an investment from a wealthy patron.” Well, suppose we'll visit them as well then. I turned to Louise once again.

“Can you think of anything else to tackle now?” She shrugged in response.

“Nothing which Father won't address himself in the coming days, such as setting up an account with the royal bank. Assuming you don't want to just use the family account, that is.” That... Would be something to consider. Francois was greedily rubbing his hands together in my peripheral vision, to which I had to fight the urge to roll my eyes.

“Very well then, let us finish up here and head off to visit this inn... What was it called?” The ageing fellow grinned somewhat... Lecherously?

“The Charming Faeries Inn, young master. Here, let me write down directions to the fine establishment for you.” ...Hm, alright then. Suppose we're off.

---

Have I mentioned how gorgeous the noble districts are? Because they are. I'm sure the districts where the small folk live in are fugly as fuck, but we've yet to visit such places, and I see no reason to focus on something which I won't be able to directly affect anyways.
That aside, two-story buildings were pretty common. Three-stories were uncommon, four-plus were rather rare outside of churches. I'd asked Louise about this and she admitted that Halkeganian architecture was somewhat... Crude compared to Earth architecture. The really tall buildings require magical reinforcement to not collapse in on themselves, and mages need to periodically maintain those reinforcements, and by periodically I mean monthly. Which sort of limited the amount of complex tall structures they could build.

Anyways, they were all vastly outnumbered by single story dwellings. Glass seemed to be surprisingly common. Relatively high-quality glass, that is. Smooth, transparent window glass. Greenhouses must be common considering that. Really felt like I was walking through a proper European fantasy city.

“Your people make excellent use of stone, ya know...” Louise didn't respond... I turned to face her. She was pouting. Uh... “Louise?”

“...I was supposed to be the one to find an inn...” ...Wha- Oh. Ha, really? Well, alright, this should be easy.

“Where did we learn of this inn?” I asked. She gave me an incredulous look. “And who suggested we head directly to the pawnbroker before anything else, for that matter?” The look softened, then a grin slowly overtook the grimace.

“I did.” She stated, a prideful look emerging on her all-too-adorable face.

“Indeed, you did. So stop sulking, if not for you, we'd probably be sleeping on a bench tonight.” Louise gave me an exaggerated glare.

“You wouldn't be that bad at finding a place to sleep.” She attempted to argue.

“Yes I would, I've never had to find lodging for myself before, had you not been here I'd surely be forced to build myself a ramshackle shelter for the night.” Outright lies, but she doesn't need to know that. Luckily I could see a prideful grin play across her features. Just play up on her pride, keeping her happy seems like it'll be easy enough. Good, don't want her to be unhappy if she doesn't need to be. She's had to put up with enough of that as it is.

“Well... Lucky that you have me here then.” Now she was puffing her chest out and striding with her back straight and chin up. “So, how are you going to approach this? The business proposition, I mean.” Fair enough question.

“Let's try to spend the night there before making any big decisions. See if this is even the sort of place that we would want to be associated, let alone partner with.” Louise gave me a ponderous side-long stare as we continued to step along the reasonably crowded marble white city streets lined with the occasional tree along the edges, as one would find on a city street of Earth. The streets themselves were significantly thinner compared to a city street on Earth, though. ...Well, a North American city street, at least. European streets tend to be rather cramped as I understand it.

The smell is also rather unoffensive compared to what one would hear about historical European cities. But then again, magic. Also, noble district. Commoner area's probably rank as fuck.

“So, we nearly there yet?” Louise glanced at the vellum pad she had been lightly grasping since we'd left the pawnbroker.

“Another 10 minutes down this street. It's supposed to be located right next to the market district, which will be convenient.” Hm, indeed.
...Have I mentioned that I've been catching a lot of stares? Because I have, and it's been every bit as uncomfortable as one would think it would be. I was making an effort to not let it show, wouldn't want to risk getting Louise worked up at all.

Notably, I can confirm that dark hair does indeed not naturally occur among Halk's populace, or is at least so exceedingly rare as to be virtually unheard of. Plenty of blondes, gingers, crimsons and light-haired brunettes of varying hues, and, surprisingly, a few stark snow whites, but not a single dark strand of hair to be seen. To say it was odd to witness was an understatement.

The distinct lack of non-Caucasians aside from the rare vaguely Indian/Middle Eastern dusk-skinned yet crimson-headed Germanian was also kind of odd. Not used to such a noticeable lack of ethnic diversity. Already having been somewhat on the ethnically ambiguous side on Earth, I stood out about as significantly as a black guy wearing full African regalia in rural China here in Bruxelles. Doubly so since I'm still wearing practical, understated modern Earth-made clothes, which contrasts quite considerably with the local's flamboyant, vaguely historical European outfits.

The people here are also kind of short. The men typically only seemed to come up to about my nose on average, and the women were typically maybe an inch or three above Louise in height. Basically, I really stand out, and it's making me sort of uncomfortable. Gonna have to visit a tailor to get some more inconspicuous clothes for whenever we leave the academy before we head back. “We gonna head to a tailor before we shop for anything else?” I asked the girl walking alongside me.

“Hm... If you want to. There's no way my clothes will be ready before we have to return to the academy, so it shouldn't really matter when we go there.” She stated as she shrugged.

“I was considering having some clothes that would blend in with the local fashions made for me, actually.” Louise gave me a surprised look.

“Why? Your clothes are of fantastic quality from what I've seen.”

“Well, yeah, but I don't like how badly I stick out in a crowd.” I stated, a hint of discomfort edging into my voice, which Louise seemed to pick up on.

“...Jophiel, unless you're going to dye your hair and tan your skin to pass yourself off as a half-Germanian I don't see you blending into the populace even if you dress in the local fashions.”

...Yeah, I suppose that's true. “Still... It wouldn't be a bad idea to acquire a cape or cloak for you, to ensure there aren't any incidents with someone ill-informed misjudging your status.” ...I don't want to wear a cape... But at the same time, what sort of Noble wouldn't want to flaunt their status? Maybe I could convince her to let me get away with an Ezio-style half-cape that wouldn't get in the way as much as a full-sized one...

---

“Well, this looks like a fine establishment. From the exterior, at least.” Louise stated with a grin as we gave the Charming Faeries Inn a thorough examination from the bench we'd claimed in front of the fountains that were situated in the lovely plaza the inn was located on to rest our feet.

Two stories, white painted wood siding and rustic flowers serving as window dressing. A warm glow could be made out through the coloured windows that implied excellent interior lighting. As an early modern inn, it was certain to pull double duty as a tavern/proto-restaurant as well. The idea of having a proper, warm meal was appealing to me greatly after so many hours of attempting to subsist on dry trail mix and a measly litre of iced tea.

“Indeed, seems quite welcoming... Not much in the way of traffic, though.” Louise cocked an
eyebrow at me.

“It’s the Day of the Founder. Unless the Inn's owner is a heathen he'll have allowed any employees the option of taking the day off. It's likely that the business is slow right now because most of the employees are spending the day relaxing and praising the Founder.” Huh, I see...

“Is that why there was only the one man at the pawnbroker despite being a fairly large business?” Louise nodded wordlessly. “So, that aside: Will we be getting separate rooms or a shared one to save money?” She gave me an incredulous look in response.

“Neither of us are paupers, I think we could both afford our own rooms.” ...Fair enough. ”Well, my legs feel rested enough. Want to pay for our rooms now?” May as well. Something to eat would be wonderful too. I responded by forcing myself to my feet. Louise followed immediately afterwards as we set off towards the inn. The building only got more welcoming as we approached. The entire place gave off a very warm vibe, seemed like the sort of place that people would flock to on a good day. Door's unlocked, guess the boss is at least in. Well, hopefully, this will turn out well enough.
So, seems the building is completely empty. Or, well, mostly at least.

There was a lone girl standing at what I'd assumed was the main counter. She was idly playing with a mug, seemingly attempting to stand it on its corner. Notably, she was clearly of Japanese ancestry much like Siesta. Black hair adorned with a white kerchief, almond-shaped hazel eyes, she was wearing a simplistic green dress that exposed a considerable portion of her cleavage with a large white apron and... Well, to put it bluntly, she made Siesta look physically underdeveloped in comparison. Something tells me that the two are probably related.

Clearly, she'd not noticed that we'd entered, so I took a moment to look around the tavern area, such as it was.

Plenty of simple tables and chairs, and even a few diner-style booths built against the walls. The panelled walls were painted white with unpainted supports exposed all along the walls, giving the inn a rather rustic look. Embellishments were few, mostly shelves with fabric doilies and flower vases. Oddly, the back room, the kitchen I would assume, was visible through a very modern-esque fast food window/counter thing where food orders would be placed to be collected and distributed by serving staff. The room seemed to be lit by mage lights which were placed in clear glass bowls suspended from the ceiling by hooks.

Colbert had explained to me that mage lights are just enchanted hardened glass orbs that begin to emit a bright light depending on how much they've been heated and 'shut off' when they're rapidly tapped against or with something. A bit of a bitch to operate if you aren't a mage, but functional and requires no real maintenance otherwise, so that didn't seem all that odd to me. Overall the set-up was pretty basic. It was clear that their business was young... Or at least hasn't had quite enough success to really dress the place up. Either way is good for me if I decide to partner up with them.

Louise seemed to grow annoyed at the counter girl's continued failure to notice us, giving an attention-grabbing cough which caused her to jump in surprise. The mug was knocked over and only saved from rolling off of the counter top by its handle. She quickly ran around the counter and approached us with a huge, beaming smile on her face.

Notably, she stopped and gave me a brief, particular stare before she finished closing the distance between us and gave what I'd assume was the standard greeting of the inn. "Greetings and welcome to the Charming Faeries Inn Masters! My name is Jessica, I apologise for the wait; we weren't expecting any customers on the Founder's Day! How may I help you?" Just gotta say now that I could see her entirely... Damn, that is some long, sexy hair. Yeah, I find really long hair on girls sexy, what of it!? Anyways, she bore a resemblance to Siesta, so that she was beautiful went without saying.

Louise chose to speak up for us. "We require separate rooms for the night, and if it is at all possible, a meal with drinks as well."

Jessica nodded cheerfully in response. "Very good masters, would mutton stew and a glass each of this year's wine from Tarbes be acceptable?"

"I'll take something non-alcoholic, thank you." I chimed in before the order was finalised. Jessica gave me a peculiar look before nodding as she spun on her heel and called out to an unseen individual in the back.
"Scarron! We have customers! Two servings of mutton stew, a glass of wine, and a glass of-" Jessica stopped and turned to gaze back at me for a moment. "Sweet cider!" ...Something tells me that a certain maid has been sharing letters with a certain relative in the capital.

"Oh, how lovely my sweet! Please take a seat masters! Your meal shall be out shortly~!" A stupefying chill ran up my spine, and I could feel that Louise had pretty well the same reaction to that... Unsettling falsetto voice that sing-songed from the back room, just out of sight. Jessica had ducked behind the counter, presumably to fetch our room keys for us... I glanced over to Louise to find that she was giving me a nervous stare... Nah, we're probably just overreacting to nothing.

"I'm sure it's nothing, here, let's claim a booth next to the windows, yeah?" I stated as I about-faced and made for the booth nearest to the entrance, which as far as I knew was also the building's only exit. I dropped onto the lightly padded wooden bench as Louise sat directly across from me, nervousness painted plainly across her features. I glanced towards the backroom again to see that Jessica was giving us a predatory smirk...

Uh... Okay, anyways...

"So, the place seems nice enough at first glance." The diminutive blonde gave me an unsettled glare. Guess she isn't in the mood for talking right now then. I mean, okay, that falsetto was all kinds of unsettling, but it wasn't that-

"Ooh, your meal is reeeaaady dearies~!" Jesus tap-dancing-!

The man that... Pranced from the backroom doors was just as, or was at least damn near as tall as me, but he was built like a fucking tank! He was muscled, almost comically so, and oiled, oiled! Why was he oiled!? What possible purpose could that serve!? And his clothes...

On his top half he wore a purple waistcoat with a single, large brass button which looked like something one would see on a themed Chippendale dancer, complete with plunging neckline which exposed his chiselled, rock-hard abs and a large, pink neckerchief coupled with slate grey breeches and stark white hose which were so tight as to leave very little to the imagination... Going off of his slicked-back, moderately long black hair and immaculate van dyke beard and hazel, almond-shaped eyes he was pretty clearly also Japanese, more so than Jessica or Siesta even.

Probably related to one or both of them, though noticeably older than either.

Have I mentioned his lips? Because in that regard he makes the likes of Mick Jagger look like his lips were pencilled on in comparison- Oh God, he's wearing make-up too... ...Lip gloss, I only just noticed that he's wearing lip gloss. Did lip gloss even exist in the early modern era? Maker preserve me...

Okay, don't be an ass, people can dress and be as camp as they damn well please- Holy sweet Jesus did this guy take it up a notch, though! As he inexplicably spun in place I'd noticed that his waist coat had a large, black ribbon on the back, like one would find on a cocktail dress intended for women. 'Camp' would be an understatement, which I found all sorts of confusing. This would be over-the-top for modern Earth, but here, an early-modern setting of all places? If this man isn't an infamous eccentric I will be absolutely dumbstruck.

The man lifted our bowls of stew from the tray he had somehow managed to keep stable despite his prancing and delicately placed them before us, followed immediately afterwards by Louise's glass of wine and my mug of cider. "I simply must apologise for the lack of staff this day my lovelies, however upon the day of our Founder's birth, I simply could not ask that the fairies remain to work! I pray that you each can find it within your hearts to forgive me!" He'd started off bubbly as fuck but
now sounded as if he were on the verge of tears. He was obviously putting on a show, but still.

I stifled my shock and did my best to prevent my voice from cracking, least of all because I'd just discovered that were I to partner with this business he would be who I'd be working with. "Think nothing of it, good sir, it would be ludicrous to expect you to make your employees work on a day of worship." I thankfully managed to keep my voice level. The huge man bobbed happily in place with a joyous smile on his face.

"Oh, such a kind and understanding young man! I thank you, from the very bottom of my heart I thank you!" He stated as he... Spun, and curtsied with a comical flourish. The fuck... "Now please, enjoy your meal my sweet darlings. Now, I return to my post~!" He then pranced back to the backroom, leaving Louise and I quite confused. I couldn't help but notice that Jessica was giving us a particularly sadistic grin from her place behind the main counter before she approached us with a pair of old-fashioned brass keys in hand.

"Well, you handled that quite a bit better than most do." I wasn't entirely sure how to read grin she was giving me at that moment. "Here's your keys. Yours is the door at the end of the hall milady." She stated as she handed the smaller of the two keys to Louise. "And yours is the door closest to the top of the stairs handsome." I gratefully took the key with a- Wait, did she just- "We lock the front door at sundown, but Scarron's room is the one decorated with white roses, flick a few pebbles at his window if you come back late to get his attention and he'll let you in." Jessica turned on her heel and made for the backroom as well.

"Hold on, what about payment?" I called out to her before she'd disappeared into the back after Scarron. She turned and gave me an incredulous look.

"The day that the man who rescued my little cousin, filled our hometown's dwindling grain stores, and renovated the winery pays for anything in the Charming Faeries Inn will be the day that the Founder Brimir marries an Elf." She stated with a... Particular grin before she passed through the doorway into the kitchens.

...Huh.

"What... Do you know her?" Louise suddenly asked me, confusion lacing her tone.

"No... However, I think it's clear that she's related to Siesta, the maid that's been hanging around me lately. It seems that Siesta has been in contact with her, and told her about me. Enough for her to be able to recognise me at a glance, at any rate." I stated with a shrug. Louise shrugged herself in response.

"Well, I suppose it would be all but impossible to not recognise you going off of even the vaguest of descriptions; you being as exotic as you are." Yeah... Being sincerely described as 'exotic' was kind of odd. I mean, okay, sure, I was something of an odd ethnic combination even back on Earth, but I didn't stand out significantly enough to be considered 'exotic.'

Man, the lack of ethnic diversity here is really throwing me off...

"I'd assumed that the maid dyed her hair black to make herself stand out even more than she would normally with those eyes. But seeing those two... Is that really their natural hair colour?" Louise seemed more than a tad confused. Understandable, considering that dark hair isn't supposed to naturally occur among Halkeganians according to what I've learned of them thus far. Siesta and these two are pretty damned obviously Japanese, so it's clear that I'm not the only one that has been summoned from Earth all things considered... I should really look into this.
Going off of their features I'd have to guess that Siesta and Jessica are maybe a quarter Japanese, and Scarron, probably Jessica and/or Siesta's father or uncle going off of his age is at least a halfie, meaning that their Japanese blood can't be more than two generations down the line. If this individual from Earth is still kicking around... I should try and meet them if I can.

...Wait, she'd assumed that Siesta has been dying her hair black? "Louise... Isn't proper black dye like, stupidly expensive?" The blonde gave me a surprised look, probably at my crude choice of words there before she stopped and started blushing somewhat in response.

"I... I had never really thought about that, but you're right. Commoners could never afford black dye to waste on colouring their hair..." That only seemed to confound Louise even further. We can get into this topic once I'm sure what the deal with Siesta's family is. For now...

"So, hey; free room and board." I gave Louise a wry grin. Her eyes narrowed in response. Uh...

"What was it that she said? 'Refilled their food stores, and renovated the winery?' What did she mean by that?" Er... That's right, I haven't told Louise about the soda cans I gave to Siesta... Which in retrospect I now know where worth enough to... Well, to allow Tarbes to just coast through their year of blighted grape crops and apparently improve upon their existing wine-making faculties at the very least... Good to know Siesta spent the money wisely, at any rate. "...Jophiel?" Louise's tone was laced with ice. Um...

"I... May have given Siesta a few aluminium cans when I'd heard that Tarbes was struggling to remain afloat due to having suffered from a blighted grape crop before learning exactly how much individual cans are worth."

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...It was almost as if Louise had been frozen in time. I think I may have broken her. "...Louise?"

"...Well, that explains why the maid has been waiting on you hand and foot as if you were the Founder himself." With that she redirected all of her attention to the bowl of stew resting before her, mechanically scooping spoonfuls of it into her mouth... Yup, definitely broke her. Guess I'll just focus on emptying out my own bowl for now then.

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I gave my belly a contented pat as Louise and I reached the top of the stairwell. She still had a thousand-yard stare but had at least managed to finish her meal. Yeesh girl, I just gave a commoner enough money to renovate her home town's winery on a whim, 'tis nothing to be freaked out over. Anyways, before we'd finished Jessica had popped out of the back room and shoved some bannock scones on us, citing that she wouldn't let a 'boy so big' and a 'girl clearly underfed' scrape by on such a 'paltry' meal. Dear God, and here I thought over-sized portions were a distinctly American thing. I felt mildly overstuffed, but everything did taste rather good.

With the way Jessica spoke you'd think that she and Scarron would be packing a few extra pounds, but that dress was pretty tightly fitted; I can confirm she's a healthy weight for her size. And Scarron... Yeah, comparable to Arnold Schwarzenegger in his prime. Think she's just attempting to butter us up, which was a good tactic for encouraging loyalty in customers. Scarron seems to be a tad on the eccentric side, but otherwise, I'm liking what I've seen thus far.
I tested the key to my room, and yup, opened just fine. The room was on the small side, only enough space for a wood-framed bed, bedside table, linens folded up on said table, and a small waist-high dresser. But considering it's a clearly meant to be an overnight inn I'll let that slide. Rustic, lots of natural wood tones and uncoloured linens. The bed was maybe a twin, smaller than I'm used to, but it looked... Barely adequate enough for a person of my size.

I approached the bed, dumped much of my shit on the dresser top, then dropped myself on the mattress... Wow, this seems to be a feather bed, but already I can tell that I'm going to miss my real bed tonight. "Does the bedding suit your needs, my Lord? It looks to be a tad on the small side for such a large man..." Jessica's voice spoke up from the still open doorway. I couldn't quite place the tone of voice she was using, oddly.

"It will suffice for the night." I could hear very light footfalls close the distance between us. Soft sole shoes? Hadn't noticed that beforehand. The voluptuous raven-haired beauty took a position at the side of the bed on which I was lying, a cocky grin painted on her exotic face. The expression actually suited her well. Have I mentioned that I really like confident girls?

"You sure? You don't look terribly comfortable... I might feel bad leaving you on this lumpy thing tonight..."

"Heh, are all of Siesta's family so considerate to strangers?" Jessica melodically chuckled as she leaned forward- Sweet Jesus-!

"Depends on the individual... And with as much as you've given us, I don't think anyone in the family would consider you a stranger." I'm normally a very reserved individual, with a steel-clad control of my sex drive. It took every ounce of my inner strength to keep focused on her face, stooped over as she was. It was almost as if...

"Uh, Jessica? I can see pretty much all the way down your dress." Her grin only widened.

"I know." ... The type of girl that likes teasing men, huh? Well, I certainly appreciate the sight if nothing else... "Siesta wasn't exaggerating. You really are quite the gentleman."

"Why do you say that?" I asked with a nervous chuckle.

"Well, most men take a glimpse down my blouse as an invitation to paw at me, regardless of whether giving them a look was intentional or not, yet here I am, all but presenting myself to you and the only thing you're gripping at are the bed sheets." Wa- Oh, I am sort of clutching onto the bedding as if for dear life, aren't I? She chuckled melodically again, which caused her to... Jiggle almost hypnotically.

"Well, my little cousin certainly does have good taste in men." With that, and much to my dismay, she straightened her back to stand at her full modest height and gave me a fairly warm smile- Wait, what did she just say?

"I was worried that you'd try to bed me the moment I gave you a look, but look at you, no lecherous comments, wayward hands, and you've even managed to keep yourself at only half-mast!" What? Half-mast- GAH! I grasped at the bedside linens and pulled them over my mutinous mid-section. Jessica laughed aloud this time. "Why do you cover yourself as if in shame? Don't worry milord, from a man like you I'll take it as a compliment!" Eh, heh heh... Awkward...

"Jophiel? What's going on?" Louise popped into view, an inquiring eyebrow raised as she looked me and Jessica over.

"Oh, nothing my lady, I was merely ensuring our Noble guests find their accommodations adequate
and your companion told me a most entertaining joke regarding scholars and goats." Louise gave an appraising 'humph' in response. "Incidentally, is everything to your liking my lady?" Jessica asked in a most chipper tone. Louise shrugged in response.

"The room is on the small side, however, this is merely an overnight inn, such is justifiable considering that." That sentence... Could have been structured better. Louise shifted her weight onto her left leg as she continued. "Featherbedding is quite rare for an inn, it is of simple design, but otherwise is of unexpectedly high quality." Jessica nodded simply in response.

"Thank you, my lady, it brings me great cheer to know you are pleased." At that, Louise directed her attention back to me.

"Are you ready to travel to the markets Jophiel?" I attempted to not be awkward with the bundle of linens still inexplicably gathered over my misbehaving midsection.

"I should be ready in a few minutes, please wait for me in the front." Louise looked ready to protest before she rolled her eyes and set off for the stairs.

"Don't make me wait for too long." With that, Jessica and I were alone again. She turned and gave me a rather predatory smirk and spoke up in a hushed, albeit husky tone...

"Do you require that I 'Lend you a hand,' my lord?" ...Okay, even I'm not dense enough to not know exactly what she's suggesting. I'm going to get rather frustrated rather fast at this rate, would be best to kill this teasing immediately. There's something she said that I want to seriously ask about anyways.

"Please stop." I stated firmly with a hint of annoyance in my voice. Jessica's expression faltered somewhat. "I appreciate the flirting, but you're taking it a tad farther than I'm comfortable with." Jessica was now giving me a contemplative stare. "Besides... What was that you said about Siesta? That she's got good taste in men?" Jessica gave me a look I couldn't quite read again.

"In regards to how she's head-over-heels for you?" ...What. Jessica's expression changed rather quickly. Evidently, she's better at reading faces than I am. "There's no way you haven't noticed. Siesta has never been good at masking her crushes." ...No way, she's just been following me around because I've been nice to her and gave her enough money to feed her entire village and renovate their winery and gave her a personally hand-made necklace made of a material worth more than gold-

...Oh.

...

...

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...Oh.

Jessica spoke up once I'd sat up. "...Oh my, you actually haven't noticed, have you?" I'd repositioned myself to sit on the edge of the bed with my gaze firmly affixed to the floor. "...My lord, I've noticed thus far that true to Siesta's assertions, you are quite lax when it comes to speaking casually with those below your station-" I grimaced in discomfort at that statement. Don't care for being reminded of the societal gap between commoners and nobles. "...so I don't think you'll punish me for having the gall to ask you this, but now knowing that Siesta has feelings for you, are you going to address them?"
It took me several seconds to redirect my gaze from the floor to Jessica. Her face was still quite unreadable. "I was just trying to be nice; there were no ulterior motives behind my actions."

She sighed. "That isn't what I was asking." Ugh...

"I'm in a very complicated place right now, it would be extremely unfair to Siesta to enter into a relationship with her when I'm in such a turbulent and unsure situation... Beyond that, I've only known her for a week now. It would be far too soon for a relationship for me." Jessica nodded in understanding.

"I see. Would I be overstepping to ask that you explain this to her? At least before she manages to coax you into her bed." I nodded in-

"Wait, what!?!" I spoke up in shock. The fuck?

"Hm? Why do you look so surprised? She's a commoner, milord. We don't have the same rules about sex as you nobles do. Frankly, knowing my firebrand of a cousin I'm surprised she hasn't tried harder to catch you on your own in the bathhouse to date." I- Okay, that's-

...Wait. "...Tried harder?" I couldn't help but ask for clarification. A Cheshire Cat grin found its way on her face.

"Well, yeah. You gave her a necklace worth more than its weight in gold. If the language she's been using in her letters to me is anything to go by she's been quite eager to show her appreciation for the noble sire's kindness." ...I... What.

But, she seems so reserved... Which she would be after nearly losing her livelihood due to attempting to fuck with the nobility to sate her boredom. Crap.

"She reads too many of those trashy noble/commoner romance books. Little surprise that when a kind, exotic noble who happens to be not so hard on the eyes comes into her life she's eager to reenact the bathhouse scene from 'The Lusty Lord and the Scandalous Scullery Maid' with him." ...Well... That's kind of unfortunate.

"Too bad she's a year out of my acceptable age range..." Jessica looked mighty confused at that statement.

"Your what? What is that supposed to mean?" I sighed wearily.

"I don't touch girls more than four years younger or older than myself. Personal rule." Jessica seemed rather perplexed now.

"...Why?" I shrugged.

"Because I don't." Which, admittedly was as much a shame as it was a relief, Siesta is rather quite the looker, but I'd rather not have to deal with any complications like that here.

Jessica was giving me a rather odd look. If Halkeganian culture is anything like old European culture peasant girls are considered to be of marriageable age while still being young teenagers; plus Siesta's pretty clearly fully-developed, so in that context my considering her to be 'too young' would be a perplexing point of view. "How old are you, milord?"

"21." Jessica's grin returned in full force. Um... "...Why?

"Siesta turns 18 in six days." ...Aw, crap. "Mm, I think I have a good idea for a gift you can present
"Jophiel! What in the Founder's name are you doing!? We have things to do!" Saved by the Louise! I leapt from the bed and immediately made for the door.

"Sorry, don't want to keep her waiting, talk to you later!" As I turned to give Jessica a friendly grin and wave I noticed that she had that predatory grin on her face again. Lordy loo this girl gets too much of a kick out of messing with men... Wonder what it says about me that I actually kind of like that?

Anyways, Louise seemed a tad annoyed once I'd reached the base of the stairs.

"Sorry about that, Jessica seems interested in getting to know me considering the way Siesta has been talking about me in her letters."

Louise rolled her eyes in response. "And? She's a commoner. You don't have to waste time entertaining their curiosity if you don't want to."

I made little attempt to hide my momentary scowl at the short girl. She seemed somewhat perturbed as I stepped past her to open the door. She said nothing as she passed me by as I held the door open for her. I'd forgotten that at the end of the day she's a noble; she's been raised to believe that she's inherently superior to commoners, and- Well... Frankly put: that isn't wrong in a sense.

Nobles are capable of magic, commoners are not. Nobles can deal with exceedingly dangerous creatures like dragons and griffons with a certain degree of effort, commoners can't even really defend themselves from lowly orcs, let alone greater beasts such as the aforementioned dragons. I don't like it, but unlike on Earth, the nobility here have some undeniable basis in fact when they assert their power and necessity in protecting society from extinction at large.

Barring a stupidly unrealistic technology surge that results in human civilisation here suddenly having WWII-era tech that isn't something that's going to be changing anytime soon I think, so it'd be best for me to just swallow my complaints and learn to deal with it for the foreseeable future.

...Still would be nice if nobles weren't such condescending dicks for no good reason. Would be nice if I could eventually work that particular aspect out of Louise's personality... Might try to chip away at that over time, actually... And I just realised that I've been awkwardly standing at the inn's entrance still holding the door open, and Louise looked a tad annoyed at that once she'd turned around and noticed that I wasn't following her. I sheepishly scurried up to her after shutting the door behind me. She scoffed and we were off for the markets.
Describing the markets as 'bustling' would be doing it an injustice. So many short white people... Anyways, there were plenty of open stalls with vendors loudly attempting to attract customers. Plenty of meats, fruits, veggies, and grains. Plus a metric fuck tonne of more fish than I'd have expected, in all sorts of varieties I didn’t recognise at all at that too! Good news for a fish meat lover like me. Gonna have to ask about fish-based dishes at the inn when we get back.

There were all sorts of other products on sale as well. Trinkets, pastries and confections of all shapes and sizes, even a plushie stand of all things. Louise bee-lined for that the moment she laid eyes on it and left with a small armful of assorted fantasy plush canines; mostly what I think were supposed to be droogs and wolves with a single manticore and dog among the pile she'd eagerly stuffed into one of her travel packs.

It was rather quite adorable seeing her get so worked up over the surprisingly well-crafted little toys. I'd briefly considered grabbing a droog plushie for Siesta seeing as how I was aware that she liked them before recalling the whole thing about... Well, yeah. Gonna lay off on the gifts to her for a while.

"So-" I started, my mood thankfully lifted by Louise's beaming smile. "Where are we heading next?" With a spring in her step, the blonde chirped cheerfully in response.

"We might as well head to the tailor first. If nothing else we can get a cape made for you before anything else so nobody will mistake you for a commoner." Alright, time to try and get a half-cape instead of some big dumb wrap-around thing like the academy students wear.

"Would a half-cape be acceptable?" Louise didn't even bother turning to me with her response.

"Yes. Why wouldn't one be?" Well...

"I haven't seen anyone at the academy use one."

"The academy cloak is mandatory wear during school hours, outside of the school cloaks are typically only seen among travellers. Half-capes are very popular in Tristain, I've never seen Mother or Eleanore wearing a full cape, for example." I see. Goodie.

"I was also thinking..." Louise turned to gaze at me out of the corner of her eye now. "Would it be a good idea to have formal wear made for me, just in case?" Louise stopped, I ceased walking about a step ahead of her myself.

"I hadn't considered that. You don't seem to have much in the way of formal clothing..." Her eyes narrowed in suspicion somewhat at that. Err...

"Formal wear is kept separate from everyday clothing in Canada, in its own room entirely, in fact." Louise gave me a queer look.

"Why?" I shrugged.

"Never thought to ask, it's just how it's been as long as I can remember." She seemed perplexed at my story but nonetheless nodded in understanding.

"So your formal dress was in another room when I summoned you... Yes, then it would be wise to have something made for you while we're here." She started her march forth again, I fell into step
alongside her. "Can you recall your people's fashion well enough to instruct a tailor in recreating an outfit for you?" I blinked in surprise.

"What? Why wouldn't I just have something made in the local fashion?" Louise emitted an annoyed huff.

"Because you would look strange garbed in our fashions. Also, I want to see what men wear in your culture when you are required to dress up." She gave me a teasing grin with that statement. ...I see. Hm... Maybe I could have some fun with this. Perhaps... Yes, I think I have a good idea.

"Very well, I would be glad to do so." Louise looked fairly pleased with herself as I began piecing together a Red Coat/Napoleon/Assassin-esque uniform in my mind's eye.

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So after a few misunderstandings about what I was asking for when I said 'half cape,' I finally had my Ezio-style cloth draped over my shoulder. Had to argue with Louise about the colour for a bit, apparently black is too 'ostentatious' for a low-key guy like me, which only applies to capes rather than my regular black clothes for whatever reason. We finally reached a compromise and settled on Academy grey like the colour used by second-year students, if only because it's more versatile than brown or blue would be and would help me blend into the school's students somewhat.

Louise also had the le Blanc family crest emblazoned on it to identify me as a close ally of her family, which was to be expected.

Furthermore: the tailor took my measurements and we discussed at length what my formal uniform would look like. I did my best to get across my ideas with words before I gave up and reimbursed him for a large vellum sheet and ink to just damn well draw it.

Both Louise and the tailor, a Mr Maximilian from York, seemed rather taken aback at my meagre drawing ability, which is a tad surprising considering I'd describe what I produced as 'blah' on account of working with a quill and vellum, which feels nothing like pen/pencil and paper.

"Jophiel..." Louise started, continuing to stare at my outfit blueprints. "You didn't mention that you're an artist!" Hey now, I wouldn't go that far...

"I can do line art, I'm not sure that qualifies me as an artist." I shrugged, while Maximilian's eyes bored into the sheet, his gaze so intense I'd almost begun to worry that it might burst into flame.

"Magnificent!" The man damn near as tall as myself suddenly started with a gleeful look in his eyes. "I will be ecstatic to work on such a unique outfit! Surely you shall draw the eyes of all those around you in such accoutrements!" Mmm... Perhaps. That'll be 'fun,' I thought sarcastically to my hermit self. Didn't think this through as well as I should have.

I suppressed a sigh before speaking. "So, you have Louise's measurements as well, anything else you need before we leave?" Maximilian turned to face us and bowed elegantly.

"No, noble sire. This should be all that I require. Your goods shall be delivered to the academy once they are finished." Fantastic. Louise and I paid him for the services and were on our way, leaving the handsome tailor shop behind us as we set off for the nearest blacksmith's shop.

"...So, how far do your artistic abilities stretch?" Louise piped up as we continued down the paved roadway, my shoulder bag loaded down with a fair amount of the stuff Louise had picked up, on account of her arms clearly not used to hauling around a load for any amount of time.

"Not very. I focused almost entirely on line art in my art classes, my colouring is amateurish at best,
and my shading is... Better left unmentioned." I stated with a shrug.

"I see..." Louise seemed interested in my limited artistic ability. Unfortunately, I'm not very good at painting, so I don't see my abilities being of much use in a pre-pencil and paper world. Which is unfortunate. I like drawing.

...Actually, considering it, could I introduce paper to Halk? I can vaguely recall watching a few documentaries on ancient Chinese paper-making, so there'd be some guess work, but Colbert and I would probably be able to work it out eventually, right? ...It would be worth a try at least. I think it involves shredding wood, turning it into pulp with water, then flattening it out with some sort of press, finishing with setting it out to dry. Worth considering, at any rate. Would be more economical than working with animal leather for writing if nothing else.

"Okay Jophiel, we're here." I was shaken from my thoughts as we came to a halt in front of a rather small building. A bronze sword sign hung over the doorway, making its purpose clear even to an illiterate fuck like myself. Notably, the building itself was in somewhat... Rough condition compared to the others. This is one of the businesses that I'd been considering buying into, so I found that a little disconcerting. Hopefully, the owner is just in a rough spot and can't afford to keep up outward appearances at the moment. Louise gave me a concerned side-ward glance...

Well, not going to find out if the place is worth investing in unless we talk to the owner. I pushed the door open and spied a dusty old shop with shelves which were... Notably under-stocked. Not a great sign.

Clearly, a weapons shop, though the weapons all looked to be rather on the... Munitions grade side of things. Save for a single, grossly over-designed Norse-style spatha hanging from a fancy plaque over the main counter, most certainly a wall-hanger, many of the weapons were noticeably rusted over, or just banged up beyond the point of repair. I'm... Not sure that investing in this shop would be wise.

I gave Louise a worried look, she seemed to share my concerns. I was about to motion back out the door when the shop's owner, a scrawny man that whose appearance just SCREAMED 'greasy used car salesman' stepped out of a back room and began grinning at us like a hungry predator.

"A-ha! Greetings, and welcome to my humble shop my most auspicious Noble lord and lady! How may I help you?" I immediately regretted not turning and walking out the moment I got a glimpse in the store. Hm... Well, there's one sure-fire way to catch him in the act if he's really a con man. I stepped forward, my chest puffed out in an exaggerated manner.

"I require a sword of nothing less than the highest quality! A monster-slaying blade which will awe and impress my peers beyond reason, a weapon that would make even the royal family positively green with envy so that I might do proud my beloved partner!" Louise had been further in the shop than I was. With her back now turned to the shopkeeper she looked at me as if I'd claimed to be a giant anthropomorphic aardvark.

A more sheltered individual may not have been able to properly read the shopkeeper's expression, but to me, it was quite clear that in his mind he was thinking something along the lines of 'SCORE!' He about-faced and reached for the mirror-polished spatha currently hanging on the wall. He gleefully beckoned me towards the counter and presented the sword to me, obviously expecting me to be impressed as the over heavy thing was placed in my hands...

"This, milord, is a one-of-a-kind masterpiece! The blade is of pure, weapons-grade silver the likes of which would pierce a dragon's hide as if it were lamb's skin, the gems are only the rarest available in all corners of Halkegania, and-" I made a concerted effort to tune out the obvious con-artist. Well, I
suppose I am sort of impressed. One has to be putting a great deal of effort into the art of failure to produce such a garbage... Sword-like object.

The handle is too long for an arming sword, yet too short for a bastard sword. The blade is shorter than one would expect from a spatha and is awkwardly tip-heavy in spite of the over-sized hazelnut pommel that seems to be made of solid polished iron. The pommel and guard were both inlaid with... What looked like gems at a glance, but upon closer inspection is clearly coloured glass of middling quality. The blade has runes inscribed on either side. The edge has what I could only describe as a tertiary bevel, it also lacks a distill taper of any kind... Bet that if I were to bend it over my knee it would stay bent.

...As a matter of fact...

I gripped the tip of the blade, brought my knee up, placed the sword over it, then pulled. The blade deformed with alarming ease and stayed that way. I could tell that I could have done that with just my bare hands, no knee necessary. If the ear-piercing shriek he was emitting is anything to go by the shopkeeper is none too pleased with my little test. "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING TO MY MERCHANDISE YOU RUFFIAN!?" His face had turned a rather peculiar shade of red, and Louise seemed rather taken aback by my action as well.

"W-what in the Founder's name are you doing Jophiel!?" I responded by unceremoniously tossing the wall-hanger sword on the counter top the gaunt man was attending followed by drawing my own REAL sword, the Hellion, and performing the same test on it. As expected it flexed back to true after I relieved the pressure on the blade. Louise's expression changed fairly quickly once she'd noticed this, and the shop owner turned pale. I returned the Hellion to its sheath on the back of my hip and addressed the blonde's concern.

Halkegania lacks true steel, but I'd tested a spare guard's sword Colbert had in his office, and it still flexed a little, suggesting at least a mild steel; probably something akin to what the Romans had. "Real iron swords, milady, don't bend. They flex." Previously, she looked flabbergasted at my actions. So quickly did her expression switch to fury directed at the shop keep that the change was almost instantaneous. She stomped up to the counter and slammed her palms on it as hard as she could, which caused the owner to jump pretty significantly.

"You would DARE attempt to cheat us you cur!?" Last I'd seen her this mad was with those maids... Uh oh.

Just as quickly as she'd approached the counter she'd spun on her heel and stomped for the main door, throwing it open she projected her voice and loudly and shrilly as she could.

"GUARDS! GUAAARDS!!" As soon as she began calling for guardsmen the shopkeeper kicked off his heel and ran for the back room, which probably means there's a back door... Wait. Why is he running? He shouldn't be trying to flagrantly escape from such a small crime unless... He's a wanted man.

Am I allowing a criminal to just bolt out the back door to escape from justice? Maybe I should...

I glanced at the runes, and a surprisingly entertaining thought of chasing down a wanted criminal in a fantasy world entered my mind, then the runes suddenly lit up and I felt a particularly strong urge to chase him down.

...Well, a chase wasn't what I was expecting to get involved in today. But you know what? Fuck it. I bounded over the counter, knocking over a few empty vases in the process and made to follow the cheating git. The familiar runes on my hand began to glow noticeably as I felt an adrenaline rush at
the prospect of chasing down the man, suddenly causing me to feel invigorated and physically light. Wow, wasn't expecting that out of the runes! Heh... This ought to be fun.

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Seems that the man thought to block off the back door from the outside when he'd passed through it. Smart, but the runes allowed my to just jump clean through the door, sending both it and what appeared to be the heavy bookcase that was used to barricade it flying into the middle of the mercifully empty back street. I hadn't even thought about whether I'd be able to do that when I charged the door, just sort of did it... File that away for consideration once things have calmed down.

I swung my head side-to-side down the street and just spied the man passing into a side alley down the left path. He was riding a droog, which under normal conditions would mean that I wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell of catching him on foot, however... The runes allow me to cannonball my way through barricaded doors... With a grin, I couldn't help but wonder... What will it do for my running speed?

With intent, I launched forth and- WHOA! I nearly face-planted when I attempted to stop and had to catch myself on the pavement with an out-stretched hand. I turned back to gauge the distance I'd covered... Probably five or so metres in a single running stride at a guesstimate. Holy hell! I wasn't even putting a great deal of power into that step, and I'd also launched forward, fast... The grin returned in full force... So, super-human movement? Oh, this should be fun!

I launched forward, this time expecting the huge strides. I was never great at running, but it felt all but instinctual to move like this, with massive, powerful steps, hunched forward, all but launching myself with each tread...

I'd covered the ground which he'd passed in seconds. ...And learned that tight corners are something that I can't really do while super-sprinting when I tried to turn into the alleyway and my forward momentum conflicted with my attempt to rapidly change direction, caused me to wipe out right into a brick wall. I came to a rolling stop on the ground, at the most, it felt like I'd maybe lightly jumped at that wall. Okay, that really should have hurt a LOT more than it did.

I glanced up from my spot on the ground. Mere seconds had passed since I'd burst through the back door of the weapons shop, and the man had stopped and turned, likely in response to the sound of me crashing into a wall. He looked mortified before he urged his droog to kept going forth, now pushing the great mutt to rush as fast as it could... Not that it would do him much good.

I took advantage of my low position to launch myself from a runner's pose. I could easily catch the man right now... I gotta say, want to test out my apparent new rune-granted superhuman abilities. Can I pull off manoeuvres from Assassin's Creed, or hell, even Prototype now? Unfortunately, the back streets of Bruxelles aren't well-suited to that sort of fun, plus it would be pretty irresponsible of me to drag this chase out for the sake of sating my own curiosity. I can run tests for this later, right now I've got an apparent criminal to catch.

With a few well-placed strides I leapt in front of the man and stopped myself with a three-point landing before spinning to a stand to face him, drawing my kopis with a flourish as I did so. The man and droog nearly wiped out when they stopped and looked utterly flabbergasted at me. I couldn't help but respond with a cocky grin. Tackling him off of the beast would have been more dramatic... But considering that I'd sort of exploded a solid wooden door and bookcase by running into them a few moments earlier that probably would have been a terrible idea.

It took a few moments for the man to process what had happened, and for an instant, it almost looked as if he was going to about-face and attempt to keep running, he relented in the end, though, to my
admittedly slight disappointment. After making him dismount directing him back to the shop was uneventful. The guards that Louise had called looked rather pleased to notice that I'd caught the man myself just as they'd passed through the back door, with Louise following shortly behind them.

"Ha! Look at that, the lad did our job for us! And he didn't even hurt the git to do it neither! Good on 'ya milord!" The larger of the two bronze-clad guardsmen cheerfully stated with an understated Scot-I mean Highland Albion accent.

Louise seemed impressed as well. Heh, I'm going to begin developing a reputation if I keep this sort of thing up, aren't I?

"Now, about you, 'ya cheeky little snake... I'd have been willing to give you the benefit of the doubt had you not ran. I mean, why would an innocent man run, ain't I right Luke?" He asked the other, thinner guardsman who was apparently named Luke, who nodded in agreement. "So, whadda 'ya say we bring you down to the guard house, maybe look into runaway bounties from Gallia and Albion, hm?"

The Con-man turned pale at the suggestion, and the guardsman grinned in response.

"If it turns out this cur has a sack 'o gold on his head you'll be the first to know milords. Barring that, you'll never hear from him again. Either way, we'll make sure he doesn't trick any honest folk out of their coins from now on. Oh, and for a more immediate reward, feel free to claim whatever you will from his stock, I doubt he'll be needing it where he's going. So, pleasant day Noble folk!" With that the Fantasy!Scottish guardsmen roughly took custody of the man while Luke beckoned his droog to follow them and led him down the street and away from us.

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As I picked wood splinters out of my hair and patted the wood dust off of my clothes, Louise and I chose to go through the now vacant weapons shop to get back to the main street, stopping in the main room to look over the wares, just to see if there was anything decent worth taking. My hopes weren't high. "So..." The blonde lady started. "...Are you going to tell me how you managed to catch a man riding a droog on foot?"

Hm, this should be interesting to explain. "Well, for starters, I think I know what my familiar ability is now." To say that Louise perked up would be an understatement.

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Louise was giggling almost manically. She also refused to stop hugging me. "You can outrun a droog and jump through reinforced wood without suffering injury! You're like a hero from the old Brimiric epics!" She started giggling and burying her face in my chest again. "I knew it, I knew I was right when I told Mother I would summon a great and powerful Familiar!" Heh, guess she has good reason to be excited then.

I'd given up on trying to calm her down and opted to instead wrap my arms over her shoulder and around the back of her head. If she wants to be excited I'll just let her. We've still got plenty of time to burn, so it isn't like it's a great inconvenience to amuse her for a time.

"I'll bet you're super strong and could beat a war droog with your bare hands too!" Okay, running really fast I'm okay with testing, but I think I'll pass on testing that theory out. She finally pulled her face away from my chest and beamed up at me, her eyes joyfully twinkling like a pair of brilliant amethysts. "I bet you could even break a sword with your bare hands!" At that, I couldn't help but laugh and tussle the little blonde's hair affectionately.
"Okay, okay, calm down Louise, you're getting ridiculous!" She briefly pulled herself back into hugging my chest like an excited child, which I with a good-natured eye-roll returned before she finally released me.

There was little doubt in my mind that the Familiar bond was making us far quicker to grow affectionate with each other than would be normal, but ya know what? I'm okay with that. I've never been all that great at making friends. It felt nice to become so friendly with someone so quickly for once. It also only seemed like a good thing that I'd quickly grow close to my summoner if we're to be bound together for the foreseeable future.

"I want to find out what exactly the extent of my Familiar abilities are, so I'll be looking into this once we get back to the academy." Louise eagerly nodded in response to my statement. Anyways...
"So, the guardsmen said we could claim something from the shop as a reward for catching the owner when he tried to flee..." I started looking around but was interrupted by Louise scoffing.

"Please, Jophiel. There isn't going to be anything of worth here, especially if the owner was trying to sell such garbage to us. Trying to find anything of value in this-" She motioned over the shop with a wave of her hand. "disgrace of a weapons shop would be a complete waste of time." Not an unfair assessment, however...

"You never know, there might be a diamond in the rough tucked somewhere just out of sight." Again, Louise scoffed.

"I wouldn't count on it." With that, she sat upon a box near the main entrance, and I began looking over the various swords that were sitting about.

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Wow, there really is nothing here that isn't junk. There was a larger single-edged Norse sword like a two-handed Albion Berserkr hanging on the right wall that looked to be in marginally better condition than most everything else and stood out due to its blackened blade, bronze crossbar and pommel with white leather-wrapped hilt... But the blade snapped in two when I tried to lift it off of its display pegs. I turned to Louise with the top half of the blade still in hand, and the 'I told you so' look she was giving me would be infuriating if I didn't already know that trying to find something of worth here was likely a waste of time.

I approached the main counter and dropped the broken blade half next to the still bent showpiece sword as I circled around the back and began rifling through the shelves which were only accessible from behind the counter. There was one flask of oil which Louise vaguely recognised as something she'd seen Colbert using at some point, which wound up being my only real worthwhile finding. Talk about a shitty loot run. With a shrug, I pocketed the oil flask and Louise and I were on our way, leaving the utter waste of space that was that store behind us as we left for the more reputable blacksmith's guild.
A Wonderful Guy Part 03

So, while the guild blacksmiths turned out to be LEAGUES ahead of that shyster, none of them were open to having a stranger come in and basically buy a portion of all of their future profits, which was unfortunate.

After determining that we'd spent some time at the armour smith discussing having a plated maille shirt made for me. It'll be made from mythril - their name for magically hardened arsenical bronze which is about on par with a rather mild steel- which is pretty much the best weapons and armor-grade metal they know how to produce. In addition: it will have an accompanying pair of vambraces and a helmet patterned after a WW2-era German stahlhelm.

Why the stahlhelm? Well, as far as I can tell pretty much everybody adopted the basic design of the stahlhelm in the modern era, which to me suggests that it must be good. Beyond that, looking at the writing on the wall I'm getting the distinct impression that I'm going to wind up wrapped up in some sort of dangerous bullshit at some point; and I'm NOT going to go without some form of brain case protection if that does happen. One head-trauma-induced coma is already one too many so far as I'm concerned.

Louise was constantly questioning the logic behind wearing armour when magic can just bypass it altogether, but I don't care, I'm not going to forgo armour if I don't have to!

That aside, nothing else of interest occurred at the blacksmith's street.

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Nothing else of real interest happened during our travels around the rest of the markets at all, for that matter. Just shopping and idle chat between the two of us regarding topics such as my artistic ability and the Canadian schooling system.

Surprisingly ran into Colbert at an alchemy shop. Apparently, he was assigned to escort Guiche to town to discuss his everything with his parents, which apparently was going to take quite a few days. I'd asked him about purchasing firearms, he'd directed me towards a specific importer of Germanian goods if I'm looking to get a gun.

Just as Louise and I were about to be on our way, her new confections in hand he grabbed me by the shoulder. For a moment he looked extremely grim and serious like he wanted to tell me something rather important, but he wound up just giving me his typical goofy smile and wishing me a good day. ...Okay, yeah, that wasn't disconcerting in the least. Whatever; I'll ask him about it later, I've got other shit to consider for now.

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Wound up grabbing a pair of side-by-side .44 calibre flintlock pistols, some Germanian black powder, which is allegedly superior to other kinds, and enough balls for 50 shots. Acquired all the stuff necessary for loading and maintaining the guns as well, obviously. Louise seemed a tad annoyed at the entire visit to the shop. Seems that Germania is the only nation that gives firearms the respect they deserve, which was evident by the way she kept snorting and rolling her eyes when I spoke to the shopkeeper at length about the gun's materials and what not and he extolled the virtues of each individual gun.

Notably, it seems that firearms here primarily use bronze rather than steel since, well, high-quality
steel isn't available. Interesting side-note that. Curious about how this will effect advanced firearms production going forth. Anyways, bought a twin cross-draw holster for my right hip so I could keep both pistols on the same side and a sword on my left hip. I'd keep a short sword on the back of my hip as well if necessary. It looked a little LARP-y, but the kopis and gladius are short enough to make drawing them from that position actually pretty easy in practice.

With our shopping done, it was about time to head back to the inn. The sun was on the verge of setting anyways.

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Nothing of note occurred once we'd gotten back to the inn.

Jessica provided Louise and me another meal, this time a smaller one at our request. Otherwise, the end of the day was quiet. Even Louise didn't really seem up to finishing any of the various conversations we'd started but failed to finish throughout our ventures around the markets. It was honestly a really fucking boring couple of hours there at the inn. Jessica, who had ceased with the overt flirting and started talking to me normally assured me that the inn was much more lively when the 'fairies' were in, but I'm not sure I'd have felt better in that case; not at all one for bar scenes.

I had considered trying to squeeze some information on her family out of Jessica but decided I just wanted some time to myself. I'd had the foresight to pack a book so I could do something before bedtime. The irony of reading The Fellowship of the Ring when I was literally in a genuine fantasy world was not lost on me, but whatever. There was nothing else to do to wind down.

An hour or so after the sun set I'd tapped out the bed-side magelight and curled up under the linen sheets I'd been provided with. I could already tell that I wasn't going to sleep very well tonight with this bed being as mediocre as it. "Just had to open my big mouth..."

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Apparently, Jessica decided that she had some flirtation left in her after all if her waking me up rather early by gently whispering sweet nothings into my ear was anything to go by. I probably should have been mad about her sneaking into my room while I was sleeping, but something about that cocky cat grin she seemed rather fond of just made it difficult for me to be mad at her. That she was giving me another grade-A view of her cleavage did not factor into my decision to forgive her at all, no sirree. She'd suggested that I wake Louise up shortly so we can get back to the academy before midday. Before that, though...

I reached out and grasped Jessica's wrist before she made for the door. She seemed more than a little surprised, and even a bit worried at my sudden action. I took a moment to yawn and rub the gunk out of my eyes before continuing. "So, Jessica. I don't do mornings well so I'm going to just be frank. I want to invest a significant sum of money into the inn in exchange for a partnership which will guarantee me a modest portion of all the business's future profits for the foreseeable future." Jessica was silent for a long period after that. I'd taken the opportunity to continue rubbing my eyes with my free hand.

"...Just... How much money are we talking about?" She seemed rather uncertain, understandably so.

"However much you would need to bring the inn up to relatively high-class standards." Again, Jessica was quiet for a fair amount of time.

"...You're serious." That wasn't a question, more her voicing her thoughts aloud. Yes, sweetheart, I'm being serious. "...I'll go ask Scarron about it. We can talk about it whenever you're ready." With
that, I relented my grip on the raven-haired beauty's thin wrist and she left the room. It took me maybe ten minutes to work up the will to drag myself out of bed and get dressed. Gonna want Louise to partake in this conversation as well, so would be best to nudge her out of bed before heading downstairs to see if Scarron is actually game for basically signing me onto the business as a co-owner.

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To describe Louise as crabby after spending a night on a cheap feather bed would be an understatement. Seems she'd forgotten to lock her door, which I took advantage of to wake her in person for once. After finally managing to prod her out of bed, a transgression for which she seemed ready to murder me over, I might add, I proceeded down stairs ahead of her to avoid having my head bit off. Scarron seemed to be in a rather serious mood when I stepped into the back room to meet with him. He has a little office back here as it turns out, which shouldn't really come as much of a surprise.

The two of them were taking my offer seriously due to my earlier 'donation' to Tarbes which had basically pulled them out of a potential famine. We'd discussed some numbers back and forth for a bit until Louise finally saw fit to grace us in all her grumpy presence.

After about an hour of discussion, Louise pointed out that we'd need to leave town rather soon if we were to arrive back at the academy before midday. She'd assured the inn owners that her father would get in contact with them to iron out all the finer details of the contract. The two seemed ecstatic once they'd recognised the 'le Blanc' name. Unsurprising, I imagine that being associated with such a prominent family would be utterly awesome for a pair of commoner business owners.

Jessica and Scarron tried to rope me into planning out the uniforms the 'Faeries' (i.e. serving girls) would wear with them, and furthermore attempted to convince us to stick around long enough to meet the faeries who would be arriving to work shortly and would surely love to meet the new, most generous boss. I'd declined in favour of not getting Louise in trouble for being late to school, and the blonde seemed oddly relieved at that.

"You two don't be strangers now, you hear?" Jessica called out to the two of us as we made for the main door, having returned the bedroom keys and collected our stuff with due haste. I'd turned and gave her and her overly flamboyant father a friendly wave. He was mock-weeping, just FYI. Can't understand why he'd act like that unless... He's trolling, HAH! Never mind, I understand completely. I'd chosen to trust the two and left them with a blank bank note they could use to withdraw money from my account to kick-start the refurbishing of the inn.

Hopefully, it'll be a lovely place the next time we're in town and can stop by for a visit.

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"Oh damn! I gave them my mailing address at the academy, not father's!" Louise suddenly cried out just as we crested the hill leading away from Bruxelles on the backs of our droogs. She'd turned around briefly to gaze back at the city with a contemplative look on her face... "Bah, I'll just redirect the documents to father when they arrive at the academy. Let's head back already." Heh, a bit of an air head in the mornings, are we? I'd had the presence of mind to not openly tease the girl. The last thing I need is to poke fun at my charge when I've reason to believe her self-esteem may not be the best in the world.

I'd turned back on my droog to take one final look at the city... Wait a tick, what's that massive building near the royal palace? I must not have realised that it's clearly separate from the palace when we were approaching the city yesterday.
"Louise, what's that huge building near the palace?" She turned in her saddle again to look back at the topic of interest herself.

"What, the stadium? That's where sports events and the like take place. There was nothing going on there yesterday so I didn't see any reason to bring you there. We'll probably wind up there come Princess Henrietta's birthday, though."

"Oh?" That sounds interesting.

"Yes. The Princess's birthday will occur during the upcoming summer break, and a nation-wide festival will be held to celebrate it. The princess is fond of droog and griffon races, so we can expect several to be held in her honour come then." She actually seemed more than a little excited at the prospect herself. "That will be so much fun! I love races, they're so exhilarating! And-

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Louise went off on racing for a good four hours once I'd provoked her. I'd tried to remain cheerful initially, but I'd quickly come to regret having brought the topic up. Not that she'd noticed, of course. She was too busy fangirling over her favourite teams and revealing that she's a total racing hooligan. No, seriously. She's a legit hooligan. Literally nearly got her family banned from the stadium a few years before she was accepted into the academy when she heard another kid cheering for the opposing team and tried to hit them with a bucket in retaliation. 'Twas the first, and last time her mother ever actually struck her as punishment for something. Normally I'm quite against hitting one's kids, but... I'd argue that her mother was justified in that case. Seriously, trying to hit another kid with a bucket? Talk about an overreaction on Louise's part. Don't want her repeating that sort of behaviour down the line.

"...phiel! Are you even listening to me!?!" Eh? I was shaken out of my reprieve by Louise calling out to me angrily. Uh oh, um...

"I, uh... Sorry, I was... Absorbed in thought regarding races." Not... Completely untrue.

"Heh heh, finally, someone that appreciates that art of racing as much as I do..." ...Uh oh. Let's try and change the subject toot-sweet.

"So, I've been curious about what the extent of my familiar abilities may be." Off to my right, her eyes widened with glee, and she started giggling cheerfully.

"I might have an idea for finding out just how fast you are..."

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"Come on, is that really the best your big fancy dog can do?" I cheekily called out to Louise after I stopped and turned to give her a chance to catch up. I could only just make out her face, which had turned a very noticeable shade of red at being left in the dust by a man running on foot... Heh. It took a few minutes of concentration, but I was eventually able to 'activate' the runes, at which point I hopped off of Cu and accepted Louise's challenge to a race.

Initially, she seemed ecstatic at the thought of a race with a super-powered human, but she'd quickly grown furious as I outpaced both Sleipnir and the wolfhound, though only barely in all fairness to the beasts. Were they breeds specialised for speed I probably wouldn't be able to outrun them in bursts, but as it was I was just a tad faster than they are on top of being able to run longer on account of that whole human running endurance thing.
On that note, my stamina also seemed to be boosted by the runes, though not to an infinite degree if the burn in my legs and lungs was anything to go by.

Sleipnir and Cu slowed to a walk as they approached, clearly they were feeling overworked, and suddenly I felt guilty. Hm... Good thing there happens to be a stream nearby for the big lugs to recuperate in. Also that the academy's main tower just crested into view as I stopped, meaning our trip was almost over. Louise gave me a glare as she dismounted her droog and removed his saddle before directing him to the stream to drink and cool off in. "You only won because you cheated." I cocked an eyebrow at the short girl.

"Cheated? How do you figure?" This ought to be interesting.

"You used magic." She grumpily stated as an exaggerated pout found its way on her face.

I chuckled heartily before countering her argument. "Wasn't that the point?" Now she was directing an exaggerated scowl at my face. Heh heh...

"I wasn't being serious anyways, Sleipnir could have easily won if I hadn't been going easy on you." I see our adoptive sister is something of a sore loser then. I'll have to keep that in mind in the future. "Well, we're back at the academy at any rate... What time is it..." The girl stated as she began fishing through her pockets, apparently, she had something which would tell her the time, I interrupted her searching by glancing at my watch and giving her the time myself.

"11:33." She looked confused before she noticed the watch on my wrist. She'd tried to make me give it to her when I'd told her what it was yesterday on the ride into town, only relenting when I pointed out that she wouldn't be able to read it even if I did surrender it to her. She was rather annoyed at that, entertainingly enough.

"So we've arrived just before luncheon. Splendid... I believe that I'll spend the midday break in the bathhouse cleaning myself of this wretched trail dust." She patted her shoulder for effect and a puff of dust popped off in response.

"I think I'll wait until sundown to visit the baths myself." I craned my neck skyward as I said that in a stretch, my neck having felt somewhat stiff at that moment. Louise scoffed in response.

"I don't understand your reluctance to being seen undressed among your fellow men. You claim to be heterosexual, so I don't see the issue with just going at a reasonable hour." I shrugged.

"Body image issues." Might as well be honest.

"Body- what?" She seemed confused by that statement.

"I've got a protruding belly, somewhat at least. In Canada, that's considered to be embarrassing." Louise was looking at me as if I had claimed to be a giant anthropomorphic aardvark again.

"Is it also considered embarrassing to be wealthy and influential in Canada?"

...I looked Louise up and down, feeling more than a little confused at her implication that a big gut is considered attractive when she was so thin herself.

She seemed to catch that and rolled her eyes in response. "Fashion is complicated. And mother expects her daughters to remain as physically fit as they can in case they find themselves in danger and can't rely on magic to defend themselves, a concern which many parents don't take seriously."...Now that I consider it, there were quite a few plus-sized students and teachers around, and they seemed about as confident as anyone else. Hm... Whatever, don't care. Ain't letting anybody see me
shirtless until I've at least shed the gut, and preferably put on some muscle as well. Also...

"What's that about your mother wanting you to be able to defend yourself without magic?" Louise sighed wearily as if the topic annoyed her.

"I personally think it to be wildly unnecessary... But mother insisted that I learn to defend myself with a sword growing up. I'm not great, but I've managed to best even Guiche several times in martial arts classes." ...Wait a tick.

"Martial arts classes?" Just as Louise was about to respond Sleipnir and Cu strode up to us, Sleipnir absolutely soaked to the bone with their tails wagging cheerfully... Wow. The Saint Bernard looked downright comical with all his normally poofy fur weighed down by the seemingly tonnes of water that was practically streaming off of him, rapidly forming a pool where he stood.

She grimaced at the dogs and began walking towards the academy with Sleipnir's saddle in hand. Apparently, someone is above riding a wet dog. "I'll tell you about it later. For now, let's get back to the academy, I want to relax in the bath for as long as I can before attending my evening classes."

Mm, fair enough.

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We'd arrived at the academy on time, at which point nothing particularly worth mentioning occurred 'till nightfall. I'd locked myself in my room so I could have some alone time, and Louise had indeed opted to spend her lunch break in the bathhouse, cleaning herself of the dust and sweat we'd accumulated on ourselves during our journey. I on the other hand deliberately waited until nightfall to head there so I would have the building to myself. Say what you will, I'm not comfortable with washing myself while naked with a bunch of other people in the room.

The baths are segregated by gender via doors which were attuned to only unlock for a specific sex for either side of the baths, thus preventing boys and/or girls from peeping on each other... Unless a member of the opposite gender where to help them by opening the door for them, but I imagine that a prefect is usually assigned to the front room specifically to prevent such things from occurring, but they are otherwise communal.

Luckily the baths were running, as in they were basically artificial indoor heated streams you waded in. I'm not sure how they're heated, or where the water comes from due to the 'tunnel' it flowed from and into being grated off, or why the academy makes use of fucking chamber pots if they know how to do indoor plumbing, but they're lovely as fuck, so I'm not going to think too hard about that. Least not until I can remember to ask Colbert or Osmand about them for details later on.

So lo and behold, I indeed managed to move slowly enough to reach the baths after everyone else had left. It was interesting, the way it was built. The structure was vaguely Greco-Roman, though with no small amount of Norse and French influences. The layout was similar to a modern pool house's, with an entrance hall that branched off to a pair of separate changing rooms which further led to the bathing streams themselves.

The floors throughout the building were mostly very finely polished stone tiles, though the tiles in the bathing rooms themselves were notably textured in a way which provided a not insignificant amount of friction, surely to prevent people from slipping when wet and hurting themselves, including in the stream's floor itself. Incidentally, the stream was about 5 feet at it's deepest, with a fairly slight slope to the bottom. Allowing it to double as a moderately shallow heated pool. Smart design, nice to see the people here aren't completely helpless when it comes to architecture.

As I traipsed down the hall to the changing room I noticed that I hadn't heard the door lock behind
me. I turned to see it hadn't closed all the way when I pushed it shut with my heel.

...Eh, fuck it. Somehow I doubt that I'm likely to get peeped on at this time of day anyways. Plus if I want to properly close the door I'll have to walk all the way back to said door. To hell with that, it'll be fine for tonight.

Anyways, with a change of clothes slung over my shoulder and a small basket containing my precious modern bathing amenities I stripped out of my dirty clothes and gleefully submerged myself in the wonderful heated bathing pool. I hadn't even realised how stiff my muscles had been... Lovely.

Did I mention that the building has skylights and large windows as well? Glass bricks by the looks of it. Lets a generous amount of natural light into the bathing rooms while being impossible to see through. Perv-proof bathing, quite smart construction there. Oh, and the building has a copious amount of magelights all over which I'd lit so I wouldn't wind up splashing about in the dark. This should be a lovely way to end the day...

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I'd gotten myself all nice and clean rather quickly followed by using my hand mirror, razor and scissors to trim and shave my beard. I'd considered finishing with the old chin-strap style I'd once received numerous compliments on for having the effect of making me 'look like a lion' as one girl put it, but I'd instead settled on my typical trimmed goatee. I'd technically finished everything I needed to do here, though rather than hopping out of the pool immediately I'd opted to splash about for a good long while afterwards.

Have the pool all to myself, after all. Might as well make use of the opportunity. The magelights gave the now darkened room some lovely mood lighting... Heh, this would almost be romantic if I had a lady accompanying me.

...Damn it Jessica! She just had to hit all of my buttons and be flirty as all hell, didn't she? Usually not one to think too much about girls, but now... Ugh, probably going to take a few days for me to get back to normal on that front.

I'd found what could only be described as an underwater stone-hewn lounger in the more shallow portion of the pool, allowing me to be seated while remaining submerged in the fantastically toasty water. Whoever designed this building deserves a raise. Seriously, this place is fantastic.

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I'd been resting in silence when I thought I'd heard the soft noise of cloth hitting the floor in the changing room... Huh, well, of course, I wouldn't be the only one to have the wonderful idea of waiting until everyone had left to hop in the pool. Luckily I'd had the foresight to keep a towel on me which I'd wrapped my lower half with upon hearing evidence of another occupant. Yeah yeah, I'm a total prude, piss off, I can be as ashamed of my own body as I damn well please.

I lounged back on my underwater throne and shut my eyes with my face firmly affixed to the ceiling, hoping to not have to make eye contact with the new occupant before I left.

Eventually, the pitter-patter of soft footfalls broke the otherwise near silence of running water. The footsteps unexpectedly stopped for a few moments, as if the approaching guy had just noticed me and was reconsidering getting into the pool before I head the water's surface break softly as if they were nervous... Then I could hear them approaching me. ...Uh, should I be glad that I'd brought my
Hellion and left it sitting just within arm's reach on the pool's edge? Why-

"H-hello, milord." My eyes slammed open and my face jerked towards the soft feminine voice addressing me... Siesta, with the only things blocking her naughty bits being her own arms and hands. Sweet JESUS, that maid dress she normally wears does NOT compliment her figure well at all! Wait, no, what!? Why am I focusing on THAT of all things? Why is she here!? How did she get in-

...Oh. Right. I couldn't be bothered to properly close the auto-locking door. Shit. Anyways, that doesn't answer my other question! Why- ...Jessica mentioned Siesta wanting to reenact a scene from one of her favourite dirty books in the bathhouse yesterday.

...
Oh God, oh God, oh God, why did I do that, why did I do that, that was dumb, that was stupid, that was a mistake, oh fuckfuckfuckfuck- No no, okay, calm down, it's alright, it's alright, just... Stop. Open the window to... Air out the room and look out the of it and take a deep breath.

...The academy battlements really are downright picturesque this time of the morning.

Okay, chilled out now. So... I took another calming breath before turning to look at my bed... Yup, Siesta's still curled up under the sheets, her dress and accessories still strewn about the floor on her side, a contented smile plastered on her sleeping face.

Fuck.

Okay; so, Siesta obviously succeeded in seducing me last night... Twice. While it was... Fun, it was also really stupid of me. Guess all the stress from the past two weeks just caught up to me and I couldn't help but just say 'fuck it' when a beautiful, exotic and friendly girl approached me. While, yes, my muscles no longer feel ready to snap like over-stressed steel cables and even now there's a certain... Elation flitting about in the back of my head, this still can't be good considering the time period and culture.

The maid was pretty clearly not a virgin, probably part of the reason last night wasn't just awkward and uncomfortable, and I... Well, she most definitely isn't pregnant, however, based on what I've heard from Jessica she's going to be expecting something more to come from this. In retrospect, she's clearly smitten with me for a number of understandable reasons considering... Well, the time period and culture.

I've been portraying myself as a generous, kindly, decently charismatic noble willing and happy to treat a 'lowly' maid with a respect she probably wouldn't have ever expected from a 'high-born' man in her life. I've also been going out of my way to look as good as I can considering I'm supposed to be a noble, and I'm not exactly an ugly guy when I can't be bothered to gussy up, coupled with being of mixed heritage I was seen as being at least mildly exotic in Vancouver when I spent a month there...

She's been putting me up on a pedestal, hasn't she?

Fuck me and my oblivious to romance bullshit. I was never terribly bothered by it back on Earth because it never really got me in trouble... Caused me to miss a few opportunities, yes, but nothing serious. Here? I've now got a maid with fantasies of being whisked off of her feet to live a life of luxury with a rich noble that treats her well sleeping naked in my bed, probably expecting me to marry her and make a fuck tonne of exotic babies with her.

Trying to explain to her why this wouldn't work without blowing my cover and/or making her hate me after last night is going to be difficult.

I really should have just closed the fucking bathhouse door properly.

Still staring at the girl, her admittedly glorious hip bump on display with her laying on her side I began to hyperventilate, again. Need to calm down or I'm going to wind up waking her up and freaking her out... Assuming she isn't just faking because she did wake up when I was panicking earlier with my back to her and she doesn't want to escalate the situation, that is.

...Has her smile has faded a bit?
...Nah, she's still asleep.

...Probably.

...I hope.

...Fuck me, I'm supposed to have better self-control than this!

Okay, okay, just calm down, calm down... First thing's first, let's gather up her clothes for her, fold them nicely and set them on the end table so they'll be in arms reach when she wakes up.

...

...

Okay, that's done.

NOW WHAT THE FUCK DO I DO!?

A quiet vocalisation emitted from the maid just as I managed to calm myself down again. Suppose she's finally waking up then... Just... Chill out, you can do this. "Uh... Good morning." She just smiled sweetly at me Mercifully, she pulled the sheets over her chest, preventing me from seeing anything too fun which might freak me out even more than I currently was.

...

...

...

Oh, my God, this is awkward, I don't know what to say...

"Good morning to you too. Pardon my abruptness, but what time is it?" Oh, uh, yeah, I can tell her that.

"About six." I turned to stare back out the window, finding it difficult to make eye contact with her.

"Hm, I should probably dress and head off to my duties quickly then." The sounds of shifting cloth filled the room for a minute or so. I finally turned to look back at Siesta once I'd heard footsteps coming towards me. Fully dressed, looking as pretty and normal as ever."Thank you for the fun night Jophiel. Hopefully, we'll be able to talk later today." She quickly stood on her tiptoes and gave me a peck on the cheek before suddenly leaving the room.

Several minutes passed before my brain decided to start working again.

...Well, wasn't expecting that to... Not happen. I reached up to touch the spot on my cheek that she'd kissed as I turned to look at the door. To say I'm surprised would be an understatement. Maybe I just over-thunk things?

...Or maybe she actually had woken up earlier and was just attempting to get out of an uncomfortable situation as quickly as she could before things got weird.

...
Fuck me, I need to sit down and... I dunno, think.
Or maybe not think. I dunno, I'm not handling this very well...

I sat down at my desk and attempted to relax in my shitty office chair and let my poor mind try and
work out what the hell just happened.

...I really can't believe how poorly that maid uniform compliments Siesta's magnificent figure- GAH!
A walk! I need to go for a walk! That'll help me clear my mind! I quickly trudged towards the door,
ignoring the chair that was now laying on its back on the floor as I rushed my way out of my room,
only just remembering to grab my shoes on my way out.

---
Okay, yeah, just walking has always helped me gather my thoughts. I'd stopped in the apple groves
that I'd found myself frequenting often for whatever reason, leaning against a tree just off of the main
trail with my thoughts now in order.

So, Siesta said that she wants to talk later on today, so she had probably just in fact thought that
leaving for work was more important than sitting down and discussing our... Relationship, such as it
is. Not... Untrue considering she's probably on thin ice what with the whole Guiche incident. That's
good, gives me time to figure out what in the fuck I'm going to do.

Siesta seems pretty nice and pretty and all that stuff, but unless she's an exceptionally strange girl by
the local culture's standards she's going to want a traditional family alongside marriage and all that.
Unfortunately... Well, I was planning on getting snipped back on Earth before Louise summoned
me, which should say everything about how I feel about the idea of having children.

Not to mention that... Well, she doesn't actually know me. Okay, granted, technically I told her my
real name right off the bat before anyone else... However, based on context she might think that it's a
nickname intended to be used by friends. Aside from that... I've been putting on an act to try and
better my situation here. Nobody here knows how I really act naturally. Siesta thinks she just
seduced Jophiel the kindly noble, not Joe the dumb ass that's only barely managing to prevent
himself from panicking at every turn because he's making shit up as he goes along and isn't as clever
as he thinks he is.

...Should I tell her the truth? In all honesty, I'm equally terrified and excited at the idea. If she's
understanding it would certainly be a weight off my shoulders; to have someone I can just be fucking
honest with... Though if she isn't happy about it... Well, any hope of us being friends, never mind
lovers goes right out the window. Although I doubt that anyone would take her word above mine
were she to attempt to inform anyone of the truth, that would really mean that I could never be
truthful with anyone else down the line without revealing that I'd thrown Siesta under the bus...

Fhaaaaaaaak. Why couldn't I have just properly closed the damned door yesterday-

"Oh, hello there darling Jophiel, haven't seen you in a few days!" I shifted my gaze from my navel to
the path I'd arrived from to notice a particular parrot-red haired Germanian approaching at a leisurely
pace. "What've you been up to-" She suddenly stopped as she got within arm's reach of me. I was
about to ask if anything was wrong when she cleared what little distance remained between us and
got right up in my face. She silently stared at me for several seconds before a massive, shit-eating
grin inexplicably emerged from her features. Um... "So, who was it?" I blinked in confusion.

"...What?" The hell?

"Oh, don't play coy you wild stallion! I think I'm more than experienced enough to recognise that subtle change in the demeanour of a man." ...No fucking way. Bullshit, she can't possibly... "It was the pretty little maid that follows you like a lost puppy, wasn't it?" ...Wha- how- I don't-

I haven't done anything! I haven't even said anything! I'm just fucking leaning on a tree here! How in all the Gods of Fire and Fuck could she have-!?

"It's so much fun, isn't it? Bet you regret waiting as long as you did. Chastity is downright insultingly overrated." She looked... Genuinely happy right now. This is... Weird. I'm really not sure how to react to this...

---

Kirche wouldn't stop bothering me about Siesta. This really wasn't what I had in mind when I went out to find something to distract me from her... "...Not like it's something to be ashamed of, mistresses are common even here in Tristain, in spite of what a few particular, self-deluding prudes might try to tell you..." She's been attempting to convince me to not feel ashamed of what happened, kind of presumptuous on her part considering that I'm just not the type to swap under the bed sheet tales with others.

She's also refusing to believe that's the case and is assuming that... Well, I'm just clamping up out of a misplaced sense of shame.

She's really starting to grate on my nerves, needless to say.

We'd left the apple grove about fifteen or so minutes ago. We'd been milling about the foot of the tower of fire for a bit once it became clear that running wasn't going to work and that she was determined to get me to spill the beans. I'd shifted paradigms to ignoring her, which didn't seem to be bothering her much at all.

"You know what you need Darling? Practice. Lots and lots of practice so you can keep your mistress happy and prevent her from wandering. Why don't we retire to my room for some quality 'study' time? My treat~." ...Sigh... She's also been... Well, Louise had stated before that Kirche has the decency to not touch men in relationships. So, of course, dummy that I am, I informed her that Siesta and I aren't actually in a relationship, hence the designation of 'mistress.'

She's taken that to mean that I'm fair game and is now attempting to convince me to bang her, ostensibly because of how 'exotic' I am. The irony is not lost on me.

She's honest if nothing else. I can appreciate that... Better clear things up here, though.

"Look, Kirche..." Still smiling sweetly at me... "I said that I'm not in a relationship with Siesta, but we didn't get a chance to talk before she had to attend to her duties, I don't actually... I'm not sure what's actually going on with her, so could you please tone it down?" She pouted, but mercifully didn't snap back with another ham-handed seduction attempt as she previously had been.

"Okay then... So, what were you two doing in Bruxelles?" She'd gleaned that out of me between unsubtle seduction attempts a few minutes ago.

"Shopping trip. Louise bought daily amenities while I ordered a cape as well as formal wear, and purchased a pair of pistols." Once again, I found Kirche right up in my grill.
"Really!? What's their make? Calibre? Single, double barrel? Have you test fired them yet?" ...Hold on a moment... Is she...?

"You like guns?" An eyebrow was raised well above its typical place on my forehead at the revelation.

"Like? LIKE? I'm a born-and-bred Germanian girl that grew up in the capital watching prospective dragoons compete in the shooting competitions to qualify for the chance to join the Honour Guard! I knew how to shoot before I knew how to cast a cantrip!" ...Huh. Looks like we may have something in common to bond over. "Do you have them on you?" She started pawing at my midsection, to which I weakly resisted her unsubtle attempts at groping me. "I wanna see it! Come on, if you show me yours I'll show you mine~!" ...Okay, fair is fair, that was a good one. But anyways...

"I told you to stop that." Again, she pouted. Gonna have to figure out what the deal is with Siesta quick so I can know just how mad at Kirche I should be getting. "So do you actually have a gun on the academy grounds?" She backed up and rested a hand on her hip.

"Well, of course. I brought a Schulz & Richter Model 12 Wyrmslayer .70 Longshot and a Gross & Stein Lady of the Night .40 Pocket Pistol when I was sent here. I'd have brought the rest of my collection as well, but mother wouldn't let me..." She looked downright dejected at that statement. Guess she really likes her guns.

Hm... A thought occurs. "I haven't noticed a shooting range anywhere on the academy grounds." She pouted again.

"The teachers removed it a week before you arrived. Apparently, some delicate little flowers were getting shocked by the reports of my guns whenever I'd go to shoot them. Apparently that the guards were enjoying testing them out as well meant nothing against that." Huh. Well, I suppose I could sort of understand that... Guns are pretty fucking loud. Maybe...

"Have you proposed having them set up a range on the other side of the fortress walls? Gunshot reports shouldn't carry over them too badly." Kirche looked thoughtful.

"I'd considered it, though having to pass the walls to go shooting would be annoying." Eh...

"Would be better than not getting to shoot at all." She seemed to ponder this point for a few moments before responding.

"Well, I suppose it couldn't hurt to suggest it. My trigger finger has been getting rather itchy lately." With a shrug, she crossed her arms under her chest and shifted her weight onto her opposing leg. Wouldn't mind getting some practice in with my pistols for damned sure, especially if doing so might result in bonding with Kirche. Kind of rare to meet someone that I can say I actually have a real shared interest with.

...Hm, getting a wee bit peckish. I raised my wrist to check the time on my watch, only to find that I'd forgotten to equip my watch before leaving my room. In fact, I don't have my belt, sword, knife, or cape either... And I'm wearing my plaid pyjama bottoms rather than jeans. Good thing I'd gotten used to putting on my shoes as I got dressed in the morning, else I might have left without those as well. Damn it, this thing with Siesta really has me out of it.

Suddenly feeling more than a little embarrassed at my state of dress, I let out a chuckle as I inserted my hands into my pants pockets. "It looks like it's close to breakfast, yeah?" The redhead gave a silent nod in return. "Well, I suppose I should go wake up Louise then. Meet you at the usual place in the Dining Hall?"
"Sure thing. Just don't keep me waiting too long Darling." With a suggestive wink, Kirche sashayed off down the grove trail... Hopefully, I can make my way back to my room without being spotted dressed like an idiot by anybody else.
Miia and I just wound up hanging out and talking about fairly mindless shit for a good couple of hours after that, with anime/manga/video games being a particularly strong topic of discussion. Guess that was another reason for her to have learned Japanese. Cut out the dubbing/subbing middleman and go straight to the source. Incidentally, this means that she's more familiar with Akio Otsuka as the voice of Snake rather than David Hayter. I was initially rather confused by her not getting it when I did the Snake voice once the topic of Metal Gear came up...

'Tis nice to have someone that I can just talk about regular shit with anyways.

It's kind of funny. Miia looks so different, she's so clearly not human if one takes even a cursory glance at her, but I can just relate to her so much easier than my actual fellow humans here from Alfheim... I should try to spend more time with her, especially if she's feeling alone and antsy about her relationship with Jacques. Hopefully, things won't wind up getting really complicated for her down the line. She seems like a really sweet girl, I'd hate for her to lose her one real source of support here on Alfheim-

...Wait. If things do wind up going belly up between them... Well, I've got a metric fuckload of money, right?

If things don't work out between them I'll offer to help her, maybe employment at the very least. But let's keep that as a last resort sort of solution. I don't want her to have to fend for herself here, so I'm not going to just flip her the bird if things get really bad because it would be more convenient for me.

Let's just hope it doesn't come to that in the end.

Anyways, her mood seemed pretty lightened by the time she slithered off to do her own thing, so it seems as though my objective was completed. I also told her to feel free to drop by my room any time if she wanted to play some Metal Gear or something. She's here, we're the only 'modern' individuals around and we seem to get along well enough, so one of us may as well reach out, especially since I have the only real modern amenities around, and I'm sure that she's missing those right about now.

Huh. I'm usually a pretty salty asshole... But then again, I'm not back in my shit burg of a hometown surrounded by ignorant leeches that are proud of the fact. ...Though in fairness, I haven't really spoken to many people here in Halk yet.

...I wonder how Rose is doing.

...

Bah, let's not dwell on such shitty thoughts. I'm not miserable here, I shouldn't be trying to ruin that for myself. Anyways, should try and ask the headmaster about Miia and my own runes before I forget about it. I gave my ankle a few decent squeezes... Yup. Totally fine now.

So, with the soreness in my ankle mostly gone I finally lifted myself off of my ass and moved to see if I could pay Osmand a visit.

---

No, turns out I couldn't. Not only is Osmand not in the academy, according to the one guardsman that's stationed at the base of his tower he's currently in the countryside with a search party.
Apparently, Ms Longueville left the academy to go for a walk and didn't come back. Been missing for a few days now... That's quite worrying, to say the least. Hopefully, she'll turn out to be safe.

Didn't notice it at first, but yeah, there are clearly fewer guards around the academy since Louise and I got back from the capital.

Well, nothing I can do about this. It's still pretty early in the day to try and find Siesta on account of her surely still having duties to tend to, so I suppose I'll just return to my room and sit about until Louise is done with her classes.

...Actually, I'll do that after a bath. Don't want to get caught upwind of Miia and get her... 'Bothered' by me and Siesta's... 'Scent,' again.

I'll be certain to ensure that the damned door is firmly shut and locked this time.

---

With a contented sigh, I shut my bedroom door behind me and moved to flop down on my bed, glad that I managed to at least rinse myself off in the bathhouse before anyone popped in to take a dip and saw me in all my unfit shame. I'd noticed a few bruises forming while I quickly washed myself, as if I needed a reminder that the runes were apparently faulty and couldn't be relied upon to keep me safe.

I just laid there for a few minutes before sitting back up and gazing around the room to find something with which to occupy myself... Books? Nah. Swords? Already about as well-honed as they can be. Vidja? Mm... Maybe. Actually, yeah, why not. Louise should be done with her classes in- I quickly glanced at my watch -two hours. That's about as much time as I can play games on the 360 each day anyways. Now, what to play...

---

With only mild disappointment at not being able to continue wrecking shit in Prototype, I powered down my console and unplugged it from the generator. Don't want it leeching power unnecessarily and all. Still about a half hour before Louise is done with classes for the day. Suppose I can just go for a walk to kill time 'till then- My train of thought was derailed by a light knocking at my door. "Jophiel? Are you there?" I found myself tensing up at the sound of Siesta's voice. Uh... Okay, shit. Suddenly I recall just how antsy about all this I am... The knocking came again. "Jophiel?" Crap dammit...

"I-I'll be right there!" I nervously rushed to my school-assigned mirror and looked myself over, making sure that I wasn't too unkempt- Wait, I did what? I don't- Fuck, this girl is really messing me up, isn't she?

Another, this time half-hearted knock. "I suppose he's already left..." Wha- How could she have not heard me? I quickly shuffled over to the door and yanked it open, the... Frankly, gorgeous maid looked a little surprised at seeing me whip it open.

"D-did-" Oh crap, don't start stuttering you fool! "Did you not hear me calling out to you?" She looked a tad confused.

"U-um, no... Personal bedrooms are sound-proofed one-way. You can hear things happening in the hallway, but people in the hallways can't hear what's happening in your room." ...Oh. Well, that's convien- Wait a damned moment!

"I can hear into Louise's room just fine from the hallway." Siesta gave me a blank look for a
moment, which quickly progressed into concern... Uh oh.

"I would suggest that you inform the Headmaster of that as quickly as possible, and lady le Blanc as well for that matter." ...Uh, okay...

"I'll let Louise know once she's out of class. Osmand isn't in the academy, though." Siesta nodded, then started contemplating her navel.

"...So, may I come in?" Ah. Right. I stepped aside and motioned to allow her in the room, firmly shutting the door shut once she was inside.

An uneasy silence fell between us. I really should have given this more thought-

"I can see how nervous you are, and I know how nobles think about sex, so I just want you to know; I don't expect you to marry me or anything." ...Well, that's... Surprising. "I apologise for not explaining that beforehand, it's just... Well... The set-up was perfect, and I didn't want to risk wasting the opportunity. And afterwards... Well, I didn't really wish to ruin the... Afterglow either." ...Well...

"...And when we were walking to my room from the bathhouse?" Siesta giggled and gave me an amused glance.

"I had to stop you from walking into the lampposts alongside the walkway to the main building. Repeatedly." Wha... "Was I really that out of it? I mean, well... "I was under the impression that you weren't in the sort of state for any kind of serious conversation." Okay, fair enough. "And this morning... Well, I have duties to tend to during the day." Again, fair enough. "In fact, I'm supposed to be dusting the hallways right now, I just supposed that if you were in we could get thus conversation out of the way." I see...

... ... ... 

Damn awkward silences. I should be relieved, right? Though I'm... Not sure how I feel right now.

"So, um..." Siesta was now fidgeting about nervously. "If you want to... Well, mistresses are frowned upon in Tristain, though you aren't from Tristain so, well, if you want..." ...And now my heart is beating at a billion beats per second. Damn it, why can't I just know what I want here!?

"Uh... Maybe?" She gave me an uncertain stare.

In spite of myself, I began nervously moving my hands about, rubbing the back of my head, scratching at my shoulder, etc...

"I mean... Shit, this isn't really what I was expecting, but... Well, I'm still in a really weird situation right now. I'm not saying no, but I'm not sure that I need such complications in my life right now." And with that look she's giving me I feel like I just kicked a puppy. Gods- As if I need that on top of knowing that I'm rebuking a beautiful girl's advances! "D-don't look at me like that! I'm not saying no, just not right now!" She at least redirected her gaze to the floor at that statement.

... 

Have I mentioned how much I dislike awkward silences yet?
Christ... I'm not even sure what her angle is here. She says that she doesn't expect any special commitment out of me, suggesting that last night was just about fun, but she seems rather disappointed at this moment and I know that I wasn't good enough for her to be specifically upset at turning down her offer to become my mistress... Fahk. Well, I'm not about to change my mind right now, so it might be prudent to send her about on her way.

"So... You should probably get back to work." She took a few moments to respond, and she only responded with a silent nod before making her way to the door. Oh man please don't tell me...
"Siesta." I started. She stopped in her tracks. "I really do like you. Which, in all honesty, is not something I can typically say about most people so soon after meeting them, let alone at all. I sincerely hope that you won't allow my hesitance in this drive a wedge between us."

A few moments passed, then she turned about to face me, thankfully, with a fantastically sweet smile on her face. "We'll talk tomorrow. Have a pleasant day Jophiel." With that, she left, and I found myself releasing a breath I hadn't realised I'd been holding. Gods damn it, this is some unexpectedly stressful shit. I really should have considered my actions since arriving here more carefully; girl troubles really aren't something I need to be dealing on top of everything else here...

Hopefully, I've managed to anchor that particular ship for now at any rate. I'd at least like to have some things firmly established, to be sure of whether I'm here for the long haul or not before I start fucking around with things like intimate relationships I may not have the option of truly committing to.

With that aside, there wasn't much else to do besides head out to intercept Louise and hopefully be distracted from all this shit for a time. I need to clear my head, should be able to think properly once I've had some time to just chill out.

---

So I'd indeed ran into Louise as I made my way to the history classroom, and without hesitation, she'd grabbed my hand and dragged me off to the sparsely populated fields around the academy, and once we were obviously alone immediately asked me why I was so distressed a few minutes earlier... Yeah, shared emotions. Forgot about that. Gotta try and figure out how that works. Don't want to wind up poisoning Louise's own mood because I can't get my poop in a group and am letting shit bother me.

Anyways, I valiantly attempted to dodge the question; trying to assure Louise that it was nothing she need concern herself with. She retorted by arguing back that if we're going to be emphatically linked we should be open and honest with each other, and she can tell at times that I'm clearly quite bothered often, which has been causing her stress as well.

When I can feel Louise's emotions it's like I'm only skimming the top of a river, so to speak. Only her surface most emotions, and it must be stressed, nothing else. This isn't telepathy and/or two-way mind reading as far as I can tell. I don't know what she's thinking specifically, it's only a strange, almost distant 'echo' of a familiar emotion. Sometimes the echo is clear and easy to make out, other times... Not so much. Usually, I can ignore it entirely, push it off to the side like the white noise of a desk fan.

Usually.

Right now... She's mad at me... And is now starting to feel regret, possibly because I'm just unfocused enough to have been making no attempt to hide how I'm feeling about this entire situation, in my mind or on my face.
"I-" Louise started, kind of looking as if she felt like she'd just kicked a puppy. "-Look, I'm not trying to be difficult or mean, I just want us to not try and hide things from each other. We're going to be stuck with each other for the foreseeable future, and I- Well..." Uncertainty, nervousness, fear. Ugh... "...Okay, you know what? Maybe we should take a step back and slow things down." That might be a good idea. "Let's... Let's just go for a walk, okay? Maybe a stroll around the grounds will help you relax." Worth a shot.

---

Louise and I had taken to sitting on a bench near the on-site shrine to the Old Gods, primarily Odin going off of the insignias engraved everywhere.

I'd mentioned being able to hear through her door on the way over and she waved it off. Apparently, that's just a thing that happens with Familiars and isn't worth dwelling on.

After sitting about for a few moments I decided to strike up a conversation. "So I'm curious, has your magic improved since you summoned me?" She gazed at me for a couple of seconds out of the corner of her eye, then looked around as if to ensure we were alone before responding.

"I... Well, in all honesty, I'm not sure. When I practice there's something of a... I can feel 'something' foreign in the back of my head when I'm trying to cast. I usually ignore it, but when I summoned you it was there, but harder to ignore than ever before. For a moment I found myself acknowledging it... And the summoning spell which had been failing like every spell before it suddenly flared up and just... Worked."

An uncertain look was cast upon her face.

"I've been trying to ignore it since then because... That's not how magic is supposed to work. I don't know what it is, it kind of scares me to be honest. I mean, mages are supposed to summon animals, or rarely, demi-humans like that snake woman that one boy summoned after me. I'm afraid of what might happen if I were to acknowledge it again while trying to cast a regular spell."

Huh... Sounds like we've found out the trick to figuring out what the deal with Louise's spell casting is. Also... "This is a bit off-topic... But I don't recall seeing any Familiars when you summoned me." Louise shrugged.

"I performed the summoning ritual before anybody else." Ah. Well, that answers that. Anyways...

"So, it sounds like that may be the trick to you actually being able to successfully spell cast." She grimaced at this statement. "What's the harm in at least trying?" She turned and gave me an uncertain glare.

"It's not how spellcasting is supposed to work. I've never heard of magic working like that before, I don't..." She allowed that statement to just trail off at the end there.

"Louise. Just once? Something harmless, like levitation. When nobody is around, just in case if you're that nervous." And boy, was she ever quite nervous at that moment. I couldn't see what she was doing under her cloak, but she seemed to be fidgeting about a fair amount. "What if this is the key to you becoming a successful spellcaster? Would you be okay with knowing that you might be denying yourself your birthright by refusing to so much as try with this?" Now she seemed very nervous.

"Maybe... Can... Can we try tomorrow? I just..." Trailed off again. I see no reason to pressure her into it right now.
"Of course. I just feel like it might be a bad idea to completely write this possibility off in case it's what will allow you to cast like any other mage." She slowly emitted a calming exhale before nodding in confirmation.

"You'll be there when I try it?" The hell kind of question is that?

"Of course. The hell kind of Familiar wouldn't be there for his Partner in her time of need?" She tensed up a tad at the mention of the word 'Familiar.' Not worth dwelling on. "So, we've got a few hours to kill before bedtime. Why don't you tell me a bit about your family? You've mentioned that your Father is going to be helping with my business decisions, but I know nothing about him." She finally got a lot less tense at that inquiry.

"Sure. I can do that."

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I cheerfully kicked my shoes off as I shut the door to my room and dropped my ass down in my shitty office chair. So, Louise's family is of High Nobility. Her father, a duke that is actually named Duke is a Triangle in Water native to Tristain. He's something of a businessman and handles all the family's finances and, well, business ventures. Mostly investments as I understand it. He's also quite happy to see that Louise summoned a man with 'business sense,' which is not the way I'd put it...

In fact, I really didn't put anywhere near as much thought as I should have into my current investments. Hopefully, that won't come back to bite me in the ass down the line.

Anyways, back on topic; her mother goes by the name Karin. Louise wouldn't get into details about what exactly her mother does aside from stating that she used to be in the military and patrols the family's lands for dangers herself. So, military mom. Probably strict as fuck. Should be fun to meet her.

Her eldest sister is named Eleanore. Is a scholar or professor or something like that. Louise wasn't all that interested in going into detail about her beyond that she works at a university studying geology or something. Sounds like an absolute bitch personality-wise anyways, and due to her occupation keeping her stuck outside of La Valliere we're unlikely to ever meet, so meh.

Cattleya, the middle child, though... Christ, Louise went off on her for bloody ages. The tl;dr version is that she's got some sort of condition which keeps her bed-ridden half the time, she's supposed to be quite pretty in spite of that. Smart, kind, lover of animals, sort of salty about not being able to be an adventurer due to her condition... So, yeah. They sound normal enough. Still, hopefully, I won't have to meet them anytime soon. I could only see that going awkwardly, all things considered.

Louise attempted to ask about my family, however... Well, I suppose she misinterpreted my sudden terror at realising I hadn't put any thought into that at all and quickly retracted her inquiry with no small amount of apparent distress of her own. Nothing much happened after that until we decided to call it a night and return to our rooms. Notably, she went out of her way to pull me into a hug I could only interpret as being apologetic before we split up for the night. I almost heard her whisper something right before she let me go, but I couldn't make it out and didn't think enough of it to ask her about it.

Which leads us back to the present, with me just sitting here, leaning back in my chair and pondering my situation. I'm not entirely sure how I should go about on the topic of my family, which is bound to eventually come up between myself and Louise at the very least.

I must say, I'm really not liking that I must continue to lie about myself to Louise and, well,
everybody else for that matter. Building up all these relationships on a base of lies and half-truths... Christ, this is already really starting to bother me. But how can I go about fixing things now? Surely it wouldn't be appreciated were I to just come out and reveal that I've been faking everything... And I'm not dumb enough to think that I can actually pull off the 'I never actually claimed to be a noble' angle.

Not to mention that... Well, imitating a noble is sure to be something punishable by... Very severe means. Fuck me, I can't reveal the truth about my past at this point, can I? I certainly can't come clean about not being a noble at any rate... Maybe, maybe I can just convince Louise to not ask about my home life? Convince her that the topic is too painful to dwell on and that I'd rather keep my eyes on the future or something... And I'm feeling like a right fuck, sitting here considering the best way to go about lying to who is supposed to become my best friend in the coming years.

Faaaahk...

...Oh shit, am I causing Louise grief right now?

...Ugh, probably best to focus on other things right now. Like... Like what? Siesta? No, trying to not broadcast too many negative emotions to Louise right now. Miia? Eh... I'm even a tad unsure about her right now.

...Fuck it, I'mma read me some Lord of the Rings.
Fell asleep, slept well enough, went to breakfast with Louise, ate together in somewhat awkward silence, ran into Siesta, at which point she'd assured me that we're 'cool' to paraphrase, then save for Miia following up on my offer to hang out and us killing some time playing and talking about vidjer games for a few hours nothing much happened that day.

Least, until the school day ended and the time came to test out Louise's magic in the summoning fields.

"Alright, just calm down Louise, take a deep breath..." She was close to panicking at the notion of dipping her toes back into her apparent strange, unknown magic which she'd tapped into when she'd summoned me. I was only barely managing to keep her calm and prevent her from running around in circles. Much physically restraining her with hugs had to be done. "It'll be okay, you'll be fine, I assure you-"

"How can you be sure!?" She started attempting to squirm her way out of my arms, likely so she could start prancing about in a half-panic again. I tightened my grip on her, as jumping about isn't going to help her calm down.

"Look, I'll be right here, right next to you. We're the only ones around, even if something strange happens we're the only ones that will notice it, and surely you don't expect me to turn you in should something odd happen?" She didn't respond, though her breathing noticeably slowed a fair amount.

"I just... This is very..." She didn't finish her statement, not sure how much longer she's going to insist on this little panic attack.

"Louise." I stated firmly. "If your magic is heretical or whatever, wouldn't it have been evident to Colbert and Osmand immediately? Surely, if your Founder holds any degree of real power he'd have struck you down immediately upon you so much as tapping into the strange magic you noticed when you summoned me?" Louise forcibly backed up and gave me a glare. "In fact, what if this is supposed to be a gift from the Founder?"

"That's-!"

"Louise!" I abruptly cut her off. "What if I'm right?" Her glare withered, and she went back to worried and uncertain.

"I... Ugh! Let's just get this over with!" She suddenly spun to face the large rock I'd moved to the middle of the field and pointed her wand at it. Several seconds passed. Then a few more, then another few more... "...jophiel? Can you-" I reached out and placed my hand on her free shoulder, giving her a comforting squeeze. She felt tense as all hell, but noticeably untensed a bit at my touch.

A moment passed, and she started the levitation incantation. I'd noticed a while ago that the translation spell doesn't seem to extend to magic incantations for whatever reason, so I had no idea what specifically she was saying, though... Even so, it felt somewhat strange even compared to the other incantations I'd heard since arriving. I'm not sure what exactly it is that makes her specific verse sound so odd compared to others, though.

As Louise finished the incantation, I'd felt a... Very strange sensation wash over me, like... All the nerves in my body went numb sequentially, like, as if a 'pulse' passed me over and numbed me for but an instance. The sensation was gone as quickly as it appeared, and... Hey, look at that. The rock
is floating.

I leant into Louise's side, and whispered into her ear: "I told you so." She quickly spun about and with a joyous squeal jumped on me, wrapping her arms around my neck and threatening to burst my eardrums with her happy shrieking. I didn't let that prevent me from hugging her back with all due force, though. I'm not sure how I would put it, though for some reason I just felt compelled to say... "I'm so proud of you."

She went quiet for a few moments, followed by subdued sobbing. "Thank you Jophiel... Thank you so much..."

But a half-minute passed before Louise unclasped from me and wiped her face clean of tears. She wouldn't stop beaming, and I could help but grin gleefully myself, a perk of being emotionally tethered together. She'd turned to notice that the rock she'd levitated had fallen back into its place on the grass, as should be expected from what I understand, mages need to remain concentrated to keep a spell going.

With a joyous glee she once again cast the spell, and again, for a fraction of an instant before the rock floated above the earth I felt a spike of numbness shoot through my entire body. I can only imagine that's something of a side-effect of Louise's spell-casting specifically... Perhaps something to do with our bond?

The rock bobbed about to the left and right, forward and back, raising and falling. She'd lifted the rock only to let it fall and attempt to catch it before it hit the ground again multiple times. She didn't stop giggling the entire time, and I'd taken to filming the event with my Vita. Hopefully, she'd come to appreciate that.

"Hey-" I started, catching her attention. "-Why don't you try casting a few other spells? What are they called, cantrips?" Louise allowed the rock to resettle on the ground and contemplated her navel nervously.

"Well... You know how I've been having dreams about the Founder recently, right?" I nodded, which she seemed to notice out of the corner of her eye. "In those dreams I've... Well, the Founder cast a Void spell, and I could feel it. It felt... Very similar to when I cast levitation." Hold on, a what spell?

"Void? This is the first I've heard of this." As I put my Vita back to sleep and returned it to my pocket, Louise broke her apparent staring contest with her belly and gave me a blank stare for a few moments before she suddenly looked more than a little embarrassed.

"Oh, Gods- Nobody has told you about the Founder's element yet!?" She sounded a bit annoyed. "I'm sorry... Um, okay, the Founder had his own element which is above and beyond all the other magical elements. It is said that the Void would allow Brimir to perform miracles, destroying entire armies, reshaping entire continents, granting immortality and bringing the dead back to life..." She took a breath. "...and nullifying all magic."

Hm... Interesting... "So what was it you'd seen specifically?" Louise began shifting her weight about nervously.

"The anti-magic spell. I saw the Founder just... Break an entire regiment of spell casters, stop their spells mid-flight and seal their Soul, preventing them from casting further. I didn't hear the entire incantation for the Soul Seal, but the Dispel... I can recall the entire thing." ...Huh. Is she implying what I think she's implying?
"Are you saying that you think you may be able to cast this 'Dispel- ' Er, spell?" Louise's eyes widened, she turned a distinct shade of white but did nothing else. Uh... "I did ask about what else you think you can cast, at which point you'd brought this up, so..." Silence for a few moments...

"...I'm not sure." Her voice was barely more than a whisper. "...It seems heretical to think that I might be blessed by the Founder himself, but my dreams, this strange magic I seem to cast..."

"Well, try casting it then." Louise slowly turned to face me, her eyes wide as saucers. "That will confirm it one way or the other, right? If nothing happens your dreams are just dreams, if it works, well, it works." She didn't break her stare at me.

"I don't think you understand what you're suggesting, Jophiel." Oh lordy...

"So why did you bring it up, to begin with?"

She didn't respond, only continuing to stare silently.

"Sigh... Look, do you know how we do things in Canada? How we handle uncertain subjects or theories or what have you? We test them. We don't waste time sitting on our hands, worrying about this or the other, we make use of the Scientific Method." Okay, I'm being untruthful about my nation's actual efficiency about testing things and making decisions, but she doesn't need to know that! "If the theory is valid, it'll produce viable results, if not, well, then you know for sure that it doesn't work and isn't worth devoting any more brain power to. You can move on to other things and stop wondering."

Her gaze softened, and the colour was returning to her face, but she still looked entirely unsure. "I don't know..."

"Just try it once Louise. Look, you can use one of the nearby magelights as a target. Just one going out won't bankrupt the academy, I'm sure." She shifted her gaze to the light post I had gestured towards, though still seemed uncertain. "It isn't as though anybody is going to be hurt by one little light going out"

She took a deep breath, nervously looked around as if to ensure that we are indeed alone. "Just one try..."

This time, I felt something... Wrong shoot up my spine once Louise started the incantation. Just, something about the words felt... Not right. What in the hell is-

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"...phiel! Jophiel!" W-what the hell? I blinked in confusion, the sky filled my vision and Louise was kneeling over me, looking thoroughly terrified. My entire body was tingling as if it was just coming out of being completely numb... Did I just pass out?

"Louise? What happened?" I moved to sit up, Louise saw fit to help me by grasping my shoulders and pulling me to my rear.

"I-I-I cast the spell a-a-and all the magelights in the courtyard went out and you j-just... Fell down, passed out!" All the magelights... Huh, that's worrying.

"You'd targeted a single post, right?" She grimaced in response.

"I-I tried! B-but all of them went out anyways! T-they're starting to light up again, b-but..." Huh. Looking around, yeah. Looks like the magelights are all really dim and slowly lighting back up.
Certainly wasn't expecting that outcome...

"You okay?" She didn't seem amused at my inquiry.

"I should be asking you that! Y-you were the one that passed out!" I shrugged her concern off. Aside from being sort of worried about losing consciousness and feeling a tad tingly, I felt fine.

"I'm fine Louise, now do you feel okay?" She huffed as I pushed myself up and regained my footing, to which she followed suit.

"I'm fine, I just... Feel sort of winded. I think this is what soul depletion feels like." Oh? I wasn't aware that draining one's mana- er, 'soul' had that sort of effect. I suppose that makes some sense, though. However...

"Is that supposed to happen from casting just one spell?" She shook her head nervously.

"No, I think that spell must have been more demanding than I suspected..." Actually, now that I consider it...

"You mentioned that in the dream the spell was used against an army, right?" Louise blushed in embarrassment a bit.

"W-well... I just didn't put much thought into it I suppose." Hm. Well, at any rate...

"Suppose this means that your element is this 'Void' then huh?" She turned pale as a sheet again.

"Oh Gods, by the Founder, this cannot be..." Suddenly she was pacing about. Her hands gripping the sides of her head and a half-panicked look in her eyes. "The Void... the Void is holy, it's blessed, it's the Founder's element, it hasn't been seen since the Founder's own time thousands of years ago..."

Ah, and there we fucking go.

I knew it, I just knew it. I wouldn't have been just summoned to a fantasy world to serve as some pretty young mage's guardian for the rest of her quiet life. There'd have to be some sort of adventure or grand twist involved with one of us turning out to be some sort of Chosen One, that's how it always goes in stories, isn't it? I'm quite glad that I'd thought to have some decent armour produced for myself before anything serious happened now.

I reached out and caught her as she was about to pass me by, still muttering to herself as she went. "Louise, calm down. Freaking out won't accomplish anything right now." She gazed at me with her large, violet eyes peeking past her strawberry blonde bangs. "Look, we'll bring this up to Osmand later on, surely he'll know what to make of all this, right?" She took a deep breath and nodded in response.

I'd expected her to speak up and say something, though she didn't. With nothing else to do for the rest of the day and my getting the impression that Louise wouldn't be up for more practising today, I'd moved to direct her back towards the main building. When the ground suddenly shook hard enough for the both of us to notice it. "What was-" Louise didn't get the chance to finish her inquiry before the entire fortress wall a good fifty or so metres away just flat-out fucking exploded.

Without another word, I'd pulled Louise into my chest and spun her around to shield her from the falling fragments. Lucky nothing large enough to actually hurt my back, and once the noise of stone grinding and crashing together failed to stop I'd quickly spun about to spy what it was that caused the explosion... And was utterly dumbstruck by what I'd seen.

A terrifyingly massive stone man, not entirely unlike a giant from Dark Souls, only MASSIVELY
scaled up was pushing its way through the rubble of the wall it had partially knocked down.

I'm no fool, according to fantasy conventions this would be my 'time to shine' so to speak. The moment where Louise and I's adventure begins and we proceed towards the uncertain horizon to meet our fate, to find whatever destiny holds in store for us.

Without missing a beat I scooped Louise up and began sprinting as hard and as fast as I could in the direction opposite the stone giant. "J-Jophiel, what are you doing! Wait! We can't just run away and do nothing!" NOPE. FUCK DESTINY AND FUCK FATE! I DON'T EVEN KNOW HOW TO USE MY SWORDS AND I'VE NO DESIRE TO DIE TONIGHT!

As I continued to run a great, bone-rattling roar shook the entire courtyard... Sounds to me like a certain Tyrannical Lizard King isn't too happy to have somebody invading his sovereign land!

Fucketh me sideways, something tells me that things are only going to escalate even further before they calm down around here!
Things that Go Boom Part 01

So, a giant T-rex vs a giant stone golem in an early modern magic academy courtyard knocking shit over, tossing shit around, and knocking huge holes in the academy itself with the aforementioned thrown shit. Sounds awesome, right? Hell, I bet that you wish you were here right now, able to see this throw-down with your own eyes.

If you're wishing that right now, you're fucking insane.

It was fucking LOUD. The dinosaur was furiously roaring every time it suffered a blow, and the golem was shaking the earth with its every immense footstep. It was also scooping up chunks of the now shattered fortress walls and tossing them at the great beast at every opportunity. Apparently, the familiar runes gave King enough of a mental boost that he has the sense to actively dodge thrown objects, which has the unfortunate side-effect of having those hunks of stone instead fly directly into the academy.

Notably, the academy wasn't handling the abuse very well at all.

Entire sections of the main building's walls were collapsing, I could hear students screaming and shouting in confusion and terror at the sudden and unexplained attack on the academy and the Kaiju battle randomly occurring in the courtyard that had been the very image of tranquillity, not a few minutes previously.

Just to add the cherry on the top of the cake; by the sounds of it, the other large familiars were starting to get involved in the battle as well. Fuck me sideways with a broomstick, this is getting absurd!

Oh, and Louise is absolutely fucking furious with me for immediately running rather than trying to fight. She'd began stringing together random expletives once it became clear that I'd had no intention of turning around and rushing to our deaths and wouldn't set her down so she could attempt to attack it on her own. Suicidal overconfidence was not something I'd come to expect out of the fun-sized blonde!

"YOU WILL SET ME RIGHT THE FUCK DOWN THIS FUCKING INSTANT YOU COWARDLY BASTARD!" Louise's complete lack of forward-thinking in this situation was really making me want to drop her on her ass and give her a firm slap across the face. To say that this entire situation is really getting to me would be an understatement. Least of all because for whatever goddamned reason the runes just flat-out weren't working, forcing me to attempt to escape the insanity going on in the courtyard at standard human speed while I was on the verge of panicking.

Actually, considering it, it's probably got something to do with Louise's dispel. Could that have been what that numbing sensation was, the runes being dispelled?

Faaaaahk, this shit had to happen just when I actually need them, didn't it!? "JOPHIEL! YOU WILL NOT BRING SHAME TO ME BY FLEEING LIKE A COWARD! STOP AND STAND YOUR GROUND RIGHT!" I stopped, dropped Louise on the ground, and gave her a firm slap across the face once she'd scrambled to her feet. She stared up at me through her bangs with a dumbstruck expression plastered across her face, her cheek now rapidly growing red.

Yeah, all of this shit may just be getting to me.
"Calm the fuck down right now and think you idiot! What do you think you're going to do, throw rocks at the golem with your newfound levitation spell!? Or do you mean to tell me that you've suddenly generated enough Soul to re-cast that anti-army dispel again despite saying you'd exhausted yourself doing it the first time!?" The ground beneath our feet shook violently and the roar of a great dinosaur echoed throughout the academy courtyard from just around the corner of the main building, though Louise didn't allow that to snap her from her stupor.

Her eyes were suddenly ablaze again before she'd furiously jabbed her wand at my chest in an accusatory manner. "-I- Don't need to be able to cast anything you stupid dog! You're a battle mage, you said so yourself, and Kirche even confirmed it to the entire academy during that breakfast when she'd cast detect magic on you! You're armed all the Founder-dammed time like a knight would be and sure as Hel demonstrated that you're no coward when you chased down that criminal! So stop acting like some gutless Armand and go perform your Brimir-bound duty to the crown!"

...Oh shit. Oh fucking shit, I knew it! I knew it! I knew that spinning that web of lies would come back to bite me in the ass- Wait! "I have never-" A hunk of the wall came flying out from around the corner and shook the ground beneath us as it took out a nearby bench. "-I have never claimed to be a battle mage! And even if I was, do you WANT me to kill everybody in the academy!? I have no control over the power of my magic! If I try to do anything with it this entire fortress will turn into a smoking glass crater!

Louise gritted her teeth, and if not for the sounds of a bevvy of magical monsters battling to the death not fifty metres away from us I'd probably hear her growling right now. "That's- that's..." The ground once again shook. Sounding like the battle's inching closer towards us...

"Louise-" I felt a tiny shock run up my left arm, the runes reactivating? "-Listen, I... I understand where you're coming from. I-" Gods damn it, does she think I want to run? "-We can't do anything about this! Look at the size of that thing! What are you expecting to happen if we try to fight it?" Louise's expression fell flat for a few moments before she cried out as if in joy.

"You're right! The size of the golem! It would take nothing less than a Square-class to create something of that scale!" ...Not what I meant. "Most of the staff are gone, all's we need to do is find someone that can cast Mass Detect Magic and the golem's summoner should stand out like a bonfire in a field of torches!" Wait, is she... "Come on!" Suddenly she reached out and grasped my hand before yanking me along towards the main hall, which mercifully took us away from the fighting.

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"Augusta!" In the great hall, Kirche turned to face us with a surprised look on her face. She was leaning against a wall, was covered in dust, missing her cloak and was notably barefoot for some reason, looking like she'd just ran a marathon with Flame the Charmander standing nearby on alert.

"Oh, Louise. You two are safe. Good..." She slumped down to her rear, her back still against the wall. "I was in the medical wing for-" Her lips suddenly locked shut and she looked as if she'd just bit down on something sour. "I was in the medical wing when the attack happened. I left with a group of first-years to get them off of the academy grounds, but those stupid shits all scattered like a pack of frightened pigs when a lone brick missed me by a few feet. I tried to chase down a boy that ran here in a blind panic, but..." She gave a forlorn glance to a collapsed side hallway-

...Oh.
Oh, fuck. He was a first year, just a teenager...

"Professor Katia always did say that I was slow at casting levitate..." I felt something inside me just... "So... Anything I can do for you two?"

Snap.

I stepped forward and took a knee in front of Kirche before speaking. "Can you cast detect magic en-masse?" Now that I was focused on her I could see that she looked vaguely... Vacant. She must be in shock... Crap, she won't be of much help like-...

"...I can. Why?" In an instant, she looked more focused. Not sure how, but I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Louise spoke up before me.

"The golem that's attacking is so massive that only a Square could have created it, and since the teachers are all away from the academy looking for the headmaster's secretary we think they should stand out like a sore thumb compared to the regular students and guardsmen in the academy!" Kirche directed her gaze at Louise momentarily before responding with a determined nod. She quickly pushed herself back up, and I followed suit.

"I'll only be able to hold the spell for a few seconds, though if you're right the difference in power should be comparable to the sun and the stars." With a flourish, Kirche brandished her wand, and in a mesmerising display moved it about her body in a manner which resembled a sword dance as she chanted the spell's incantation. Colbert had mentioned that the more powerful spells sometimes require incredibly complex wand conductions if a mage isn't well-versed in casting it...

Kirche thrust her wand into the air directly above her as she finished the chant with a powerful shout. I'd thought there'd be some sort of dramatic light show after all that, but nope, just a little pulse of ethereal light that briefly flashed from the wand's tip. She held the position for a few seconds before she suddenly let out a strained breath and her legs gave out from under her. I'd barely managed to catch her as she fell forward, slumped over like a dead fish and gasping for air like she'd just ran another marathon with her face resting on my shoulder.

Flame gave a glance over his shoulder but didn't abandon his apparent sentry.

Louise gave her a few seconds to catch her breath before speaking up again. "So? Did you see anything?" Kirche was still slumped against me when she answered.

"Y-yes, I was barely able to catch something past Jophiel's freakish Soul..." ...Ah, I hadn't thought of that. "...And your's too, for that matter, Little Louise." I turned my head around to glance at the tiny blonde, who seemed a tad taken aback. "That wasn't there before... Though I believe there are more pressing issues than the two of you suddenly having identically terrifying Souls right now." Louise gave me a worried look as Kirche took another moment to breathe. "The Vault. That's where the next most notable Soul was."

A few moments passed before the sound of flesh harshly slapping flesh broke the sudden silence. If the red mark on her forehead was anything to go by, Louise had just full-on smacked herself when I'd taken a moment to glance at Kirche. "Damn it! Of course, what the Hel else would somebody target in the academy!? It's probably Foquet too, no other thief is powerful enough to summon such a large golem... So stupid-!"

Louise continued to chastise herself for a few moments while I slid my arm underneath Kirche's
knees and shifted her into a bridal carry before taking a knee and setting her on my leg as a backrest to take some of the weight off of my arms, her clearly being too weak to stand on her own at the moment. "Thank you, Kirche." She weakly looked up at me and gave me a smile before letting her head rest against my chest.

"Think nothing of it Darling... Just give me a minute, I'm not used to casting such high-level spells, I should be fine quickly enough." I nodded. The runes had fully reactivated and seemed to be boosting my strength, but I'm not sure how reliable they are, so taking any opportunity to avoid straining my muscles via stereotypically carrying around girls like some sort of shitty superhero seems like a good idea.

...Might as well ask while Louise is still chewing herself out. "Why are you barefoot?" Kirche didn't bother raising her face to respond.

"Have you ever tried to run in high heels?" Ah. Louise had ceased cussing like an inner-city gangster, instead, she stopped to seemingly calm herself with a breathing exercise. We should probably get moving if we're to intercept the Square-class.

"Louise, we're wasting time." She locked eyes with me before stomping her feet and repeatedly slapping herself on the sides of her head... Trying to force herself to calm down, maybe?

"Okay! Right, if Foquet is targeting anything it'll probably be the Staves of Destruction!" Who and the whats? "Let's move before he gets away!" She turned and moved to begin running for the main door before I could ask for further clarification.

"Louise, wait!" Kirche called out before Louise really took off, the smaller girl seemed more than a little annoyed at this.

"What!?"

"Come here."

"What? Why!?"

"Just... Come here." Louise looked conflicted, but quickly stomped over and loomed over the two of us.

"What is it?"

Kirche rolled her eyes. "Okay, allow me to elucidate. Come down here." Louise growled but obliged the Germanian by quickly lowering herself to her knees in front of us.

"Why the blasted Hel are you-" Kirche suddenly reached out with both hands, grabbed Louise by the back of her neck- ...And pulled her into a very passionate, unprompted, and unexpected open-mouth kiss.

If I weren't utterly stupefied I'd have probably reacted, separated Kirche from Louise or something, but as it was I was so taken aback that I could only stare with my mouth agape. It took Louise a few moments to really process what was happening, and she began to audibly scream -though her voice was understandably muffled- as she began to struggle against the larger and stronger girl. Louise began full-on open palm slapping Kirche about the face, and eventually, Kirche released her as she emitted a thunderous belly laugh.
For her part, as she rocketed upright Louise just clamped her hands over her mouth, still audibly attempting to screech through her fingers, her eyes the size of saucers with a disbelieving shock shining through them.

Kirche had begun to cry from the laughter, I was still so dumbstruck that I didn't know what to do at that moment. She began coughing, seemingly as she attempted to stop her laughing fit. "Oh, that was so worth it!" With a final chuckle, Kirche took a hold of my shoulders and used me to push herself back up to her feet. "I needed a way to quickly recharge my Soul. I'm not about to let you two go up against a Square mage on your own, after all." That statement was directed at me.

...Ah. That's right, I think I recall Louise mentioning during one particularly slow breakfast that Soul can be instantly recharged though a sufficiently powerful enough emotion, though it isn't supposed to be a very reliable way to replenish one's own magic pool, especially since successfully doing so runs the risk of having one 'strain' their 'magical muscles' so to speak, resulting in a mage hurting themselves.

That was a pretty risky move on Kirche's part, all things considered. It was also really... Jarring, considering the circumstances, but I suppose everyone deals with trauma in their own way.

"You're sure that you're good for a fight?" I asked as I returned to my full height, attempting to ignore Louise's continued horror at the unwanted kiss for now... Honestly, that wasn't very cool on Kirche's part, though we are genuinely going to need as much help as we can get if we're about to go up against a Square-class, so I'll overlook it, for now.

"No, but I won't be able to live with myself if you two die on this fool's errand. Doubly so if you're successful and a le Blanc can claim success while an Augusta sat back like a coward!" The red-head gave me a wry grin as she made her statement.

...Gods damn my stupid sense of justice suddenly overwhelming my self-preservation instincts. ...No, people have died, we need to fucking act now if we can. I...

...I'd rather die here knowing that I tried to stop a monster than live knowing that I hid like a coward and did nothing when I might have been able to save lives. I will not run away.

I looked around the dining hall, entire sections of walls were blown open, portions of the ceiling were caved in. The screams of students and their familiars echo throughout the academy while we stand here, wasting time... I will find the fucker that did this.

I will watch the life fade from their eyes.

I will ensure they won't harm anyone ever again.

"Then let's go."
Kirche had been shivering noticeably, and when I checked her temperature she felt overly cold, so I'd given her my jacket just before we'd left, leaving me with just my short-sleeved buttoned polyester shirt covering my chest. I felt lighter without the jacket, so hopefully that'd be a boon in my favour once we actually get to fighting the thief.

I'd found myself tightly gripping the hilt of my sword as we approached the hall leading to the vault, though more out of... Anticipation than anything. I could feel the runes flare to life once I made contact with the hilt. They didn't behave quite like that beforehand. Odd.

...What the hell is wrong with me?

This isn't the kind of person I am... I don't get excited at the prospect of fights, at the thought of hurting people. Even at my worst, I didn't enjoy throwing fists, I didn't get any kind of a thrill from fighting, just a wave of shame and regret after the fact...

Maybe I didn't actually manage to suppress the runes after all. I am supposed to be Louise's guardian familiar, and what use would a familiar that refuses to protect his partner be? It would make sense that it would take steps to make me more amicable to the idea of battle... Odd that I can consider things like this. You'd think the runes would just make me all action-hero gung-ho no thinky just smashy... Or maybe-

Bah! This isn't the time to be thinking about the nature of the Familiar Bond! I'll just roll with it, for now, I can think this shit through after things have calmed down. For now, I should be planning out our battle plan with the two mages accompanying me. I'd halted and raised a hand to the girls to signal to them to stop as well. Flame took an additional moment to get the message.

Christ, this is not how I saw this day going when I climbed out of bed this morning. "So, what's the plan?" I'd turned to Kirche and Louise to address the two. We probably should have gone over this earlier, but I doubt that any of us are really firing on all cylinders right now. Especially not me, just being some dude from Canada. Dealing with Kaiju attacks isn't exactly a concept I'm used to in practice...

The two turned to face each other, shared a blank look, then shrugged.

I could smack the both of them right now... "For the love of- What are we hoping for here then, that we'll go up against a Square-class with a Dot, a Line, and what is effectively a commoner with a sword and hope for the best?" Louise's expression soured when I'd described myself as a commoner, while Kirche just raised an eyebrow. "I'm incapable of using any of my magic safely. In practice, I'm basically a commoner, okay?" Louise gave me the stink eye, while Kirche continued to give me an appraising look.

A few seconds passed while I waited for one of the girls to speak up with an idea of how to take on a Square. Neither of them opened their mouths.

...Surely, they don't expect me to produce a plan, right? "...You two do realise that I've only been aware of your particular brand of magic for about two weeks now, right? I have no idea of what to expect from such a powerful magic user, let alone how to fucking fight one." Both girls once again shared a look, though this time they spoke up in unison.

"Well, shit."
An ear-piercing crash echoed down the hallway, the telltale screams of deforming metal and crushed stone... I'm guessing that was the sound of the Vault door being blasted open-

A flash of blonde hair streaked past me down the hallway. Louise just took off sprinting towards a hostile Square-class mage -the most powerful class of elemental mage there is- without anything resembling a plan while leaving her two teammates standing struck dumb behind her.

...I'm almost genuinely impressed at how stupidly impulsive and foolhardy this girl is turning out to be under pressure. "God fucking damn it, Louise!" While I cursed aloud Kirche began angrily muttering in what sounded like German.

"Dummes mädchen...!" Translation spell only applies to French I suppose.

I just realised that we've somehow actually managed to stand here long enough for her to actually reach the Vault on her own. Damn it, so much for planning. Guess we're winging it and just hoping this works out for the best.

I'm going to tear into the idiot if we make it out of this alive.

I bounded forward, the stone and wood panelled walls of the hallway rapidly passing by in the blink of an eye thanks to the magic buffs the runes bestow upon me. As I turned the corner I'd noticed that the Vault door had been knocked out... From the inside. Golem punched a hole in the wall and overshot it? Whatever. Gives us access at any rate. I'd stopped at the entrance, and peered inside... To see Louise grappling with a cloaked figure.

...You've got to be fucking kidding me- Wait, it looks like they're actually trying to fight over something-

I felt my heart stop. Bullshit. There's no way. There's no fucking way in hell. It's just a trick of the light... No. There's no mistaking it. That... It's the Davy Crockett from Metal Gear Solid 3.

And it's loaded.

FUCK. MY. LIFE.

The figure, obviously Foquet, kicked Louise in the shin and when she recoiled in pain bashed her in the face with the launcher, knocking her to the floor with a cry of pain. The runes flared up as I felt a rush of fury shoot through my body at the sight. I charged forward at the cloaked figure, shoulder-checking him and sending the fucker flying back.

It was then that I'd noticed that the entire back wall of the Vault was missing, and I could see the golem throwing King across the courtyard right into a tower, knocking it over... And he just stands right up like nothing happened and charged back at the golem while a number of smaller flying Familiars distracted it. Holy fuck that's one tough dino-

Pain, disorientation. It took me a moment to realise that I'd just taken a chunk of stone to the face when I wasn't looking. It hurt, really fucking bad. Shitty unreliable runes... My vision was blurred, the entire side of my face felt numb. Did I mention having flown into the opposing wall and hitting the floor? Louise, you fucking idiot, if only you'd stopped and- As I rolled over I noticed a very distinctive bottle roll out from a now overturned crate and come clearly into view... Is that a Vigor from Bioshock Infinite?

Lying within arm's reach a few feet away was a purple bottle, with a silver horse jockey atop a gold
lightning bolt stopper... Well, that's unexpected. I reached out and grabbed the bottle of Shock Jockey, taking a few more grasps than I'd have liked to actually get a firm grip on it due to still being disoriented from that blow to the head. Once I'd had it in hand I'd rolled onto my back and with more difficulty than I'd have expected sat back up.

The thief, apparently called 'Foquet' was standing with his back to us in front of the hole leading to the exterior of the building. We were several stories off of the ground, so I suppose he didn't want to risk jumping. Waiting for the golem to finish off King and the other Familiars so he can jump on it and ride it into the sunset?

I turned the Vigor over in my hand, it had plenty of writing on the label, as one might expect from an American product. I couldn't make it out right then, though... Blurred vision. Is that a sign of a concussion? Fuck me... I'm not sure what the consequences could be, but maybe I should drink this. Lord knows I'm hopelessly outgunned as it is and need every edge I can get, but what if-

"Jophiel, Louise!" Oh, I'd forgotten about Kirche. The fire-topped Germanian turned the corner with her Familiar on her heels and stopped as she noticed the situation. Foquet spun around to face her, and his grip on the Davy Crockett- which should be so heavy he shouldn't be capable of carrying it around by hand I might add! -tightened in response. Just as Kirche moved to raise her wand a vicious snarl and a blonde blur suddenly jumped at the thief again. For fuck's sake Louise, are you trying to get-

This time Foquet used his wand to fling a stone at Louise as he had done to me. She raised her arm reflexively, and a sickening crack filled the room, followed shortly thereafter by a horrible scream of pain. Louise was back on the ground, clinging to her arm, which now seemed to have produced an additional joint in the middle of the forearm... The runes flared up, my vision suddenly cleared, and all doubt was gone from my mind. I grasped at the stopper and tore it out of the bottle.

You just broke Louise's arm.

Tossing aside the stopper, I shifted myself about to my knees, glaring up at the thief still staring at Louise, who from what little of his girlish facial features I could make out under his hood looked oddly horrified.

You hurt Louise. You hurt my sister.

I glanced down at the bottle and could see the liquid inside sloshing about through the mouth. It was a strange, iridescent blue colour, and seemed to give off a slight glow inside the opaque bottle.

Your life is forfeit.

I lift it to my lips and start downing the concoction.

It burned, and stung. Hellishly. Not like alcohol, nothing like alcohol. It felt like I was swallowing liquid electricity, blueberry-flavoured electricity, but still. My throat damn near closed up on its own, and I could feel the muscles all down my neck and in my chest begin to spasm. I held the bottle in place, kept it down, forced myself to not waste a single drop. I don't know how this is going to effect me, but I don't care about that now. This fucker hurt Louise, and will fucking die for it.

I allowed the bottle to fall just as I got the last of it down. The sound of the tempered glass bouncing off the stone floor seemed to startle Foquet, who was now staring at me in surprise.

Every muscle in my body was spasming, it hurt terribly, and the runes were glowing brighter than they ever had before.
Then my arms felt like they'd caught fire. I felt something hard forming under my skin before the mass began shifting under it; then broke it altogether, revealing an obsidian-like lump in my left palm accompanied by a surprisingly small amount of blood, followed by many more popping up all over both hands and forearms. The skin around the obsidian chunks rapidly blackened, followed by bolts of electricity began sparking between the masses on each arm, crackling and popping accompanying each tiny string-like bolt that hopped between my hands and off of my arms in random directions.

My arms had gone numb, but I still had complete control over them. Better than being in horrid pain, I suppose.

It took me a moment to realise that I was controlling the bolts jumping between my hands myself. Holy Christ, I barely needed to even think about it, it's damn near instinctual... It took me another moment to realise that I was cackling like a mad man. I glanced up from my arms to see Foquet, now backed up against the opposite wall next to the hole, doing his best impression of a goldfish... Notably, Louise's cries were rapidly fading. A glance about the room confirmed that she and Kirche were vacant, meaning that the Germanian girl saw fit to get the injured blonde away from danger as quickly as possible.

Good. Means I can go all out without fear of hurting one of them.

I raised myself to my feet, never taking my eyes off of Foquet as I did so. He had the Davy Crockett clung to his chest like his life depended on it, keeping it crooked in the elbow of his wand arm. Must have cast a featherweight spell on it to be able to so much as hold it up.

Heh... Might as well go for gold, huh? With a murderous grin, I spoke my first words to the wretched thief as the sounds of two great beasts battling outside echoed throughout the academy. "I am going to make you suffer."

I thrust my arm forth and unleashed a bolt of lightning at Foquet- HOLY FUCK-! I was sent reeling back, clutching at my ears and screaming from the sudden pain they and my eyes were suffering from in equal measure. It took me a few moments to realise what just happened. Lightning bolt. Lightning. Little surprise that thunder and a blinding flash would accompany it.

You ever been near a gun going off in real life? Know that sound, how even through ear protection you can easily tell just how ridiculously loud it is? Well, the thunder was comparable to the report of a .300 Winchester Magnum. A .300WM going off in an enclosed space.

My ears were RINGING, and IT. FUCKING. HURT. "HORSE-FUCKING SHIT-STAIN!" Funny how what should probably be a series of awesome moments keeps getting ruined by dumb shit. Oh wait, not funny, the other thing. Infuriating.

When I'd finally recovered from the unintentional auto-flash-bang I'd noticed that Foquet had the sense to jump out of the way and that the wall behind him had exploded, likely from my lightning bolt. He seemed to have recovered faster than I had and was looking more than a little terrified if his body language was any indication. Fuck me, Shock Jockey was never that powerful in the game! Though Booker only ever took tiny sips from the bottles when he picked up a new one, while I downed the entire damned thing in one go...

Probably shouldn't be relying on game mechanics to determine what to expect out of magic-imbuing potions from video games in real life.

Okay, I'm not willing to risk blinding and/or deafening myself, so plan B! I drew my Hellion and moved to charge the thief, who in response tossed another bundle of rocks my way. I'd blocked them using my arms as Louise had, but they uselessly bounced off of my still blackened skin. Chalk that
up to the runes deciding to actually work this time. I'd lowered my arms and moved to finish advancing upon the thief, only to have another, larger rock side-swipe me and knock the Hellion out of my hand... And out the hole in the wall into the courtyard.

FUCK ME, this just keeps getting better and better!

With no weapon on hand to attack the mage with I began frantically turning over crates, spilling their contents about to see if I could make use of anything in the Vault- Is that a fucking Pip-Boy!? Pokéballs!? What in the actual-

Another barrage of bricks came flying at me. I'd fallen over behind a pile of chests while trying to scramble out of their flight path and they'd luckily missed. First off, holy crap is this not going well for me, and secondly, why in the hell is Foquet going so easy on me? A Square should be capable of one-shotting just about anyone without much effort... Unless he's deliberately trying to not seriously hurt me? Though he sure as fuck didn't let that stop him from breaking Louise's arm...

Once again, I tried to look around to see if I could find anything to improvise as a weapon. I'd grabbed on of the smaller chests that were between Foquet and me, then proceeded to use the super-strength the runes impart on me to firmly grasp the iron lock and tear it clean off. Probably going to just be full of trinkets, but I'm desperate for something that isn't going to deafen me if I use it- I swung open the top, and my jaw dropped. Plasma grenades from Halo.

...What in the actual fuck is going on here!?

Okay, no time to be worrying about details, just focus on the issue at hand! Good to know these are here, but like I said, I'd rather not be deafened in my attempts to stop Foquet and prevent him from escaping with a fucking Doomsday weapon! Gah, this would be bad enough if it was just a regular M29, but it just had to be that crazy over-powered launcher from Snake Eater, didn't it!?

A number of bricks rapidly collided with the wall behind me. Suppressive fire? Makes sense if Foquet just wants to keep me off of him while waiting for his golem to finish up with King, who I'm guessing isn't going to be able to stand up to a giant made of solid stone for much longer I might add!

Anyways... Okay, I know that there are weapons here for certain now, let's just look for boxes and crates that look big enough to hold a sword or gun or something... I glanced at the pile of crates and noticed a particularly long one sitting on the floor, partially covered by a flag which I didn't immediately recognise. I pulled it towards me and noticed that it had a pretty significant amount of locks all around it. Almost as if they had reason to keep this one particularly secure... Definitely a sword or rifle case! Though, what if it's something especially danger-

Another barrage of stones exploded as they hit the nearby wall, and I could hear King's roars starting to wane in strength. Fuck it! I need all the aid I can get, and I don't want that Tyrannosaurus to die on my watch!

As quickly as I could I began to tear the locks off in rapid succession. As I tore off the last lock I only just noticed the chest seemed to be jolting about somewhat in my hands. With the last lock gone I swung open the case to find- "OH PRAISE SWEET SAINT SASHA'S GLORIOUS TITS! SUNLIGHT!" -a... Talking sword.

...HOLY FUCK YES. At a glance, it seems to be a bastard sword-length yatagan with a smokey grey finish, not entirely unlike my Hellion. There's also a noticeably distinct wavy water or wood burl-like pattern underneath the smokey finish... Damascus steel? Nice! The deepish voice that came from it seemed surprisingly human, aside from a subtle 'reverb' and 'echo' to it. Not to mention a slight... Spanish accent? Odd that...
"Fucking took you long enough Partner! Been calling out to you for a good two weeks now-" More rocks collided with the wall, cutting the sword off mid-sentence. "Oh shit! Ha, right into the thick of it eh? I like you already! We can get properly introduced later, for now just know that I'm an anti-magic sword! Swing swing swing away and mages won't be able to touch you! We'll put them down like pigs! Ha ha! Aha, ha ha ha! That's right, we'll break their bones, harvest their soul, end their lives! It's been so long since blood ran down my fuller! It's been too long since I'd last seen battle! YES! BLOOD, GIVE ME BLOOD! Let me PIERCE, let me SLASH, let me CLEAVE!"

Uh...


...Silence fell in the room, even Foquet stopped throwing stones at me by the sound of it. I'm not entirely unsure that I didn't just make a mistake in breaking the locks on this sword's case...

"What in fuck's name are you waiting for? There's a fucker that needs killing! Let's get to it already!"

Just as 'Derflinger' said that a new flurry of stones starting impacting not only against the wall but against the chests I was currently taking cover behind... Well, fuck me, guess it's either do or die here! I grabbed the sword by the hilt and allowed the case it had been housed in to drop to the floor... I felt a tad... Odd once I'd held it for a few seconds. Why-

"Brimir's great swinging cock, what in Odin's name is wrong with your runes!? Everything's all screwed up, little wonder you didn't respond when I was calling you; you probably couldn't even hear me!"

Hold on- What!?

"I can fix this, but I'm going to need some time to do so properly. For now, I'll try and get the speed and focus aspects operating properly if nothing else. Earth mages like to rely on physical objects, and anti-magic isn't going to do much to stop a flying rock, shamed as I am to admit it. I'd advise that you learn how to dodge a flying object real fast, by the looks of it even with the runes shielding you that noggin' can't take much more abuse than it already has!"

This- This sword can alter my runes!? Wha- The next blow against the many chests that were shielding me from Foquet's onslaught caused the entire pile to visibly jump a few inches towards me. Oh shit...

"Quit pissing about you knob! I've got focus working, so you should be able to avoid taking a killing blow to the face, let's go!" Damn it... Alright, let's do it!

I jumped to the side from my hiding spot, trying to get out of range of Foquet's seemingly ceaseless attacks. It worked, and he seemed rather taken aback at my leap. Luckily I'd avoided tripping on or colliding with anything, so I was in a perfect position to dive at him. I wound up again and threw myself with Derflinger brought back and ready to swing at the thief full-force. Most considerably, everything seemed a tad... Slower than normal. This must be what Derflinger was talking about when he mentioned focus. Enhanced reflexes! Nice!

With as much strength as I could muster, I swung the sword as hard as I could- which promptly caught on a stone pillar, getting stuck and sending me into an uncontrolled spin into the thief when my forward momentum caused me to lose my grip on the sword.
Derflinger was shrieking his displeasure at being embedded into a stone pillar and I was laying on the floor, attempting to recover from the horrible dizziness that wild spin and impact with the mage threw me into, so much so that I'd completely failed to notice that Foquet was for the most part unaffected by the collision until he took the opportunity to dump a significant portion of stones on me, enough to completely weigh me down and prevent me from moving. Could be worse, I actually managed to avoid hurting my head again.

Fuck me, could this be any more of an embarrassing shit show on my part? C'mon runes, don't crap out on me now, I'd rather not get crushed here...

A few calm moments passed while I tried in vain to get free of the rubble covering me and Derflinger continued to shriek about how shitty of a warrior I'm turning out to be... With the action calmed I'd noticed the sounds of battle outside had also stopped, followed by the sounds of immense footsteps approaching us. I was able to twist my neck around just enough to see the Golem reaching into the Vault to pick Foquet up, Davy Crockett still in hand; King and the other Familiars must be either dead or damn near close to it...

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck FUCK, I can't let this happen, that thing is stupidly overpowered by real Davy Crockett standards, it may even be able to take out an entire city if they figure out how to fire it! God damn it if only I had a gun on me!

As Foquet and the Golem pulled out I could only watch helplessly... God damn it! How could I have fucked this up so badly!? If only-

A firebolt suddenly shot out from out of my cone of vision and damn near hit Foquet, at which point the Golem spun around, shielding the thief with its body and began thunderously running back out the way it came. Seconds later Kirche came into view and knelt before me with a severely concerned expression on her face. "Geist in Valhalla, your arms-! Jophiel, are you okay!?” I tried to respond but found I could only grunt with the weight of the stones on me. Shit, the runes are very likely the only thing keeping me from being crushed to death right now... "I'll get this off of you, just hold still!"

True to her word, Kirche stood up and began throwing large chunks of stone off of me with a levitation spell. Once most of it was gone I was able to throw the last of it off myself and attempt to force myself to my feet, though she stopped me at my knees with a firm grip on my shoulders, though I protested. "W-we have to catch Foquet-!

"Whoa there big fella, you're a lot... Absurdly more tough than you look, but you're clearly hurt badly from that pile of rocks and... Whatever happened to your arms! Just calm down, we'll-

"NO! You don't understand! That thing Foquet was carrying, it's a Davy Crockett, a weapon from my world-" I was cut off by a loud crash coming from the hole in the wall leading outside that Foquet had just escaped out of. Peeking inside the Vault was the blue dragon I'd noticed flying around the academy from time-to-time, which was followed by a small, distinctly albino girl wearing an academy uniform running up its neck and jumping into the Vault itself. She gave the room a quick once over before Kirche addressed her.

"You- You're Tabitha of Gallia. What are you doing here?" 'Tabitha' stopped and acknowledged us with a brief stare before speaking up.

"Was looking for Longueville. Headmaster's mouse saw Golem attack from the tower, was sent back ahead of the group to help." Her voice was damn near mechanical, which when coupled with her manner of speech, alabaster skin, too-perfectly bobbed snow-white hair, inexplicably vibrant violet eyes, and complete lack of visible emotion in her features, made her quite an unsettling presence...
Kind of pretty in an 'ethereal' sort of way too, but for the most part just kind of creepy. Kind of like Rei from Evangelion... Oh God, is this girl an IRL Rei clone? "You both, tried to fight?"

My voice caught in my throat and I found myself in a brief coughing fit. Guess those rocks did more damage than I'd thought... Runes suppressing my body's pain reaction? Shit, hope I'm not bleeding internally or anything... Once I'd caught my breath again I responded properly. "Yes. Tried to." I was finding it difficult to talk. Shit... Tabitha was quickly walking around the Vault as if she was looking for something. I think I can guess what.

"Foquet is Square class. Lucky to be alive." She has a point. "Greater Staff of Destruction is missing." Bingo, though I think she was just thinking aloud there.

"The Greater- Goddess-! Jophiel, you said that Foquet has a weapon from your world!?!" That seemed to catch Tabitha's attention.

"Y-yes. An M29 Davy Crockett. It's only usable once, but it's capable of turning a city the size of Bruxelles into a glass crater, not to mention making the remaining area uninhabitable due to a kind of... Airborne 'poison' called radiation for which there is no cure or protection, which takes upwards of two decades to fade from the blast area." Tabitha was staring at me intently. "I don't care why Foquet stole it, he can't be allowed to get away with it!" Breathing was getting easier, maybe I'm not in such bad condition after all...

Tabitha nodded in response. "Can't fight Foquet on my own, will need help." She closed the distance between us, took a knee and performed an incantation with her staff at me, her flat expression never changing in the least...

This close up I could see that past her silver-framed glasses her pupils are just a deeper shade of violet and even her eyelashes are snow white...

Huh. Reminds me of Rose. "Hurt bad, slurring noticeably, needs medical attention." Oh. Shit. Guess the runes really are just suppressing the pain then- Wait, slurring? "Fought a Square and survived. Will need your help." She stood and turned to the dragon. "Track Foquet, stay hidden. Will call you back when ready to hunt."

"Kyuu~!" The dragon responded with a surprisingly adorable cry before launching itself off of the wall and flying towards the direction that the Golem had charged off in.

"Stay still." Tabitha redirected her attention back to me and began chanting a healing spell, I think I recognised a few of the words from when Vezimir healed me. It felt... Well, it didn't feel like much was happening. Guess the runes are suppressing all pain receptors if I can't even feel my body being repaired by the second. She'd been at it for two or so minutes before stopping. She sighed as she finished. "There, won't die now." ...Well, that's alarming. "Need further healing, need to preserve Soul for Foquet though. Will wait for academy staff to return, proper healer is among them."

Neither girl would allow me to stand after that exchange, and aside from Kirche confirming that Louise is safe in the courtyard with Flame and the few staff members that had stayed behind when the rest left to search for Longueville, nothing worth noting occurred until Osmand and the main staff body returned.
"So..."

I started, turning my head to face Kirche from my spot on a cot in the medical tent.

"Tabitha of Gallia?" The fantasy Arabic girl shrugged her shoulders in response from her spot seated on the ground next to my low cot, using her reclaimed cloak as a make-shift blanket to shield her bottom from the grass. She looked quite tired. Justifiable considering she was going around helping the main academy staff to rescue students that had been trapped under rubble and what not. Turns out even casting a cantrip (a classless novice spell) like levitate can really drain one's Soul if done enough times in a day, and Kirche was operating off of a second wind, to begin with.

"Not much I'll be able to tell you about her, I'm afraid. I tried to approach her and make friends when I first arrived in the academy... Birds of a feather; rejected pretty girls with a strange complexion and hair colour sticking together, etcetera, etcetera..." Odd that the translation spell translated into Latin there... "...But she wasn't having any of it. No matter how hard I tried she wouldn't even respond to me. Eventually, I just gave up and began ignoring her like everyone else does..."

She wavered in her spot again, almost like she was about to pass out.

"...Honestly, I totally forgot that she even existed until she jumped into the Vault and started poking around. For such a visually striking girl she has an uncanny ability to just fade away into the background like a piece of furniture." Hm. Sounds like me when I was younger. "Can't really tell you much-" She cut herself off with a rather gaping yawn. Man, poor girl's really been pushing herself today.

"You should probably lay down for a nap Love." I damn near bit my tongue once I'd realised I'd just used that particular term of endearment for Kirche, which Louise had asserted would get me in trouble... Though near as I could tell didn't seem to notice the slip-up.

"No, it would be undignified for a lady to sleep on the ground, I'm fiiiiii-" She briefly slumped over, before her head jerked back up with a grimace. She turned to look me in the eye for a moment before relenting. "Maybe for just a few minutes..." She quickly spread her cloak out, curled up atop it in something resembling the foetal position, and was out like a light in seconds, her form slowly raising and lowering with the gentle rhythm of breathing... Hm. She has a surprisingly cute face while sleeping.

With a sigh, I turned my gaze over to my opposite side and confirmed that Louise was still in fact there on her cot, drugged so hard that she was basically in a medically-induced coma from what I could gather.

Her broken arm wasn't life-threatening -it felt like a dagger was being driven into my heart when I glimpsed her arm, wrapped up in that crude cast, making her look so small and pitiful- so the head nurse couldn't afford to 'waste' soul on healing the injury when there are students in danger of dying from their wounds, so they just forced some 'Milk of the Poppy' (Which I'm pretty sure is from A Song of Ice and Fire, probably a shortcut on the part of the translation spell) down her throat to ease her pain and keep her quiet.

That was a mercy. I'd briefly heard her pitiful crying before she lost consciousness when I was brought down from the Vault and it made me feel more horrendous than I had in months. As unhappy as it made me to see Louise in this condition, she was in no danger of death, so at least I
wasn't filled with horrible worry... Over her, at least.

With some effort I'd pushed myself up into a sitting position and allowed my eyes to scan the interior of the fairly large tent, looking over all twenty or so the inhabitants again. Not a strand of black hair to be seen. I'd overheard that some of the servants had been hurt as well, so I was scared shitless wondering about what may have happened to Siesta. I glanced down at my body. I'd indeed received some pretty bad internal injuries, but at Tabitha's insistence, everything was healed well enough that I'd be able to get up and move around vigorously if I'd so chosen, though the healers said they'd really rather I not.

The staff initially went into a panic when they'd seen my arms, but I'd made some shit up about it being a side-effect of my people's magic, and that it was nothing to be afraid of. Took a while for them to buy it, but Mrs Lamperouge wasn't about to complain about being able to spend Soul on healing other students. I glanced down at my arms... Still blackened, but lacking the massive obsidian masses that were previously growing out of my skin. With a little effort, a small charge of electricity could be made to arc between my fingers.

...Christ, I really should have thought before downing that Vigor. Didn't even help me at all in the end. In fact, something tells me that this is going to just make explaining things more difficult for me... Bah, I can wonder about that later, for now, let's see if we can't find Siesta.

With a grunt, I forced myself to my feet against my muscle's protests. I'd considered moving Kirche onto my cot, but something was telling me that I didn't have the strength to do that right now. It wouldn't be much of an improvement on her current sleeping situation anyways.

I reclaimed my jacket from the ground, threw it on and withdrew the cheapo olive drab cotton gloves I keep tucked away in the pockets, slipping them on to mask my arms and hands from observers. Don't feel much like having to answer further questions about them when I'm on a mission.

"Oi, you'd better not be thinking about leaving me here partner." The bloodthirsty talking sword I'd attempted to brandish back in the Vault called out to me from its place next to my cot. Tabitha had hung back to look around the Vault more after I'd been hauled off to the healers, from what I understood Derflinger asserted that he's my sword that asked that he be returned to me. Not sure how I feel about having this thing sticking with me, but... Eh, if he's really an anti-magic weapon I'll really need to hold on to him for the future. Especially if I'm really going to try helping Tabitha fight Foquet...

With a groan, I'd lifted the sword up and took a hold of it in my off hand by the blade. Won't have to worry about cleaning the blade after handling it with my hands with the gloves covering them. Gonna have to have a scabbard made for Derflinger if I'm to keep him... Should probably see if my Hellion survived being thrown out of a tower as well. Anyways, more important things to be worrying about right now. Moving on...

All my limbs felt heavy as I lifted the tent flap and proceeded outside, though I was otherwise mercifully unhindered as I moved about. Still plenty of shouting and shrieking coming from all directions, adults and teenagers running to-and-fro, carrying things, people, shouting at each other when they'd get in each other's way... 'Twas chaos. Oh, look at that, Miia using her super-strength to help carry heavy shit around. Good on her- and a servant just tripped on her tail. Well, we'll call that a wash. Anyways, moving on...

I gingerly set forth and began peeking into the various tents. Nobody was bothering with segregating the commoners from the Nobles in all the chaos, so I'd have to duck into every random tent to see if I could spot those telltale raven locks. With luck, I'd run into her just delivering clean linens to one of the tents or something, shaken by all the crazy shit happening, but otherwise unharmed. I'm a
pessimist by nature, though, so I can't help but expect the worst...

I was crossing the field to the next cluster of tents when I was unexpectedly called out to.

"Sir Jophiel!" I'd jumped at suddenly being addressed by a familiar male voice. A quick turn-around revealed Colbert, looking a mite out of it himself. Isn't he supposed to be in Bruxelles with- Ah, and Guiche is standing behind him, looking rather freaked out at everything going on. "Praise be... We just got back less than fifteen minutes ago to find the academy looking as if it had been set upon by the Raging Tempest, and the rest of the staff have simply refused to stop and explain to me what has happened! If you'd be so kind-"

I'm in no mood for pleasantries right now. "Foquet the Decaying Earth attacked the Academy with a siege golem. Broke into the Vault, and the golem got into a fight with the T-Rex familiar King and a bunch of other Familiars-" Who, by the way, is still alive and likely to survive his injuries. The others... Some survived. ".and the two did the majority of the damage you're seeing." I made a sweeping gesture towards the wrecked buildings. Colbert turned pale and his expression fell flat. Guiche stepped forward with a dumbstruck look on his face.

"Foquet- The legendary thief? B-but how!? The academy's architecture is supposed to be reinforced with Square-class magic! Even a tornado shouldn't be capable of doing this kind of damage to it!"

...Huh. That's worrying if true... "Where were the staff? How did the golem manage to do so much as break down the exterior walls with the headmaster here!?" Kid sounds pretty panicked. Understandably so, I suppose.

I directed my gaze to Derflinger as I continued. "Miss Longueville went missing a few days ago. Osmand had organised a search party to go searching for her, which for God only knows what reason consisted of most of the school's staff, including the guardsmen. What few people were left behind when the attack happened were too occupied trying to help students to confront Foquet." Once everything has calmed down I'll be sure to ask what he was thinking taking almost all the guards when he went out looking for her... I looked back up to see that Colbert was wearing a very peculiar expression on his face.

"W-What!? You mean that Foquet was allowed to attack the school, break into the Vault and escape unmolested!?!" The blonde fop looked aghast.

"No, I- That is, Louise, Kirche and I attempted to stop him, though we failed." ...Yeah, I failed to stop that bastard from getting away scot-free- No. Tabitha's dragon is tracking him at this moment and I'm going to be helping her hunt him down. I can still fix this. I'd been staring off into space when I made that statement. I turned to face the two again in favour of brooding and found both looking rather taken aback.

"You fought a Square-class!?' I can see this routine getting old fast. I suppose I didn't make much of an attempt to hide my scowl since they shared a glance and quickly dropped the subject.

I don't have time for this. If Siesta is hurt I need to know. "Tabitha of Gallia is putting together a posse to hunt down Foquet. If you're interested in helping, go find her. I'm looking for someone, so I don't have any more time to spare." With that I took my leave, not bothering to wait for their reaction.

---

Checked all the damned tents, not one sign of Siesta... I'll do another lap of the courtyard. I'd really rather not find out that she only wound up in one after I'd already passed through it. Aside from Colbert and Guiche popping up and stopping me earlier nothing much worth noting happened, aside
from the obvious things like recognising a few of the faces among the- No, let's focus on less depressing things right now. Like my surprisingly quiet new sword. "You haven't said much of anything in a while."

It took Derflinger a few moments to respond, seemingly waiting until we passed into one of the empty stretches between tent clusters to speak up. "Trying to focus on getting your runes functioning properly before we have to fight again." Hm, I see. That begs quite a few questions, but priorities...

"No questions to ask then?"

"Oh, I have a metric fuck load of questions to ask partner, but making sure you don't die in a few hours takes priority over introductions, as my enthusiasm for spilling blood doesn't extend to yours. Spirit weapons are also so damned rare as to attract lots of attention, and I'm under the impression that you'd rather people not bother you right now."

"Fair enough." I let the conversation sit there as I entered another heavily populated area in my search for a particular elusive maid.

---

"Siesta!" Finally! I knew it was a good idea to do another run through all the tent clusters! She was sitting up on a cot, a detached look on her face, but she otherwise seemed intact. With a relieved sigh, I crouched beside her and placed a hand on her shoulder as I set Derflinger down next to me, a smile finding its way on my face as relief washed over me. The girl just stared at me blankly for a few moments, which was quickly getting awkward. "Uh... Siesta?"

She switched her attention to her lap, the blank expression remaining. "...They're going to send me back home. Release me from my contract." ...Huh? "Didn't get out of the way in time, should have moved faster..." I gave her another once-over, I didn't see anything immediately wrong with her. "No use for a one-handed maid..."

...It took a few moments to register what she'd said. It was only then that I'd really noticed that she had her left hand covered by her right... I wasn't entirely sure why I did it, suppose I was kind of in shock at the revelation. But I'd slowly reached out, gently took her intact hand in my own, and gingerly lifted it.

Her fingers and knuckles are gone. The bandages covering the wound are clean, so it was likely healed properly, but- She'd suddenly begun trembling. I looked at her face, and she'd starting biting down on her lip, audibly sobbing and looking like she was trying to fight back tears. She then desperately entangled her hand around mine and began squeezing very hard, her emotions suddenly getting the better of her. I'd moved my arm over her shoulders and pulled her into a hug. Once I had her pulled into my chest she began crying full-out. I didn't know what to say. What could I say?...

...I could feel the runes flare up again as anger overtook my emotions.

Foquet... An eternity suffering in Hell will feel like a mercy once I'm done with you.

"I- *hic*" She began, hiccuping as she tried to speak through her tears. "I... I'm g-glad tha- *hic* - that I got to meet y-you, Jophiel..." ...No, I've got a simple solution to this.

"I don't know how to read Halkeganian runes." Siesta pulled away slightly after a moment, giving me a confused look. "I need someone to teach me how to..." Looked her right in the eyes, I gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Whatever the academy was paying you, I'll match it." The tears in her eyes were causing them to shine like a pair of perfectly polished hazel jewels.
She eventually buried her face in my shoulder again, her sobbing renewed, though I think I could feel her nodding her head. Suppose that's settled then. I allowed her to remain like that for a few minutes, seeing little reason to deny her a friendly shoulder to cry on when she probably needs it.

Eventually, she pulled herself back and wiped her face clean of tears using her good arm. "I-I don't know what to say..." I pulled my arm back to rest my hand on her close shoulder.

"Just wish me luck." She was back to looking confused. "...Please?" Even more confused.

"...G-good luck...?" Somehow I got the impression if I told her what I intended to do I'd have to physically fight her off from trying to hold me back. But I'm not just doing this for her, so I can't let her wishes get in the way of this plan. I took her good hand in mine, lifted it up, and gave her a respectful kiss on the back of her palm, to which she blushed in spite of her hiccups.

"I'll be back shortly. Get some rest for now, okay?" Siesta looked concerned but nodded in agreement before I grasped Derflinger, stood and left the tents, noting its location for after our return. For now, I've just got to find Tabitha and assure her that I'm ready for this.

---

As I'd approached the group gathered around Tabitha, I'd noticed that Colbert, Guiche, and a fair amount of guardsmen were among them, along with the Headmaster himself.

"Ah, Lord Pholus. I'm glad to see you well." Osmand looked older than he had since I'd been summoned by Louise, stooped over and looking exceedingly tired. Given his apparent magical ability, it would make sense that he's been overextending himself in an attempt to help as much as he can. "Miss Tabitha has informed me of your intent to aid in tracking down Foquet the Decaying Earth, and not only that, you've already duelled him in the Vault in an attempt to prevent him from escaping with the Greater Staff- I mean, what was it you called it Miss Tabitha...? Right, the Davy Crockett."

I gave a curt nod. "Tried to fight him... Didn't do so well." That really was such a shit show...

"Regardless, it is good to know that you're an actively just sort. There are too many in this day and age that are all too willing to stand back in fear when criminals abound." I bit my tongue when I nearly shot back that I was mostly doing this because I wanted him dead for hurting Louise and Siesta. Osmand gave me a respectful nod of his own. "Miss Tabitha has given me a rather... Truncated explanation of what the Greater Staff- Davy Crockett is capable of:"

"Big boom." I was almost stunned at the childishness of Tabitha's brevity.

"...Yes, I was hoping you'd be able to clarify, Lord Pholus?" Simple enough.

"Yeah. It's what we call a 'recoilless gun.' The warhead, that is to say, the big red thing on the end of the green tube is the dangerous part. When a specific switch-Er, button... The trigger is hit on the tube the warhead is launched in a massive arc. When the warhead impacts against something... It'll create an explosion large and powerful enough to destroy a city the size of Bruxelles outright, and on top of that it's a nuclear weapon that'll release what's known as 'radiation' along with the explosion."

Okay, how to explain radiation...

"Radiation... Is a kind of airborne poison that one cannot protect themselves from and... 'Infuses' itself within the earth itself, so the area around the explosion is poisoned, rendered uninhabitable for decades afterwards."
Osmand looked quite unsettled by my explanation. "I... See. This weapon, surely it is a one-off, unique creation made for an extraordinary situation?"

"No, it was produced on a fairly wide basis for relatively small-scale warfare." Everybody gathered looked rather... Shocked at that statement.

Colbert was the first to speak up. "By the Founder... I cannot even begin to imagine how war is waged in your homeland if this 'Davy Crockett' is widely used." Oh, wait, that's not-

"Wars in which entire cities are destroyed!? That would be beyond horrifying!" Guiche suddenly shouted out when I was gathering my thoughts. "How-"

"Headmaster!" Tabitha shouted over Guiche's sudden panicked yelling. "You had a point." Her words were oddly clipped, and her cadence was as mechanical as ever. What a strange girl...

"*Sigh...* You're right, I apologise Miss Tabitha." He attempted to straighten his back somewhat, though he seemed to be relatively unsuccessful. "Lord Pholus, I was wondering if you'd happened to recognise any of the items in the Artifacts Vault? And- well, let us take this one step at a time." Right to the point. I like that.

"Yes. I recognised several things that were in the Vault." Everybody in the group looked rather surprised at my statement. Osmand himself gently stroked his beard as he gave me an appraising look.

"Good. Has Foquet moved from the cavern, miss Tabitha?" The girl even smaller than Louise closed her eyes for a few seconds before giving a curt shake of the head. "I don't believe that you're lying, or rather we can't risk assuming that you are, so taking into consideration everything you've said I feel as though it would be wise to take any possible advantages we can to prevent Foquet from escaping with this weapon."

Osmand turned and began walking towards the academy main building.

"Please accompany me to the Vault, Lord Pholus. With luck there will be something else inside that will make it possible to easily settle this issue." If there weren't a few things there I was hoping to collect there before leaving to hunt down Foquet I'd have protested, but as it is? Yeah, good excuse to see if I can get away with taking anything for my own use. "Everybody else, remain here and continue working out a plan with Miss Tabitha, we should be back shortly."
After a quick detour to pick up my Hellion (still intact, Zombie Tools ftw!), we proceeded to the Vault in silence after Osmand explicitly requested as much. Once we'd actually arrived and passed the sentries now guarding it he cast a spell, which seemed like a bad idea to me considering his condition, but eh. "Okay, I just cast a spell that will prevent us from being eavesdropped upon unless one were to actually enter the Vault with us." Ah, that explains why he didn't want to talk before arriving here. "Now, if you'd so please, can you show me what you recognised during your fight with Foquet?"

I set Derflinger against a wall and spun about to quickly make for the Pip-Boy, still lying about where I'd last seen it, the crate it had been in as overturned as it had been an hour ago. I'd picked it up and held it up to my face to examine it more closely. Definitely a Pip-Boy, arm-mounted like the 3000 from Fallout 3 & New Vegas... But it looked quite different compared to that 3000. It wasn't as wide, had a visible latch under the screen, and all the buttons were on the opposite side of the device. A bit of an ugly brown colour as well, but eh, a Pip-Boy's a Pip-Boy. "For starters, this is a Pip-Boy."

Osmand approached and looked at the device in my hands. "Pip-Boy... I can't recall when this came to be in our possession. What is it then?" I rolled up my jacket's left sleeve, undid the latch on the device, and locked it into place before hitting the power switch. I couldn't help but smile widely when I saw it boot-up properly, just as one would expect for the ridiculously tough Fallout tech.

Some tech jargon scrolled up the screen before a prompt to enter my name came up with no readily apparent text input method...

I was a bit confused for a moment before I realised that it had a hidden flip-out keyboard. Indeed, turned out I was right. Interesting...

"It's a 'Personal Information Processor,' it can tell you if you're sick, hurt or what not, as well as track what you have on your person." I stated as I tapped out my internet handle of 'BakaSmurf.' "It can also detect radiation and warn you when you're within its area of effect." Osmand nodded in understanding. "Also-" A particular message scrolled across the screen that actually worried me a bit. 'Please brace yourself for calibration.' What the hell does that mean- "GAAAAAAAGH!"

I dropped to my knees as a horrid shock shot through my arm... Well, I suppose that explains how the Pip-Boy works then. "Brimir's shit, are you well!?" ...Haven't heard Osmand curse before. Must be quite stressed considering that.

"Sorry, I... 'Forgot' about the calibration, how it actually begins tracking one's condition, to begin with. Nothing to worry about." Osmand gave me a sceptical sideways stare but didn't press the issue any further. I glanced at the infernal machine mounted on my arm... 'Initial calibration complete, thank you for your patience, please enjoy your new RobCo Pip-Boy Model 3000 Mark IV and be sure to look other quality RobCo products at your local department store!' Well, this is an interesting development.

With a grunt I returned to my feet, my legs protesting the motion as I did so. "Hm. Well, I suppose that it belongs to you now." I raised an eyebrow at the elder mage, honestly surprised by the assertion. "You know how to use it, and I sincerely doubt that anybody even remembers that it exists. If nothing else I can write it off as payment for your participation in hunting down Foquet. It being able to detect this 'radiation' could prove useful in the hunt as well." ...Seems reasonable enough.
So my very own Pip-Boy 3000... Cool. Feeling a bit too overwhelmed by everything going on to be very excited about this right now... Unfortunate.

"I assume you're familiar with other artefacts here?" I turned and looked about for the mini chest of Plasma Grenades.

Took a bit to find it, but it was still there. Eight neon blue orbs all haphazardly sitting in a box. "These are Plasma Grenades, they're like-

"We have grenades." Ah. "The 'plasma' part is what I fail to recognise." Mm, easy enough to explain.

"Think of it as a super-fire bomb, capable of burning through even the most resilient of armour."

"...I see. I could see those also being useful against Foquet's golem. Take them, you are going to need every advantage you can get." Not going to argue there. "Anything else?" I pointed to the red and white spheres that were still strewn about the floor randomly.

"Those are Pokèballs. Y'know Kirche Augusta von Anhalt's Familiar? He's a Pokémon, or 'Pocket Monster.' Those balls are used to capture creatures like him and... Well, bind them to commoners as Familiars without using magic, I suppose."

That seemed to catch Osmand's attention.

"I don't think they'd work on regular creatures, though. If you're curious take one and touch it to your mouse. If he seemingly transforms into light and is pulled into it, we'll know." I scooped one up and handed it to the older fellow. He did as instructed with the mouse sitting on his shoulder, and nothing happened. "Well, that answers that." Little disappointing, but not unexpected.

"Hm, might it be a good idea to gift these to Lady Augusta?" Perhaps...

"Maybe one, I don't know what she'd do with any extras. I'll show her how they work later on if you do." I stretched my back with a groan. "Well, unless you're gonna let me start opening chests I don't-

A particular bottle caught my eye. I cut myself off, traipsed over to it and lifted it off the ground. The now empty bottle of Shock Jockey. I wasn't able to read this before, wonder what the rear label actually says- 'WARNING - DO NOT CONSUME MORE THAN A QUARTER OF A BOTTLE PER 24 HOURS, severe intestinal distress, permanent scarring of skin tissue, and risk of uncontrollable lethal electrical discharge may occur if recommended dosage is exceeded!'

...Well, guess that explains why it was way more powerful than I was expecting. Overcharged the fuck out of it, probably nearly killed myself as well. Fuck, let's try to keep our head on straight from here on out, yeah?

"What is that?" Osmand asked from his spot a few feet away.

"It's... A potion that's supposed to temporarily suppress a Wizard's magic, weakening their spells and allowing casters with uncontrollable magic to actually utilise their abilities." Fuck me, just keep digging the hole deeper why don't 'ya? "It allowed me to cast a lightning bolt at Foquet, though it was still too powerful for me to do it more than once, and I missed on top of that." Osmand looked rather intrigued. Better get off this topic fast. "Anyways, as I was saying, unless you're going to let me start opening chests and what not to look for more weapons..."

He appeared ponderous for a moment before responding. "Perhaps after you return from hunting
Foquet. For now, there's something else I need you to see in the tomb under my tower while we have
time. There are weapons there I believe may be of use if nothing else, so we should hurry before you
have to leave." He sounds quite serious...

A thought occurred to me just then, however. "Hold on, Headmaster, a question?" He turned back
and responded with an expectant stare. "Guiche mentioned that the academy shouldn't have been
able to receive the amount of damage that it has...?" Osmand breathed a weary sigh before answering
my inquiry.

"Yes, the Academy's architecture has been reinforced with magic over the millennia since its
foundation, its walls kept strong by Square-classes since as far back as can be recalled. The sheer
volume of the reinforcement spells that were functioning just yesterday should have prevented
anything from damaging the main building itself. The exterior walls I could see being sabotaged by a
Square that had enough time to disenchant the walls from the outside, but the Dining Hall? The
Elemental Towers? That just shouldn't have been possible. It's almost as if... Almost as if all the
reinforcement enchantments were suddenly..."

"Dispelled." I really wish it hadn't just clicked for me right there.

"Hm, yes, quite." Osmand gave the ground a long, remorseful stare. "I am not sure what caused all
the magic to fail, but one thing is for certain, it will take several months to ensure the academy has
been repaired and enchanted to enough of a degree to make housing and teaching students here safe.
It shames me to have to consider it, but I feel as though postponing classes and sending the students
home for the summer early this year until the situation is resolved may be necessary."

Well... It isn't as bad as it could be. Louise isn't going to be happy once she hears about this and puts
two-and-two together, though...

Osmand sighed wearily before continuing. "So, if that's it, we really ought to head to the tomb with
all due haste."

Fuck, I'm not looking forward to having to tell Louise about all this. Though let's just focus on this
moment's issues for now. "Well, lead the way then."

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I'd never really wondered where the stairwell leading underground led to the handful of times I'd
climbed Osmand's tower since arriving here, never would have guessed it would lead to a tomb of all
things... Doesn't take a genius to figure out that this is going to have something to do with these
apparent extra-dimensional objects being in the Vault.

Once we'd reached the bottom landing we'd come upon a wide set of double doors that seem to be
hewn from polished marble. No handles or door knobs to speak of.

Osmand held his staff aloft and spoke a quick chant, which was followed by the doors leisurely
opening on their own. Gotta love magic automatic doors. "Close to sixty years ago, when I was still
young enough to go on adventures I was set upon by a fire dragon." The robed fellow started as he
began meandering through the now open door-

Wait, sixty!? Just how old is this guy?

"I had been lost, not a kilometre from here and was weak from hunger and thirst so I wasn't able to
defend myself properly using my magic. It seemed as though I had met my end... When a strange
sound emerged from the treeline, followed by the great beast exploding from the waist-up." The
tomb was long, richly decorated with fine tapestries, rugs and meticulously painted stone statues of what appeared to be ancient Norse warriors, though their overall aesthetic was somewhat off compared to what one would expect from actual historical Norsemen. Ancient early Halkeganians, maybe?

"The person interred here must be quite important." Osmand gave an affirmative huff a few steps ahead of me.

"To me, at least." Huh... "It took me a few moments to realise what had just happened, and once I had I'd tracked the sound back to its origin I'd seen a man wearing strange clothes the same colour as your coat and a black mask that obscured his face, wielding one of the lesser Staves of Destruction." ...Sounds like a modern soldier. "He'd collapsed immediately afterwards, as far as I could tell he'd fallen into a coma from injuries he'd sustained before encountering me."

We were close to the end of the hall, and I could start to see an olive drab-garbed figure housed within a glass coffin, laying at a 45-degree angle and flanked on both sides by several glass display cases.

"To my eternal shame, I must admit that I was not able to save him. My Soul was tapped, and if I'd attempted to heal him I'd have collapsed into a coma myself..."

The man came into clear view. Without a doubt, a modern Earth soldier. "An American...?" I spoke quietly to myself, near as I could tell Osmand hadn't heard me.

"All's I could do was drag him along with me as I attempted to reach civilisation. Shortly after that I happened upon the academy, and was brought in for medical attention by the guards." He was silent for a moment. "He'd already died by the time I'd reached the academy. There was nothing the healers could have done for him." I could now make out the finer details of the man's outfit once we'd stopped at the foot of the coffin... You know, I'm not even surprised at this point.

"Militaires Sans Frontiéres." Osmand turned to face me, something resembling relief on his face.

"So you do recognise him..." Yeah, I suppose that explains the Davy Crockett being the same model as the one from Metal Gear Solid 3.

I leant in and examined the man... According to Osmand, the body is over sixty years old... Chalk that up to magical preservation. I could see his skin through the eye holes of his balaclava, absolutely no colour, but otherwise undamaged by rot or decay. His equipment in the display cases looked just as intact, aside from some the sort of wear, tear and repairs one would expect from military gear. Olive drab fatigues, typical western cold war military clothes. No helmet to speak of, though he does have a set of goggles resting on his chest, probably ballistic grade.

Though what really caught my eye was the unloaded RPG-7, and the scoped Mosin-Nagant complete with a suppressor resting on either side of his person. Osmand seemed to notice where my eyes were focused. "In our culture, it's been traditional to bury a warrior with his arms, I wasn't sure how he'd have had it done, but it seemed to be the safest option." ...Gonna be honest here if his intention was to properly honour this man.

"We don't typically inter our dead soldiers with their arms and armour. In fact, a fallen soldier's equipment is normally passed on to one of his comrades." Osmand looked mildly distressed. "I doubt he'd have taken being interred with his gear as an insult, though, so don't be too concerned about that." He looked pensive but didn't get any further worked up. A few moments of inspection confirmed a simple pair of runes engraved above the coffin on a brass plaque. "What do those runes say?" He looked a little remorseful at the question.
"A hero." ...Huh. That's right, Osmand wouldn't have had the chance to learn his name, and wouldn't be able to read his dog tags. Better fix that.

"He'd have been wearing a metal pendant, his personal information would have been printed on it. If you'll allow me to access the coffin I can actually tell you his name." The old fellow looked surprised at that, then for the first time since I'd seen him today, he actually smiled.

"Here, the cover is held in place by some fairly simple latches." Set Derflinger against the nearby wall, got the coffin opened, and as respectfully as I could I reached into the collar of his combat shirt and quickly found his tags. Notably, no detectable smells were emanating off of the corpse... Fucking amazing preservation magic. Anyways, I pulled the tags out and read them aloud to Osmand.

"Corporal Dmitry Kuznetsov. Russian. Roman Catholic." I set the tags back down on his chest and stepped back to face Osmand. "Corporal is his military rank. Dmitry is his given name, Kuznetsov his family name, Russia his home nation. I believe that as a Christian he'd want a cross on his plaque." I made a crude cross with my fingers to get the point across. Osmand nodded in acknowledgement.

"Thank you for informing me of this... It is a weight off my shoulders to know that Corporal... 'Kuznetsov' can be properly remembered now." Good to know that gave him some relief. "Now, if you'd please, I think it would be prudent for you to take the weapons he has on him."

I turned to gave him a surprised look.

"He is from your world, your people pass your fallen warrior's weapons onto their comrades... Well, the way I see it you're the closest thing to a comrade he has on this world and given everything happening lately I believe that you'll be able to make good use of them against the threat that Foquet poses right now." ...Fair enough- wait, 'my world?' When did- Y'know what? That can wait, there are more pressing issues to tend to right now.

As respectfully as I could I withdrew his arms from his person. The RPG-7, and the suppressed Mosin Nagant (M91/30 I think, curved bolt and a mounted scope, will give it a proper examination later).

In the nearby cases were a simple flak vest, ballistic pauldrons and knee pads, an M1911A1 with an MSF emblem in place of the rearing colt, a KA-BAR, and a pair of M67 grenades. Luckily the four full stripper clips for the rifle were being kept in a chest at the foot at the coffin along with the grenades, some ration packs, a Walkman cassette player, and a perfectly preserved banana (lolmetalgear). So thankfully I didn't need to go digging through a dead man's pockets.

Just a handful of spent casings for the 1911, unfortunately. Still, Colbert will probably want to have a look at the pistol for sure. "The rifle seems to be in usable condition, though the pistol lacks any usable ammo... Regardless, this could very well help against Foquet, assuming everything still works, that is." Osmand gave me a cocky grin.

"I cast the preservation spell that kept everything in this room safe from decay myself. I assure you Lord Pholus, that musket is as functional as the day I enchanted it." Heh, 'musket.' "Now, I believe that was everything..."

"Hold on, do you have any warheads for the RPG?" Osmand gave me a blank stare. "Erm... The lesser Staff of Destruction, those things that can slide into the end?" His eyes lit up at that.

"Ah! Yes, as a matter of fact. In my office. It seemed wise to keep them separated once I'd realised
they fit together... In retrospect, I really should have done the same with the Greater Staff, but...
Irrelevant now. You believe that the Lesser Staff could help in a fight with Foquet?" This time I gave
Osmand a blank stare. "...Yes, a fire dragon was felled with one. Right, stupid question. I'll have
someone fetch them from my office, I believe there were three of the 'warheads' in question."

"Good, though hopefully, I won't have to use them." Osmand nodded in agreement.

"Now, I presume this vest is some manner of armour? Let's see about making sure it actually fits..."

---

The vest fit relatively well after some adjustments (though I'm not sure how effective it'll actually be
against magic), and I was even able to strap Derflinger to it at the hip rather than having to carry him
around by hand. The rest of the protective gear also fit well, so I'd paid my respects to the fallen MSF
trooper and gave my thanks for the equipment that would hopefully make retrieving the Davy
Crockett he had also brought with him from the Metal Gear world easier.

Before making our way back a quick test-firing of four rounds through the large hole where a
fortress wall used to stand confirmed that the rifle was working well (one dud), and after he stopped
marvelling over the repeating firearm Osmand had a guardsman retrieve the warheads for the rocket
launcher while I made sure everything was in working order and collected the spent casings. With
the RPG and its rockets slung over my shoulder Osmand and I returned to Tabitha's posse.

Colbert still had that strange expression on his face that he'd started wearing after I'd told him about
Longueville. Must have a crush on her or something. Guiche meanwhile looked quite pensive...

Does he actually intend to help? Well, that's better than I'd have expected from him. Hopefully, he'll
actually be of some use should it come to a real fight. Otherwise, the four guardsmen were decked
out in their typical gear; decorated bronze helms in a vaguely Norse style, mail shirts, short swords,
and spear-staves over blue cloth gambesons. Captain Keyes was also there, though he looked so
haggard that I'd imagine he was just going over basic tactics or something with his men before setting
them loose.

Also, Tabitha, of course.

I cleared my throat before speaking up. "Is this everybody that's fit for battle?"

Tabitha nodded. "Nobody else to spare, school needs help keeping academy standing." That's the
second time the academy's structural integrity has been mentioned... Really need to ask about that
when I get a chance. Anyways, still no change of expression on the girl's face.

"Aye, though we'll put everything we have into catching that wretched thief, you can bet on that!"
The shortest of the guards shouted with a fist thump against his chest, to which the others cheered in
agreement.

"I'll shove my sword so far up that wretch's arse." The sole female guard started before Keyes gave
her a stern glare, causing her to trail off with a mumbled apology for 'crude behaviour' before he
addressed Tabitha.

"Do try to keep my men alive Miss Tabitha, it would hardly do for all that effort I put into training
them to go to waste."

"You're all heart boss." Another of the guards spoke up from behind the others, to which Keyes
grinned slightly.
"In all seriousness, I expect you all to treat this with all the due respect a Square-class deserves. There is a reason why they're often times considered to be living national treasures, forget that reason out there and this will likely be the last day you ever see." Keyes turned to face me directly. "I'm not entirely sure what the case is with you milord, but I trust that you're wise enough to not underestimate this foe?" I nodded in response. "I suppose that's the best I can hope for then..."

Osmand stepped forward and placed a hand on the captain's shoulder. "Yes yes, your concern is noted Jacob, now go get some rest, you'll be doing nobody any favours if you collapse now of all times." Keyes looked about ready to protest but seemed to relent before he opened his mouth.

"Very well, I shall take a twenty-minute break if you insist Headmaster." With that Keyes wearily about-faced and started marching for a tent cluster, presumably to sit or lay down for a while.

The group fell into silence as Osmand stepped forward and gave it a once-over before speaking up. "Now, everybody. Have we settled on a plan yet?"

Hopefully, I won't come to regret getting mixed up in this...
“Headmaster.” Tabitha spoke up suddenly. “Professor Colbert's eagle arrived at Sylphid's—” She cut herself off mid-sentence and her eyes looked glazed over for a moment. “Foquet noticed Sylphid, is fleeing.”

Osmand visibly grimaced and cringed. “Oh Gods damn it all! Everyone, round up droogs, we have to pursue the cut-purse immediately!” The elder wizard desperately motioned towards the guardsmen. “Stephen, can Sam remain in pursuit of Foquet!?”

Colbert gave a determined nod. “Sam knows to remain outside of Foquet's effective range and to weave between trees... Foquet's going to know he's being followed, though and will be actively attempting to... 'discourage' pursuers.” Osmand nodded.

“We shall move to catch Foquet with all due haste, we don't want to put your Familiar in needless danger.” Colbert nodded in appreciation. “Miss Tabitha, I presume you've recalled Sylphid?” She only nodded in confirmation. “Good, once she's returned you, Lord Jophiel, and Professor Colbert are to pursue Foquet ahead of the rest of the group.” Tabitha looked over at Colbert... Skeptically...?

“Professor Colbert is a Square-class in Fire.”

…I couldn't help but stare in shock. Colbert's a Square? A Square!? Tabitha was also staring at Colbert, though she presented no other indications that she was shocked or otherwise taken aback by the revelation.

Colbert gave a weary sigh. “…I have combat experience, I'm currently our best option for fighting Foquet. It would be... Irresponsible for me to not provide any aid I can here.” ...Well, wasn’t expecting that. “You both... I must speak with the Headmaster privately if you'd be so kind-” Tabitha immediately and wordlessly about-faced and marched off towards the empty field behind us. I followed without complaint.

With Tabitha and I now a fair distance away from the two teachers, she wasted no time in shifting her sights to interrogating me for tactical information. “Your magic, how?” I responded by slipping off my glove, unlatching my new Pip-Boy, holding my arm up and 'calling' on Shock Jokey, and cringing as my skin rapidly blackened again and the barely-healed breaks on my arm and hand re-opened, allowing the obsidian 'conductors' -as I'd determined them to be- to re-emerge from under my flesh with a light trickle of blood and begin generating electricity.

I also noticed that the skin around the stones turned somewhat scaly along with everything else. It didn't hurt, was really more tingly than anything, but holy fuck is it all kinds of unsettling to see your arm... Do that.

Tabitha took a step towards me, leaning in to examine my Vigor'd arm with a critical eye. “I presume you have questions?”

“Spirit magic?” That's what the elves use, right? I shook my head, which she evidently caught in her peripheral vision. “Incantation?” Shook my head. “Catalyst?” I took my free arm and pointed to the 'conduction stones,' so to speak. She gave them a very keen stare. “Hurts?” I shrugged.

“Tingles.” She reached up to gave one of the stones an experimental poke, causing a light jolt of electricity to jump to her finger and give her a light shock, which elicited a dog-like yelp and a jump from her. It took her a moment to realise she'd allowed her robot facade to break. She quickly glanced around worriedly, then locked eyes with me as I attempted to stifle a guffaw.
“That never happened.” Her expression as blank as ever.

I responded with a wry grin and a cheeky cadence. “What never happened?” She wordlessly continued to examine my arm, though with her hands remaining firmly at her sides now.

“Implants...?” It almost sounded like she was concerned there for a moment.

“No, they came from within my own body.” She seemed intrigued. “Er... I'm not really knowledgeable enough to give you further details, sorry.” A slight huff was the only indication that she was annoyed by that.

“Soul?”

“Salts.”

“Salts?”

“That's what we call it, the energy that powers Vigors. I don't know why, though.” I shrugged. Tabitha's head cocked.

“Vigors?”

“Ah, right, that's what this kind of magic is called.” She nodded wordlessly.

“Your Salts, will last?” That... Is a very good question.

“I hadn't thought about that... Never used this magic before today. I know there's a limit to how much a Vigor can be used before a user's Salts are depleted, but I'm not sure what that limit actually is in practice.” She was now giving me a wordless stare... I suppose that would sound absurd to someone from a civilisation where knowing the ins and outs of one's magic is like, basic education. “I should be able to throw fair amount if lightning bolts before I expend myself regardless.” Tabitha just nodded warily... Understandably so.

“Will ride Sylphid with me, throw lightning from above. Drop and help with guns when Salts are gone.” Hold on a moment...

“Drop?” She raised her staff.

“Feather-Fall.” Ah, I see... That'll probably be horrifying. Let's hope I don't wind up needing to jump off a dragon mid-flight, yeah?

“So, we're gonna circle around the battlefield, providing supporting fire for Colbert and the guards?” She nodded. “Great, so-”

“Miss Tabitha, Lord Jophiel.” Osmand suddenly stomped up behind us, and I 'switched' Shock Jockey off, doing my best to ignore the bizarre sensation of the conduction stones retreated back under my skin and seemingly dissolving into my muscles while I quickly slipped the Pip-Boy into my otherwise empty ammo satchel, making a point to leave it off to avoid a nasty shock. Upon turning to face him I'd noticed that his face was... A particular shade of red. “It seems that there has been a... Most unfortunate development.” That doesn't sound good. “Professor Colbert is asserting that Longueville is Foquet.” ...What.

I glanced behind Osmand, Colbert seemed to be rooted to his spot, his face fixed firmly on the ground at his feet. “…How does he know?” The elder Mage was grimacing quite harshly, his features taught as a suspension bridge cable.
He inhaled deeply and exhaled in an obvious calming technique before continuing. “Colbert asserts that he'd happened upon evidence implicating Longueville in a plan to rob the Vault. Initially, he'd believed that she was simply working with 'him,' but quickly determined that Foquet is simply a disguise she uses to hide her identity.” ...Hold on a moment.

“When did he learn of this?” Osmand's brow twitched violently before providing an answer.

“Two weeks ago.”

...

...

Silence hung in the air for a few moments. Tabitha said nothing, as expected. Osmand was breathing rather heavily, and I was trying to process the new information.

Colbert knew about her? That she's Foquet, and didn't even think to mention it to anybody? Or deliberately kept it hidden? Why in the fuck... “Why didn't he tell anybody?” Osmand's brow somehow managed to twitch even more violently before providing an answer.

“He intended to... Allow her to initiate her plans, and catch her in the act himself. Clearly, he was not expecting her to attack while he was away from the academy.”

...

...

...Of all the people I'd have expected to be a stupid glory hound...

“Trustworthy?” Tabitha broke the momentary pause, staring at Colbert as she spoke up.

“I... Do not believe that Colbert had malicious intent. His actions, -or rather, his lack thereof- were unfathomably negligent, however...” Osmand shook his head for a moment, clearing his throat as he did so. “Regardless, he is the only combat-capable Square here, and forgive me for my bluntness; but I do not trust you two and the few capable guards accompanying you to be strong enough to best Foque- Longue- The thief.” The elder spat out the last of his words with disgust. “At least, not without killing her in the process.” That caused me to quirk an eyebrow.

“You want us to bring Longueville back alive?” ...Wait, why am I surprised? What was I expecting to come of her at the end of this, for that matter?

“Yes.” He shot back immediately. “The Staves of Destruction are legendary here in Tristain, and I sincerely doubt that one would steal a weapon of such great power with the intent to hang it over their fireplace.” He shifted his weight somewhat before continuing.”We need to know who she is working for, or at least what the intent behind her theft is. Though...”

He allowed himself a sigh.

“You've made the danger of the Davy Crockett clear. Should any of you feel it necessary, I will not hold it against you for putting her down.” Those final words struck somewhere deep inside me, caused a most unpleasant sensation to reverberate through my chest.

I glanced around the courtyard, towards the emergency medical tents haphazardly scattered all around the academy main building... She's killed people, children. Hurt more than I care to count... He's right, she's dangerous, she's demonstrated that she'll hurt people, innocent people to complete
her goals. If we corner her while she's attempting to flee? There's no telling just what she might do in
her attempt to escape justice...

Could I? If she tries to lash out, strike like a cornered snake with her magic... Could I kill her? End
the life of another person?

Suddenly the various weapons strapped to my person felt as if they'd grown twice as heavy. Why do
I even have them? What am I planning to do with this rifle? This isn't a video game or some dumb
Hollywood movie; if I use this on her, regardless of where I hit her body, she'll be at minimum
maimed for life if by some miracle she's able to survive the 7.62mm hollow-point bullet blowing a
sizable chunk of her flesh off. What about my sword? Could I use it on her, bring it down upon her,
even as she screams in pain?

I didn't hesitate back in the Vault. Not for a second. Had that Shock Jockey bolt actually connected
with her... I was actually excited leading up to it, and eager in the middle of it. What the fuck is going
on in my head...

...The runes.

I lifted my left hand as I craned my neck down to look at the brand marring the back of my hand,
now accompanied by ugly blackened scars. Heh, of course, it wouldn't have been so easy to stop
them messing with my mind. Was actually pretty arrogant of me to believe I'd suppressed them, to
begin with. Suppose I'll ask Derflinger about that later... “We'll cross that bridge when we come to
to it.” I stated as I returned my gaze to the elder wizard, who gave a curt nod in response before
speaking up himself.

“Colbert! Come here, we need to formulate a plan before miss Tabitha's Familiar arrives and you all
need to pursue the thief.”
With the sun still well above the skyline a great number of thoughts were spiralling about in my head as we moved on Foquet's location; how I completely shat the bed during my duel with the thief, how to avoid making the same mistakes should it come to another fight with her, how Guiche was pretty clearly forcing himself to come along and could wind up being a liability should he need to actually fight; how in practice riding a dragon is actually more FUCKING TERRIFYING than anything...

After I had mentioned my lightning-throwing Tabitha insisted that I ride her great winged iguana with her, mentioning that lightning serves best in combat when cast from above.

I was doing my absolute best to not crush Tabitha's waist in terror as every beat of the dragon Sylphid's great leathery wings briefly caused her to jump up a few feet in the air as wind buffeted us both from the front, which made for an unnervingly turbulent flight for a guy used to the relatively stable ride of modern airplanes. Coupled with the complete lack of any safety measures aside from clinging to the dragon's rider for dear fucking life, I could state with some confidence that I will be doing everything I can to avoid riding any other dragons in the future.

Just sitting on the beast was uncomfortable to begin with. Turns out scales are really rough on one's legs, even when wearing sturdy denim pants! How in the hell Tabitha could do this while only having a simple pair of white stockings to protect her inner legs is beyond me.

“Your spirit sword-" The rather small girl started suddenly, the spell she'd cast earlier to make talking while flying easier evidently still functioning. “-is really a Spellbreaker?"

“Oy, you insinuating that I'm a liar girlie!?" Derflinger interrupted from my hip before I had a chance to reply myself. Had I been able to see Tabitha's face I'd have expected to see her rolling her eyes.

I attempted to swallow my fear before speaking up, doing my best to keep my eyes up and off the trees rapidly passing underneath us. “N- not sure, haven't gotten the chance to u-use him yet.” I intentionally left out how I did try to use him, but made a complete ass of myself in the attempt.

“Foquet will use Golems. Spellbreaker could destroy them easily. Would be helpful if true.”

“What, you think I'm gonna try and get my wielder killed!? You daft girlie? I ain't in no rush to get tossed back into a locked box by a bunch of superstitious old codgers! 'Youtou' my arse... If I could possess people you'd think I'd have done that once those idiots starting talking about locking me up!”

’Youtou?’ The Japanese word for a living sword that possesses its wielder like the Soul Edge?

...Well, no English equivalent, and I'm familiar with the word, so I suppose it makes sense that the translation spell would default to the Japanese term...

Anyways, I guess Derflinger must have finished tinkering with the runes -however he manages that- if he's speaking up now.

Tabitha seemed to be making a point of ignoring the sword's words. “Your musket-”

“Rifle.”

“Is accurate at distance?” Derflinger was grumbling at being ignored, and I wasn't in the mood to entertain him while trying to discuss tactics.

“Yes. I've never used this model before, but it should be able to hit targets well past the point that a
musket would have become useless.” Oh fuck me, why did I bring this thing, I don't want to actually kill Longueville now that I'm thinking about it! Having the RPG slung across my back is all kinds of dumb as well if I'm not planning on using it!

She nodded wordlessly and with her staff motioned to the droog riders below us, Colbert among them. “Can't rely on him, may need to shoot Longueville yourself.” My jaw tightened uncomfortably, and not just because I made the mistake of actually looking down... “Can you do it? Dangerous, might die.” Guess she felt my grip on her waist tighten there- OH! Holy shit, white-haired, purple-eyed girl riding a dragon!? I just noticed the opportunity, and I ain't wasting it!

“Valar morghulis, Khaleesi.” Tabitha wordlessly turned all the way around and craned her neck up to look me in the face for the first time since we mounted Sylphid, her ethereal amethyst eyes meeting my own deep browns as I made little attempt to hide the dumb grin that'd forced its way on my face at being able to say that and have it actually make sense in context.

“Didn't translate.” Oh...

“All men must die... Dragon Princess.” ...I think? Fuck, guess that was something else I lost when I took that hunk of bronze to the back of the head.

She gazed up at me wordlessly for a few moments before turning her attention back to the sky ahead of us. “Not a princess.” Didn't mean it literally, y'know... A bright flash of green from the leading droog on the ground caught my attention. “Colbert signalling, Longueville near, prepare to fight.” Oh fuck. Oh fuuuuuuuck...

Alright, alright, just calm down, you can do this... Worst comes to worst, the runes will probably go all Sons of the Patriots and prevent me from feeling bad about needing to kill her.

...Okay, that thought just made me feel worse. Gods damn it all! Fuck, don't over think things, just follow your instincts and keep in mind that she's killed kids and hurt Louise and Siesta for fuck's sake! You wouldn't exactly be committing an unjustified murder here!

Much to my great relief Sylphid bled off altitude and speed in a manoeuvre which probably would have been awesome had riding the damned dragon not been so terrifying to begin with. Before we set down near the base of a moderately sized hill the droogs stopped and Colbert signalled for us to approach to discuss our strategy. Though I was still sat atop the blue beast I was thankful to feel her feet hit the ground and the damned flight turbulence to stop.

I moved to eagerly jump off, but Tabitha latched onto my right arm and firmly set it back around her waist, wordlessly making it very clear that I wasn't allowed off the dragon just yet; much to my dismay. The guards seemed to find Tabitha forcing my arms back around her amusing if their snickering was anything to go by, and I didn't whimper at that, nope, not at all, nosireebob.

Colbert and the guards gathered at our side so we wouldn't have to shout at each other before speaking up. “Sam tracked Foquet to this location, specifically to a nearby cave that he collapsed behind him when he dove inside thinking he'd lost his pursuer.” Oh yay. I spoke up at that.

“How are we supposed to catch h- ...im, then?” Colbert is still referring to her as if she was a man... Nobody told the guards about Longueville being Foquet, did they? Is there a specific reason Colbert's keeping that a secret from them...? Bah! Not the time to be pondering things like that!

“You daft boy?” One of the male guards, Ake I believe his name was. “We got a pair of Earth mages right 'ere-” He stated as he motioned towards Guiche and himself. “-we dig our way through his shitty 'lil cave-in. His Soul ought to be right and proper tapped b'now after fightin' you an' holding up
that golem fer so long, so even the young Lord 'ere'll be able to put 'im down!!” Guiche looked as if he'd just bitten down on a lemon, probably because of Ake's unrefined manner of speech.

“I... Will do my best to aid in catching Foquet!” The blonde fop attempted to project an aura of resolute will, though only managed to look rather shaken. Couldn't help but empathize...

Colbert called attention to himself with a cough before speaking up again. “To summarize the plan before we move to act; Tabitha and Jophiel shall attack from the sky with lightning and wind spears, Guiche shall produce bronze golems to counter any stone golems Foquet may summon, and the-” A deep rumble reverberated from the ground beneath us, interrupting Colbert. Much to my surprise, it was Tabitha that spoke up next, and she did so with a shout.

“Scatter!” I couldn't help but curse as Sylphid suddenly launched herself off of the ground, damn near causing me to fall off, only managing to remain on the dragon's back thanks to my death grip on Tabitha's waist. A deep, crashing boom emanated from the ground beneath us, though I was too disoriented to determine what was actually happening down there for a few moments.

“The fuck!?” My eloquence fails me when I'm stressed. A few glances at the Earth below determined that the ground is... Roiling. Shifting in on itself like a pot of boiling water. What in- “Don't know the name, Square Class Earth spell; pulls people underground, crushes and suffocates them beneath shifting stone and dirt. Extremely powerful, extremely dangerous.” Tabitha spoke up as if in response to my unspoken question. “Headmaster could have countered it, others not strong enough.” Aw fuck!

“Are the guys on the ground okay!?” Panic wormed its way into my voice; Tabitha and I aren't going to have to tackle Longueville on our own, are we?

“Droogs are fast; they escaped.” I sighed in relief, though fighting Longueville without Colbert... I gulped nervously, praying that shooting her wouldn't turn out to be necessary. Sylphid started circling the area, with Tabitha scanning the ground below intently. “Obvious distraction. Foquet might try to escape; look closely. Must be weak now, will have to tunnel out near by, get ready to attack.” It took me a few moments to summon up the will to activate Shock Jockey, grimacing at the thought of needing to hit her with it...

Nearly a minute and a half passed with us continuing to circle over the area, neither of us speaking as we attempted to spot the thief. Suddenly a bright plume of fire spouted up from the other side of the hill through the treetops, followed shortly by Sylphid jerking towards the flame and bee-lining for it. I pointed my outstretched arm in that general area as we did a pass over to see Colbert surrounded by Foquet's golems. I couldn't help but gasp in shock and awe at the sight as Sylphid starting circling six or so stories above the battle.

A great serpent of flame was lashing out at the stone golems surrounding the older mage, turning molten and collapsing with each strike from the fire serpent which was rapidly coiling around Colbert and cracking out at anything in range like a horrifying Hell-whip, even screaming like a frigging Metal Gear as it did so, which I could only assume was meant to serve a demoralizing function. It seemed to be following Colbert's movements, directed by his staff as he spun it about with remarkable grace and fluidity, not entirely unlike a Mage from Dragon Age 2.

Remarkably enough the serpent wasn't igniting everything around it, with the only visible burns on the environment emanating from the molten rock being cast off from the stone golems. His control over his magic must be supreme... Also, the golems seemed to be rapidly replenishing their numbers by forming out of the ground somehow, leaving indentations in the Earth from which they arose. Worrying, that.
A loud, suppressed gun-like crack filled the air in front of us and one of the golems seemingly randomly exploded. It took me a moment to realize that was a wind bolt cast by Tabitha, if her outstretched staff was anything to go by. Makes sense that weaponized wind magic wouldn't be visible to the naked eye yet would produce a very audible sonic boom... “Attack, idiot!” Ah- Tabitha's annoyed shout broke my fugue state and I pointed my arm at a golem, willing a bolt to launch from my open palm, Iron Man-style.

The light-speed blue-tinged bolt wasn't as deafeningly loud this time, maybe about on par with a heavy book being flatly dropped on a hard floor. Though the sheer brightness of the flash did sting my eyes a tad, not enough to be debilitating luckily. It struck a golem, which now had a very visible burn mark on its side but seemed otherwise unbothered by the strike... Well, I suppose that should have been expected. “What the fuck is lightning going to do to stone golems!?” Tabitha cast a few more wind bolts before responding.

“Look for Foquet then!” I complied and started quickly glancing around the general area; scowling at not being able to spot anything- A large American bald eagle suddenly flew into my field of view, making eye-contact with me and jerking its head east of the base of the hill.

“Tabitha! I think Sam knows where Foquet is!” Again, she cast a bolt before speaking up.

“Follow him!” I stared at her, then blinked. How-

“How am I supposed to-”

“Wait, no!” She interrupted me before I could finish. “Hold the golems off, Colbert pursues her!” Okay, I can see the logic there, but-

“Again, how!?” Immediately I regretted that question as she pivoted around, hooked her staff behind my neck, and brusquely pushed me off the back of the dragon into a horizontal spin towards the ground. “AAAAAAAAAAAAA-” The ground rapidly slowed as I neared it to the point that I only lightly set down flat on my feet as I inexplicably up-righted properly. “Crazy fucking bitch!” Fucking Hell, I would have pissed myself had I not emptied my bladder before we set off! Would it have killed her to give me a God damned heads-up before she threw me off her dragon and feather-fall'd me!?

With an aggravated huff I spun on my heel to bring Colbert and the golems in view; with the stone constructs now closer I could see that they were about two or so metres tall, stouter than the giant Foquet used to attack the academy, more like the shorter stone giants from Dark Souls 2, and appeared to be formed from a collection of loose stones and dirt. I cringed when Colbert's fire snake whipped out at one and turned it into a pile of molten rock, spewing lava outward in a spectacular, almost directed explosion, like from a claymore mine. Holy fuck do I NOT want to go anywhere near any of that!

Nevertheless, I dropped my all my guns in a pile before I pulled the velcro strap I'd fastened Derflinger to my vest with free, then hefted the great yatagan over my shoulder; ready to take advantage of the cleave-friendly forward-curve with a downward strike as my anxiety mercifully faded with the runes lighting up- “WHOA! Blunt edge, blunt edge!” Eh? Derflinger suddenly shouted with a distressed candour. “I can't cut through stone! You're just gonna be slapping me against the golems so my dispel enchantment can break them, so use my spine!” Ah- right. Don't want to wreck his blade.

I spun the sword around in my hand and instead brandished it ahead of me like a katana, which its curve and three-hand-length hilt complimented nicely. There was a slight lull in the golem's attack, which I took as my cue to jump at a golem which was in the middle of forming out of the ground
nearby, striking it with baseball bat swing and feeling no small amount of relief once it crumbled back into gravel upon contact with Derflinger, thus leaving a gap in the encirclement.

“Colbert!” When I called out to him he spun to face me with a surprised look on his sweat-drenched face, his robes dramatically swaying in the wind as he did so. “Go after Foquet, I've got this!” He hesitated for but a moment before nodding and charging out in a manner very similar to Mage Hawke's run cycle towards the opening in the formation I'd created, lashing out at a few golems behind him on his way out, presumably to give me a few moments to make a plan while they reformed.

Derflinger saw fit to comment on the situation. “He sure can run fast for an older guy...” Colbert quickly disappeared into the tree-line, leaving me with the golems. I then realized that I had no idea what I was doing. “Fuck me, how is this gonna work?” The great sword responded with a rushed voice.

“They're set to spawn from the area, Foquet would have had to enchant the clearing to keep producing them until the Soul she infused into the ground is tapped, so just keep knocking them down until they stop getting back up! I've got the runes mostly running properly, so-” I jumped forward as I only just noticed a golem try to smack me from behind before a wind bolt exploded it with the loud crack of a sonic boom.

Guess Tabitha decided that helping me is more important than supporting Colbert.

“Just keep them from going after the old guy! Last thing he needs is to get sucker-punched by one of these things while he's trying to duel another Square!” I nodded in understanding, and dug my heel into the grassy dirt as I wound up to smash the golem closest to me with a home-run strike.

As the misshapen stone man stepped closer to me I swung the sword with a step forward and a fair amount of force, which again had the effect of dispelling the magic holding the golem together, causing it to seemingly burst into a pile of loose rubble with a satisfying crunch. I’m finding this much preferable to duelling Foquet already!

The sound of a twig breaking behind be elicited a backwards step and a spun on my heel with Derflinger outstretched, hitting two oncoming golems at once and causing them to burst into shards of stone and soil. It wasn't exactly proper sword technique, but hey, whatever works, right? More wind bolt reports erupted from above, indicating that Tabitha was likely taking shots at any golems which managed to get close without my noticing.

For a moment I questioned why she wasn't just swooping down and having her dragon wreck these things with those massive clawed arms; then one of the golems extended its arm forward, the sound of stones rapidly colliding and breaking could barely be heard coming from it, and I only just thought to jump aside in time to dodge a sudden volley of what I could only describe as stone flechettes. No damned wonder Tabitha's keeping her distance!

One shard actually managed to graze my cheek (which notably I only determined though an odd tingly sensation and a spattering of blood now visible on the flesh under my eye rather than any pain), and if the gash in it is any indication these things have the means to rapidly knap stone projectiles from their own bodies and fucking launch them at high velocity at hostiles, meaning the things have built-in ranged capabilities! Suddenly I was simultaneously very glad that I'd claimed Cpl. Kuznetsov's flak jacket and very annoyed that I didn't take his ballistic mask and goggles as well! Maybe... “Derf, can you-”

“No, I can't stop physical objects that're already moving!” I failed to duck beneath the wide swing of
a golem that'd managed to close distance between us when I wasn't looking, taking a pretty damned harsh blow to my side before crudely half-swording thrusting Derflinger at it and feeling great relief when it crumbled into a pile. “Just target the ones that're making that grumbling noise before they get a chance to shoot at you again!” Damn it, guess I'd better go on the offensive rather than continue letting them come to me then!

With a snarl I dig my toes deep into the ground as I kicked off the ground, launching myself at the next closest stone automaton with as much force as I could muster. Mercifully the runes' enhanced reflexes activated shortly after I leaped forth and due to the slight apparent decrease in the surrounding world's speed I was just able to put Derf between myself and the golem before colliding with it.

I kept going and damn near wiped out completely as I only barely managed to bring myself to a mostly controlled rolling stop on the ground.

I unfortunately also managed to get a mouthful of pebbles and dirt on account of passing right through the golem's rubble cloud before it got a chance to settle. “Gah, fuck!” I spat as much of it out as I could while putting some breathing room between myself and the remaining handful of golems.

“Sasha's glorious tits-! I appreciate your enthusiasm partner, but give me a head's up before you go trying to pull of stunts like that!” Why would I- “I have to manually manage power to all the rune's abilities you know, not everything works at one-hundred percent all the time! You're ridiculously lucky I was able to power up Focus before you literally jumped into the arms of the enemy damn it!” Wait, what!?

“Why the fuck didn't you tell me about that before we-” Previously the golems had been sort of jogging at me, though it seemed they were getting tired of playing games and starting full-on fucking sprinting. “Fuck! Full speed offensive mode then!” The world suddenly slowed down even more, not to an excessive enough degree to make everything move in overt slow motion, but as it is it would probably be impossible for an average man to land a punch on me unless I let it happen. Holy fuck, this is weird!

I sprinted aside for a few seconds to place more distance between myself and the golems so I could just think for a moment.

I noted that a few had broken off from me and seemed to be pulling anti-air duty to keep Tabitha from interfering, staggering their fire to force Sylphid to keep performing evasive manoeuvres, preventing Tabitha from lining up a shot properly if the ground periodically exploding like a high-calibre bullet just hit it a few metres away from each golem was any indication... So they can even alter the grouping of their scatter shot to make firing at extended ranges feasible? Christ almighty! Alright, target those fuckers first do she can continue properly supporting me...

“Partner!” Derf spoke up as I jammed my heel into the ground to stop and spun to face the hostiles again. “Do NOT get hit, you hear me!? I had to divert damn near all power from the Shield to get Focus and Might nearing full strength, so even though you're stronger than an Orc and have the reflexes of a Vampire right now one good hit and you're DEAD. You fucking hear me!? DO. NOT. GET. HIT.” I bit my lip in annoyance and gave a confirmatory nod. Couldn't have just been a flat package deal, could it?

I eyed the battlefield quickly and noted a significant gap in the formation of the advancing golems, giving me a clear shot to the bastards suppressing Tabitha. I drove my toes into the ground again as I charged forward, sprinting low to the ground with my back arched forward significantly like a predator rather than straight up like a regular person. Less the Flash and more the Hulk, effectively launching myself forth with great leaping strides, likely kicking up dirt behind me if my feet sinking
into the ground with each step was any indication.

I know that it's a result of the runes suppressing my fear reaction, but holy fuck this is more exhilarating than anything! This feeling of sheer power, the muscles in my legs being strong enough to let me propel myself forward like a cannonball, my reflexes honed to the point that I was in no danger of losing control of my own body through the sheer speed and power of my movement... Haha, holy fuck, I'm actually enjoying this, aren't I?

The golems attempted to lash out and strike at me as I passed them, but they missed by a country mile. Derflinger in hand I grinned wildly as I wound up to strike at the first of the automatons firing on the friendly dragon rider, and started laughing in spite of myself when it exploded in a shower of dirt, pebbles and dust.

Rather than stop I allowed my momentum to carry me forward, seeing as how the golems were oh so helpfully lined up I took another great step and swung Derflinger through the next one, then following another step I cut down the next target, one final step and I'd felled the last target, grinning wildly as I anchored myself to the ground with Derf and spun around to face the rest of the golems. Little surprise that they'd already replenished much of their numbers.

There was enough distance between myself and the golems to give myself a few seconds to catch my breath, during which time Tabitha started casting wind bolts at them again. She seemed to have a rate of fire of about one spell every two-and-a-half seconds. Inferior to a modern soldier's RoF with a semi-auto, but still appreciated nevertheless.

As I struggled to catch my breath I grimaced in spite of my adrenaline rush; even with the runes buffing my everything to superhuman levels I was finding myself losing steam. Hell, actually pausing to let myself think I already felt that I'd soaked my undershirt all the way through, and I was sweating bullets from my forehead; not to mention that I was still bleeding a fair amount from that flechette which just caught my cheek...

I'm not going to be able to keep going at this pace. I think a paradigm shift to focusing on anti-air golems would be smart, let Tabitha take over as the heavy hitter lest I burn myself out and get ganked because of it.

A few golems were already shifting to anti-air priority, notably the automatons ahead of them had switched to a significantly tighter formation than before, with a few standards remaining near the anti-airs as well... So they're learning. Great...

Drawing Derf from the ground (only then did I remember that sticking one's sword into the ground is a good way to dull it) I brandished him again, and scanned the golems for openings to get to the wannabe flak cannons... Nope, they've closed their openings real good and doubled their ranks; presumably so I couldn't hit the front division without running right into the second. Simple, but smart. Not sure I'll be able to get around them... How about over, though? “Derf, max strength!”

“What? Why- Ugh, I hope you know what you're doing partner...” My limbs started moving even more easily than previously, such an invigorating feeling... With a bounding step I lurched forward, then crouched down as my foot hit the ground before launching myself up as hard as I could.

I was expecting to maybe pass just out of the reach of the Golem's arms... Wound up launching nearly two fucking stories into the air instead.

“YOU IDIOT!” Uh oh. The after passing the apex of my jump well past the golems on the ground the grass came rushing up to meet me really damned fast, and I couldn't help but feel extremely concerned as I recalled that Derflinger mentioned having to turn off 'the Shield' to get 'Might' at full
This is gonna hurt, isn't it?

I clenched my teeth before colliding with the ground. The impact was significant, and I could only crumble into the dirt with a curse as my face smashed into the ground and I got dirt up my nostrils and in my mouth. On the one hand, it really didn't hurt much at all, chalk that up to the runes suppressing pain. On the other tentacle, I'm fairly certain that ankles aren't supposed to bend that way. "I TOLD YOU TO WARN ME BEFORE YOU DO SHIT LIKE THAT!"

As I coughed and sputtered while attempting to clear my face-holes of soil, I remarked on how I managed to retain my grip on Derflinger; which I imagine wouldn't help much at all, considering that the golems can just shoot me while I'm down and incapable of running properly... "Fuck my life."

"Throw yourself out of the area, quickly!" Huh? "I cut Focus to power Shield, you should be able to still kick off the ground with your good leg and throw yourself to get around quickly, now move your ass, you aren't going to be fighting properly for the rest of the day now!" But- Oh fuck me!

Though I was loathe to do so, I obeyed the sword; pushed myself off the ground with an outstretched hand, caught the ground with my still good right foot and propelled myself forward like I had before. Of course, now I couldn't help but hit the ground with all the grace of a thrown brick, barely shielding my face with my free arm as I skidded along for a few feet with each impact.

Going off the sudden crashing noises and roaring happening behind me Tabitha saw fit to get Sylphid involved in the melee once I'd obviously fucked up my leg. Thank fuck for that, otherwise those golems would surely have been able to catch me, even if I was managing to toss myself some five metres with each kick off the ground.

Shit, she wouldn't have been trying to keep Sylphid away from them unless they were capable of hurting her though... After passing into the treeline and confirming that I wasn't being pursued I forced myself up on a knee, clinging to Derf and doing my best to catch my breath. Damn, can't just- "B-Brimir! J-Jophiel?" Holy shit, the fop!

"Guiche!" He looked even more shaken than previously, and out of breath on top of that.

"M-my droog got spooked and kicked me off after bolting for a few minutes, I had to run back on foot, and-" Yeah, yeah, pampered Noble kid can't run worth a shit, got it.

"Can you summon your golems!?" He seemed taken a back when I cut him off, though to his credit quickly recovered.

"Y-yes, I haven't tapped my Soul yet." Thank fuck!

"Then hurry and go help Tabitha, I hurt myself like an idiot and she's at risk trying to fight those golems on her own!" He seemed hesitant, looked at my wrecked ankle, then grimaced before nervously nodding his head. Oh! "And bring me my guns!" His face steeled before he responded.

"I'll try!" With that he drew his wand from... Behind his back and sprinted off, an incantation already on his lips. I could only hope that he'll be able to effectively support Tabitha and Sylphid in my absence... Within the next few minutes the sounds of battle intensified, with the crash of metal being added to stone. Damn it, if I hadn't screwed up so badly the three of us would surely have been able to make short work of those golems together... Gotta just hope that they can do it without me. For now...

An armor-clad woman suddenly stepped into view, a rifle, rocket launcher and ammo pouch in hand
before unceremoniously dropping them on the ground in front of me and about-facing with significant speed. She was only present for a few moments, but it was enough to notice that she seemed to be cast from bronze in the image of an idealized female Norse warrior... Well, he's got good taste in aesthetics, if nothing else.

I quickly slipped the RPG over my back via its bandoleer before grabbing the Mosin-Nagant and using it as an impromptu crutch to stand myself back up, butt on the ground and busted leg held aloft. “Whoa, hold your droogs there dumbass, where do you think you're going!?” I couldn't help but snarl in response to the sword's choice of words, which only seemed all the more annoying with his dumb inexplicable Spanish accent.

“Who the fuck do you think you are to call ME a dumbass!? Why in the ever-loving fuck didn't you tell me about ANY of that shit until AFTER I screwed up you dumb fucker!?” Remember how I said my eloquence fails me when I'm stressed?

“What the Hel kind of moron goes around trying to pull stunts like that in their first damned fight with powers they don't even know how to work!?” Loathe as I was to admit it, he had a point, but-

“You still withheld VITAL FUCKING INFORMATION when you had no fucking excuse to! How many opportunities did you have to clue me in while knowing we were planning to get into a fight!?” His earlier words about not aiming to get me killed were suddenly seeming much more suspect in that moment.

Silence hung for a solid minute as I started hobbling off towards a series of bright flashes in the distance that I could only assume was Colbert before he spoke up again. “Okay! You're right, I was too focused on getting the runes working right and didn't think to tell you real important things, but that doesn't excuse the dumb stunts you were trying to pull!” I grit my teeth in frustration, both at him for his lack of forethought and myself for having to admit that he was right. “Look, this isn't the time for this, truce?”

My jaw clenched uncomfortably before I willed myself to speak. “Truce.” I all but spat back as I slowly made my way to the duelling Squares.

“So what are you planning to do? I'm not gonna lie, I do get off on battle and would REALLY like to get shoved in someone's gut before the night's end, but even I can tell that you should sit the rest of this one out!” Again, I couldn't deny that he was obviously right.

Even in spite of the lack of any pain I could tell that I was fucked up from that fight. The way my limbs were moving now that the adrenaline rush wore off, my ragged, uneven breathing...

That hit I took to my side must have messed up my ribs, Lord only knows how many other injuries I could have failed to notice with my nerve endings apparently disabled, not to mention the really obviously severely dislocated -if not outright broken- ankle...

“Don't need both feet to use a gun, so I was thinking that I'd try and provide Colbert some supporting fire... Can you tell how extensive my injuries are, though?” Derf was silent for another minute as I trudged along, the Mosin-Nagant thankfully functioning as a serviceable walking stick.

“Sorry Partner, but the runes aren't really meant to let me monitor your physical health.” Well- Ah! The Pip-Boy!

I stopped, dropped back to my knee, and starting digging through my ammo satchel for the errant portable computer. Wasn't difficult, seeing as how it was the sole occupant of said bag. With the runes suppressing my nerve endings it won't hurt to activate the infernal device. I leaned Derf’s blunt
edge against my neck to free up my hand so I could strap it on. It activated mercifully fast, and following the synchronization I quickly switched over to the health tab.

Broken ribs on my right side, a partially compressed lung, broken ankle, an assortment of over-extended muscles, minor blood loss and dehydration, and a fair amount of fractures on my tibia. Holy Hell am I ever going to hurt tomorrow... I allowed myself a weary sigh before speaking up. “Yeah, I'm in no condition to be fighting with a sword. Like I said though, don't need both feet to use a gun.” I gripped the end of the rifle and hefted myself back up again.

“So you're gonna shoot her then?” That caused me to stop dead in my tracks.

...Huh. “The runes, they suppress empathy, don't they?”

“Towards known enemies, at least.” Well, I suppose that's helpful, though that period between fighting Foquet and her golems...

“Does the effect fade?”

“Yes. It only remains so long as you're in danger.” Well...

“What happens if I kill Foquet, after the runes stop suppressing my empathy?” Derf was silent for a few moments before answering me.

“I'm not sure. You won't care until the runes deactivate, but when they do you'll be hit by the full force of having killed a person. Whatever the entails depends the individual. A few of my previous partners weren't particularly bothered by it, one completely broke down and was convinced she was a monster for ending a life so callously. Most tended to sit somewhere in-between.” ...Great. So if I do march out there and plant a bullet in her gut I might wind up hating myself over it. Shit.

“Fuck my life.” Derflinger lightly chuckled at that.

“If past experiences are anything to go by; you've only just started wading into the river of shit partner. Better hope you're tougher than you look.” Yeah, all evidence is pointing towards some sort of crazy fantasy adventure, eh? Fuck, I shouldn't have poked that damned portal... No point in dwelling over spilled milk, I'm here now, nothing's going to change that.

“I'll at least stand back and be ready to open fire if it looks like Colbert is struggling. I'd feel worse if he dies because I pussied out than if I shoot a murderer.” Derf grunted, but otherwise made no comment on that front. “Well, let's go.” With that I kept trudging on towards the what I could only assume was the duelling ground of the Squares. The sounds of battle behind me gradually fading as the sounds ahead grew more and more audible.

As I hobbled through the woods and into the clearing it didn't take but a glance to see that the area had very recently been an intact wooded locale, but now? Smoking and smashed wood, smouldering grass, a fair amount of smoke wafting off of still lit piles. Not to mention that the ground had been torn asunder, almost like it had been saturation bombed. Craters, clefts, piles of stone and gravel strewn all about the place. I couldn't help but nervously gulp at the aftermath of a duel between two powerful mages, and blanch at the thought that I'd attempted attacking one of them earlier that day.

I did my best to shake that thought free and scanned the area to find Colbert and Foquet some forty metres away in what could only be described as a Mexican standoff; facing each other with about a city bus worth of distance between them, wands outstretched (Colbert must have lost his staff) both looking as if they'd been through a war zone. Torn clothes, trembling figures, haggard features, hair an utter mess...
Considering it, just how much Soul has Longueville expended today? She must be running off of multiple adrenaline-induced Soul recharges, which would be bad for her in the long run if I've been told right. Colbert can't be doing well if he's looking just as beaten as she does...

Fuck it, time to end this.

I dropped to my knee, shouldered the rifle, and lined the scope's crosshairs up on the thief. In the back of my mind I knew that I shouldn't be doing this, that there should at least be a moment of hesitation before pointing a damned gun loaded with live ammo at a person; but there wasn't. This whole thing is fucked, but this needs to end now. If this causes me pain at the end of the day- Well, better that I suffer some emotional turmoil then another lose their life.

With a deep breath I slid my finger into the guard, settled it on the trigger -just as I had in the past when hunting- exhaled and pulled.
*Click*

As the sound of metal slamming into metal resounded through the area - drawing the eyes of both mages to me - I realized that I'd never cycled out the last empty casing when test firing the gun with Osmand. **FUCK.**

I fumbled as I desperately moved to pull the bolt, damn near dropping the rifle as I did so and silently cursing the empty casing which went flying out in response. Much to my dismay Longueville switched her focus onto me, and her wand followed her eyes just as the fucking piece of Soviet trash's ammo jammed partway into the barrel, preventing me from finishing working the bolt. For a moment my breath caught in my throat and I only just realized how much of a mistake I'd just made. I could hear a spell forming on her lips and the ground beneath me began to rumble... Heh. My life; *fuck it.*

Just as it seemed like I'd signed my death warrant, a fucking broken log flew into her side and sent her tumbling a good couple of metres, ending with the log landing a ways off of her and her coming to a rolling stop to her back. Aside from some twitching and whimpering she wasn't moving after that.

I turned to look at the expected source, only to find that Colbert looked as shocked as I did, and in fact the log had come flying from Longueville's back, opposite Colbert. Than who- My thought was cut off as Sylphid slammed into the ground between Colbert and Longueville, Tabitha's staff squarely focused on the thief as she briskly hopped off the dragon's back and started marching towards her. Damn, my guardian angel sure doesn't disappoint, does she?

Notably, Sylphid seemed to be... Whimpering? She was making an oddly pathetic noise- then I noticed the pale patches along her sides. A more critical eye noted that it appeared that groupings of her scales had been, well, broken. Gonna go ahead and guess that's the result of taking one of the golem's flechette blasts to the side... I'd have thought that a dragon's scales would be tougher than that. Hope the poor girl isn't hurt too badly at any rate.

I glanced behind me, expecting Guiche to be coming up behind us, but I couldn't spot him in the trees behind. Did she leave him to fight the golems on his own? Might not be that bad if they got them down to the last wave before she left, though he didn't seem like the fighting type...

With a frustrated sigh I pulled the mag from the rifle, then yanked the jammed cartridge free from the barrel. The neck somehow managed to bend, making the casing worthless. Suppose I'll donate this one to Colbert so he can disassemble and study it later on...

Closed the bolt to ensure the barrel was empty, hit the safety, re-inserted the mag, and proceeded to force myself up and start trudging towards Tabitha and Longueville. Hopefully the thief's injuries are non-fatal, she's got a fucking *lot* to answer for.

As I approached with all the breakneck pace of a Galapagos tortoise Colbert called out to Tabitha before quickly (and quite haphazardly) closing the distance between them. They seemed to share a few words before he reached into his satchel, withdrew what resembled a bronze collar and handed it to her. She then hurriedly moved towards Foquet and snapped the collar around her neck... Huh.
It took me close to a half a minute to reach the trio. Tabitha already seemed to have started checking Foquet's injuries. Though I was actually more interested in something else. "The Davy Crockett."

The two mage's eyes snapped to me before they exchanged glances. Colbert spoke up first; he sounded like he'd just been through Hell.

"With the way you went on about the danger it posed, I... Well, I destroyed it. Flash-incinerated it once I had a hold of it." That... I immediately dropped to my knee, lifted the Pip-Boy to my face and started thumbing through its various menu options... Geiger counter's already on. Nothing. Thank fuck for that. With a sigh I let my arm drop. I'm given to understand that nuclear weapons won't go off unless they're properly primed, though regardless, knowing that he defaulted to melting it into slag without knowing what could happen... I shuddered at the thought.

I'm not at all familiar enough with nuclear weapons to know how they should react to being melted, but fuck me was I glad that the thing was gone and didn't seem to saturate the area with rads in the process. Fuck the why or how; magic. That's good enough for me. "Well, we aren't being irradiated, so obviously you succeeded in safely destroying it, however..."

I looked up and fixed the older man with a hard stare.

"Never do with that another nuclear weapon again. If it had gone off because of you tampering with it..." Somehow he managed to turn even paler at that, and nodded grimly. "Now, onto a more pressing issue..." I turned to Tabitha. "Guiche?"

"His golems outnumbered hers. Should be alive." ...Not all that reassuring. Colbert interjected.

"Lord Armand was with you two?" I nodded and gestured back in the direction I'd come from. "I'll send Sam to check on him." Good idea. "Now..." He redirected his attention to the would-be thief still unconscious on the ground before us. Only now could I really make out just how badly her condition must have deteriorated the past couple of hours, pushing herself well past the brink that many times to keep fighting...

...I also had to fight the urge to heft Derf over my shoulder and use him to separate her head from her shoulders. Jesus fuck... Lack of empathy coupled with fury over having harmed Louise and my-Uh... Siesta, seemed to equal a desire for murder. If the runes weren't obviously the only thing keeping me mobile right now... Anyways, I pointed to the collar around her neck. "What's that for?"

Colbert sighed pitifully before providing an answer.

"It's a Magebreaker, a Void artifact which is known to seal a Mage's Soul so long as it's worn." That rather piqued my interest. "There are less than three known to exist in all of Halkegania. All are supposed to be in the Church's Sacred Vaults in Roma, I'm not sure how the Headmaster acquired this one, but..." He shrugged. "Considering the circumstances, I'm not going to protest its use here."

Suppose the old perv has connections then. Well, that aside...

"She gonna live?" Tabitha responded, as mechanical as ever.

"Short term: yes. Long term: with healing." ...The distinction admittedly caused me a momentary pause of concern. Is she also considering the prospect of putting Longueville down? ...Regardless...

"We need answers from her." I stated resolutely as I glared daggers at the thoroughly wrecked woman. "Can either of you wake her?" Tabitha nodded, and began reciting an incantation with her staff.
"Lord Armand is safe, by the way." Colbert spoke up as Tabitha cast her spell. "Quite shaken and currently deposed on the ground, but otherwise unharmed." I nodded with a sigh. No idea what happened to the guards, but at least we don't seem to have suffered any casualties yet.

Tabitha finished the spell, and it only took a few moments for it to take effect, and Longueville's awakening seemed to be a rather unpleasant one, if her pained wail was anything to go by. Not used to being so unconcerned with the suffering of another... Her eyes slowly opened regardless, and she looked rather horrified if her expression was anything to go by.

We all just stood/knelt/lay there in silence for a good half minute before she spoke up. "I-I..." Her voice was quite hoarse, and she looked remarkably tired. Nervous, understandable enough. "I didn't want to do it." Oh, this should be good. "T-they..." 'They' who? "My sister, her children... They threatened to... To butcher... *Burn* them alive if I didn't do it. I- I had no choice..." That... Was disconcerting.

Nobody responded, she seemed to take that as her cue to keep going. "Kill me if you must, but... Tiffania... Albion... Westwood Orphanage... Please, she's innocent, would never hurt a fly, doesn't even eat meat... She doesn't deserve that, they don't deserve that..."

...Y'know, considering it; Longueville could have killed Louise, Kirche, and myself with ease, but she didn't. In fact, now that I think about it she was really, *really* obviously trying to not seriously hurt any of us. She only escalated with me as much as she did because I just *wouldn't stop* coming at her and her weaker attempts to stop me just weren't working. Even when I jumped at her with a sword damn near as long as I am tall she didn't turn me into a meat paste like she could have...

Maybe... She *could* be telling the truth, though... "Your golem hurt and killed dozens, kids and teenagers. That golem which was clearly made for knocking down walls."

"I didn't think it would work!" That... Seems unlikely, but... "I- I was trying to put on a show, make it look like I tried! I thought... I thought that if it looked like I actually tried to get into the Vault but couldn't they'd leave her alone, show mercy... I checked, I tested the damned reinforcement enchantments on the walls myself beforehand, even my golem shouldn't have been able to get through! It shouldn't have!" The enchant-

...*Oh no.*

To my horror, she continued. "I... I just used the standard siege golem combat logic for the summon... If I knew it would have taken down the wall against all odds I would have ensured it wouldn't have fought back against attackers. But once the wall was down... I couldn't turn back, I couldn't stop. They'd know if I didn't follow through, and Tifa and the kids would suffer the consequences..." Ha, haha, hahahaha...

Fuck me. This entire situation is *my* fault. I pressed Louise into testing Dispel, I pressed her into testing her magic tonight to begin with...

Silence hung for a fair amount of time after that... I looked up to meet Colbert's eyes, and he seemed as taken a back and concerned about this as I did, though probably not for the same reasons. Though I don't care about Longueville herself right now, on account of the runes and all... If she's telling the truth, then at the very least this sister and her kids don't deserve to die. What to do about it though-

Colbert then broke my train of thought. "We'll inform the Headmaster of this." Ah... Well, I suppose that's all we can do. Though, for now... "We'll also bring Longueville in to the Headmaster, she
poses no danger to us with that collar, so there's little reason to not bring her in alive." Her eyes widened at that statement. What, didn't notice the hunk of metal around your neck before he mentioned it? ...Huh. She wasn't aware that she couldn't spell cast, yet didn't make any aggressive moves towards us...

Tabitha chipped in next. "Sylphid can carry all of us, but will be cramped." Alright... "Will pick up Armand before leaving; guards can find their own way back." Fair enough.

"Well..." I started, weary with all the shit that's gone down the past few hours. "Let's get going then."
The next twelve hours were something of a blur, likely in no small part due to having been drugged with that 'Milk of the Poppy' proto-morphine immediately after returning to the academy. First off: sweet mother of Christ is that stuff bitter as all Hell. Secondly: turns out its effects are also quite severely pronounced when one hasn't developed a tolerance for it on account of its magical nature, which was good for me; significant physical injuries which would have become Hellishly painful the moment Derflinger could no longer trick the runes into thinking me in danger to spare me the suffering of my wounds and all.

As I lay upon my cot, eyes rather firmly affixed to the fabric ceiling I struggled to recall anything that occurred while I was deposed. I could vaguely remember Louise being present at my side at one point, and Siesta too, but otherwise it was just noise and blurred... Well, everything.

According to my Pip-Boy I was now relatively healthy -some rather nasty and painful but otherwise harmless bruising aside- and in no danger of suffering permanent injury. I was so damned beat-down by the weight of everything which happened yesterday that I felt no particular desire to get up and start wandering around, so I offered little in the way of protest when the nurse noticed I'd woken and requested that I remain where I lay while she went off to retrieve Osmand, who it seemed wanted to speak to me privately before I did anything else.

Hopefully he isn't planning on asking me to travel to Albion to ex-filtrate Longueville's alleged sister.

Several minutes passed, with little interesting happening aside from the wind occasionally opening a gap in the tent flap and allowing the mid-day sun to peek into the spartan tent. I was actually the only one present in said tent, the other cots being notably empty that morning. I hoped that was a sign that people were being successfully healed and were up and about, and not... Well, not that there weren't enough people left to fill up the cots to begin with.

...With the mind-altering influence of the runes having long since faded I now found my feelings on Longueville to be a mite more complex than they had been in the heat of the moment. If she was telling the truth, if her hand really was forced with the threat of the death of her loved ones...

Fuck. I could scarcely believe how sick one would have to be to do something like that, and sincerely hoped that they'd find themselves feeding worms soon enough. The world is a hard enough place as it is without sick fucks like that going around and forcing others to commit horrible acts on their behalf.

Longueville needs to face punishment for what she did, the lives that she took, even if indirectly, but... Gah. This would have been so much simpler if she'd turned out to be a cackling moustache-twirling villain that openly got off on smashing kids to death. I could have just offed her guilt-free and been done with it in that case, but this...?

I let my mind drift off from that topic. Wasn't feeling up to debating morality with myself at that moment.

A fair amount of minutes passed until a familiar old wizard finally parted the tent flaps, hobbled over to my side and claimed the simple chair next to it. He emitted an exaggerated sigh as he fell into the seat, and allowed silence to reign for a time before speaking up with a quiet chant under his breath... The anti-eavesdropping spell?
"So... First off: thank you, Lord Pholus. Miss Tabitha and Stephen made it abundantly clear that you were instrumental in Longueville's capture." ...Wait, what? "Lord Armand in particular seems to have taken quite a shine to you as well. He's been going around and spinning tales of the heroism you displayed in the field, openly likening you to the Hero André himself. His word alone would not equate to much in the eyes of the populace, but Stephen and Miss Tabitha have been openly supporting his assertions as well, so it seems that you've developed quite the reputation overnight." ...I- What!?

"For fucking what!? Breaking some mindless drones and my own leg before nearly getting turned into paste by Longueville through utter stupidity!?!" Osmand gave me a long side-ways glance, his face betraying no emotion... I... May have let my frustration get to me there. He gave me a ponderous look for a bit before continuing.

"Of course, the two informed me of what actually occurred out there after you all returned safely, though neither were anywhere near as venomous towards you when describing your involvement... Nevertheless, Stephen has chosen to avoid any and all praise and/or glory for this accomplishment, noting that allowing himself to seek out glory again was what allowed this entire incident to occur to begin with-"

"She wouldn't have broken through the wall had I not pressed Louise into practising her Void magic though." ...It took me a moment to realize what I'd just said, and I nearly fell into a panic over it. Osmand seemed rather nonplussed, however.

"Yes, yes... You, Stephen, Lady le Blanc, Miss Tabitha, and myself are all solely responsible for what happened here tonight, of course." The sarcasm in his voice was practically visible. "I have heard the same routine a thousand times in the past Lord Pholus, and I shall tell you the same thing I did to all the others: this was a series of unfortunate and extraordinary events that nobody could have seen coming and nobody is singularly responsible for; and even if any of us did bear the burden of what happened, we've all contributed to correcting it together in some manner."

"But..."

He reached up to the sides of his head and began massaging his temples. "Simply put: shit happens. Do not let it get to you, you will live longer." He's right, of course, it's only natural to blame one's self for something like this happening if one can find anything which would suggest as much...

"...Huh. Wise man." He chuckled at that.

"Live for over a century and a half and you will likely pick up on a few things as well." ...Holy shit, he looks good for his age, all things considered. "Now, moving on; Lady le Blanc informed me of her Void magic a few hours ago. It was not difficult for me to put two-and-two together. No, I do not blame either of you for what happened, and neither of you should blame yourselves either." He certainly didn't look upset. No, more tired than anything...

"...I... Guess."

"Perhaps I have simply become numb to shock after everything which has occurred since yesterday afternoon, but no; I do not find myself overly dumbstruck at the revelation of her Affinity... However, I will suggest that you two keep that private. There are others who shall not take kindly to the suggestion that she has the Founder's blessing." Fair enough.
"You're taking this really well... Yeah, you're probably kind of shocked-out at the moment. Though what do we tell people? She has to have an element of her own, right?"

Osmand scratched his cheek before continuing. "If you are pressed; she is a wind mage, like her mother before her. She has already decided to focus her studies on that front to sell the image down the line. You two can discuss the intricacies of that between yourselves later. For now... Where was I?"

I sighed wearily before helping him. "Colbert doesn't want acknowledgement for defeating Longueville." He nodded before continuing.

"Right, right... Yes, Stephen believes that it would be best for him to abstain from attention, and Miss Tabitha seemed rather hostile to the idea of receiving credit for defeating Foquet, so that only left you." He gave me an apologetic smile. "It would have been better to have consulted you before we started spreading the tale, but you were already soaring high above Halkegania by then, and we needed to accredit somebody with Foquet's defeat. The guards that had accompanied you were practically dragged back here after their droogs were spooked, and Lord Armand... Well..." He gave me a 'you know' look. I sighed.

"How did you convince Guiche to go along with the tale anyways?" Osmand chuckled at that.

"He was not there to see Miss Tabitha defeat Foquet, and he is a gullible sort to begin with; he was quick to believe the word of an honour student and a professor." ...Lovely.

"Okay, so I'm going to be receiving undeserved praise in the future, got it." I made no attempt to hide my displeasure with that, Osmand didn't comment on that. "So, what about 'Foquet'?

He wasted no time in filling me in. "You killed him, disintegrated him with your lightning and rescued Miss Longueville from his clutches."

...I twisted my head on my pillow to fix the old man with a stare. "What?" He shrugged.

"You arrived back here in broad daylight with Longueville quite clearly seated between yourself and Stephen. Everybody noticed her, and with the complications in her situation it seemed prudent to hide her identity until we have confirmed one way or another whether she is telling the truth."

I continued to give him an uncertain stare. "Please tell me she isn't wandering free right now."

"Obviously she's being kept under lock and chain, just in secret." He responded with an eye roll. "You, myself, Stephen and Miss Tabitha are the only ones that know she and Foquet are one and the same." ...That's right, nobody told Guiche what happened when we picked him up. He looked shocked when he saw her, but he didn't comment and nobody thought to mention it to him. Convenient.

"What about her claims of having been forced to do what she did?"

"Well, to begin with: there's evidence to suggest that she's being truthful outside of her claims."

"Such as?"

"This entire 'attack' is just about the exact opposite of her typical mode of operation. Foquet is a ghost; sneaks in, takes what he wants, gets back out with nobody any the wiser, the only evidence of
his intrusion being the absence of whatever he took as well as a small stone loon left in its place.” He paused for a moment with a finger to his lips. "I think it is a loon, at least. Earth magic doesn't lend itself well to precision work.” Huh... Wonder what it's supposed to represent? Anyways...

"Anything else?"

He gave his chin a scratch before continuing. "She had no idea of what she was doing when casting combat spells. Both Stephen and Miss Tabitha confirmed it; there was absolutely no finesse in anything she threw at you all."

Huh.

"First, her Churning Earth was almost comically telegraphed compared to what a half-way competent battle mage would have produced. It is frankly absurd that she managed to bungle it to the extent that she failed to catch anybody in it despite you all having been standing on it when it started. Furthermore; her combat golems were all crude to the point of absurdity. Were they truly composed of gravel?"

I nodded. "They were."

He shook his head in apparent disgust. "Furthermore; she was wasting a ridiculous amount of Soul with each spell, indicating that she was completely unpractised in anything she was using." He sighed in frustration. "Honestly, going off of what I've heard: it sounds as though she was making use of spells she'd only heard of in desperation." I see...

"Mages can do that?" Osmand nodded sagely.

"Of course. It is how all Mages start off. One learns of what they are supposed to cast; visualizes it, and wills it upon the world through their Soul, then refines the spell over time; learning to better realize it and do so with greater efficiency." Huh. I suppose that would make it easy to determine when a Mage is casting an unfamiliar spell.

"What of her supposed sister?"

"I sent my personal messenger to Albion to determine the truth of the matter. He is ex-Griffon Corps, so should arrive there within three days assuming he pushes his mount to its limit. If this 'Tiffania' is real, then she and her orphans will be temporarily relocated here until a safe location for them to be resettled in can be determined." Okay... Good. "...If she isn't, then it may turn out that Miss Longueville suffered severe internal injuries which we'd all missed, and she lost her life to them some time in the night."

...That's fucked up. "I'm not sure that I agree with that." Osmand shrugged.

"It is not your call to make. This was an attack on the academy, and is therefore my responsibility. Her fate is up to me, and if she is lying I have no intention of showing her undeserved mercy." ...Not happy with that, but fuck, it really isn't my call this time...

"...So, was there anything else in that front?" He shook his head. "Well... You said earlier that the academy is going to be closed?"

He grunted before elaborating. "Early, at least. Summer break was to begin within a half a month, though students would have been allowed to remain on-campus; now I have no faith in the
academy's architecture without the enchantments to reinforce it. All students will be sent home once they are fit for travel and shall return to attend to their classes once the academy is able to house and shelter them. The school year will end later to compensate for any time lost to repairs." Seems fair enough...

...Not really looking forward to meeting Louise's family. That's likely gonna be awkward all around. ...Oh! Louise! "Is Louise doing well?"

"Yes, she has recovered fine. Her arm is still sore, but she is otherwise intact." He shifted around in his seat before continuing. "She and your new tutor were here watching over you this morning. Neither seemed particularly happy with you for having 'ran off like an excited child playing at war' as Lady le Blanc put it." Tutor-? Oh, Siesta.

...Wait...

"She seemed rather mad at me for not wanting to fight initially." Osmand chuckled at that, again.

"I believe that she was simply cross with you for having left without her." ...Ah. "If it is any consolation: she was clinging to your chest and seemed to be on the verge of tears as she said it, and I doubt that she was so upset over having been left behind."

"That's... Right, the Familiar bond has made us feel rather strongly for each other in the short time we've been acquainted, and I came back from fighting a dangerous foe injured to the point that I had to be tranquilized. 'Course she'd be upset." Girls aren't always overly complicated, as it turns out.

A light smirk seemed to play across Osmand's features. "Miss Siesta was more restrained, but seemed rather unhappy as well." Now I'm feeling bad... "My, to have been here such a short time yet have two beautiful young maidens fretting over you already? You must have been quite the heart-breaker back home." I made a point to ignore that.

...Home. I'd never be in a situation like this back on Earth. Christ... "I'd have never had to worry about anything like this happening back home."

He seemed to deliberate his response for speaking up. "Incidentally, Lady le Blanc told me of that as well. You being from Midgard, that is." He leaned back with a bit of an odd look on his face. "To think, a genuine full-blooded Markey would once again walk the grounds of the Founder's own academy in my lifetime..." ...A what?

I gave him a confused stare. "Markey?" He nervously chuckled.

"I apologize, that is what the original people from Midgard are known as. It's been said that when they arrived here in Halkegania the Markey were terrifyingly powerful compared to the Mages of the modern day. Even the lowliest of Markey could wordlessly and wandlessly cast multi-stacked spells like lightning with ease, which is what allowed them to best the Elves and claim the lands which we inhabit to this day." He paused for a moment, seemingly expecting me to speak up.

"...Uh, go on." He merely stroked his beard before continuing.

"Old tales said to originate from Brimir himself state that there were people on Midgard that would grow hair in such exotic colours as black, and your own deep brown..." That's been bugging me, actually. How could there have been no dark-haired or eyed people in Brimir's colonization party? How could they have created a genetically viable society from what must have been a minuscule
Wait, why the fuck am I focusing on that? He thinks that I'm one of these 'Markey?' I suppose it makes sense considering the tale I've been weaving, though... Fahk. I shouldn't let this spiral any further than it already has. Don't need this shit making everything more complicated than it already is. "I don't think I'm one of these 'Markey,' Osmand. I've never even heard of the name before now." He tapped his fingers on the chair's arm rests for a bit before responding.

"Regardless, one must admit that the similarities are striking. I doubt that I will be the only one to notice them in the coming future." Damn it. "To be honest... It might not be a terrible idea to encourage the idea eventually." ...Uh...

"Why?" He gave me a look.

"Lord Pholus, you are from a far away land whose societal norms, frankly, mean nothing to us here. You may have been a noble back home-" My jaw involuntarily clenched at that. "Though here? In practice you're little more than a Hedge Mage. No property or family to call your own, no real influence to call on besides what you create yourself..."

"But-"

He suddenly held up a hand to quell my retort. "Things are progressing well between yourself and Lady le Blanc, but keep in mind that things can change. If you're a foreign Noble with nothing to call your own... Well, you're just a Hedge Mage. However, if you're a full-blooded Markey?" He turned to look me in the eyes directly. "I imagine even Princess Henrietta herself would have at least a passing 'interest' in you, if you know what I am saying." His eyebrows rapidly wriggled up and down in a comical manner with a most lecherous grin breaking his hereto somber scowl. Ugh...

Suddenly I felt a rising apprehension echoing around in the back of my mind... Louise? Why-

The tent flaps were dramatically cast open, and the familiar little blonde stepped into the fabric shell, seemingly attempting to look stern before she noticed me sitting up and her expression immediately fell. "Uh... Good morn-" I was cut off by her diving into my chest and openly wailing. Yay...

"Y-y-y-you s-s-s-s-stupid j-j-jerk!" She reached back, and a tiny fist harmlessly impacted against my shoulder. Ow. "Y-y-y-you c-c-could have d-d-d-d-died!" Another fist hit my other shoulder. Other ow. "W-w-what if, w-w-what i-if-" I spread my arms out and firmly wrapped them around her, pinning her arms to her sides in the process. She tried to squirm briefly but gave up quickly enough in favour of quietly sobbing into my chest.

"It's okay, I'm here, I'm fine. I'm not going anywhere, I promise." A bit of an awkward pause followed that. Luckily she's really light, so her added weight didn't seem to bother the cot much.

"Y-you killed F-Foquet." ...That wasn't said like a question. "A Square-class, you beat him... I didn't think... I... I really summoned a hero." That made me feel more than a little unpleasant. I glared at Osmand out of the corner of my eye, and he at least had the decency to look apologetic. "Mother and Father are going to be so impressed, and Cattleya! She'll want to hear all the details of your duel when we arrive back home!" Well, that was a quick emotional turn-around. Not that I'm complaining, anything would be better than sobby shit right now. "Guiche has been saying you didn't even use your guns, just a sword!" Well...

"I suppose I did." Against her golems, at least... She pulled back to look up at me. Her face was an
odd combination of elation and wet, teary eyes.

"He also said that you were using a massive, scary sword larger than anything that could have been made by Halkeganian hands! Surely, _that_ was an exaggeration!" Well... Helkeganian metal working is pretty primitive, they still use bronze as their primary metal, though a sword of Derflinger's size being unfeasible to create?

Actually, considering it; he hasn't said anything since we got back, has he? I turned to glance at him, stood up against the tent's frame as he was along with the Mosin-Nagant, RPG and MSF gear. If the shocked gasp from the short girl was anything to go by she followed my gaze and only just noticed him herself. "Depends..."

She suddenly detached herself from me, stood and approached the great forward-curved yataghan with unhidden awe in her eyes. "It's- it's as long as I am tall!!" He- ...Holy crap, he is. No damned wonder he got caught on that pillar back in the Vault, he's too damned long! Seriously, who the heck needs a five-foot long sword? "Where did you get this?"

"He was in the Vault." Louise seemed a tad confused at that statement.

"I suppose the translation spell is starting to fail." Oh? "I heard 'he' was in the Vault." Uh...

"That's what I said. 'He,' as in 'him.' He's a spirit sword." Her eyes widened, followed by her jaw dropping. She started whipping her face between Derf and myself in a disbelieving manner. I suppose that spirit swords are rare then?

She immediately closed the distance between herself and the sword before reaching up and wrapping her hands around the hilt, which was about even with her face. "OI! Piss off, I'm trying to sleep here!" Derf slipped out of her fingers and made a light konk when his split pommels hit the thin wood frame again. The wonder on her face was quickly replaced with anger.

"H-how dare you! Who do you think you are!?!" So they've know each other for literal seconds and already they're bickering. _Great._

"The Blade of the Gandalfr! Now _piss off_, I'm trying to rest!" That seemed to catch Louise off-guard, giving her a moment of pause.

She turned back to face me. "Gandalfr?" I shrugged, and motioned to Osmand, who had apparently been taking Louise's claiming my attention as a chance to just lean back and relax for a bit.

He straightened his back a tad. "I do not recognize the word, though I shall have it looked into." Suppose that's all we can ask. "Though, that aside... Have you decided how you two are to travel to your home, Lady le Blanc?" She looked a tad annoyed at the sudden change of topic, but allowed it, nevertheless.

"I was hoping that we'd take droogs and have our belongings brought along afterwards via carriage." She gave me a hopeful look as she made that statement.

"I suppose that's opposed to just taking a comfortable carriage ride there?" I'm a bit surprised at how we're just... Not discussing everything relating to her being a Void mage, but fuck it, I've put up with enough heavy shit today as it is.

"A long comfortable carriage ride. Just taking essentials and riding directly on droogback would
allow us to arrive nearly a day earlier than if we take a carriage." ...Hm... Y'know what? Fuck it, I've never liked extended journeys.

"Let's take a pair of droogs then." She seemed rather happy at that, which had the side effect of giving me a bit of an emotional boost as well.

"Good! Now... I suppose that means we will have to determine riding arrangements then... Perhaps your tutor should ride with me. It would certainly be less of a burden on your droog than on Sleipnir." Hold on a tic...

"Hold on, Siesta's coming with us?" Louise looked at me like I was an idiot.

"How is she supposed to tutor you to read if she isn't present?" Oh, right- "Actually, that's been bothering me. Why would you hire a commoner to teach you to become literate our language? I mean, it's odd for a commoner to be able to read to begin with... How far is she going to be able to bring you? Do your aspirations only extend as far as being able to read simple shop signs?" I was finding myself rather annoyed at the casual assumption of Siesta being an incompetent reader.

"Siesta seemed capable of reading the library's bestiary when I wanted to know more of the local wild life." I was expecting Louise to look annoyed, not for her jaw to drop, and Osmand to audibly gasp behind me.

"S-she can read advanced runes?" ...Uh... Y'know, considering it, she is a pre-modern peasant girl... It's actually rather fucking weird that she can read at all now that I think about it. "How? Where would she have learned to read scholar-level writing?" ...Okay, now I'M confused here.

Suddenly Osmand spoke up. "How much would you sell her contract for!?" ...I slowly turned around to face him, rather unsure of how to process that. He almost looked and sounded... Desperate. "If I'd known she can read advanced runes at all I'd have taken her on as my personal secretary!" ...I glared daggers at the old pervert, and he slowly shrunk back into his chair after looking between myself and Louise a tad. I turned back to her and it seemed that she had joined me in glaring at the Headmaster. Thanks for the back-up Love.

"...So, as I was saying... I've never heard of a peasant being able to read complex literature. Do you know where she learned that?" I shrugged.

"I hadn't thought to ask. Literacy is actually common among Canada's entire population due to our high standards of learning for all, regardless of their societal standing." That seemed to catch her off-guard.

"That's... Difficult to imagine. It would explain why you thought nothing of her being literate though..." Osmand hummed contemplatively in the background. "Your homeland only grows more and more fantastical as you reveal more and more pieces of it..." ...No comment. "...Anyways, yes, Siesta will ride with us. Though... I suppose she could simply accompany our belongings with the carriages. It isn't as though you'll need to start practising the very moment we arrive at home."

"Any reason she shouldn't just come with us?"

"If she takes the carriage it means that you and I can just take Sleipnir. He's large enough that he should be able to comfortably carry us both and still make good time compared to the carriages." It would also mean that I wouldn't have to direct a droog without training again.
"Maybe it would be best for her to take a carriage then." She nodded in agreement.

"Yes, this makes the journey easier overall for us. Alright, so that's settled?" I nodded in confirmation. "Very well... So, we should determine what will be sent home along with the carriages." I'm not gonna have to leave my wonderful modern bed behind, am I...?"
A few hours later Louise and I had sorted out our belongings, specifically what would be delivered to the La Vallière manor following us. I'd be packing up my electronics and clothes, Louise the majority of her own clothes and books, barely even enough to fill up a single carriage; more than enough room for Siesta -who would only be taking a few sets of clothes and books herself- to be comfortable on the ride over. Otherwise everything was staying behind.

That made me a tad uncomfortable, but Osmand assured us that our stuff would be safe. My swords (and Derf, who Osmand had officially transferred ownership of along with Cpl. Kuznetsov's gear to me) would be coming with me.

In addition: Osmand had summoned everyone that had taken part in Foquet's defeat around his make-shift field desk to announce that he'd sent a messenger bird to Bruxelles to both request aid from the crown and recommend a commendation for our 'valiant' efforts in stopping the (as it turns out) legendary and reviled master thief Foquet. So more praise I don't deserve. Great.

Colbert looked uncomfortable, but made no fuss; Tabitha didn't seem to particularly care; Guiche was preening like a peacock; and Kirche was alternating between looking overly proud of herself and pouting over having been left behind when we left to chase Foquet down.

For my part... I fell into at attention and was doing my best to keep my expression flat in spite of my annoyance at the entire situation. Louise saw fit to follow along the same lines, though she was angling more for a proud noble air than my stoic militarism.

Jon Williams, the T-Rex King's summoner was also present, and was standing at attention in much the same way that Louise was. King was fucked up, but would survive without lasting injuries.

The guards were praised for at least accompanying us. They all seemed rather bemused at having lost out on the 'glory' due to their droogs bolting like a bunch of chicken shits.

Osmand also stated his intention to hold a ball in our honour once the academy was re-opened regardless. Not really looking forward to that, but at least my fancy-shmancy formal wear would be done by then so I can at least dress properly for the occasion before I duck out and sneak off to escape the party. We'll cross that bridge once we get to it at any rate.

Once that was over and done with I accompanied the students to the designated 'dining area' as it was before meandering off on my own; for the most part it was just a bunch of assorted tables and chairs with a few fabric sheets suspended over them via tent poles to keep the sun off of people in the area. I recognized a fair amount of the students, though Montmont, Katelyn and Miia drew my attention more than anyone else. Montmont and Katelyn each looked rather haggard. They're both water aspected, so they've likely been helping out with the healing.

Notably, Guiche was tailing me. Loudly proclaiming my awesomeness to any nearby as he did so. To say this was something of an extreme turn-around considering that he attempted to murder me when he first met would be an understatement.

I didn't want to come across as a total ungrateful dickwad so I let him come along in spite of my misgivings, though I was rapidly beginning to regret my decision to not chase him off with the way people were starting to react to my presence; such as a posse of guys partaking in the grand-standing on my behalf and an assortment of uncomfortably young school girls openly swooning over me as I walked by. The older girls at least had the restraint to try acting subtle compared to their younger
counterparts, though regardless I'm really not liking all this attention.

I was eventually able to lose them by making something up about needing to speak to the Headmaster in private. I was kind of hoping to talk to Miia to make sure things were okay with her, but she was uncharacteristically hanging around with others and I didn't really want to be around most people at that moment, so I'd contented myself with just wandering around the less populated places of the academy grounds.

I'd have hung around with Siesta, but she was really obviously upset with me for having run off to put my life on the line fighting a living legend and I wasn't much in the mood to put up with that.

Over all, my last afternoon at the academy for at least the next month and a half was rather paradoxically lonely and frustrating despite people's desire to flock around me.

Needless to say, I was feeling rather resentful towards Osmand, Colbert and Tabitha for putting all the credit for stopping Foquet on me at that moment. I could only hope that Louise's family won't behave much like this when I meet them.

Nothing much worth mentioning happened for the rest of the day.

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All my travelling gear strapped on, Louise's stuff packed away on Sleipnir's saddlebags, we were about ready to mount up and ride off for Bruxelles the following day, where we'd spend the night. I was actually glad to see Miia and Kirche approaching with a wave. Wanted to bid them farewell until we'd return anyways. "Was hoping I'd get to say good-bye before leaving." Kirche had her typical lazy smile, while Miia was beaming.

Kirche was the first to speak. "Oh, it's going to be so odd to not have Little Louise around, I've gotten so used to your grumpy presence, it's going to be like having lost a particularly sore but adorable tiny finger!" Louise just grunted in response as she fiddled with Sleipnir's saddle straps, likely in an attempt to look busy. "Oh, I'm going to miss you too!" Even tired as she is she couldn't help but act overly glib. Heh, I find myself kind of appreciating that right now.

"It's gonna suck not having someone around to talk about modern stuff with. Jacques just gets confused when I try to tell him about Metal Gear. Looks at me like I'd grown a second head..." Heh, such priorities the pretty snake woman has. On the matter of him...

"Everything okay between you two?" She seemed a tad surprised, but recovered quickly enough.

"Oh, yeah yeah, don't worry, that's all okay." She nervously asserted while waving her hands in front of her, almost like an anime girl would for whatever reason.

"If you say so... You know how to send me a message if you need anything, right?" She seemed a tad taken a back, but her surprise quickly transitioned into a smile.

"Y-yeah. Thanks Jophiel..." I shrugged.

"Think nothing of it." Kirche gave an amused look between us.

"My, I hadn't realized you two were so close." Typical teasing grin.

"Well, our homelands are remarkably similar to each other, so it's been pretty easy for us to relate to each other." That seemed to pique the dark-skinned redhead's interest.
"Wait, what? Why would you only tell us that now!?" She whined with an exaggerated pout. "You can't reveal something like that just as you're about to leave for over a month and we can't ask you any questions about it!" Uh... I suppose that would be really interesting to them. "...Then again..." Her smile returned in full force as she turned to face Miia. "You aren't going anywhere for another day or so, are you?" Miia suddenly looked a tad nervous, and gave me a mildly betrayed look.

"Jophiel." Louise started with a flat voice. "We should leave soon if we're to arrive before sunset." Ah, Okay.

"Well, you heard the lady. I suppose we're off." Kirche placed an arm around Miia's shoulders before responding.

"Very well, I hope to see you both well soon. No more heroic shenanigans without me, you hear?" She said that in a playful tone, but I could tell she totally meant it. Does that make her a bone-fide party member then? "Now, why don't we go off and acquaint ourselves, Miss Maar? I have a few friendly questions for you..." Miia looked a tad worried as Kirche led her off, but turned back and gave a friendly wave nevertheless.

"See you later Jophiel and Miss Louise!" Hm, what a lovely pair of red-headed girls.

With them now wandering off, Kirche now seemingly having decided that she and Miia were close enough to casually touch each other, I turned back to Louise to see her with a conflicted look on her face. "You okay?" She grunted.

"I'm fine, just... The le Blanc's and Augusta's are supposed to be enemies, but..." What, seriously?

"Please tell me you aren't daft enough to be one of those types that blindly hates someone just because it's expected of you." She didn't seem to take kindly to that, but quickly seemed uncertain about her response. "There's nothing wrong with potentially making allies with former enemies, you know. If anything it's the sort of thing that should be lauded." From what I could tell she was seriously considering my words.

"Perhaps... Though for now... Let us get going. Sleppy, down down!" She stated as she patted the massive dog's side. He dropped to his stomach to allow us to easily kick our legs over his back and settle on him before returning to his feet. I placed my hands on Louise's shoulders and noted how glad I was that we were going to be land-locked the entire trip. "According to the letters Mister Scarron has sent the Charming Fairies Inn is undergoing renovations, so we'll have to find somewhere else to stay for the night."

"...What letters?" Louise tensed up for a moment before nervously laughing.

"Um, I guess I forgot to tell you..." ...Whatever.

"Doesn't matter. So on the topic of letters, Colbert will be able to keep me updated on the revolver project?" Louise groaned.

"Ugh, yes, stop asking that already! As if it wasn't enough to keep asking me that while we were packing all our things away..." Just want to be sure... "By the way, I'm curious: why did the Headmaster seem to be so upset at Mister Colbert?" Uh...

"Personal matters, I presume." She hummed.

"I see." Dodged a bullet there... "Very well. Off we go then."

As Sleipnir started trotting off down the main road to the academy gates I turned back to take one last
look at the main building from up close. It was odd, but even though I'd only been here a half a month I'd already grown attached to the place. All the battle damage and emergency structures still littering the courtyard kind of marred its appearance, but still. It felt odd knowing that I'd be spending the next possible two months away from it and everybody I'd come to be familiar with, sans Louise and Siesta.

As we passed through the gates I turned back to face the front and gaze down the road leading towards Bruxelles. Clear blue sky, clean, unpolluted air, and birds chirping along peacefully...

...I'm ignoring a fair few serious issues here, aren't I? Things I really shouldn't be trying to pretend aren't bothering me, maybe I should...

...No. To Hell with that noise, I've got a better idea.

I reached into my pants pocket and withdrew my mp3 player from my pocket, jacking the volume up to the point that the menu sounds could be clearly heard through my headphones even though they were resting around my neck. Louise turned around to face me with a look of confusion on her face. "Do you hear that? What're those noises?" Heh. Wonder which particular genre of modern Earth music I should introduce her to first...
So, after getting over the initial awe of having 'a thousand bands in my pocket,' as Louise put it; much to my dismay she was unimpressed with damn near everything I tried to present to her. Barring a few of the orchestral pieces I had, -which hilariously enough included a cover of Guile's Theme- she wasn't particularly entertained by anything on my mp3 player.

She asserted that most of it was 'senseless noise' and 'ridiculous gibberish, someone that doesn't speak Englisc trying to mimic it,' which... Surprised me.

A fair amount of my songs are in English, which I was under the impression she understands. Turns out that English and 'Englisc,' -the language spoken in Albion- are far from interchangeable. They sound similar-ish on a superficial level, but Louise couldn't make heads-or-tails of what was being said in any of the Podcasts I had on the damned thing either.

I'd assumed that if we weren't able to re-cast the translation spell I'd at least be able to talk to Louise, an assumption she shared... Guess that isn't really an option after all.

Needless to say: Louise was suddenly rather motivated to have me become literate in their language so that we could communicate with writing in a pinch if nothing else.

Teaching me to speak Picard (their equivalent of French, which actually is damn near identical to modern French if her almost perfectly understanding the one French song I played was any indication) would be kind of difficult so long as all spoken Picard was actually auto-translated for me.

I didn't relish the thought of having to communicate with everyone around me using grunts and hand gestures while learning to speak with the local tongue over the course of bloody months, or even years.

Of course, now that we were actually talking about it Louise found it rather perplexing that our two worlds share a few languages despite the dimensional and time gap between us.

I didn't understand it either, and neither of us could come up with a reasonable explanation for the phenomenon so we chose to let it lay. We were now focused on figuring out a way to make effective communication possible while I attempted to learn to speak Picard.

"Englisc is common enough in coastal Tristain, Romaliano isn't particularly wide-spread until one actually nears Romalia though..." Louise was trying to determine which non-Picard language would be the best for getting around Tristain in day-to-day life where I to try learning to actually speak Picard.

"Can't just have the translation spell work for everything but Picard to cover most of my bases?" She shook her head.

"Such a spell would only last a few hours at the most. The more languages a translation spell has to work with at once the faster it burns out; doubly so if you want conversations to come across as even half-way eloquent on either side."

Damn...

"Englisc should work once we're home. Save for Cattleya everyone in my family speaks the language fluently, so at least we can start working towards setting the foundations for." Wait a tic.
"Hold on, how is Siesta going to teach me how to read then? Does she speak Englisc too?" Louise was silent for a beat before responding.

"Damn it!" She growled quietly to herself. "Well... I suppose we can just get you able to read first then."

I shrugged. "Yeah, seems simpler for now anyways." She only grunted in response.

As Sleipnir padded along with nary a care in the world, giving no indication that he was even remotely bothered by having over 300 pounds of human on his back the sudden silence grew somewhat uncomfortable. I wasn't sure why, but Louise's shoulders had suddenly tensed up a bit. "Jophiel...?" Nervous?

"Yes?" She fidgeted a tad uncomfortably.

"T-that song you played earlier, by that band, Black something..." She trailed off there.

"Black Sabbath, Devil and Daughter?" She was quiet for a moment.

"Y-yes... You like that song, right? Well... If you'd like to listen to it again I won't complain." ...Kind of odd for her to specify that song. Regardless...

"No, that's okay, I'll survive without music for a while." Didn't want to annoy her with music she doesn't even like herself.

She tensed up a tad for whatever reason, and another minute passed along silently. "...Really, it's okay, I won't complain, I promise." An eyebrow piqued.

She seemed to be oddly persistent about me playing that song again... I didn't respond, and I could feel her shoulders tensing with each passing moment.

"Would you just play the damned song again! You're... You're making me feel bad!" That assertion sounded so forced, why-

...Ha. Ha ha. Ha ha ha ha... Of all the things I expected to come of exposing Louise to modern music, her becoming a closet metal head certainly wasn't high up on my list of possibilities.

Though I was tempted to force her to just ask me to play it for her outright, I thought better of actually doing so. It did make sense though; the only music she'd have heard before would have been 'high-class' orchestral pieces, while metal is anything but.

It didn't feel right to enable her apparent embarrassment at liking something so antithetical to the local norm, but... Well, I'd be stuck on this giant dog's back with her for a fair while longer, and I wasn't feeling much up to risking putting her in a bad mood.

I saw her head visibly perk up once the sounds of the mp3 player's screen scrolling sound effects were audible from my headphones again, and had to stifle a guffaw at her barely contained excitement. With the song set to repeat I finally hit the play button, and I felt her shoulder completely relax under my hand.

About a minute in I noticed her head begin to ever so slightly bob more than it had been under Sleipnir's quick trot. She probably thought I didn't notice, but I did, and I was more than a little proud of her for taking a liking to this particular genre of music.

As I idly watched her head slightly bobbing in rhythm to the song's beat, the mental image of Louise
wearing heavy black make-up, black clothes, and black studded leather vambracers while headbanging along to the medley of guitars, drums and heathenish lyrics that is metal caused me to snort aloud as I damn near erupted into laughter.

"W-What!?!" Louise stiffened like a statue when I nearly lost control of myself, likely suspecting that I'd noticed her and worried that I was judging her for liking a song that I myself kept on my own mp3 player, because people are logical like that.

"N-nothing, I just... I was just thinking of something really funny." I attempted to assuage her concerns, though she didn't loosen up much at all.

"O-oh..." Yup, stiff as a board. Unfortunately she remained ram-rod straight for the rest of the song. Damn my inability to not laugh at amusing mental images...

We were both quiet for a fair amount of time after that, Louise only very slowly relaxing over the course of a few specific Sabbath songs I cued up for her.

While she did that I decided that it might be a good idea to play with the Pip-Boy a tad. Figure out what a real model is actually capable of.

A few minutes of clicks and knob turns determined that the Pip-Boy was... Honestly, kind of underwhelming, the health tracking system aside (incidentally, I'm apparently not getting enough potassium according to the nutrient intake tab; how in the fuck it knows that without at least taking blood samples or what have you is beyond me).

The 'inventory management' tab is a glorified notepad which requires that you enter all the information like weight yourself. The Geiger counter... is a Geiger counter, the radio receiver is quite useless considering the pre-radio world I find myself on, though the auto-mapper (which works off a system I wasn't even going to try to make sense of) seems like it could be useful.

Those things aside? There wasn't much interesting. There's a holo-tape player, and it had an actual game tape inside (Grognak and the Ruby Ruins, an old-school RPG I'd look into in earnest if I find myself bored later on), though I imagine I wouldn't get much use out of that down the line.

Luckily there was also an owner's manual built into the documents tab, which had some helpful information; that this particular Pip-Boy is a military-grade model and is built to be as study as power armour was very good to know, as it meant that I wouldn't have to worry about it breaking in a fight.

It apparently runs off of a 'Microfusion Breeder;' (a name I recognize from Fallout: New Vegas) a kind of self-charging fusion battery which gives it functionally infinite operational energy with the low amount of power needed to operate the Pip-Boy itself.

There's a proper directional flashlight I can use which would tip it over the limit and start draining energy faster than the battery could produce it (if I run it alongside the Geiger counter, radio receiver, and auto-mapper at least), but even then the flashlight can be used for days before that becomes an issue.

Unfortunately I don't know enough about electronics to consider jury-rigging that Microfusion Breeder to power my own modern devices... Which may be for the best. Would probably make something explode even if I had an idea of what I was doing.

Idly, I recalled that V.A.T.S was a thing in the games, though I found no mention of it in the owner's manual, suggesting that said feature is missing from this model, or that it was a pure gameplay feature like the crazy in-game inventory system. Shame, I could see myself making use of that, but eh.
Overall, the health monitoring systems made the device worth it on its own, but other than that? Well... Not bad, but not amazing either. Weighing close to three pounds was also kind of a turn-off, but whatever, I'd get used to it in time.

Once I got bored of that I recalled that the mp3 player was still running, and unlike the Pip-Boy didn't have a functionally infinite charge.

Withdrawing the device from my pocket, I hit the stop button and turned the mp3 player off, which caused Louise to briefly turn around to face me with a scowl before she caught herself and tried to act like she wasn't bothered by my stopping the music. "Don't want the batteries to completely die while I don't have a way to recharge it."

"O-oh. That's right, I forgot that your 'electronics' have a Soul charge of their own which runs out quickly... I suppose that makes sense. Memory crystals last almost an entire month on a single charge, but they're nowhere near as capable as your people's artifacts." Hold on, what?

"What's a memory crystal?"

"Oh, they're sort of... Sort of like your 'mp3 player,' though nowhere near as powerful."

Oh?

"Each crystal is extremely expensive, only high nobility can realistically afford more than a small handful, and each one can only remember about three or six minutes of sound. They also only play in sequence. They can't be 'paused' as you put it, their volume cannot be directly adjusted, their memory cannot be altered once it's been set, if there was any background noise within earshot of the orb when it's memorizing a band's song that background noise will be etched into it along with the song, they absolutely require magic to be activated and stopped."

Huh, so the Halkeganians have their own method of recording and playing back audio... But it kind of sucks. Okay, they'd likely be better than nothing, but... Only high nobility can afford them? "What makes Memory Crystals so expensive?"

Louise shrugged. "I'm given to understand that they require at least a team of dedicated Triangle-classes to be made with any degree of clarity... A clear crystal can remember more sound, and making a clear crystal requires considerable man-hours. There are only two or three groups in all of Halkegania which can make crystals, and they only make them as special orders."

Hm, very interesting... Too bad they have such a small amount of memory to work with, and aren't even re-writable. I could see them being decently useful for trading messages if they could be cleared and re-used, but as it is...

"Why can they only remember so little sound?"

"I believe it has to do with their size coupled with their clarity. Most are about the size of a the average person's thumb, though experiments have been done to make larger ones. The largest ever made was about the size of a person's palm, though its clarity was inferior owing to the difficulty in forming such a large crystal, so it only held eight or so minutes of sound."

She huffed in annoyance.

"Ultimately that stifled any desire to create larger and clearer crystals. I think that's foolish of them. It seems to me like attempting to further refine memory crystals should be something which we should strive for."
I nodded. "Agreed. Back home it's rather difficult to find someone who doesn't have an mp3 player of some kind." Louise grimaced further.

"Knowing that your people have made your sound memory artifacts so powerful and inexpensive only makes me all the more upset at my own for having given up on ours..." Understandable enough.

Hm, I find myself curious... "Does your family own any of these crystals?" She hummed positively.

"A few. Father keeps one in the manor's entrance hall. He had it memorize an instrumental song composed in such a way that it seems to never end."

The Duke was clever enough to figure out seamless song looping for their home's foyer? Cool...

"We have about five others. Each a song from a different band. They're... Honestly rather bland. Mostly father pulls them out of storage for guests to flaunt our wealth." Hm, Well I'll be certain to try introducing her family to the wonders of modern Earth music then. With luck the household will be draped in jet-black and stylized skulls by the end of the month.

I'm not sure about Louise's reasons, but I was deliberately avoiding any heavy topics. Had to deal with enough shit recently, I'd like at least a few days of just... Easy shit. Stuff I don't have to think too hard about. The conversation kind of fizzled out there, and until we reached Bruxelles we really just made uninteresting small talk to pass the time. Honestly, for that, I was grateful.
Though the Charming Faeries would be closed for renovations it didn't seem like it would hurt to try dropping in to see how everything was going. Jessica and Scarron actually live there, after all, so it's unlikely that they'd be elsewhere while that's going down. We have to pass by there on our way to the blacksmith's quarter to get a scabbard made for Derf anyways, so might as well.

Evidently we'd just so happened to stop by on the workers' day off, or at least during a break if the lack of... Well, workers was any indication. The building had been given a fresh coat of paint, and a brand new, beautifully carved and painted hanging sign.

The main door itself had previously been a rather unassuming plain wood affair, and seemed to have been replaced with something one might find on a fancy-ass business. Beautiful white wood, four-panelled, crystal clear gilded (though the gilding is probably just bronze) windows built into the panels and everything.

As I opened the door I couldn't help but notice they'd installed a bell. *Noice*, no Jessica being embarrassingly surprised by customers with that.

I was honestly quite taken aback by the interior... The furniture wasn't properly set-up or arranged, but the place looked absolutely unrecognizable.

The old plain wood floor boards had been replaced with what seemed to be a beautifully polished stone floor, tiled with all sorts of fancy shapes and polished to a damn near mirrored shine. The unadorned wood panelled walls seemed to have been replaced with fine red tiling, or at least covered with such tiling.

The simple hanging glass bowls which previously held the magelights aloft had been replaced with brass chandeliers, and at a glance looked like straight-up modern light sources, with the orbs being mounted in a way that caused them to resemble light bulbs, which was... Kind of comforting, actually. Reminds me of home, if only a tad.

The counters were now topped with what looked to me like black marble with an engraved white marble body. Polished to fuck and back, of course. Everything... Really, everything just looked absolutely high-class now. It was far from a shabby joint to begin with, but now... Well, even Louise's mouth was hanging open. Considering she's a Duke's daughter -just a step down from full-on royalty- that's saying something.

As we stood there some light footfalls approaching -heeled if the distinctive clacking was any indication- a familiar voice called out from the back rooms. "I'm terribly sorry masters, but the Charming Faeries Inn is closed for-

The backroom door cracked open and a familiar black-haired beauty popped her head out from behind it before she started beaming.

"Ah! Lord Jophiel and Lady le Blanc!" She cast the door wide-open and- WHOA!

Her previous simple, full-length lime dress had been replaced with a frilly emerald mid-thigh length hoop skirt with a black ribbon-adorned corset top which accentuated her... Holy fuck does this girl have a rockin' bod! Erm, anyways...

The dress had gold thread bordering, and white lace frills. The dress left her shoulders
and her upper chest bare, though a pretty little lace choker with a black ribbon adorned her neck to prevent her from looking too barren from the chest up, and she wore a complimentary pair of over-the-elbow length opera gloves which were laced on (presumably to compensate for the lack of elastics).

She also had a pair of white thigh-highs not entirely unlike Louise's, coupled with what seemed to be 2 inch heels, giving her just a bit more height than she did previously, while also accentuating her legs...

A few steps out of the doorway she did a full spin before coming to a stop in front of us, showing off her black-ribbon adorned backside ever so briefly. "So, how do you like the new official Charming Faeries uniform, boss?" She finished with a wink and a cocky grin.

"New uniform, huh?" Very nice, though I wasn't expecting the uniform to look so fancy... Wonder how much that cost me? "It's very well designed, but... It seems a tad on the revealing side, don't you think?" I could see Louise out of the corner of my eye, and she seemed a tad put-off by Jessica's outfit.

Seemed wise to at least hint at disapproval to appease the more prudish girl without sounding harsh enough to put-off the girl actually wearing the dress.

Jessica chuckled melodically in response. "Well, half of the appeal of the Charming Faerie's Inn is beautiful, friendly young women in very eye-catching garb, so..."


"Oh come now, that's always the first thing one mentions when speaking of our inn, and I doubt you'd be foolish enough to invest so very heavily into a business whose practices you didn't even know the very basics of!"

In my peripheral vision I could see Louise turn to face me head-on, her expression completely blank and silently judging me utterly. Meanwhile I was doing my best to not turn beet red at my... Lack of good thinkerating.

Let's try to focus on something less embarrassing... "So, your uniform seems to have been made from rather quality materials." She hummed pleasantly.

"Scarron insisted. The rest of the girl's uniforms are made from more reasonable materials, but it's the same basic design. He just wouldn't accept having his little girl not standing out from the crowd." She finished her statement with a girlish giggle.

Might as well ask. "So, how much did all of this cost?" She stopped and brought a finger up to her lip as she pondered the question.

"Mm... Here, come in the back, Scarron has has been keeping track of expenses." She twirled in place and began sashaying back the way she came, with myself and Louise hot on her heels.

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My grip on the vellum receipt was damn near causing my entire arm to cramp up... Louise hadn't lost her stone-faced expression when Scarron and Jessica went upstairs to prepare our rooms for us, insisting that so far as they're concerned their home is my home as well and that we would both stay for free at any point and asserting that us
staying at another inn would be bad for business anyways.

Slowly, the short blonde turned to face me, her eyes critical and judging. "Can you still afford to actually pay for the armour you ordered?"

I grimaced. "Barely..."

She frowned. "Honestly... I'd assumed you would not have been foolish enough to leave them a blank bank note when we left..." I clenched my teeth at that... How the Hell was I supposed to know that they'd drain my account like that? I mean, fuck, I'd assumed they'd have just bought some nicer furniture and standardized uniforms, not buy the next door building with plans to expand the current Inn into that building, and renovate both to be up to high-class standards!

...Fuck, I really should have discussed these details with them-

...Oi, wait a damned minute. "Louise, you said something about Scarron having sent letters to me about the details of the renovations?" Her expression dropped immediately, then turned extremely sheepish as she started staring at her feet and nervously fidgeting in place. "...I don't want to hear another word of criticism out of you."

She didn't respond, and I felt no need to bash her further for her failure to actually give me the letters which would have allowed to me to curtail their spending significantly ahead of time. Shit happens and all.

...So, my seemingly infinite Coca-Cola can money was already mostly gone... Though, luckily it was invested into a business which was already looking to be on the up-and-up to begin with, so I'll likely... Eventually make that money back, especially with the Inn likely attracting more high-end clientele that'll be paying far more than the average small folk does, but holy fuck does seeing these costs sting.

Definitely not going to be able to have a scabbard made for Derf now, couldn't afford it... Maybe I should have looked into keeping the box he was being stored in. Though considering it further he may have protested being kept in that case when not being used, if him having been locked in for decades was true.

..Hm, wonder how he didn't go insane while locked away like that. I can't help but wonder a lot of things about Derflinger, actually. I should probably talk to him tonight and get some things squared away already.

With a sigh I dropped the document on the table top and brought a hand up to my head to run it through my hair in a calming motion... Just then it occurred to me that Jessica and Scarron likely aren't aware of the attack on the academy, or Siesta’s injury... Probably gonna have to fill them in on that; and here I was hoping to avoid unpleasant heavy shit... Fuck. Should have just went straight to another inn.

"Jophiel?" Louise broke my train of thought, somewhat thankfully. "I've noticed that your emotions have been feeling exceptionally muted the past few days... Since Foquet attacked the academy." Oh-? ...Hold on a moment.

"Now that you mention it..." I turned to face her, and she looked a tad concerned.

"It used to be that your emotions were so strong that I'd oftentimes find them impossible to ignore, but very recently I've had to focus to the point of being blind to everything
around me to even catch a whisper of what would previously be impossible to ignore..."
I haven't been feeling anything from her either, though I didn't really notice it 'till now. Hm...

"It might have something to do with the bond. Maybe it's recognized that I'm not a lowly animal and that us sharing emotions so much could be detrimental to us both?"
Or... She said it started happening after Foquet's attack? The same day I got the magical talking sword that's capable of altering the way my runes work... Plenty of questions to ask Derf tonight indeed.

"Maybe... It might be for the best regardless. In all honesty it was more distracting than anything." That is true. "Well, regardless... Do you still want to stop by the market before we head for home?" I gave her a silent stare. She huffed in response.

"I can make purchases for you if your personal funds are that low. You can pay me back whenever you can, not that I would demand that you pay me back to begin with though. It's the absolute least I could do for you." Eh?

"Huh? What do you mean by that?" A scowl found its way on Louise's face.

"...Don't act stupid." I was kind of taken a back by that. The Hell? "You didn't come to me of your own volition..." ...Oh.

...

...

...

...Well that got awkward and uncomfortable as all fuck fast! And here I was hoping to just get some FUCKING time off from the heavy shit for a few days! Is that so god damned much to ask for!?

...I inhaled deeply, and exhaled slowly...

I don't need to be losing my temper now, she's just trying to show that she's sorry for... Something she had no control over. Jesus- Calm...! Gah! "...Louise, we can talk about this later. For now... I don't want to have to deal with heavy stuff for a few days at least. Okay?" She seemed hesitant, but nodded after a few moments.

Thank God for that... It's gonna suck badly enough that I'm gonna have to tell Jess and Scarron about Siesta without needing to address Louise suddenly wanting to talk about the circumstances and morality behind my summoning on top of it.

Christ, how am I supposed to go about telling them about that... I imagine that Jess isn't gonna be happy that I let Siesta seduce me pretty well immediately after she warned me to not let that happen too...

That wasn't my fault damn it! I was tense as fuck, ready to snap like an over-stressed suspension bridge cable, and she approached me! With everything going on I just wanted to do something that would help me- GAH!

I took a calming breath, then waved Louise's visibly growing concern off. "I'm fine. Don't worry about it." She seemed annoyed, but mercifully didn't press the issue.
Thankfully Jessica traipsed back into the backroom with us just then. "Okay masters, your rooms are ready! You both get the new 'master rooms!' Twice the size of the old rooms!"

"And twice the quality of furnishings deeeaaariesss~!" Scarron's horrifying voice called out from out front. I chose to focus on Jessica.

"Oh? How did you accomplish that? Knock down the wall between two adjoining rooms and wall over the extra doors?" She nodded happily.

"Yup! Since we bought the business next door we decided to expand the size of at least a handful of rooms, and furnish those plus-sized rooms lavishly for more well-to-do guests. Might our two Noble patrons be willing to offer their thoughts on the new rooms before anyone else?" She gave us both an exaggerated smile, and I sighed internally.

"Louise?" She turned to face me with a blank expression on her face. "Could you go ahead of us? I have something I need to talk to Jessica about personally." She looked conflicted, but sauntered off without complaint.

Jessica herself looked a mite concerned, but tried to keep up her cheerful demeanour. "...Is there anything wrong Jophiel?" Oh God this is gonna suck... Might as well get it over with- "Is it the costs of the renovations?" No- Well, I'm not happy about that, but that's not what this is about. I waved that worry off before continuing.

"No, no... This is about Siesta." She cocked her head a tad, before butting in.

"I haven't gotten any message from her since the last one before you and Lady le Blanc arrived here the first time... Did something bad happen?" UUUGH... To Hell with it, let's just get this over and done with.

"I have bad news and worse news." Her expression fell flat. "...Which would you rather I start off with?"

She glanced at her feet for but a moment before responding. "No good news to speak of at all?" ...Well...

"Maybe, but it's kind of-

"Then end with that good news, to take the edge off the bad." She gave me a nervous smile, which made me feel bad. "Start with the bad news, then the worse news, then the good." I sighed, but complied.

"Okay. I'm just gonna be blunt then. Bad news: I let Siesta seduce me the night we arrived back at the academy." I expected her to show some degree of annoyance at least, but she just held onto her light smile.

"Are you two fighting?" Huh?

"What- no-"

"Not talking?"

"I- no-"

"Avoiding each other?"
"I- I don't think so?" Her smile widened somewhat.

"I mostly warned you against letting her get you into bed straight away for your sake mi'lord, as I've seen Noble boys panic after sleeping with a Fairy before. Si-si's a big girl, and as I'm sure you noticed you aren't the first man she's been with." Well... Yeah. "Regardless, it doesn't seem like you're all that worse off for it, so I'm guessing that isn't as big of a deal as you think it is."

"...I... Suppose."

She clapped her hands together happily and her smile widened even further. "So already you're over-reacting, so the next one isn't bound to be as bad as you think it is either! So let's hear it!" ...Aw fuck.

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose in frustration before continuing. "I... I'll be blunt." Dropping my hand I kept my eyes firmly shut so I wouldn't have to see her face drop when I told her the bad news. "Foquet the Decaying Earth attacked the Academy with a siege golem. He was able to knock the exterior walls down and his golem got into a fight with a bunch of the student's Familiars."

She whimpered mildly when I paused to catch my breath.

"They did severe damage to the academy to the point that Louise and I are on our way to her home to wait out the academy’s reconstruction..." I exhaled and inhaled nervously to build up my will before finishing. "Siesta was hurt in the attack. She... Lost the fingers on her left hand; only her thumb remains."

A sharp inhale punctuated my statement.

"Her contract with the Academy was cancelled because of her maiming... And I hired her to be my personal literacy tutor so she wouldn't be jobless."

I went quiet for a time. A few moments passed before I heard Jessica take a few steps towards me. I was keeping my eyes firmly shut out of... A complicated mess of emotions. "...Are you being serious?" Christ...

"Yes..." A few more steps towards me, unexpectedly followed by a pair of slender arms wrapping themselves around my shoulders, pulling me into a tight hug, electing a confused grunt and my eyes opening back up out of surprise.

"You just keep impressing. I can't say just how happy I am that my little cousin managed to catch your attention mi'lord."

"Eh- what?"

"Foquet... What happened to him? Was he caught?" I internally groaned... Well, given that messengers were sent ahead of us to alert the Crown of what happened and gather aid workers she and pretty well everyone else will know eventually. Osmand already set the damned lie in motion, and I'd rather not make things more difficult for he and the others involved given their reasons.

"I killed him."

Jessica pulled back and gave me a surprised stare.
"I, Louise, and Lady Kirche Augusta Frederica von Anhalt-Zerbst rushed to stop Foquet when he broke into the Academy's artifacts vault. He was able to fight us off, and fled with his objective in tow. A possé consisting of Professor Stephan Tyrone Colbert, Lord Guiche Armand de Gramont, a student named Tabitha de Gallia, a small squad of uninjured guardsmen and myself chased him down."

She unwrapped her arms from around me and stepped back. "That's..." She trailed off without continuing. I shrugged.

"I duelled Foquet while the others fought his golems. I accidentally disintegrated him with lightning, leaving no body... I'm given to understand that the story is spreading quickly, so you'd have heard of it eventually. I'd very much appreciate it if you didn't make a big deal of it regardless."

She stared for a few moments before she started guffawing, doubling over and clutching her gut. "D-don't make a big deal... 'Oh, hey there, I just got back from killing a legendary Square-class mage that hurt your cousin and then once again saved her just out of the kindness out of my heart, don't make a big deal out of it though!' Haha!" I- Oh come on, my voice isn't that high! Besides...

"Aren't you upset about Siesta's getting hurt?" That stopped the laughing real quick.

"Yes. Of course... But Grandfather Takeru hammered home the importance of not dwelling on the unpleasant things in life to all of his children and grandchildren. I'm far from happy about it, but you killed the bastard responsible, and letting myself get beaten up over it would accomplish nothing." That's... A fair point.

"Siesta's accompanying us to Louise's family lands. She's coming up behind us with the carriage containing our personal effects, so she'll likely arrive some time around nightfall... Assuming they try to stop here for the night, that is." Jessica gave me a grin.

"Don't worry about that, I'll have a messenger boy wait by the main gates and let them know to come here for the night. Standard academy carriage?" I nodded.

"The carriage is being pulled by a blonde and ginger pair of Wolfhounds, the ginger droog has mismatched eyes." She nodded with a catty grin.

"A rare colouration. That'll make it easy for Young Killian to spot them then." She traipsed out into the front room. I followed to find her making for the front door. She swung it open, and started calling out for this 'Killian.'

Notably, it took him no more than a minute to arrive red in the face, panting for breath, and grinning wildly. Dirty blonde hair, orange eyes, he was young, no more than thirteen and garbed in extremely simple, poorly made and over-sized clothes.

"You called, Lady Jessica?" She laughed melodically. Suck-up.

"I have a favour to ask you Young Killian-"

She started as she leaned very far forward to meet his eyes... Which'd likely give him a grade-A view of her cleavage. No wonder he came charging like his life depended on it when she called...

"-my cousin Si-si is supposed to be coming in by tonight, and I need someone to wait by the main gates and direct her to the inn. Would you be so sweet as to make sure she
finds her way here?"

He nodded very enthusiastically, his giant grin never leaving his only slightly dirty face. "Why I'd be happy to my lady!"

"Such a noble young man, come here you selfless little angel!" She suddenly stood up, wrapped her arms around his head, and plunged his face into her bust. ...Well, that's one way to get a loyal servant boy. "There'll be a big bowl of beef stew waiting for you when you get back with my beloved little cousin!"

She released him, and he looked like he'd somehow managed to turn an even deeper shade of red, not to mention his grin having somehow widened.

"I'll have her back quick as a griffon my lady, believe you me!" He spun back on his heel and-

"Hold on there Killi!" He stopped, turned back to face her with an expectant look on his face. "Look for an academy carriage being pulled by a pair of blonde and ginger droogs, the ginger having mismatched eyes. Also, if you can let the other Faeries know that..." She leaned in and whispered the end of her request to him quietly enough for me to not catch it.

The kid leaned around her to get a peek at me, grinned, and nodded before taking off, sprinted down the street with his arms comically failing about as if he was a joyful cartoon character.

Jessica shut the door, about-faced as she pulled a cloth from... Somewhere behind her back, and began wiping away the slight amount of dirt that had been transferred onto her chest from 'Young' Killian's face. "Well, I suppose if you want a de facto servant boy that's a good way to go about getting one." Jess chuckled at that.

"Faeries typically learn quickly that one's body tends to be a surefire way to get most men -and some boys- willing to wait on them hand and foot; and low-born city girls have to learn to take any advantage they can get."

Fair enough, got a good Osmand-tier pervert in the making there. Least his perversion is being put to good use at any rate.

"Well, was that all mi'lord?" I shrugged. "If so, then I believe it would be wise to begin preparing tonight's dinner. Might I suggest giving your room for the night a check?"

"May as well..." As I turned to move towards the stairs she called out to me again.

"Thank you, Jophiel." I stopped and turned to face her. "I really am glad that Siesta caught your attention... Really caring nobles that don't treat commoners like dirt like you are far too rare." ...Well, that kind of stung... Christ, I really need to rethink this entire damned Noble thing, I'm not sure I can handle it in the long term...

I wasn't sure what to say to that with my misgivings about everything, so instead I just turned and kept heading on to my personal room for the night, maybe give the mattress a quick testing.
The stark white snow crunched beneath my feet as I stepped forth onto the frozen lake illuminated by our full lunar neighbour, moonlight catching on my frosted-over eyelashes poking out through my balaclava's eye holes, my breath visibly escaping my mouth and rising to the auroras above dancing about the night sky in front of the twinkling stars in a gorgeous manner; granting the normally almost painfully common landscape an almost fantasy-like splendour for a time.

Unfortunately, I wasn't in a position to stop and admire the most stunning view that night due to the circumstances behind my being out there, to begin with.

Marlin 336 in hand, loaded and ready to fire, I scanned the tree line for the errant bear... Typically I'm more for chasing a predator off when they get too close to town, but this bear was way too damned brave for its own good, or would desperate be a more appropriate word?

Normally bears don't wake up in the middle of the winter, let alone sneak into town in the middle of the night and tear the neighbour's dog off of its chain... Though it does occasionally happen when one doesn't eat enough food to hibernate through the winter in one sleep cycle.

These bears are probably the most dangerous one can hope to encounter. They know they aren't supposed to be up and about when there's a blanket of snow carpeting the Earth, they're starving and desperate to find food and won't hesitate to wander into a heavily populated area in hopes of catching something, anything.

In this case, someone's dog... Such a damned shame. He was a real dumb dog, but he was nice and had the fuzziest, floppiest ears you'd ever seen on a canine.

Which leads me here, off searching for a wounded, foolhardy bear to put it down lest it tries sneaking into town again.

Oh, that's right; said neighbour tried to kill the bear with a 10-22 when he saw it pulled his dog off its chain. Unloaded the magazine into its side, so hunting it down is kind of necessary at this point even if one disagrees with shooting predators that wander into human settlements.

Unfortunately, the day was beset by a blizzard that only just let up, and it covered up any tracks or the blood trail it might have left, so all the guys with guns just split up and started combing the general area for it.

I'd opted to play it safe and walk a good fifty metres off the shore and away from the treeline. If the bear notices me and charges chances are I'll be able to put a few rounds of 30-30 into it before it closes the distance between us. Admittedly a bit of a small round for bear control... If you aren't a good shot.

Regardless, better safe than sorry when dealing with a wounded, starving bear that had just been viciously denied a meal.

Suddenly a shot rang out back from the direction I'd from which I'd came, around the bend and towards the heliport. I twisted around and listened quietly, a second shot broke the silent winter night. Guess somebody found the dog killer then.

A deep voice cracked to life on the radio clipped onto my vest as I began trudging back towards the source of the rifle report. "Bear's at the reservoir. Missed the fucker, took off onto the lake." Darrell's voice called out, sounding a mite frustrated. That's my brother for you, trigger-happy as all fuck.
Bound to miss a couple of times when you're so eager to shoot things.

I popped the transceiver off of its belt and brought it up to my masked face. "It's Joe, on the ice near the cabins; heading back now." There was a brief delay before a response came.

"Try not to get shot. HEHE!" He laughed his annoying comically high-pitched through-the-teeth laugh he was so fond of. He always did have a very black sense of humour to him. Probably comes with being a proper metalhead.

I rolled my eyes and returned the radio to its rightful place and kept trudging forth, my pupils now scanning over the frozen lake as well as the treeline, rifle shouldered and ready to fire if need be. I couldn't help but steal a few glances at the dancing lights above every couple of steps. Always was one to get distracted by natural phenomena in spite of myself.

Much as I hated that bear for having killed that dog, I also didn't want to drag out its suffering any longer than necessary, with any luck it'll-
The sudden knocking at the door woke me with a start. Evidently, I'd nodded off when I flopped down on the full-sized bed for a few moments to test it... Christ, not sure how that happened. Haven't even felt terribly tired today. All this stress must be getting to me...

Still twilight outside, so I couldn't have been out that long.

I kicked my legs out over the edge of the plus-sized feather mattress and groaned... Dreams of Earth were surprisingly rare, and when they did happen I felt strangely... Detached from them, almost like they were memories of video games. Like I've seen them, but wasn't actually there... Not difficult to determine the cause.

I lifted my left hand and gave the runes on my left hand a dirty glare. Much as I appreciated the superhuman buffs, I most certainly did not approve of having my memories be fucked with. I pushed myself back up to my feet with a grimace as I let my hand fall back to my side. Unfortunately, it had been proven that I can't actually meaningfully influence the runes, so there was little point in another little fight with them.

I pushed those thoughts aside as I approached the door and swung it open to find Jessica giving me a happy grin. "That took longer than expected. Are the new beds really so comfortable that you didn't want to get back up?" Heh. Well...

"It's rather fine, yes. I actually passed out there... How long was I out?" She chuckled before responding.

"A little over an hour and a half good sir. Dinner's ready, and the Faeries are all very much looking forward to meeting the new boss!" I- wait.

"What?" Her happy grin turned a mite predatory.

"The other Faeries. I had Young Killian summon them here on his way to wait for Siesta. They were quite upset to learn that you'd skipped town before they'd got the chance to meet you, so they're all quite excited to see the new boss for the first time." Oh, Lord...

"What are you talking about? 'Boss?' I'm just an investor, all's I did was buy a portion of all your future profits, where's this talk of being the new boss coming from?" She giggled again.

"Scarron asked that the girls treat you with as much respect as they would him, so just thinking of you as the boss makes things simpler." ...I see.

"Well... How's Louise doing?" She glanced over her shoulder at the door across the hall.

"She never came back down, I can only imagine that she fell asleep like you did."

"Hm, well, alright then. I'll get her up, go ahead and wait for us downstairs." I began to turn around-

"Hold on, can I ask you something?" I paused at that.

"What is it?" She pointed at my arm.

"What is that thing?" I looked down- Ah, the Pip-Boy, right. "Is it some form of armour?" ...Well, it is made from the same materials as power armour plating and visors...
"Yeah." Not feeling up to getting into what a Pip-Boy is to a pre-electricity person.

"Alright, I was just curious. We'll be downstairs." She gave me a brilliant smile before complying with a cute little curtsy.

I slipped my shoes and clipped my cape back on, slid my Bowie onto my belt, closed the door behind me and started knocking on Louise's own door. Quiet for a few moments, followed by barely audible footfalls on the other side. "...What." I barely heard her answer through the well-made four-panelled door. Is she okay?

"It's Jophiel, dinner's ready." She was silent for a moment.

"...I don't feel good, just eat without me tonight." I was about to protest when I heard footfalls heading away from the door, presumably back to the bed... As worried as I was, I understood that sometimes people just wanted to be left alone.

With a bit of a grimace, I moved down the hall and towards the stairwell. Not sure what the problem is, but hopefully she'd feel better tomorrow. I couldn't help but notice what I could only describe as a rabble of high female voices coming from the floor below...

I'd briefly considered about-facing and just going without dinner that night, but decided that I'd probably only succeed in making an ass out of myself and just making myself look bad.

...To Hell with it, I'm almost kind of getting used to being the centre of attention anyways. Still, don't like it, but a Noble has to be comfortable with having eyes on them. Gotta learn to at least fake it.

With a weary sigh, I began the long march down the now foreboding stairs.

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As I stepped out of the stairwell, I turned to the main... Foyer? Dining area? The place where customers sit in the inn to find that the tables had been re-arranged to form a larger mock dining table in the middle of the room.

Also, there were about nine more girls than I was used to seeing all congregated around Jessica's main desk, notably all wearing uniforms identical to her's, at a distance at least. They hadn't seemed to have noticed me, and for a moment I considered about-facing and heading back for my room; never liked being the centre of attention...

Just as Jessica seemed to notice me and began motioning to call attention to my presence, two distressed woman's screams could be heard from just outside the main door. For a moment I considered running back up the stairs for Derflinger, but there was no time for that. I immediately made for the door and threw it open.

The streets were sparsely populated compared to the day, so it was easy to determine the source of the screams; especially with what few other people that were around and weren't calling for guards pointing towards the scream's source.

There was a girl, curled up on her knees not twenty feet from the inn's door with her back to me, she seemed to be clutching at her stomach. As I rushed over to her I barely noticed the crimson stained white cobblestone at her knees...

I stopped short and swung my face around the street, searching for the source of the second scream. "There!" I turned to the woman calling out to me from across the street, middle-class from the looks of it. She was pointing towards a nearby alleyway. "She went there!" Running? Mugging gone bad?
I shook my head as I kicked off my heel and started sprinting for the alley. No time for theorising, a violent mugger on the loose with a super-powered dude (complete with cape) present, time for action.

As I passed into the alley, I noticed that the runes activated, but I was only moving at my normal human speed... Chalk that up to Derflinger finagling with the runes. Not noticing enhanced reflexes, must have Shields on max, or at least I fucking hope so. Don't want to be getting into a knife fight with only my jacket and skin to protect me...

I flung my arm out and smacked the brick wall I was speeding past with the back of my rune'd fist hard enough to normally cause pain; nothing. Not sure how it'll hold up to an edge, and I'd rather not test that theory if I can help it.

I'd lost track of how many corners I'd taken, it was like a maze, and I had to be honest: I was running blind. A few minutes in I'd turned the last corner to luckily find that the apparent mugger had run into a dead end.

Very little natural light found its way into the cramped backstreet, though there was just enough light for me to make out everything in sight. She was hunched over, leaning heavily against the dead end wall and breathing very heavily. A dim bronze glint was the only thing that suggested the presence of a knife in her hand.

I slowly undid the buttons on my Bowie's sheath but left it at rest. With luck, I'd be able to apprehend this perp without needing to draw my weapon.

After taking a moment to catch my breath. I started taking wary steps towards the woman. She was so heavily hunched over that I couldn't determine her size at a glance. As I got closer it became clear her breathing was ragged, excessively so. Far more than would be expected from just running. She was also... Whimpering?

"Hey!" I started, wary and now kind of confused. She jumped at my statement, backed up against the wall and pointed her knife at me.

"S-s-s-stay b-back! I-I'll cut ya, I swear on the Founder!" Her voice peaked and cracked noticeably, not to mention being very audibly strained...

I paused and started putting two-and-two together. I recalled that I kept a small flashlight in my jacket's breast pocket, and slowly moved to withdraw it before remembering that the Pip-Boy has a built-in directional flashlight and used that instead.

"W-what you doin'? I-I-I swear y-you stay b-back-" With a click the primitive flashlight came to life, illuminating the would-be-thief clearly. Her free hand was clutched over her profusely bleeding stomach.

She looked like a deer in headlights, and promptly dropped her knife, followed by her falling flat on her rear, back still firmly against the wall. With her sharp, Nordic face clearly lit up her immense fear and pain was very plain to see. Garbed in tattered rags, glorified clothing-shaped burlap sacks really. Scruffy, chin-length ginger hair with large, sky-blue streaming doe eyes. She couldn't be more than fifteen...

I swung the light back over the paved alley to find the blood trail I'd failed to notice previously due to the failing light. Her gut wound must have been bad... I moved to redirect the light to her, stopping
on the bronze knife at her feet... I stopped and stared at it. It looked like a small Seax, but...

I took a few steps towards her to get a closer look at the knife, and she gasped in horror. "I-I'm s-sorry mi'lord, I-I did'nay wish to harm no one, p-p-please..." Her lips were quivering heavily, and I couldn't tell if she had turned pale from blood loss, or fear.

No flashlights in Halk, the only way to direct light like that must be with a wand, or a mage capable of wandless casting, course she'd immediately assume I'm a Noble.

Quickly figuring that she wasn't a threat to me, I rapidly closed the distance between us and knelt a few feet from her, just close enough to reach out and pick up her knife for a closer examination. It was a blank. No handle scales, no edge, not even the beginnings of an edge, rough, like it was in the process of being worked but never got finished. It was more like a Seax-shaped bar than a knife...

I shifted my focus from the knife blank to the girl. Did she swipe an unfinished knife from a bronze-smith so she could try mugging people with it? I had to ask... "Why?"

She opened her mouth, but she cut herself off with a grimace and a cry of pain. So, probably stole an incomplete knife, tried to mug someone with it, got stabbed when the target fought back... "I... I'm s-so h-hungry..." That hit me hard. "I-I... I'm j-just s-s-so hungry..."

...She'll get mistreated. The Halkeganians are brutal towards criminals, they won't care for her reasons. Resorting to mugging isn't justified, but... I locked eyes with her. She looked desperate, horribly so...

She was wearing a scarf, with the way it was kind of draped over her head I'd wager that she masked herself with it. It looked to be in rough condition, but... I pocketed the knife blank, reached over and pulled the scarf from her neck. She seemed confused until I folded it up and pushed it into her wound. She cried out in pain, but she was too weak to push me away.

"N-no, s-stop, please...!" Christ she's making me feel bad about trying to save her life...

"Stop resisting! I know it hurts, but the pressure will help slow the bleeding." She looked at me in confusion. It was kind of dirty, but stemming the outflow of blood takes precedence right now; having to deal with a potential infection would be preferable to dying outright. "A doctor, medic, barber, you must know someone that will heal you without turning you into the guards, right?"

Now she looked extremely confused.

"Come on, work with me Love, there's always a black market healer working in city slums, I don't want to have to turn you into a severe punishment to save your life."

She hesitated for a beat. "...Tjalling, mister Tjalling, in the old quarter..." I nodded, instructed her to hold the scarf in place herself, moved to her side, and picked her up in a bridal carry (for lack of awareness of a more appropriate position for carrying someone with a stab wound) in spite of her pained protests.

She was... Too light for a girl of her size. She was maybe Siesta's height, but she seemed... She wasn't poorly developed, I'd wager that she only starting suffering from undernourishment recently.

"You'll have to direct me there... You have to stay awake, I'm a foreigner, Bruxelles is completely unknown to me. Okay?" She nodded nervously as I moved to a nearby rickety looking door. I couldn't carry her back out the way we came, there'd be a fair amount of people waiting for me to emerge with her in tow to hand her over to the guards to face Medieval 'justice..."
No, some poor teenager pushed to desperation out of starvation? No. Hell no. I'm not going to allow it.

Shone the light between the cracks in the door... Empty. Abandoned storehouse? I could faintly see a light peeking through a boarded-up window on the other side of the building, probably a mage (street) light. I reared up and kicked the door in. Dust was thrown up, it was very stuffy, the Pip-Boy flashlight tucked under her legs being the only source of illumination in the building.

The girl seemed very nervous and confused, though the situation was too dire to stop and explain my motivations and whatnot to her. I moved to the opposite door, unbarred it and moved out into the street after taking a moment to shut the light back off. No Charming Faerie's Inn... Okay, we're off to a good start. "Now, start pointing me to where we need to go."
"TJALLING!!" With a frustrated grimace, I planted a hard boot to the door in hopes of getting the fuck to open the door up. The girl was rapidly fading, her head limply resting against my shoulder and her skin having lost most of its colour. She told me to seek out the red and green door on the old two-story brick building.

This was the only building in the area that matched the description she gave before she became too weak to respond.

There was finally heavy thumping coming from the inside of the building accompanied by angered muttering. Finally, the damned door was unbolted and swung open to reveal a short, light brunette, grizzled, and thoroughly Nordic man.

"WHAT THE BLOODY-" He stopped when he noticed me, then looked down at the girl in my arms. "Lagertha!? What the Hel happened!? Bring her in, quickly!" He spun on his heel and charged inside. I followed hot on his heels and he led me to a table which he immediately cleared with a sweep of his arm and a crash of breaking glass. "Put her here, fast!"

I set her down as gently as I could before I took over applying pressure to her stab wound -which she'd lost the strength to accomplish on her own- and Tjalling started sweeping her with a wand. Wasn't expecting him to be a Mage... The wand stopped over her wound and a very Aurora Borealis-like aura pushed flowed from the wand's tip and into the stab, seemingly going straight through my hand.

"You are wise to make an attempt to stem the bleeding. I'll have the wound closed briefly, the room back there, with the orange sign on it-" He motioned down a dimly-lit hallway. "-my medical supplies are in there, I'm going to need them if I'm to have a hare's chance in a griffon's nest of saving her." I nodded in understanding. "Okay, go... Now!"

I set off down the hall with a purpose, throwing open the door I'd been directed towards. There were all sorts of stacked crates all around, all of which labelled with runes I couldn't read.

I started looking into open crates and found one with an assortment of medical-looking bottles, boxes, and bags. I blindly grabbed one and made my way back down the somewhat dingy building, my footsteps making the plain wooden floor loudly creak obnoxiously with every step. I approached the apparently rogue mage with the smallish crate in hand. "Is this it?" He turned and looked quickly into it.

"Yes, yes, set it down on that trolley and roll it up next to me." I obeyed and he started digging through the crate, pulling out an ordinary-looking leather bag and eyeing it for a moment. "If I didn't like this girl so much..." He undid the drawstring and dropped a small, marble-sized blue orb into the palm of his hand out of the bag.

He tossed the bloody scarf aside and placed the orb on the girl's stomach, where the wound would have been before it was closed and started chanting at it. It kind of looked like it was made of ice, solid water.

"How did this happen?" He didn't take his eyes off 'Lagertha' as he continued with his apparent ritual, placing strange objects around the girl with his free hand as the wand swept over her in practised motions.
"I withdrew the knife blank from my pocket and dropped it on the table. "She tried to mug someone with this on the Royal Road, in front of the Charming Faerie's Inn." He growled.

"Damn fool girl...!"

"She said she was starving before she lost consciousness." He nodded.

"I can feel that. She's obviously malnourished. Not used to it, her father went missing not even a month ago..." Damn... Hold on, did he say he could 'feel' her undernourishment? Just how does water magic work? "Told her to go to Madame Lancaster's if she could find no other work."

I grimaced at that.

"Paid guards, friendly staff, a living wage... They'd eagerly take in a girl as pretty as her. But no, has to cling to some damn old fool ideal that some prince will swoop in out of the sky on the back of a griffon and break her maidenhead on their wedding night."

If I was grimacing before my face could probably be mistaken for being made of solid steel now.

"Instead she steals an unfinished blade from a bronze founder and tries to start mugging people despite never having held a weapon in her life..."

I was quiet, wasn't sure how to respond. He looked up at me and made eye contact.

"In what Founder-fucked world is taking people's money from knife-point more moral than working in a brothel?" He was clearly just venting, so I didn't see fit to answer him. He scoffed in annoyance. "Damned fool girl, she'll be lucky if she makes it through the night..."

He kept at the spell for a few minutes before he spoke up again.

"Why's a Noble helping some common criminal girl?" Was expecting that.

"She was desperate. She shouldn't get away scot-free for resorting to crime, but the Halkeganian 'justice' system is disgustingly brutal, I don't want to see her have a hand chopped off before being thrown to the wolves to fend for herself." He looked up at me past his brow for a moment before refocusing on Lagartha.

"Rare for a Noble to so fragrantly speak ill of his own government." His tone was emotionless.

"I'm not from Halkegania. We don't do things the way the Nobles here do." He only hummed in response.

Now that things had slowed down I could get a real look at him: light brown hair, a very Viking-esque braided ponytail-mohawk, a full circle beard which came to a single collar-bone length braid hanging off of his chin. He seemed to be about Guiche's height, and rather on the skinny side.

The building itself was sparsely decorated, furnished with very simplistic furniture, raw, unadorned wood meant for pure function. There were only a very few amount of mage lights, and they were very small compared to those used by the academy and inn at that, barring a single full-size model hanging over the make-shift operating table, clearly illuminating it. It wasn't dirty, but it did look rather... Spartan.

Suddenly I felt a... 'Tug' in my mind. A compulsion to start moving towards... Something behind me. I glanced at the runes on my hand, they seemed to be glimmering slightly through my glove... Louise summoning me, maybe? I did run off after an apparent violent mugger and not come back...
I should probably wrap this up and head back. "If she makes it..." I started, nodded towards the girl on the table. "Tell her to go to the Charming Faerie's Inn and ask about employment."

Tjalling gave me a ponderous stare. "Why?"

"I'm a co-owner."

He seemed surprised at that.

"You say she needs work but doesn't want to work in a brothel... I think she had her face covered when she tried the mugging, so she shouldn't be recognised by anyone. I'll tell them I ran into her and she helped me while I was trying to chase down the thief and that I think she'll make a good waitress, or dishwasher, or whatever. Just..."

I paused while I collected my thoughts.

"We don't like leaving people behind where I come from. I don't agree with what she did, but she was desperate. I don't want her having to feel like she has to keep trying to resort to criminal acts to survive."

He silently stared at me for a moment before he refocused on the girl. "First time in my life that I've met a Noble that gave anything resembling a shit about a commoner, a criminal commoner at that." I didn't say anything to that. "If she lives, I'll let her know. I'll feed her what I can before I send her on her way."

Things got quiet after that, and with the tugging sensation getting stronger I supposed that it was about time for me to head back. But first... "You're a mage." He responded without breaking his focus on the girl.

"Hedge-mage is what the Nobles call us. Bastard son of a Nobleman and a whore. Make my living peddling healing magic to commoners. Gets me by, and I'm helping folks, works for me. Now, if you don't mind, I'm trying to keep this girl alive." I nodded, mostly to myself, and turned about to make my way back out.

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After checking the map on my Pip-Boy I could confirm that the runes were, in fact, directing me back to the inn as the architecture started getting more ornate in design, and the place stopped smelling like piss and shit.

The old quarter wasn't far from being a slum, and I honestly felt kind of unsafe there even with my big-ass knife and super powers. Ricky-ass wooden structures, old dilapidated brick buildings, shady-ass characters prowling about...

Okay, granted, they all seemed to be more afraid of me than I was of them, but still. The thought that people lived in those conditions was... Ugh. I felt even more frustrated at how I'd be incapable of really doing anything meaningful for fixing that, least of all because such conditions likely exist all over Halkegania. Knowing that was... Sobering.

I passed by the bank which I was also invested in. Closed down by then, obviously. But it meant that I was nearing the inn. There weren't very many people outside at this time of the day, so I wasn't attracting very many eyes this time around.

Luckily, Lagartha's blood only got on my shirt, which I was able to hide by merely zipping up my jacket. It was getting a little uncomfortably warm, but that was preferable to people noticing a huge
blood stain on the front of my clothes. Praise be to Athiesmo that I'd thought to pack a few spare shirts before we left the academy.

...

With nothing else going on I thought back on that blue, ice-like orb Tjalling was using on Lagartha. What was that? I'd heard nothing about mages using orbs to alter/enhance their magic before now. Nor have I heard much about commoner mages. I'll have to ask Louise about that. As well as finally sit the fuck down and talk with Derflinger... I'll probably think of an excuse to avoid that, knowing me.

Gonna need to excuse myself to my room immediately. The longer I dawdle the more I increase the chances of someone noticing that the entire front of my shirt is coated in drying blood. I'll play off of my inability to 'catch the criminal.' Act like letting the 'villain' get away soured me for the evening; I'm sure the 'Faeries' would survive not meeting the new investor tonight.

I'll just ask Jessica to bring me some food and eat in my room.

...Wonder if Siesta will have arrived by the time I get back.
Well, suppose the parked carriage and the two giant snoozing dogs leashed to the front of the inn alongside Sleppy answers that.

It had gotten dark enough that the only indication that there was blood on the pavement was a dark splotch on the ground. The lights were still on in the building itself, so everyone was still up... Wonder if that's because they're waiting for me?

I started turning the door knob. Nah. Come on, get over yourself Joe, nobody's gonna- "JOPHIEL!"
A blonde blur collided with my chest as I stepped into the building, followed by some half-panicked gibberish and an assortment of other hair colours rapidly congregating around me. Ugggggggh...

I took the diminutive (by modern standards) girl by the shoulders and pushed her away to arm's length. Normally I'd have embraced her to calm her down, but I've currently got a significant blood stain under my jacket, and I don't want her to wind up detecting that. "Calm down Louise, I'm fine-"
The attempts at hugging quickly turned violent as she started ineffectually pounding on my chest.

"You s-s-stupid j-jerk! W-what were y-you t-t-thinking-" I grabbed her wrists and held her in place quite firmly.

"Louise, calm down." She was pink in the face and breathing quite heavily. Once I'd restrained her and it was clear I wasn't going to release her until she stopping freaking out and made a visible effort to calm herself.

"Okay, I'm fine." She stated with a weary sigh. I released her and she closed her cloak, then shut her eyes for a few moments before continuing. "What happened? You were gone far longer than I'd have thought." I shrugged, attempting to look nonchalant at all the girls crowded around me and very unsubtly trading comments about me. At least they were complimentary.

"The mugger managed to escape me in the winding back alleys and I tried to track them down. I followed them into the slums, but couldn't find them..." I forced a very sour look on my face, which everyone caught and seemed to take seriously if the cascade of placation coming from all the pretty girls surrounding me was any indication.

I allowed myself to look at the tide of girls that flanked me from every direction; ho boy were they ever pretty... Those uniforms they were wearing complimented their figures as well. A few were even as shapely as Siesta and Jessica! How'd they manage to find so many knock-outs among the common folk to work for the inn?

...Just as quickly as I allowed myself to take notice of the girls surrounding me, I suddenly became very aware that I was surrounded by a gaggle of very pretty girls that were very openly fawning over me as a 'brave and heroic nobleman.' There was little doubt in my mind that they'd not be paying me even an inkling of attention had they not believed me to be nobility, but still...

"I-if you'll excuse me, I am very tired after having run for so long and I'd like to head to bed early-"

"Noooo!" Suddenly a dozen hands reached out and gripped my jacket as I tried to gently push my way out of the situation and make for an escape route.

Louise looked ready to verbally tear into the commoner girls for grabbing at me, but I did my best to non-verbally dissuade her from that. She caught my look, looked quite perplexed for a moment, which changed into a grimace when she looked back down at the girls surrounding and now pawing
at me, then gave me a dirty look as she rolled her eyes, about-faced and started marching for the stairs. Why-

"We all came here just to meet you mi'lord!" My thoughts were interrupted by a girl with long, burgundy red hair of all colours and gentle, easy going chestnut eyes. Coupled with her baby blue uniform I got a very calming vibe from her. 'Cool big sis' seemed an appropriate off-hand descriptor.

"Yeah, don't run off on us so soon boss!" Another red head, closer to Carmine and tied up in a silky ponytail. Her eyes were wide and not too far off from the other girl's own chestnut, though she was garbed in pink. Girl next door, totally a girl next door.

"You must be tired, come and sit!" A golden blonde with anime twin tails and large eyes a duller shade of violet compared to Louise's clothed in a lilac dress. Seemed to be of the spunky sort, if her firmly wrapping her arms around my own and trying to pull me to a chair at their make-shift dining table was anything to go by.

I was taken aback both by how brazen she was and how she didn't seem at all bothered by having my arm firmly lodged between her ample breasts.

"Hey, no fair!" Suddenly my other arm was claimed by a girl with gorgeous knee-length vivid sienna hair, chestnut eyes (beginning to think that's a really common colour), and a lime green uniform.

Three other chestnut haired girls, one a short-haired pretty librarian-looking girl with glasses... Probably fake, given that she's a commoner, wearing yellow.

Another with a high, short ponytail, also yellow clothes. Another girl in a green dress, highly resembles the one currently latched onto my arm, another red head with short twin tails and a pink uniform, and another blonde with bobbed hair wearing lilac resembling the one currently clinging to my other arm.

The finer details were quickly lost in all the commotion surrounding me for the next hour or so, there was too much going on for me to really pay attention to any of the individual girls that were cascading over me...

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There were a lot of attempts at hand-feeding me going on, begging for permission to touch my hair and girls just acting brazenly as all fuck towards what they'd believed to be a Noble... It became quite clear to me why the Inn was doing well before I even came along if this is the sort of reception the average customer receives. This place must be legendary among men.

Alternatively, Jessica informed all of them of how 'laid-back' towards commoners I was for a Noble and were eager to take advantage to act really overt towards a class of guy they'd normally be tip-toeing around. That idea seemed logical if the cruel smirk I'd earlier caught on Jessica's face from the other side of the room with Siesta and the very bemused looking carriage driver was any indication.

That's what I had to put up with for a fair while. Being hounded by way too many pretty girls after having tired myself out was only wearing me down further, and I was very uncomfortable with the drying, bloody, and now sweaty shirt stuck under my zippered-up jacket, which I had to prevent a few girls from trying to undo a fair amount of times.

Eventually, Jess came up and shooed the girls off for the night, directing them to use the now vacant overnight rooms rather than letting them try to make their ways home in the dark. A few of them stopped to give me an exaggerated hug before heading upstairs for bed, and the twin-tailed blonde
even tried to stand on her tip-toes to kiss me! I nearly fell over leaning back to try avoiding that, which she didn't seem to appreciate.

When it seemed like she was going to try going in for a second attempt Jess stepped between us and shooed her off to bed.

She looked back at me with big, obviously practised doe eyes as she slowly made her way up the stairs until she turned the corner, where she comically leant around said corner in an exaggerated attempt to keep me in view until she finally disappeared. "Heh."

Jessica turned around to face me with a wry grin on her face.

"Sorry about Helena. She's quite the firebrand, but she's never been so brave before." I sighed wearily.

"I've dealt with a few brazen girls in the past, but holy shit; I was honestly kind of worried that she'd try to pull my pants down right then and there a few times." Jess laughed aloud at that.

"She was certainly trying to suggest that she'd be open to sharing a bed with you for the night, that's for sure!" She starting chortling in a rather unladylike manner. "I'm sorry, they seemed to be under the impression that you and Si-si were an item before you came back, but someone went and asserted that you two were just friends, which I'm sure made all them a fair bit bolder than they'd normally be."

She shot Siesta a look which I couldn't read from the back of her head, and Siesta sheepishly redirected her gaze to a nearby window. Notably, the carriage driver was nowhere to be seen. Must have left for bed a while ago.

"I... See." I wasn't sure how to respond to that, in all honesty.

"So..." Jessica started again. "Most men would be ecstatic to be put in a situation like yours. Though, no offence, you look less like a dozen beautiful girls were fawning over you for an hour straight and more like you've just been through a battlefield." Certainly felt like I'd just gotten out of a battlefield...

"I really dislike being the centre of attention, and I was already really tired when I got back here..." I had a stifle a yawn there. Honestly, I'd really rather not get into a situation like that again. Helena came dangerously close to groping me (and guiding my hands to grope her) a couple times, and I'd rather not have to tell her, or anyone else off.

Hopefully, Louise and I would set off before the Faeries were up and about tomorrow. "Oh. Uh... Well, I'm sorry then. Had I known that I would have sent them off to bed far sooner." I gave her a bit of a stink eye. Though she did at least seem to have the decency to actually look apologetic.

I trudged over towards Siesta, and she seemed to tense up somewhat at my approach. Er... "So..." I kind of uncomfortably started as I realised that I hadn't really spoken with her since before I went off to fight Longueville. "Was the carriage ride here enjoyable?" I tried to give her a warm smile, and she seemed to loosen up just a tad at it.

"...It was fine, mi'lord." Oh, bother...

"Siesta, please stop doing that." She seemed a little taken aback. "I don't like it when you talk up to me like that. Like I'm better than you or some shit. Just talk to me like normal, please." She didn't respond, so I saw fit to keep talking. "So... Is everything okay?" She just nodded.
...Boy, this is awkward. Fuck it, I'm too tired for this. I turned and started moving for the stairs myself, before remembering something I was supposed to ask Jessica about.

"Hey, Jess." She perked up expectantly. "When I was attempting to chase down that mugger I ran into a girl that tried to help me track them down. It seems that she's very down on her luck and in desperate need of employment, so I suggested she come by here to talk to you."

She motioned for me to continue.

"Her name is Lagartha, she's about fifteen, has ginger hair and blue eyes. If it helps her case at all she looks like she'd be rather pretty if she had a steady diet and is fairly well developed." Jessica gave me a thoughtful look before responding.

"If she actually comes by, I'll consider giving her a chance."

"Thank you. Oh, and who was it that fought off the mugger earlier? Is she okay?" Jess responded.

"Miss Bakker. Runs a fish stall in the market. She was pretty shaken up over having stabbed the thief, but we think she'll be okay. Good on you for asking about her anyways." I nodded weakly.

"Alright, that's good to know. I hope you both sleep well, good night." With that, I trudged up the stairs, made my way to my room, chained it shut once I was inside and wasted no time in tearing off my jacket to get the now absolutely fucking disgusting shirt off.

...Sweet mother of Christ, I was wearing this thing for a good two hours, at least. I headed over to the bucket of water Jess left in every room and peered into it for a moment. Taking the accompanying rag in hand I quickly wiped myself down, thankful that I could at least get the stink of sweat off before going to bed. The water was rather cold but far better than nothing.

...Might not be a bad idea to try soaking the bloody shirt overnight. Or... How does one get blood out of clothes? Shit... Let's just try soaking and scrubbing the shit out of it for now... Using soap couldn't hurt. Assuming Jessica and Scarron- ...Actually, where was Scarron? Haven't seen him at all since getting back... Eh, I can ask tomorrow. For now...

Just then I remembered that I kept a fresh bar of soap in my bug-out bag, which I'd packed along when we left. Hopefully, it'll be enough.
Thirty minutes in I found that the blood was actually coming out really well. Chalk that up to my sweat keeping the blood kind of moist, and that I'd packed away real working soap rather than some fancy-pants flower scented tosh. I'm sure that the shirt was red to begin with helped.

I'll slip out back in an hour or so when everyone's certain to be asleep and dump the bloody water where nobody will spot it... Maybe get another bucket of clean water to rinse the shirt out before I hang it to dry as well.

As I was contemplating my actions for later on a light knock came from the door... A bit late for room service. Jessica or Siesta? Could be Louise wanting to speak to me alone.

I left the shirt in the bucket, quickly dried my hands with the rag, threw on a spare long-sleeved shirt and my gloves to cover my still Shock Jockey-scarred hands, then moved to pop the door open. I paused for a moment and decided to keep the chain on before turning the knob. I was glad I did when said chain suddenly went taught as a slender pair of fingers wrapped themselves around the door's edge.

I peeked through the inches-wide crack to find a perplexed pair of dull violet eyes framed by golden hair staring at the chain. Helena trying to barge her way in... Probably should have seen that coming. "Hello, Helena." I started in a droll, though hushed tone. She caught my look and quickly shifted to a practised, beaming smile.

"Hello, mi'lord. I'm honoured that you would remember my name!" Only because Jessica mentioned it. "Though why ever would you chain your door shut? Do you not trust us?" She attempted to give me a mock-hurt expression; it didn't work. At that moment I was glad for my slight paranoia which compelled me to at least lock any room I'd be spending a night in.

"Caution is the better part of valour." ...Wait, I didn't say that right, or use it right- Bah, as if it really matters.

"It's rather cold out here mi'lord, would you be so kind as to allow me inside to warm up?" A quick glance down confirmed that she wasn't wearing much, just a frilled bra, panties, her uniform's arm gloves and thigh-highs, same lilac as her uniform. She was rubbing her inner thighs together really obviously.

Not even I'm dense enough to not realise exactly what she was hoping for here... Perks of being a desirable 'Nobleman' I suppose.

"It would probably be best for you to head back to your room and curl up under the blankets then." I moved to shut the door, but she didn't withdraw her fingers, which obviously dissuaded me from actually closing it all the way.

"B-but mi'lord." Oh Christ.

"I'm going to be honest; I know what you're trying to do Helena. You're a gorgeous girl, but I really didn't appreciate how brazen you were back there, and even if you had shown a little more class I'm not the type of man that sleeps around with girls he's just met."...Shut up, Siesta doesn't count! I knew her for over a week by then, and I was extremely stressed! ...Shut up!

...Siesta may also be part of the reason I'm so resolute in turning Helena away...
She looked confused. "B-but..."

"Helena; I said no. Now return to your room." I gave her a stern stare, and after a beat she relented.

"...Of course mi'lord, my apologies for inconveniencing you." Beaming, clearly fake smile. Probably frustrated as all Hell, but not willing to risk showing it to a Noble. She withdrew her fingers and set off back down the hall. For just a moment I caught her backside through the opening and found myself biting my lip.

Gorgeous young woman, but like I said, too damned forward and brazen for my tastes. I shut the door and returned to my duties with the bloodied shirt, which quickly brought back to mind the image of a teenaged girl slowly dying in my arms, which quickly quelled any urges arising from seeing such a beautiful woman in such revealing wear, which felt like a mercy right then.

With luck, I wouldn't be bothered again for the rest of the night.

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I stretched out on the kitchen door frame, trying to work the kinks in my back out. Nobody else bothered me that night, and my little operation played out without a hitch; though I didn't get as many hours as I'd have liked in order to accomplish it.

At any rate, it turns out that fresh blood washes out a lot easier than I'd have thought, which was good to know... Hopefully, I wouldn't have to make use of that knowledge in the future.

...Oh who am I kidding, that armour I ordered is probably gonna be absolutely wrecked from overuse in time... Probably doesn't help that I seem overly eager to pick fights and charge into danger without a second thought nowadays as well. Normally I err on the side of caution, but... Well, a good guardian is supposed to be dauntless in the face of danger, right? A proper Familiar needs to be brave...

I released the top frame and let my arms flop down to my sides as I stepped out of the doorway, crossed the room and headed out into the early morning streets. Little point in dwelling on that now. I could have asked Derf about it before I went to bed, but I was wrecked and opted to get as many Z's in as possible.

We'd be arriving at Louise's family home by nightfall, there'll be plenty of time to talk to Derf at some point after meeting Louise's fam-

It felt like a rock fell into my stomach. I'd definitely be meeting Louise's family tonight, barring Eleanore... Uggghh... That'll be pleasant for sure. Can only wonder how they'll actually react to meeting their daughter's unprecedented human Familiar...

Jessica sidled up beside me, back to wearing her original full-length dress. The rest of the girls were still sleeping, luckily. Scarron was also out on business too, which explained his absence yesterday quite handily. She leant in close to speak in a hushed whisper. "So, I saw Helena try to sneak into your room."

That caused me to cock an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"She may not have shown it, but Siesta was really bothered by the sight of all the Faeries making such a big deal out of you. I'll admit, I may have been out of line, but I was keeping an eye on your room so I could see if you'd take advantage of any Faeries looking to bed a Nobleman."

She gave me an apologetic look.
"If it's any consolation, I must say that I'm extremely impressed. Not many men could resist Helena's... Blunt charm, Noble or no." That's putting it mildly. Girl out-Kirches Kirche for God's sake...

"Well..." I shrugged. "...*Sigh*... Siesta." Jessica gave me a gentle sidelong grin. I could have tried to make an excuse, but something told me she'd see right through it. Siesta herself was already loaded up and waiting to leave by the carriage. Sleipnir was also ready to trot off, Louise was just making sure everything was set so we didn't have to turn around half way because we forgot something.

"Mm, Siesta, huh." She seemed oddly contented by my response.

I'd found that Siesta didn't seem all that eager to talk to me, which I was starting to find annoying; though I'm sure she has her reasons. We'd have plenty of time to speak once we arrived at Louise's home regardless. I motioned towards the carriage which her cousin was presently occupying. "How's she doing?" Jessica's grin faded a bit.

"She's taking 'it' pretty hard. Understandably so, though I've never really seen her get so mopey before. It's... Unpleasant." The grin faded into a displeased line. "I was really hoping to cheer her up, maybe dress her up as a Faerie and have her partake in some fun for the night... But she wasn't having any of it. Took everything I had to keep her from bee-lining for her room and locking herself up." Christ...

"That bad, huh?" She only nodded.

"You'll make sure she'll get better, right?" I nodded.

"Of course. I don't like seeing her upset either." Her grin returned in full force, which lifted my spirits a tad.

"Hey. Just so we're all clear-" That got me a tad worried. "-you've gone above and beyond for our family. No matter what happens, anywhere you can find a Horie: Tarbes, The Charming Faeries Inn, anywhere, is your home." She took a step to close the distance between us and pulled me into a hug, one which felt genuine, rather than some crude attempt at sucking up to me or seduction.

I... Wasn't expecting that.

"You've already done so much for us, but take care of her, okay?"

With a genuine smile, I wrapped an arm around Jessica and returned the hug. "I'll do my best." She chuckled.

"With what I've seen of you so far, that actually means a lot." Well, damn did that make me feel good. Maybe I actually am doing some good here after all... She released me and backed off. "Grandpa Takeru and the rest of the family have been really wanting to meet you as well, so you keep safe until you can make a trip to Tarbes, okay?"

I could smack myself. Takeru! The obviously Japanese guy that's probably from Earth! I should have taken the opportunity to ask Jessica about him yesterday!

...Well, Siesta's coming along, so I'll just ask her later. No biggie after all.

"Well, I'd better let you get to it. I don't imagine your ward would much appreciate you getting so chummy with a common girl."
My expression soured a tad.

"I noticed the look she gave you when she thought you were 'enjoying' being fawned over by an assortment of commoner girls. I don't want to make things difficult for you if she pops out of the inn and sees you hugging one of the small folk." I didn't even attempt to hide my distaste.

"I fucking hate that the Nobles here think like that. Treat the common folk like you're below them..." I bit my tongue. Didn't mean to speak that aloud, but... Fuck, that's seriously been bugging me, though. Felt kind of nice to actually speak it to someone... Speaking of which, Jessica was giving me a very peculiar smile.

Just then, Louise stepped out of the inn behind us and put a quash on that line of conversation. She was fully equipped for travel. Guess it's about that time then. "Okay, I have everything. Are you ready to go, Jophiel?"

I nodded. "Yes, I'm ready." I turned back to Jessica. "Thank you for your service. I can say with honesty that I'm glad to be invested in your business." She beamed pridefully, which made me feel rather good.

Louise spoke up next. "Yes, while your choice of uniform is rather... Indecent-" Oh God, was that her toning down what she really wanted to say? I could face palm right now... "-the inn seems to hold much promise. The larger room and higher quality furnishings were especially appreciated. I can see this business growing popular among a... A specific sect of the Nobility should you plan everything out properly."

Sweet fuck, is it possible for her to not sound condescending as all fuck? I did my best to keep a pleasant face in spite of my misgivings about Louise's behaviour towards commoners.

"My lords, we are undeserving of such high praise from such high patrons. May the Founder watch over your journey." She curtsied in a very lady-like manner, which Louise seemed to actually approve of.

Louise redirected her attention to me. "Very well, let's mount up on Sleipnir and get going then. The sooner we leave the sooner we arrive." True enough. Louise marched off towards the great dog, and I hung back just a moment to give Jess a friendly smile and farewell wave. Hopefully, my next visit to the inn wouldn't be so... Turbulent.

With us both set up and ready to go -Derflinger mounted onto Sleipnir's saddle in a re-purposed carrying case Jessica pulled out of storage for me- Louise ushered her Droog forward and we set off towards the secondary city gates which would bring us onto the road to her family home. It was gonna be a long day. Hopefully, we'd arrive in high spirits regardless.
On the one hand, the day went by entirely peacefully, with Louise and I just engaging in mercifully idle chat, for the most part, her deflecting my questions regarding her apparently having felt bad yesterday night. On the other hand, HOLY FUCK I'VE NEVER BEEN MORE BORED IN MY LIFE.

We'd stopped by the markets on our way out and Louise quickly bought a few small things such as travelling rations but got out of Bruxelles pretty quickly aside from that. Otherwise...

Turns out that travelling along a typical European fantasy road without everything hyper-compressed down for the sake of gameplay in an RPG was horrendously boring. Basically identical to travelling back on Earth, rich greens, lots of trees and grass, occasional deer or something...

We'd occasionally passed through some very small... Hamlets, I think they're called? But otherwise there were no real notable landmarks, and aside from Louise spotting a harpy (oh, by the way, HOLY FUCK THEY HAVE HARPIES AND THEY'RE FRIENDLY, THAT'S SO COOL!) flying around in the distance a few hours into the journey nothing worth noting happened.

I was kind of hoping that the harpy would have decided to fly down and interact with us, but it (didn't get close enough to confirm a gender, and Louise confirmed that they do in fact have males and females) didn't.

Apparently, they're one of the few first-borns that humans get along with, and are the Halkeganian's only real source of Elven goods, as the harpies migrate around with the seasons into and out of human lands, and occasionally bring Elven-made stuff back with them that they're willing to trade with.

Louise also noted that harpies are probably the reason that nobody really made that big of a deal about Miia, as they already have contact with friendly demi-humans. Snake women are just not something they'd encountered before. Christ... What was I missing locked away in that academy? That was the sort of fantasy shit I wanted to encounter on a daily basis!

I considered waking Derf a couple times, but remembering the poor foot he and Louise got off on I'd thought better of it and decided to wait until later that night to talk with him.

Louise finally asked about my Pip-Boy a few hours into the journey, and I told her everything I could. She thought it was cool and was particularly intrigued by the health monitoring system. She actually asked if she could try it on, but quickly changed her mind once I told her about the 'calibration.'

After that, I fired up the Grognak RPG that was came loaded into the system, and wound up giving Louise a play-by-play as I went through it for a few hours. She seemed rather interested in the idea of video games and wanted to know if I had any such things on my computer or Vita.

She actually got annoyed when I confirmed that I did, mainly because I didn't even try to show her them at any point. In fairness, I wasn't sure how she'd react and didn't want to freak her out... Well, she'd get to see all that stuff once I'd set everything up at her house anyways.

Eventually, we passed into the borders of what Louise told me was La Valliére, the territory her family presides over; meaning we were only a few hours away from her home.

As we passed through a few farming hamlets the people inhabiting them actually recognised Louise,
and happily called out and waved to her as we passed by, making note of how much she's grown up since they'd last seen her two years ago. Oh, and it turns out that it's been some two years since she'd last actually seen her family.

Interestingly, some guardsmen aside, they were commoners; and Louise was actually returning the smiles and greetings. Maybe she's being nicer to them specifically because they fall under her family's domain? Nice to see her being kind to small folk for once at any rate... Not that it really helped the knot in my stomach that was tightening with every step we took closer to her home.

Oh God, I'm, not looking forward to meeting her parents and sister... But anyways, let's try to focus on something else. "So-" I started as the last hamlet we passed through fell behind the green hill we just crested over. "-you really haven't been home in two years?" Louise tensed a bit at that question.

"Yes... Students are allowed to return home for breaks, but I always chose to remain at the academy to study and focus on trying to get my magic to work." She sounded a tad weary as she told me that.

"That must have been hard to keep doing." She nodded.

"Cattleya and Father were never happy to hear that I was staying at the academy, but Mother would just write in her letters that she understood and encouraged me to keep working at my magic."

I leant forward to catch a glimpse of her face. A small smile was planted on it.

"Mother has never been good with expressing emotions, but even when Big Sis and Father grew doubtful about my magic, she would tell me to keep at it, to not give up, no matter what anyone else said." She untensed a bit.

"She sounds quite supportive." Louise nodded again.

"'You're my daughter; I know you can do it.'" She gave a light chuckle before continuing. "Her tune never changed. No matter how badly I was doing, mother stood behind me, never once wavered in her faith in me..." Hm, that's good to know.

"That's great... So..." I felt kind of dumb for only thinking to ask right before arriving there... "...How do you think I should act around your family?"

Louise was quiet for a beat before answering me. "Just be yourself, I'm sure they'll like you, even if they may be initially wary of you."...Uh... Christ, okay, just keep up the act then. Fuck, just thinking that makes me feel bad.

...I shouldn't keep lying to Louise. This isn't right. It's... It's eating away at me. It's half the damned reason I've been as stressed I have the past half month. Even if I have to keep lying to everyone else, Louise is the one I should just be honest with.

...I bit my lip as I tried to will myself to just come out with it.

...
FUCK IT. "Louise!" She flinched in surprise and twisted around to face me.

"W-what?" I stared at her, right into her brilliant violet eyes... This would hurt, but it fucking has to be done sooner rather than later, before we meet her family and only worsen the situation by getting them wrapped up in it too.

"I... I..." Oh fuck, oh fuck fuck fuck fuck... "I-I h-have t-t-t-to t-tell you s-something..." Her eyes grew wide with concern... N-no, it'll be alright, I can keep the lie going- NO! Just say it! "I'm sorry!"

She looked very confused now. "Wha-"

JUST FUCKING SAY IT! "I've been lying to you!"

... ...

Silence. Even Sleipnir stopped walking and was craning his head around to look at us out of the corner of his eye. The only sound was that of the wind rustling the nearby trees. Louise was just staring at me, her expression unreadable.

"I-I'm not a Noble, we don't even have Nobles where I come from. Or magic..." Her face continued to be completely blank. "...I'm just a commoner. I've been lying to you." ...Oh God, I can't read her expression at all. "...I'm sorry..."

... ...

...Oh God, stop just staring at me, say something!

Another moment passed before she finally did something. She snorted.

Then the corners of her mouth grew taut, and she let out another little snort.

Then the corners of her mouth started curling upwards, and the snort came out full-force, transitioning into a raucous belly-laugh. She was doubling over, laughing hysterically. I actually had to grab her around the waist to keep her from falling off Sleipnir's back, and she leant back heavily into my chest as she kept guffawing.

...What. No, really, what?

A good minute later she finally ceased chortling and started speaking. "Oh Founder, Founder in Valhalla..." She was resting against me rather cosily, as if I was a five-star lounge. "Oh thank you Jophiel, I needed that." ...What the fuck just happened?

"W-what?" She started chuckling again.

"Saint Sasha... You, you, a commoner. Bloody Hel, I haven't laughed like that in months! What a riot!" But- but...

"But I'm being serious-" She broke out into another round of laughter before I even got the chance to
"Stop, stop!" She started slapping my chest. "Awful, that's just awful! How could you think anyone would ever fall for such a poorly thought-out jest!? If that's the best you can come up with, then you're a phenomenally terrible liar Jophiel!" ...I... I don't... Wha... WHAT!?

WHAT!? FUCKING WHAT!?

"You're tall, you're strong, you're well fed, you carry yourself with dignity, you're fantastically well-mannered, you have absolutely luxurious hair, you style your beard, you wear an enrapturing perfume you brought from your home, your clothing is of fantastic make even if it is unadorned—which means nothing, Mother and I prefer plainclothes ourselves—"

I was struck dumb. None of that shit is a significant accomplishment back on Earth!

"-you're clearly well read, your bedding rivals—Hel, surpasses my own, you own a dozen fantastical weapons, absolutely wondrous artefacts—" She suddenly snorted again. "Oh Founder, you were trying to trick me about your music device yesterday, weren't you!? Telling me that even the common folk own them!" She started shortling again.

"N-no! Louise, I was being honest!" She just started laughing harder.

"And I fell for it! Oh my, I'll be keeping my wits sharp around you, you... You blasted lark you!" She gave me a cheerful grin before turning back forward and urging Sleipnir forth. "To think that I'd have summoned such a skilled jester, and to reveal his skills just when I needed them the most too!"

I didn't know how to process what had happened there. I tried to be honest, I tried to be forthcoming, and she asserted that the truth felt like a joke. I just...

---

I blue screened, shut down, just couldn't process that, so much so that I completely failed to notice the last few hours pass by. I only clicked back on as the La Valliére manor came into view on the horizon... Apparently, Louise had been talking to me, telling me about some stories from her childhood, though everything was going in one ear and out the other...

I hadn't even had the time to think about how I was going to compose myself. "Fuck me." Louise spun around and gave me the stink eye.

"I understand that my family's home is breathtaking, but that's no excuse for speaking like a filthy Augusta." Okay, okay, chill out, compose yourself you git... Actually looking at it, she was being honest. Holy Hell, it was a full-on mansion, with everything that implied.

Great hedges, immense flower beds, truly impressive fountains, an accompanying lake with a... Gazebo, I think, built on a small island in the centre of it, paved pathways... The amount of magical power needed to keep all of it standing must have been immense.

I perked up at that and looked down the road, expecting to see a servant or what have you riding up to meet us, but... Nope. Barren. What was she-
Just as I started to wonder what she was on about she stuck her arm out and a fucking huge owl came out of nowhere and roosted on said arm. Jesus, I didn't notice that thing coming at all! "Lady Louise, this is quite the surprise, you were not expected home until tomorrow night at the earliest."

...Did the owl just fucking talk- Y'know what? Nah, I'm not even surprised by this.

Louise nodded earnestly. "Had I taken a carriage, but I wanted to get home as quickly as possible." The owl '-Wiseman' I gathered- ruffled his feathers before responding.

"I can see that. Your Father will likely disapprove of you riding Sleipnir directly, but Lady Cattleya shall be ecstatic to know that you are back early." Louise's smile somehow managed to grow wider.

"Is Big Sis well?" The owl hooted in his fitting owl voice.

"She has been quite well the past few days, I imagine that she may even be well enough to come greet you in the front of the manor." Louise beamed. Just as he finished his statement, Wiseman directed his attention to me. He scooted up along Louise's arm, apparently to get a closer look at me.

"So, this is the famous Fam- Partner."

...Remember how I said I wasn't bothered by the talking owl? I was lying; this is fucking weird.

Louise nodded gleefully. "Jophiel: this is Wiseman; my father's Familiar. Wiseman: Jophiel, my summoned Partner." He continued to stare at me for a few moments before scooting back down Louise's arm to face her.

"I shall return to the manor to inform the family and serving staff of your arrival at once." Louise made a halting motion before he took off, however.

"I'm happy to see you again, Wiseman." He blinked.

"The feeling is mutual, Lady Louise." With that, he leapt off her arm and took off towards the manor in the distance... I'll just assume that he didn't tear her arm up with those huge talons by virtue of being intelligent enough to not use a death grip.

Just as I was about to start asking questions Louise squee'd like a tea kettle, and before I knew what was happening Sleipnir was bounding towards the home full fucking boar.

Suppose she's eager to be home then.

---

With his saddle removed, Sleipnir bounded into the den to reunite with the other family droogs in a cascade of fur, yelps, and booming barks. "They didn't know each other for very long, but Sleppy bonded with them really quickly before Mother had him delivered to me at the academy..." As nervous as I was, seeing the giant dog cheerfully playing with his surrogate family did cheer me up a fair bit.

Intimidated the fuck out of me as well, but it was still pretty adorable.

"Oh, Saints... I'm home, I'm really home!" She was absolutely ecstatic. "I can't wait to introduce you to-" Louise stopped and she perked her attention towards the door way. It took but a moment for me to hear why as a female voice could be faintly made out coming from outside.

"Louise! Louise!" The little blonde's face lit up like a Christmas tree.

"Cattleya!" She took off like a rocket, was out the door in seconds.
"Louise!"

"Big Sis!"

From my spot within the den, I imagined Louise joyfully jumping into her sister's arms, the two jubilantly sharing their first hug in years.

"My little Louise, you've gotten so big, and so beautiful!" I grimaced as my grip on the box in my hand tightened exponentially...

"...So." A familiar Hispanic voice suddenly came from the box. "You really messed up right out of the gate, did ya, Partner?" The first time Derf spoke up in a while.

"Jesus fuck you have no idea..."

"MY PRINCESS! WHERE IS MY LITTLE PRINCE-" A great booming voice cried out and was hushed for but a moment. "My jewel! My precious little amethyst!"

"Daddy!" Oh, Christ, they're all coming out to meet her at once, aren't they...

The sword wasted no time in responding. "Well, I'll make this quick for you since it seems like you aren't gonna be able to hang back for long; be honest from now on, honest as you can be. In a year the truth will outweigh the lies by a right ass-load." That's... True.

"D- F-father, why are you crying!?”

"When you left you promised me you'd never grow up, but look at you now, you've gone and become a beautiful young woman! In a year you'll be as tall as your Mother!" The deep male voice I could only assume belonged to Louise's Father cried aloud in an over-dramatic fashion... Sweet Jesus.

"Oy, Partner!" I looked back down at the sword in the box I was holding. "It's not that she didn't believe you back there, she just didn't want to believe that you were lying to her." Wait... "Like I said, just be as honest as you can be from here on out and the good will outweigh the bad in no time! She'll still kick your ass before everything's said and done, but you did try to come out earlier, so she'll forgive you for sure!"

...Fuck me, it isn't as though I had a better plan of my own... "Jophiel? Jophiel! What are you waiting for? Come out here already!" I froze, and the box in my hand started creaking from being over stressed.

"Alright Partner, you're up. Just play it cool, things'll work out in the end!" Oh God, am I seriously taking advice from a homicidal talking sword right now!? I took a deep breath, set Derf down, and exhaled.

"We'll talk more tonight, for now, just keep calm and carry on, A'ight?" I gave a determined nod. "Alright, go get 'im manticore!"

I turned to the door, marched to it, stopped short, and took a moment to compose myself.

"...Well..." I took the last step through the door. "Here goes nothing..."
As I turned the corner the first thing that came into view was a duo of gorgeous strawberry blonde girls and one large platinum blonde man gathered on the mirror-smooth pavement leading to the massive three-story manor, all three flanked by a rapidly growing crowd of servants wearing violet uniforms which looked a fair bit more elaborate and fancy than the Academy's servant uniforms.

Firstly; damn, Louise seems to come from a tall family by Halkeganian standards.

Her Father was damn near as large as myself. Fairly powerful in build and garbed in gilded violet finery. Strong, handsome features, absolutely clean face, no scars or errant markings to speak of barring some light wrinkles which suggested that he couldn't be a day over thirty back on Earth. Shoulder-length slicked-back straight hair and a glorious Van Dyke beard. He bore something of a resemblance to a younger Sean Bean in the face, interestingly enough.

The taller of the two girls, Cattleya, came up to probably about my nose comparing her to Louise. Appearance-wise she seemed to be a larger, much fuller-figured Louise. Same hair colour, same eyes, very similar face, just a bit softer in her features. She was wearing a completely unadorned button down long-sleeved shirt with puffy shoulders and a full-length burgundy skirt. So, a practical girl then.

Notably, it seemed that the Familiar Bond's familial instincts did not extend to Louise's sisters if my finding myself rather flustered by Cattleya's gentle gaze was any indication. Given how similar they look that's making me a tad uncomfortable... She was staring at me as I approached, giving me a fairly pleasant look. I really couldn't help but notice how gorgeous she was. Christ, she must have suitors up the wazoo!

Louise's father, Duke, currently had her in a bear hug; lifting her off the ground and holding her close to his chest with her arms wrapped around his shoulders. They were both beaming cheerfully and laughing. I'd closed the distance between myself and the family unit, stopping with maybe two metres between us.

Duke and Louise untangled and she spun around to face me as he stood back up to his full height and started looking me over. His expression was fairly neutral as he gave me a critical eye. Would probably be wise to try making as good of a first impression as possible.

I attempted to perform a sophisticated bow, stepping back on a foot and extending an arm out to my side and everything. I'd like to think that I managed to look at least somewhat graceful, and it seemed to work if Catt and Duke giving much simpler bows of their own in response was any indication.

Alright, now for names. "I am Jophiel Pholus van Cazonium II of the Citadel of Springfield, gateway to the Great White North of the Grande Constitutional Monarchy of Canada. It is truly a pleasure to finally meet you." Notably, the mother, Karin, was nowhere to be found, and I didn't see her approaching from anywhere either.

Just as Catt stepped forward to introduce herself Duke raised his hand in a halting motion before speaking up with his very Sean Bean-like voice. "No no, I will be having none of this over-formal nonsense." He stepped up closer to me himself with a grin on his face. "Louise says you are like the brother she never had, and my little girl was never the type to deliver such high praise lightly!"

He reached up and put a free hand on my shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze with an assuring grin.
"First you're there to support my princess when she needs it the most, then you put an end to the scourge of Foquet when he has the gall to bring harm to our precious little amethyst!" He gave me a toothy smile. "So far as I am concerned you have already proven yourself my boy, and I'm sure Karin is going to be thrilled to have another warrior around to hunt Orcs with!" Uh... Well, that's-

Louise interrupted my thoughts. "Where is mother, father?" Hm, that's a good question...

Catt spoke up. "A large Orcish tribe was reported to be near encroaching upon our lands close to the border to Anhalt; mother left to destroy it if it actually enters our territory, not trusting the Augustas to settle the issue themselves." Augustas? Isn't that part of Kirche's name? Do their territories border on each other? "We weren't expecting you home until tomorrow night, so mother saw no issues with leaving for the day."

Louise deflated a tad but otherwise remained in rather high spirits. "A Warband... Do they have an Orcus?" ...The Roman God of the Underworld?

Duke shrugged as he stepped back, relinquishing my shoulder as he did so. "Unlikely; not even the Augustas are daft enough to allow a properly organised Orc horde to pass through their territory uncontested."

I interjected with a raised hand. "Where I come from 'Orcus' is the name of a mythological God..."

Duke responded with a chuckle. "Oh? What an interesting coincidence. 'Orcus' is the name of the orcish God of War, sufficiently powerful and intelligent orc war chiefs are known to take on the name as a symbol of their ability and authority. Given that tribes as a whole don't allow the name to be claimed lightly, it's typically a very bad sign for nearby human settlements." Oh, so not the same God that the Romans worshipped then.

"So, Orc tribes led by an 'Orcus' tend to behave like Barbarian Hordes I imagine." Or... "Let me guess; an Orcus tends to be capable of spirit magic." Duke and Catt nodded.

Catt interjected. "They aren't anywhere near as powerful as an Elf, but they are a severe threat to anything less than a Triangle-class. Coupled with how they are often intelligent enough to utilise functional military tactics..." Huh. That's-

"HMPH!" Louise suddenly stomped her foot with a huff and a pout.

...Uh, right, supposed to be her big reunion with her family and here we are talking about Orcs. Better get back on-topic before she gets upset. "So, Karin is unlikely to return tonight?" Louise's father and sister both chuckled sheepishly, likely upon realising that they'd made the same mistake as me.

"Potentially. My wife has never had many compunctions about sleeping in the wilderness if need be. Doubly so with her Manticore to keep her company." Whoa, wait, what!? Karin has a fucking Manticore familiar!? Sweet! ...Better avoid going off-topic again, though.

Catt gave Louise a sweet smile. "Mother will return by the morrow at the latest, do not be concerned with that little amethyst." Louise was indeed looking a tad put-off by her mother's absence at the moment. "For now... The Headmaster's letter informed us that your magic has finally revealed itself and that you have inherited Mother's Wind element!"

Louise suddenly looked a tad uncertain. "I- ...Y-yes, that's right..." Not comfortable with lying? Heh, you have no idea, Love...
Catt stepped forward and took Louise in a big hug. "That's so wonderful! I should never have doubted you." Yeah, I imagine they're both feeling kind of shitty for having been uncertain about Louise learning to spell cast.

Duke interjected next. "I would ask for a demonstration, but that should be saved for Karin's return I think... Regardless, we should have known to trust your mother's judgement. I am sorry my precious amethyst." He seemed genuinely remorseful. Least he isn't a pompous shit-stain that refuses to admit failure.

Louise notably pulled away from Catt and looked a mite upset. "T-that's fine! It's nothing, really! Don't worry about it!" Huh. Must not have been expecting things to get heavy then. "J-Jophiel!" She spun around to face me rather unexpectedly. "Y-you'll need a tour of the manor, right?"

Heh, she must not want to dwell on vaguely uncomfortable topics then. Duke and Catt seemed to catch on quickly enough as he shifted his focus to me again. "Yes, it would hardly be appropriate to leave the newest member of our household to wander aimlessly without direction! Come, we shall give you a tour of our home and introduce you to the serving staff. We shall have dinner following your familiarisation with the manor."

The family patriarch beckoned me to follow him as he moved towards the mansion. Catt and Louise fell into step beside me as he led us forth. Catt, in particular, seemed intent on starting a conversation. "So, you simply must tell me about your battle with Foquet!" Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that she looked really excited. Louise mentioned previously that Catt's the type that really enjoys tales of adventure and what have you... Oh, lawd this is gonna be 'fun.'

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Duke led us around briskly as he gave me the grand tour, and holy shit is this house ever huge. It was... Christ, where to even begin?

The ceiling was very tall on each floor, gorgeously rich and lacquered woods and fantastically tiled floors with amazingly woven and patterned fabrics. Massive windows to allow a fantastic amount of natural light into each very brightly coloured room, enormous halls which would make even a high volume of traffic a complete non-concern...

You ever seen pictures of those utterly majestic French manors and castles from the Early Modern era, or even been to one? Versailles and the like, buildings that are just opulent to the extreme? It was very much in the same vein as those in appearance, though somewhat toned down compared to what one might expect from a royal household.

Also, where one would find mostly Christian stuff decorating paintings and whatnot: I saw much in the way of Nordic influences instead. Though rather familiar it also had an air of the fantastical as well, on account of the Halkeganians having had time to develop their own mythology aside from our own.

The Brimiric murals were particularly interesting, though I didn't get much time to admire any particular one as Duke dragged us about so I'd be able to make my way around on my own and introduced me to the servants, who all seemed pleasant enough.

Notably, they were a fair bit less stiff and/or skittish than the Academy's staff. Chalk that up to the le Blancs being more mature than the average egocentric Academy student.

I also noted something very... Disconcerting. Cattleya was giving me goosebumps.
I tried to brush it off as her beauty just making me exceptionally nervous, as even I can be affected by some particularly pretty girls. Though... Something about her was just unsettling, though I can't even say what. Maybe it's because I know how sickly she normally is? I don't like being around sick people normally, though she isn't even unhealthy right now... No...

I glanced back over at her and stole a look at her face again. This close-up... What the fuck is it? I can't place it, she just seems like a really pretty girl at first, but...

...Ugh, I'm just letting my nerves get the better of me, seeing ghosts that aren't actually there. Chill out you idiot, you're freaking out over literally nothing.

"Sir Jophiel?" Catt suddenly spoke up, seemingly catching my nervously glancing towards her every few moments. "Is something wrong?"

Duke called back to us before I could respond myself. "He's just nervous about finally meeting us. I told you; don't worry about it, my boy! With what you've done for my little girl you are among family here."

Louise nudged me from my side opposite Cattleya and gave me a reassuring smile when I gave her a look.

...Yeah, he's probably right. Totally freaking out over nothing.

"Now, coming up here is your room, my lad." That caused me to perk up a tad. "It has been a guest room since we'd moved in, however it seems to me that it would be better served being used for our newest family member!" ...Huh. Wasn't expecting to get my own room. Not sure what I was expecting actually...

As we came up to another beautifully decorated door the Duke made a sweeping motion over the wide hall. "Directly across from you is Eleanore's room, next to hers is Cattleya's, next to yours is Louise. At the end of the hall is the master bedroom where Karin and I rest our heads at night." Hm, okay. "Now, Louise also mentioned that you have a personal tutor coming in with your luggage?"


"Um, Sir-" Again with the 'sir,' I'm not a Knight girl. "Jophiel, have you not misspoken? Louise has stated that your tutor is to teach you to read?"

I sighed and nodded. "No, she's a commoner; she's also capable of reading the Academy encyclopaedias well enough to understand them." Both stared at me for a beat before Duke started laughing aloud, followed by Catt giggling lightly.

Catt spoke up again. "Oh, my... Louise, you were not exaggerating about sir Jophiel being a skilled jester!"

I grit my teeth in annoyance, and Louise spoke up for me. "He isn't joking, I've met her, this commoner is even capable of reading from the Academy Alchemy books, I tested her myself to ensure she wasn't some manner of charlatan." ...Wait, she did? When? ...When I was drugged after capturing Longueville?

Catt and Duke both looked very surprised now, and in fact looked rather dumbstruck. Duke spoke up next. "Where in the Founder's name would a common girl have learned to read advanced runes?"

That was directed at me...

I shrugged. "Literacy is common among all social classes in Canada, I never thought anything of her ability to read considering that."
He lifted a hand to his beard and gave it a few contemplative strokes before responding. "I see... Well, I find myself curious, surely there shall be an interesting story behind that. We shall ask her for clarification once she arrives." Alright, now on the topic of Siesta...

"Where will Siesta sleep, Lord le-"

He cut me off with a stiff wave. "Duke!"

Uh, okay... "...Duke?"

He started stroking his beard ponderously again. "Well... Normally a commoner would be assigned to the servant's quarters, but you've hired this girl onto a fairly prestigious position, so that would hardly do..." He started scanning the hallway. "We couldn't give her a Noble's quarters, being that she's of the low class..." His eyes stopped on the door right next to my own, opposite Louise's. "Perhaps..."

He walked over to the door and pulled it open. My position in the hall gave me a pretty clear view into the room. I could see that it was probably a closet, filled with cleaning supplies and unused furniture from what I gathered. Do note that when I say closet I mean 'closet' in the 'crazy rich' sense. It was probably about the size of an average modern bedroom. Maybe 12' by 11' I think. Even had a decent sized window.

"Perfect!" Duke stepped back and beckoned one of the servants following us to approach. "Good man, have this closet cleaned out and properly furnished for its occupant's arrival tomorrow night!" The servant bowed in affirmation and took off back down the hall we'd approached from. So, Siesta's room is gonna be right next to my own... I can live with that.

He shut the door to Siesta's room and returned to his original position.

"So, with that out of the way, I think it would be fair to leave you to familiarise yourself with your new room. Arnaud here shall remain nearby should you find yourself in need of answers or directions."

He motioned towards a fairly skinny but otherwise unremarkable red head that stepped forward and bowed lightly.

"You will also be called upon once dinner is prepared of course. For now, take the time to relax. You will have the entire summer break to really familiarise yourself with the manor and its grounds. And Cattleya-" He turned to the full-size version of Louise. "You don't be harping him about tales from his homeland or what have you tonight, he and your sister just arrived and are surely tired from their journey, your curiosity can wait."

She pouted but otherwise didn't complain, mercifully enough. Catt wouldn't stop bothering me about Canada and Foquet until Duke outright told her to. Louise had previously mentioned that she's the type that would have aspired to be an adventurer had her health not stopped her, and relished any opportunities to learn about the outside world.

Given that I'm from an allegedly heretofore unknown Human kingdom from beyond the borders of No Man's Land she's gonna be harassing me with questions for quite a while methinks...

"Big sis?" Louise started with a hopeful tone. "Might we go for a walk on the grounds? There is much I'd like to discuss with you." Cattleya smiled brilliantly at her tiny clone.

"Of course, let us set off now then." Louise happily scooted up next to her sister as the two made their way back down the hall. Duke followed very shortly after them with a friendly nod of the head,
and the servants quickly dispersed after that.

With little else to do, I'd decided that it wouldn't be a terrible idea to test my new bed as I popped the door open and stepped into the large, lavishly decorated room.

Looked about the same as the rest of the manor, but with bedroom furnishings, and a bathtub I think. I approached the large windows and gazed over the exterior grounds, taking in the sight of the beautifully curated flower gardens and strategically placed trees. As I looked over the enormous space the image of Bruxelles' slums came to the fore of my mind.

I moved to the great king-sized bed and flopped down on it as I let out a frustrated sigh. "...People living in squalor not a day's travel away while the le Blancs live like literal royalty because of reasons... Talk about a gross misallocation of resources..." I grumpily grunted as I fell silent and allowed the minutes to pass by in silence.

Not feeling up to really doing much until dinner I'd chose to just remain as I was for then, gradually allowing myself to nod off for a while...
A knock at the door jostled me from my mercifully dreamless nap. I groaned, pushed myself up from the feather bed I'd been assigned and stretched my arms and back out with a yawn.

It wasn't as comfortable as my old Earth-made bed back at the academy... But it'll work.

I unlatched my Pip-Boy, took off my jacket, draped it over the back of the room's desk chair and set the computer on the desk itself before heading over to the door. Probably should have done that before my nap, but eh.

Arnaud was waiting on the other side. Louise was also there, notably not wearing her regular cloak. He gave me a slight bow before speaking up. "Lady Louise would like to speak with you before dinner comes, mi'lord."

I nodded in understanding. "Very well." He bowed again before turning and heading down the hallway towards the dining room. "Coming in?"

I leisurely made my way back to the desk, removed my cape from my jacket and clipped it over my long-sleeved button-down in preparation for dinner. Meanwhile, Louise stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. "So, I spoke with Cattleya for a while."

Okay...

"It seems that she's hoping for some rather fantastical tales of your homeland." Huh. "I... May have let slip that you're from Midgard as well." Wait, what? "So... It occurs to me that I have yet to ask you much about your homeland. You've told me much about your nation's politics, but little about the land itself."

Okay... "What are you getting at, Louise?"

She fidgeted somewhat. "It's just that... Cattleya does not get much that she truly wants. Mother and Father would buy whatever they could to make her happy, but what she sincerely desires is adventure. Something which her health prevents her from doing..." Still not sure what the point here is... "Jophiel, you'll be able to share fantastical tales with her, right?"

I paused at that, mostly due to the way she stressed 'fantastical' as if it was of the utmost importance... "...Well, not really."

She didn't look very happy at that, but I'm kind of committed to taking Derf's advice here.

"In all honesty, Canada's a pretty boring place. We don't have monsters, bandits, hordes of any kind to speak of... The far north aside, our lands have been completely tamed. By and large, it's a perfectly safe place to live in." Her expression became rather sour at that... Uh...

"Jophiel..." She stepped closer to me and her features grew hard. "Big Sis gets almost nothing which she actually wants because she couldn't physically handle it."

Okay...

"Tales of the outside world are one of the few things she genuinely enjoys which don't put her in danger, and she's heard almost all there is to hear of our own history and world." Al...right? I don't really- "Your people have a rich mythology, right? Creatures which once roamed your people's lands
before they were wiped out, heroes who went on epic quests?"

I nervously nodded. "Well, I suppose, but-

"Then tell her about those. Stretch the truth, make it seem like those things still roam the land to this day, that you've seen them with your own eyes."

I stared at the short girl in surprise. Did... Did she just- "Are you telling me to lie to your sister?"

Louise didn't seem to like that question. "I'm asking you to do her the kindness of bringing her a shred of excitement and joy for once."

She stopped short and her expression went taut for a moment before she continued.

"...Look, Big Sis, she smiles all the time, acts content and happy with the way things are, but she's... Not. She hates that she's bedridden so often and wishes for nothing more than to be an adventurer..."

Her eyes turned downright pleading as she looked up at me.

"She can't be an adventurer because the Gods saw fit to provide her with a weak constitution, but I can recall from my childhood that the few times she would smile and really meant it, was when meeting and speaking with an adventurer during a ball or gathering held here at the manor. Hearing tales of the world beyond civilisation from-

I threw my hands up in a halting manner. "Okay, okay, I get it. I..." God damn, can she ever produce some heart-rending doe eyes when she wants to. "I'll tell her tales, spin the truth if I have to in order for her to believe they're things I've gone through myself; just... Stop looking at me like that!" It's no damned fair when girls do that, damn it!

Her gaze slowly normalised, and with a sigh she returned to her normal demeanour, thankful. "Thank you." Jeez...

"Now-" I started. "-What's this about Cattleya being sickly? She seems perfectly healthy to me." That caused a full-force grimace to appear on her face.

"For now." She looked as if she'd bitten down on the sourest lemon ever. "We have no idea what causes it, but occasionally Big Sis's condition will just... Become normal for a time. Occasionally it will last a day, often less than that, rarely two." Her hands balled into tight fists. "Regardless, she always finds herself bedridden again before she gets to... Do anything, really."

I found myself frowning as well. "That sounds... Awful."

Louise nodded her head minutely. "Mother used to try bringing Big Sis out to explore during the few times when she feels better, but more often than not she suddenly relapses while in the field and Mother has a fit trying to get her back home where she's safe."

Hold the phone... "She would bring Cattleya outside, even knowing how sick she is?" Louise gave me a cross look.

"You don't understand. Eleanore and I didn't inherit mother's love for adventure; she wants someone that would go wandering about with her with real excitement, and Cattleya wishes for nothing more than the opportunity to explore..." Oh. So...

"Let me guess: Catt guilt-tripped your mother into bringing her out against her better judgement."
Louise's shoulders shrugged. "Not intentionally, I don't think. But when she thinks nobody is looking Catt won't bother trying to hide how she feels about being locked up all the time. Mother would notice, and... Well, I suppose it made her feel guilty." I see...

Suddenly Louise shook her head side-to-side and grimaced.

"Enough with this sort of talk; I just wanted to make sure that you'd be able to make Cattleya happy." Her grimace was quickly replaced by a small smile. "I understand if it makes you uncomfortable, but it's for the best, and it isn't as if you're hurting anybody, right?"

...I wanted to 180 and repeatedly slam my face into my newly appointed desk.

"Now, moving on from that..." Thank God. "I understand why you would be... Embarrassed about your scars, but wearing working gloves to dinner is considered extremely rude here." ...Well, shit. "Father knows better than to pry if you're uncomfortable with it, and he'll reign in Big Sis if she gets too pushy about them." Well... Alright.

I nervously slipped off my olive drab cotton gloves and tossed them on the desk alongside the Pip-Boy. Louise's eyes widened noticeably for an instant before returning to normal.

"I... I forgot how bad-" Her jaw slammed shut and she looked very apologetic. "I-I mean..."

She directed her face downwards before continuing.

"H-how did that happen anyways? Your arms looked perfectly fine before you got back from defeating Foquet. I haven't said anything because you haven't shown any signs of being in pain, but..." Christ... Of course.

Siesta would have seen my arms while I was drugged into the upper atmosphere too. Difficult to not assume they'd be battle scars considering the circumstances behind them both seeing them for the first time, and further considering just how fucked up they look... "Don't worry, it doesn't hurt. It's..."

...Fuck, how to I spin this without fucking myself over?

"It's a side-effect of my magic." ...Oh please God let her just leave it at that.

She was quiet for a few moments. "I... See. Can... Can you still feel things properly?"

Okay, good, this I can answer without fucking myself. "Yes. Don't worry about it Louise, it's only skin-deep. My arms still work just as properly as they ever have." She nodded wordlessly and didn't take her eyes off my left hand.

She stepped closer to me, reached up and gingerly took said hand by the fingers as if she were afraid that she was going to hurt me. She took her other hand and slowly ran her own fingertips over the blackish, scaly scars, followed shortly after by the runes, slowly following along the ridges of the healed brand.

"Uh..." I wasn't sure what to make of what she was doing right then.

"Will it ever heal...?" She said that so quietly I almost didn't catch it.

"I don't know." She wordlessly kept my branded hand clasped in both of her's for a few moments before letting me go.

"Well... Okay. I suppose we should head off then." She suddenly beamed up at me. "Father and
Cattleya have liked you so far, you'd better keep it up with the good first impressions!" Oh, yeah, no pressure or anything... "Oh, and you don't need to bother wearing your cape while we're home, it's more to make your status known to strangers." Oh. Well, that's cool.

As I unclipped the cape and rolled it up to place it on the desk along with the Pip-Boy I noted that Louise said when we're home... So she really does think of me as a sibling, huh? That caused my heart to warm a tad. God, she sure does make it easy to love her-

Whoa, wait, WHOA, WHAT?

I froze with my hands still resting on top of my now rolled cape. Love!? I... I've only known her for a little over a half a month! I mean, sure, I get that the Familiar Bond is pushing us together, but...

...No, when I think of Louise I get a swell in my chest in a manner similar to when I think of Rose. Fuck, we haven't even talked all that much all things considered, but already I think of her the same way I think of my best friend from back on Earth? That best friend that took years to really earn my trust and adoration?

...That's disconcerting as all Hell. I mean, okay, it's great and all that I'm not all awkward and shit while interacting with Louise, but fuck.

"Um... Jophiel?" Louise broke my chain of thought. "Are you well...?" I turned and gave her a small reassuring smile.

"Y-yeah, I'm just still waking up from my nap is all." She gave me a sceptical look but offered no argument.

"Well... Alright. Splash some water on your face and let's head to the dining room. Dinner will be ready very shortly." I curtly nodded, marched over to the room's basin, quickly washed my face and after drying off followed in step beside Louise as we leisurely traipsed down the manor's elaborately decorated halls.

As we moved along in silence I pondered what exactly I was supposed to tell Cattleya... Okay, gotta work quick here. Somewhere fantastical, mysterious... The north, the far north. The Arctic, and...

When you go far enough north the sun only very rarely rises above the horizon, so... The Land of Always Winter and the Ever Night. Yeah, that sounds fantasy as fuck.

What else... Hell, ya know what? Fuck it, let's go full A Song of Ice and Fire here.

In the farthest reaches of Canada, on the very border of the frontier of the Northwestern Territories lays the Wall, a great ancient super-structure which separates the civilized lands from the near-mythical region of Nunavut: the Lands of Always Winter and the Ever Night, where only the brave Northern Rangers and mighty Inuit people dare to travel; for beyond is where ancient monsters of myth reside. The Windigos, the Skin-Walkers, and-
Dinner was a fairly quiet affair, the boring music orb Duke pulled out aside. It seems that le Blanc house rules are no talking until everyone's cleaned their plates, which I've seen back home as well. This was good for me, gave me more time to stitch together a fantasy setting to tell Catt about.

The food notably consisted of... A bunch of weird fantasy things whose names I couldn't be bothered to remember, all spread out over an impressively decorated table. I was beginning to notice that while their stuff was fantastically decorated and what have you, it was all also practical in design. Function and form. I can approve of that.

There was a lot of flesh coming off of a very large hunk of roasted red meat, perfectly seasoned and just fantastically juicy. An assortment of other meats like fish, veggies, some fruits, some rather interesting condiments...

All in all the food was interesting, and I was kind of regretting that I hadn't popped a few Pepto pills considering how sensitive my guts have been to fantasy foods thus far. With luck, I've acclimatised enough that I won't need to beeline for the nearest chamber pot in a few minutes.

Not having access to one of Colbert's magic toilets was going to suck...

I finished eating first by a country mile, which Duke took as a compliment if the grin on his face was any indication, luckily. I nibbled on a kind of purple apple thing which had a vaguely tangy flavour to it to pass the time.

Duke and Louise finished around the same time, well after Catt, who was bouncing quite excitedly in her seat as she constantly glanced at me out of the corner of her eye.

Damn it Louise, and here I was all ready to start being truthful and everything...

After giving my thanks for the fine food, the middle child of the le Blancs wasted no time in spinning to pelt me with questions once everyone was done. I actually couldn't keep up with the rate of which she was verbally vomiting at me.

Duke interrupted her, mercifully. "Cattleya, what did I tell you?" Catt's expression soured to a pout.

Louise spoke up next. "Father, Jophiel himself hasn't voiced a desire for Big Sis to withhold her questions himself..." She made eye contact with me. "Surely, he would be willing to entertain her with at least one story?"

"...I wouldn't mind sharing one tale tonight."

Catt's eyes were practically sparkling once I finished regaling the three with my absurd tale of horror
and battle. Duke looked very intrigued, and Louise seemed rather entertained even knowing the story was fake beforehand. Well, good to know my talents of bull shittery are adequate then.

"Founder above... That sounds terrifying; I'll have nightmares for weeks!" Catt started as she shuffled closer to me on the fancy-ass couch in the manor's lounge. "I can't imagine how it must have been to experience such a horror in person!" She asserted that she was frightened, but only looked ecstatic. So she's one of those types, huh...

Duke spoke up next. "Now daughter, allow our new housemate his personal space." He chided Catt, though with a light tone. She seemed conflicted but anchored herself to the couch with a comfortable couple of feet left between us. "I must say... That was not the type of story I was expecting to hear. To think that your people would suffer from such a severe threat from outside your borders as well..." Well... Louise all but demanded something fantastical...

Louise stretched with an adorable sigh before chipping in. "Well, considering that you defeated Foquet-" I fought the urge to drop to my knees and slam my face on the rich wood-tiled floor. "-I have little trouble believing that you could fight your way out of such a situation."

I attempted to shrug humbly. "Well, it wasn't as though I was fighting alone; I had the Northern Rangers and my Red Coat escorts to help me all the way through."

Catt cooed at that statement. "Ah, such brave, heroic men, so fearlessly delving into the abandoned temples of a forgotten race, fighting back against the Darkness of the North!" Oh God, she's making me feel guilty...

Duke spoke up next. "It is good to know that our little amethyst's guardian acts so well under pressure. I'm sure Karin will be impressed by the story as well!" ...Maybe I should have disregarded Louise's request that I tell the story as if it was something I'd experienced... "Now, I am sure that we all have many questions, but it is getting rather late." Duke motioned towards a window, and yeah, it was indeed getting dark outside.

I stood with a stretch and a grunt. "Alright, perhaps it would be wise for us all to turn in for the night." Catt did not seem to agree, but it was three against one, so she ultimately relented.

Duke dismissed the servants for the night and we all proceeded towards our rooms. Evidently, Karin was spending the night in the field, though Duke thought nothing of it. She must be all kinds of bad ass for him to think nothing of his wife sleeping outdoors when there's an orc horde nearing the family property...

---

We all shared goodnights; Louise followed Cattleya into her room kind of inexplicably, and after locking the door behind me I wearily trudged over to my bed, undressed, then realised that I should probably give myself a wipe down before sleeping.

After I was done drying off I climbed under the covers. The mattress itself wasn't as nice as mine, but the covers were pretty damned fine. Very smooth and pleasant on the skin.

As I allowed myself to sink into the bed I idly noted that mercifully, nobody bothered me about the Shock Jockey scars, which I suppose I have Louise to thank for tomorrow.

...

I tossed and turned for a while as I tried to shut my brain off, but I was having a pretty hard time of it with the worry of fucking EVERYTHING kind of getting to me. Fuck me I'm gonna seriously come
to regret obeying Louise there, I just know it...

Eventually, I figured that I wasn't going to be getting rest for at least a little while longer and sat up on the bed with an annoyed grunt. It was too dark for me to really do much of anything, and I wasn't feeling up to playing Grognak, so I was feeling a tad lost at that moment.

Then I remembered something important I've been putting off for too long now. Didn't look around the room before crawling into bed, but... "Derf?" Silence. "Derflinger-?"

"...What?" Hm, guess the servants would have assumed that the giant talking sword would belong to the apparent warrior. Or he just told them as much...

I couldn't tell where he was in the dark, but I wagered he was near my desk with the rest of my crap. "Were you sleeping?"

The blade grunted before responding. "Yeah, but I don't need to, don't worry about it." Yeah, I imagine a sword wouldn't have any biological imperative to sleep...

"Alright. So, I think it's about time we had that talk now."

"Probably not a bad idea." I pushed my back up against the headboard of the bed so I was resting against it like a chair to make myself more comfortable.

"Alright, now where to begin... For starters, how can you affect my runes?"

Derf wasted no time in answering. "First off; I'm a real old bastard; my memories are kind of spotty, so I may not be remembering things properly."

Oh, wonderful.

"With that out of the way: well, you're the Gandalf; and I'm pretty sure that I'm supposed to be a 'companion spirit' to you, a Familiar in all but name if you will." Heh. "The runes' aspects can't all be usefully powered at once, so I need to alter them every moment to make sure you're operating as best you can."

Hold the phone. "Why can't every aspect operate at full power?"

"There's a set amount of 'Soul' to apply to all three aspects, and not enough to power them all at once at full strength. Not sure why that's the case, but it is."

...Okay, that's annoying, but moving on. "Okay, well that doesn't actually answer my earlier question anyways."

Derf grunted again. "That's the best I can do for you, partner. I'm bonded to you, and I know how to tweak aspects of your runes to help you in fights. I can't say why."

"I suppose you also can't tell me how you came to be bonded to me?"

"I wasn't bonded to you specifically partner. There have been other Gandalfs before you, and other Void Mages before blondie." Oh...? So it's sort of like a Dragonborn situation then-

Wait a minute. "Are you saying that I'm like... A reincarnation of the first Gandalf?" I found myself clutching at my sheets nervously- Wait, would they have the concept of reincarnation-?

"Well... No, not quite." Oh, guess so. "I'd say that it's more like you inherited her 'Life Force,' absorbed it into your own." Ah... Well, that's less disturbing, but still a little unsettling for a number
of reasons. "I don't think it's worth worrying about regardless." ...Fair enough.

"Okay, so moving on: I have to tell you whenever I need one of my powers changed?" It had grown so dark that even with my eyes adjusted to it I couldn't make Derf out on the other side of the room, not that it mattered. Not like a sword makes expressions or has body language to read.

Derf was quiet for a moment. "For now. I think I can remember learning how to communicate with one of the previous Gandalfrs using our minds alone, but I don't remember doing it for very long before they keeled over, so it must have taken a while to figure it out." Alright, duly noted and filed away for later consideration...

I yawned rather obnoxiously in spite of myself. Damn it, shouldn't have gone and waited until bedtime to start questioning the evil talking sword- Actually, there's something I really should be focusing on. "Okay, got it. Moving on... What the Hell is the deal with you being so bloodthirsty?"

Silence hung for a time before I got a response. "I'm a sword."

...Uh... "...And?"

"And what?" Oh, you've got to be kidding me...

"You're gonna have to give me a better answer than that."

"Oy... When a spirit is bound to an item it eventually takes on personality traits suited to its new body. I was bound to a sword, and swords are just weapons: they have no purpose beyond killing things. Little surprise a spirit would get a little bloodthirsty considering that." ...Wait.

"Are you saying that your original personality was re-written when you 'became' a sword?" Sweet fuck it that's the case...

"No, I just got real eager to spill blood after a while." Oh. Well... Okay, still.

"You're okay with that?" Christ this is getting disturbing real quick.

"Seemed like a pretty reasonable side-effect considering what the alternative was before I got bound." 'The alternative?'

"What alternative? In fact: how did you come to be bound to a sword?"

... ...

Silence. "Derflinger?"

"I'd rather not get into that Partner." ...Well, shit, okay. Moving on...

"Okay, well, I suppose that explains why you can seem so calm lately." There was an odd chitter from the other side of the room, it took me a moment to realise that it was Derf chuckling.

"I can keep it under control most of the time. Can't resist the urge when there're pigs that could do with a good sticking nearby, though! Didn't help that I was in that box for good couple decades, box fever'll do that to ya!" More chittering. So he probably won't be getting on my ass to murder random peasants then. Good.

What else did I want to ask... Fuck, trying to think while tired sucks- Oh, right. "Derf, a while ago
the runes were trying to prevent me from thinking about my homeworld—"Oh shi—...Nah, fuck it, I'm sure I don't have to worry about him knowing I'm from Earth. "—and I was able to resist them, only for them to... Well, effect me later on anyways."

The chittering stopped, and Derf seemed to pause before speaking. "Weird." ...Well, that was helpful.

I had to admit, that was a little annoying. "...Is that really all you have to add?"

"What? Give me a break, I'm not a bloody encyclopaedia. All's I can think to add is that you may have mucked up the runes when you did that, but I've already fixed them, so it's really not worth dwelling on. Maybe don't do that again, though, I guess."

...Huh. "I'm not comfortable with the thought that I may not be able to think of my—"

"Partner." Derf suddenly cut me off. "I'm going to be blunt with you here: you aren't the first Familiar that's been summoned from very, very far away, and you won't be the first to refuse to just let go of your past." What- "Partner, I know this may seem hard to believe right now, but the runes and bond are trying to do you a favour."

Oh, you've got to be... "Bullshit. How does keeping me from thinking about—"

"You're never going to see them again."

... ...

..."

"...What."

"Partner, there's no spell to send summoned people back home, and in the many hundreds of years I've been around I've never heard nor seen any evidence that it's possible to do so through other means; and believe you me that I've been around." ...I... "I know that the thought hurts, trust me Partner: I fucking know. But it's the truth. This is your home now, and you need to accept that you're never going to see your family or birthland again. I've been partnered with other Gandalfs that refused to, and it destroyed them."

..."

"I understand that the thought is hard... It doesn't have to happen overnight, but Partner? You need to let go. You're never going to see Midgard again."

... ...

Eventually, I laid back down and pulled my sheets over my shoulders. The minutes ticked on by as I stared into the darkness of the room off to the side of the bed before I finally managed to steady my breath enough to respond, after which there were no words exchanged for the rest of the night.

"...You're wrong."
Slept like shit, woke up like shit. Got up real early, got dressed, and left to go for a walk around the emerald green manor grounds to clear my head.

I'd quickly found myself standing at the edge of a picturesque pond in the back yard, just standing and listening to the gentle trickle of water and the chirping songs of local birds and insects off in the distance.

The pond was on the larger side; wide enough to comfortably house a beautiful white gazebo on a small island in the centre of it. By the looks of it, one would need to hop in a small white rowboat tied to an equally small white dock if they wanted to reach it without going for a swim. It was a pretty bog-standard European pond, nothing really noteworthy beyond its familiarity to an Earthborn like myself.

That's most of the reason I was there, in fact. It looked like a snapshot of a European greeting card, which I found comforting at that moment, even if I'd never actually seen Europe in person myself.

Derflinger's words last night really got to me. I'd been trying to avoid considering my situation too deeply, which honestly, now actually thinking about it... Was probably part of the reason I was being such a short-sighted dumb fuck.

I mean, for Christ's fucking sake. Why did I lie to Osmand about the Vigor? What reasonable excuse did I have for doing that? Why do I not care about Scarron and Jessica inadvertently emptying out my bank account anywhere near as much as I should? Why do I- As I cast my eyes downwards I found myself staring at my legs. The legs I'd allegedly wrecked a few times over the past two weeks, but have no lasting damage to suggest I'd ever truly suffered injury. Injuries from...

...How many times have I nearly died so far? Guiche, the Vault, the Forest... Thrice, in just a half a month. I nearly drowned in the town river when I was eleven, and I only recently got over my intense fear of deep water. Those moments, those times I very nearly died here in Halkegania, and nearly died violently at that...

I suddenly found my legs growing weak and quickly dropped to my ass to avoid falling over uncontrollably.

Crossing my legs, I rubbed my previously shattered ankle idly as I started actually considering the way I'd been looking at everything.

...Dumb ass. I'm a dumb ass. Just brushing this short of shit aside like it's nothing... This isn't the way people react to this kind of stuff, to nearly dying in fights against witches and wizards, to making that much money all at once for no effort, to being pulled across time and space into a real fantasy world to be bound as a teenaged witches' surrogate big brother guardian Familiar and branded with magical runes with grant me superhuman abilities right out of a video game or anime-...

...Something inside of me just...

Broke.
I...
...
...
...

...I've been in denial, haven't I? From the beginning. I've been detached from everything, even when I was taking things seriously, I was only doing so in the way that I take some games seriously... Like my life was never truly in danger, even though if Montmont and Katie hadn't been there when Guiche attacked me, had Kirche and Tabitha not came to me after Longueville left the Vault, had Tabitha not been there to side-swipe Longueville when she turned her wand on me in the forest...

But this isn't a video game. This isn't an idle daydream. This isn't a story, an anime, a comic book, a movie...

...

I'm really here.

I've really been teleported into a fantasy dimension, taken from Earth and made into a Familiar without my consent.

...

I suddenly found myself close to hyperventilating. Everything I knew, everyone I knew, gone. I-

...No. They're all still there. They're all still going about their daily lives.

I was gone.

Just... Gone. Disappeared, along with everything in my room. No explanation, no way my roommate couldn't have not noticed me just up and leave with all my shit overnight. Just gone. Vanished into thin air.

...Are they searching for me? Is the RCMP questioning everyone I was recently in contact with, combing the town, my internet footprint for any traces of me?

How... How long do they search for a missing person before giving up?

...How long before a missing person is assumed dead?

...Are they already preparing for a funeral?

I...

...Oh, God...

I...

They might think I'm dead. I- I nearly did die.

...

I'd nearly died.

...
I'd nearly died.

...

I'D NEARLY DIED. THRICE!

I'd nearly died and I thought fucking nothing of it! I didn't take it seriously at all! And how the fuck could I!? It didn't show at all! No scars, no lingering pain, no nothing! Fuck, there wasn't even immediate pain, the runes wouldn't let me feel anything-!

...The runes.

I lifted my hand and looked at the markings on the back of my hand... I've been too blasé about everything. Everything.

The only things I've been sort of acting properly towards have been... Siesta. Having slept with her, which she quickly chilled me out on. Siesta and the commoner girl, Lagartha. Everything else... Because of these fucking things on the back of my hand!

These fucking things that fucking sword knows how to control! These fucking things that fucking inconsiderate bitch branded me with without my consent-!

...I need to calm down. Losing my temper, lashing out at Louise would accomplish nothing good. I just-

...I'm not sure how I'm going to fix all of this.

I allowed myself to settle down flat on the grass, firmly affixing my gaze on the twilight sky above as everything just...

...

"Fuck my life."

***

"Hell no. Fuck off." I gave both Darrell and Tiger an annoyed grumble as I continued to rub my still ringing ear with my free hand. Turns out that three rifles all dumping their mags out at once is really fucking heard on one's hearing. Who'da thunk it?

"Why not?" Darrell continued with his usual immature grin. "He was gonna eat us, and the meat will just go to waste anyways, so why not return the favour?"

I let my hand drop free as I gave him an annoyed glare. "I'm not going to eat a fucking bear." I quickly checked the barrel of the Marlin in my other hand again to ensure that it was still empty. "Not one that's so damned close to town, at least."

"Bad idea." Tiger piped in as he scratched his slightly greying black beard with the hand free of his repeater, mercifully backing me up by the sounds of it. "Garbage bear eats trash. Get sick if you eat it." Bears that hang around settlements also tend to hang around said settlement's garbage dump. Easy living for a bear, picking through half-eaten meals people throw away every day.

Darrell wasn't relenting, unfortunately. "But I've never eaten a bear before! I wanna know how it tastes." I grimaced at the thought of cutting off a chunk of the now dead bear that attempted to charge at us from the treeline. Least of all because he looked downright ancient. "You can even use your
new sword to chop it up!" I grimaced at the thought of Christening the Xiphos I'd bought to replace my missing Hellion on a dead bear.

"Even if it isn't a garbage bear, look at how fucking old it is. It'd probably be like trying to chew pure sinew." Even if one were to not take into account the multitude of bullet holes now riddling the vicious bear's hide, it was clear that it had seen some shit over the course of its life. The meat on the thing would be tough as boiled leather. "Besides, who knows how many parasites it might have. I sure as fuck wouldn't trust the campfire to kill them all." I gestured back at the fire we'd had going which was the only thing lighting up the dark winter night around us to emphasise my point.

Finally, Darrell seemed to relent. "Agh, fine. Well, what do we do with it then?" He queried as he turned to Tiger, who seemed a tad taken aback by the question.

Darrell and I were about as far as a pair of guys could get from having a traditional mindset, but the locals were annoyingly superstitious and would really get on your case if you didn't do something vaguely... Druidic, I guess, after killing an animal. Tiger wasn't exactly a superstitious man himself, but he knew what would appease the locals better than we would. "Uh..." Tiger didn't seem to know how to respond for a few beats before responding. "Hang its head in a tree?"

I only barely resisted the urge to face-palm. What the actual-

***

I woke with a jolt, finding myself rather short of breath.

It seemed that I'd fallen asleep next to the pond. Suppose I slept worse than I thought I had. But-

"...Milord...?" I turned to the voice addressing me. It was one of the household maids. "Are... Are you well? Do you require aid?" Was she trying to wake me? Suppose she's the one that woke me up from that- Whatever the fuck that was. Also, my eyes were inexplicably stinging on top of everything else. Fucking lovely.

"I- I'm sorry." My voice was somewhat shaky as I attempted to reign my emotions in and not snap at the innocent maid or anything. "Were you attempting to rouse me?"

She nodded in a concerned manner. "...Yes, I'd thought you were speaking back to me milord. Should I-" I could already tell that she was about to ask if I needed medical attention or something dumb like that based on the look on her face, and so cut her off before she could finish.

"I will be fine. I just... I just need a few moments to gather my wits." She nodded nervously.

"Well... It is nearly time for breakfast, Lady Louise sent me out to find you and let you know." She was still looking at me with concern in her eyes. Must be a nice girl, I guess. "...Shall I wait here and lead you to the dining hall once you are fine to walk?"

A bit of a worry wart, isn't she? "No, that won't be necessary. Don't allow me to keep you from your other duties, just inform the others that I shall be along shortly, please."

"I... As you wish, milord." With that the girl standing a few feet from me curteyed at my prone form before turning and heading back for the manor, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

...
I've never been out hunting with both Darrell and Tiger before. I was going to go out and visit Darrell and his family for a month or so before Louise summoned me, though. That was...

...Just a dream. That's it, nothing more. My mind throwing together something that could have happened back on Earth because of how I passed out with home on my mind.

I pushed myself to my feet and took a moment to catch my breath.

...It seemed so real for a dream... But that's all it could have been.

I shouldn't dwell on it, I've got actual issues to be concerned with right now. Issues like that fucking talking sword and how I'm going to go about attempting to undo the shoddy foundation of lies I've built everything here upon.

God damn it, I've really gotten myself into a right mess, haven't I?

...Anyways, let's put that aside for now. I shouldn't keep the others waiting, Louise will likely be none too pleased if she figures that I was blowing off her family on my first morning here to muck around in the back yard.

As I set off for the manor, I reached up to gingerly rub my still sore eyes, only to find half-dried tears on my cheeks. Was I-

...Oh.

...Well, that explains why the maid seemed so concerned.

...Fuck my life.
You know what I miss? Tacos. I mean, don't get me wrong, the food Tristanians eat is quite nice in its own right, but I was really starting to miss my New World foods as I looked down at the plate of some kind of roasted bird breast served with gravy and a side of spiced broccoli and Brussels (or Bruxelles, if you're feeling pedantic) sprouts.

Something of a shame that this couldn't be one of those bullshit fantasy settings where they have widespread access to every foodstuff Earth does on a single continent despite being firmly stuck in their Medieval era...

Obviously, I was doing my best to distract myself from recent events and was only mildly successful given that I was still thinking of Earth to some degree...

"Jophiel, are you feeling well?" I looked up from my plate to meet the concerned violet gaze of Louise, and the guilt of having thought so ill of her not a half hour earlier forced my eyes back down, which seemed to do little to assuage the girl's worries. It seemed that the both of them had finished well before I had, and I was apparently eating slowly enough to worry them both enough to break their tradition of remaining silent until everybody was done eating.

I really couldn't just remain quiet, but I really didn't want to talk to either of them about my personal issues right there for a number of reasons... Perhaps... "I'm just..." I allowed my eyes to swivel towards and rest on Catt's chair for a few moments. "I'm worried, is all. You've mentioned before that Cattleya's health is very..." I allowed myself to trail off there in a mildly melodramatic manner.

Luckily, I actually was fairly concerned about her given how hearty she was yesterday, so it wasn't particularly difficult for my concern to come across as genuine, given that it actually was. Louise responded to me first. "Ah. I see, right, you wouldn't be used to Big Sis's condition..."

Duke spoke up from his position at the head of the table. "It is good that you are so concerned about Cattleya, however, it would be best for you to acclimatize yourself to the fact that this is normal for her-" One second I was fighting the urge to snap at the patriarch for so blithely telling me to get used to his daughter's health condition. "-if not for yourself, then for her sake." Then was surprised at his following suggestion.

... I have to admit, it makes sense. She doesn't seem like the type of person that would want others worrying too badly over her. Still... "Really, Jophiel." Louise suddenly broke my train of thought. "She'll be glad to know you're already showing such concern for her, but it will make her feel terrible guilt if you allow yourself to dwell on something you cannot help."

...Maybe if I had a medical degree... No no, head out of ass dummy, she's right. No need to dwell on this on top of everything else. "Right... Sorry."

The two blondes have me a confused look for a second before Duke responded. "Is it common for Canadians to apologise for being kind?"

It took everything I had to not guffaw, and I failed to stifle a snort. Both of the present le Blancs seemed rather taken aback at my response to what I'm sure was a purely innocent question to them. "Jophiel?" Louise spoke up. "What's so funny?"

I took a moment to compose myself before responding. "That's actually a very commonly believed stereotype of Canadians, that we're so excessively polite to the point that we'll apologise for accidents
which weren't even our fault." I found myself giggling a tad at a particularly funny joke about that. "Hey, do you wanna know how to tell if someone is a Canadian or an American?"

Duke seemed confused for a moment before Louise clarified. "The United States of America is a nation which shares a border with Canada, and is their closest political ally on top of sharing much of their culture." Duke nodded in understanding before motioning for me to continue.

I grinned a bit in spite of myself at the stupid joke I was about to share. "Walk into them from behind." Both of the blondes seemed rather confused by my answer before I finished it. "A Canadian will apologise for getting in your way, while an American will turn around and try to punch you in the face."

I tried to stifle my laughter at the shitty joke, while Louise and Duke looked rather taken aback. "That..." Duke started. "Is quite the disparity in responses. Are these 'Americans' truly so-?"

Louise interjected. "Father, I think that was a joke."

Duke stopped, pondered it for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, I suppose that one must be familiar with both nations to understand it."

They may not have got it, but for whatever reason telling that awful joke did an inexplicably good job of cheering me up.

Not much else worth noting occurred while I wolfed down the rest of my meal, my appetite suddenly having decided to pick back up. Well, nothing aside from Duke having mentioned that he was going to be busy the entire day with business, while Louise was apparently in need of a sparring partner...

---

I wearily sighed as I finished lacing up the gambeson I'd been provided, nervously looking over the bronze Nordic-style helmet that was still resting on the equipment table along with the wooden gladius I would be using.

"So." I started. "Are you sure you want to train with me?"

Louise nodded in my peripheral vision with a hum. "Yes. School is out, but Mother will not accept that as an excuse to fall behind in my swordsmanship, nor will she allow her not having been present for even a day a reason to have slacked off while I'm home."

She came to a stop opposite me on the other side of the training ring, a cleared area in the gardens where servants were scurrying about, tending to the carefully curated flora while occasionally looking over at is both with an excited twinkle in their eyes.

"So, father is occupied with business for the day..." I took a hold of the deliberately over-weighted training sword resting on the table, lifted it and gave it a few test swings. Had to be four pounds, at least. "And I've been curious to see what Canadian swordsmanship looks like anyways."

She held her blade out with a cocky grin on her face as she dropped into what must have been a Tristainian duelling stance, and suddenly I felt extremely self-conscious while looking at the lightly armoured young woman that clearly knew what she was doing in sharp contrast to my clueless bumbling ass. Seriously, just slap some mail over that gambeson, hand her a round shield and she'd look just like a proper Nordic warrior with that long blonde hair streaming out of the back of her helmet! "Um... Louise?"

Her grin faltered somewhat before returning in full force. "What? Are you intimidated by such a
Well, that too, but mostly... "I don't actually have any formal swordsman training."

She looked rather surprised by that statement, then started chuckling. "Very funny, now put on your helmet before I decide to start whacking you about the head regardless."

She took an aggressive step forward, I nervously stepped back. "Louise! I'm serious! I wear my sword around everywhere because it was really expensive, a symbol of wealth and prestige! My people stopped seriously using swords in combat hundreds of years before I was even born! Hell, I and everyone else were even using guns in that story I told Catt, if you'll recall!"

She paused at that and looked conflicted. "...Really?"

I shrugged sheepishly. "Yes. The only reason Foquet got out of the Vault, to begin with, was because I over-swung Derflinger like the amateur that I am and hit a pillar, which gave him an opening to attack me. I'd never used a sword in a real fight before that night."

She gave me a blank look before emitting an annoyed sigh. "Well... That certainly takes the wind out of my sails. Though I shouldn't be all that surprised. Even here most Nobles don't know how to seriously use a blade. Why would they? They have magic, and your people have guns that can be fired dozens of times before needing to be reloaded on top of your own magic." I cringed at the end of that statement.

She looked me over with a critical eye, before sighing again and dropping back into a combat stance. "I suppose that means I'll just have to train you myself then." Hold on, what? "So hurry up and put on your helmet already!"

I paused nervously. While I wasn't against learning how to actually use a sword, should I be learning from a teenager? "Wouldn't it be better for me to learn from your mother?"

Louise seemed to freeze for a moment before she started guffawing aloud, much to my surprise. "Jophiel, do you see this tooth?" She reached up and pointed to her top left canine with her free hand.

"Uh, yeah?"

She gave me a predatory grin. "It's a replacement. Father had to regrow it with water magic when mother broke it while training me to use a sword when I was thirteen."

I blanched. "Holy shit, seriously!?"

She nodded with a toothy grin. "Do you know what she told me after father finished regrowing it?" I grimaced, nervous at what was coming next. "If you don't want it to happen again, then learn to parry or dodge properly." Holy fucking shit, Karin is hardcore as fuck! "Are you sure that you'd rather Mother be the one to train you?"

Uh... "On second thought..." I set the sword down for a moment as I equipped the padded hood and bronze helm Louise had provided for me before lifting it back up and marching to face her in the training circle. "I'd much rather train with you." The helmet's visor restricted my vision somewhat, though it didn't feel all that bad.

Her grin only widened as she dropped back into a combat stance. "Okay, so, first off..."
Suddenly, to my great surprise, Louise launched herself at me. Not excessively fast, but I was so not expecting it that she caught me entirely off guard before actually tackling me to the ground, at which point she took her sword and very deliberately ran the blunt wooden edge across my throat.

I was so shocked by the sudden, brutal action that I simply could not process what happened before she leant in and in a very cocky tone whispered into my ear. "Mother didn't teach me how to duel, she taught me how to win." She leant back up with her arms crossed over her chest, still straddling me on the ground with a cocky grin on her face.

"Holy shit! Where the fuck was that back in the Vault!?!" Immediately her expression dropped, and I felt like an ass. "Uh, I mean--"

"No." She cut me off as she stood up and offered me a hand. "You're right. The way I acted against Foquet was pathetic. Mother taught me how to defend myself, yet when under pressure the first thing I did was start thrashing like a bumbling peasant." I took her hand, but still wound up doing most of the work of getting up off the ground. "...I've also grossly neglected my fitness training. Would you believe that when I left home a few years ago I was more toned than the guards at the academy are?"

That really took me off guard. "Seriously!?"

She nodded. "Yes. Mother was especially hard on me since I could not defend myself with magic... I honestly fear how she's going to react when she arrives back home to find that I've grown as soft as some pampered wallflower." She reached behind herself and rubbed her lower back with her free hand. "Even just charging you like that felt taxing. Mother is going to be so mad..." Her voice actually quivered a bit, and suddenly I found myself very intimidated at the thought of meeting Louise's mother... The mother of the girl that I'm supposed to be the guardian of.

If she's that demanding of her own daughter... "Mother of God." Louise cocked an eyebrow at me as I started, fear creeping its way into my voice. "I'm your guardian, Louise." Both eyebrows raised now, understanding seeming to dawn on her. "She's going to grind me into fucking paste."

We were both quiet for a few moments before Louise spoke up. "Well... I suppose we'll suffer together, at least."

...Why did that not make me feel any better?
The next few hours made one thing perfectly clear: take away my runes, give both Louise and I swords, and she would resoundingly kick my ass, and by that I mean fucking kill me with contemptuous ease. It quickly became clear that while she'd been neglecting her overall fitness, she'd at least been practising her technique in her martial arts classes and was a competent swordswoman.

I, on the other hand? The only way I got any victories was by using my strength and weight against her. Picking her up and pinning her on the ground where I could just brute force her into submission when she couldn't get a swing in. Diametric opposites; I, large, strong, and utterly unskilled. Her, small, weak, and professionally trained.

Incidentally, I immediately thought I'd gotten overzealous the first time I jumped on her, and when I immediately tried to get off her with an apology she took the opportunity to jab me in the throat with her sword.

Turns out that some of Karin's more hardcore training tendencies rubbed off on Louise, and that she herself rather enjoys the sparring, given the manic grin that she was wearing the entire time. 'You don't stop until you hit a vital spot, or receive a surrender, period' is what she said. So I had to learn quickly that holding back was a good way to piss her off...

Louise gets downright scary when she gets into a sparring match. Previously I'd assumed that she was... Well, some typical little Noble girl, weak, incapable of defending herself. But Christ, it turns out she's anything but. I bet that if she had kept up with her fitness training I wouldn't even have strength over her!

We both stood against a tree that stood near the training ring, resting against it while catching our breath. To say that the small blonde girl gave me a serious workout would be an understatement. I was hurting all over, and Louise kept poking fun at how clueless I was with a sword. She knew how to feint and everything, and I fell for every single one. It would have been cool to see her doing all those moves had she not been inflicting them on me.

Honestly, I was feeling a lot better about everything after that. So I suppose that I just needed to let off some steam, which rolling around in the dirt with and tossing around a small girl seemed to actually accomplish well. I need to do that more often.

"Jophiel." Louise started, her breathing having calmed to a more reasonable rhythm as she removed her helmet and unceremoniously dropped it on the ground. "It's good that you know to take advantage of your size, but it can't be the only thing you rely upon."

I couldn't help but scoff at that. "As if I had any other options for actually beating you." Seriously, the girl's ridiculously good with a blade.

I felt an unpleasant jab to my side, Louise reaching back and poking me with her sword, cheeky little shit. "Not yet. I'm not going to let you fight like a peasant, or a pampered noble, for much longer. You'll be dancing with that blade in no time, I promise."

"Heh, thanks, Love, I know I can trust you on that." I was so sore that I didn't want to stop leaning against the tree, but I was marinating in sweat and wanted to head off to fix that. "We done sparring for now?"

"Mmhm. We'll do this daily, soon enough-" Louise's words were suddenly cut off by a sharp intake
of breath like she just noticed something utterly terrifying, which was concerning.

"Louise? Whats-" I started turning to face her, and my eyes firmly stopped on the figure ominously standing on the opposing side of the training ring.

There stood a person wearing a richly decorated winged mithril and gold helmet reminiscent of a Roman galea with a polished iron mask shaped to resemble an expressionless face, full-sleeved mithril plated mail with a violet knee-length gambeson beneath with pauldrons like two over-sized Roman segmentata strips with blade breaks on each bicep, vambraces, and greaves as richly decorated as the helmet.

The belt tightly worn around the waist along with the slim figure under the armour made it abundantly clear that the person was a woman.

If Louise looked like a Norse warrior, it would be entirely apt to describe this armoured woman as a Valkyrie.

...It didn't take me long to figure out that this was Karin. Just back from culling some pesky Orcs.

Maker, preserve me...

We all stood in silence for a few moments before the taller woman in the complete armour set starting slowly approaching us. Each step was calculated, with no wasted motion, like a predator about to pounce. Even without being able to see her eyes through the two vision slots in the mask, I could just tell that they were lingering on me, piercing, measuring and judging me from top to bottom.

I was frozen like a deer in headlights. This... Something about her, the way she moved, the way her head was cocked downwards ever so slightly, not in deference, but like an apex predator facing down a potential threat... She was unarmed, but I could tell that she wouldn't need a weapon to kill me. She was smaller than I, yet I felt like a mouse in her presence.

She finally stopped within arm's reach of the both of us, her proud bearing leaving little room to question her status. Her gaze had shifted to Louise, where it now seemed locked in place.

In my peripheral vision, I could see that Louise had somehow managed to turn even paler than usual, and was trembling from head to toe...

Karin reached up to her own chin and seemed to undo a leather strap with her fingers before removing her helm with one deliberate, graceful movement, tucking it in the crook of her right elbow.

I was struck by her beauty. So youthful were her features that looked like Louise's elder sister, with the same strawberry blonde hair pulled back into a single large braid which fell to her lower back, piercing violet eyes, the same face, though utterly stern compared to Louise's more gentle features...

It became clear to me that Louise was, by all means, a carbon copy of her mother, albeit in a more compact, softer package.

Suddenly, the silence was broken when the taller of the two girls finally spoke. "You have grown considerably, my little amethyst." Her free arm reached up and behind Louise's head, settling on the nape of her neck before gently pulling her into a one-armed hug.

Louise said nothing, but after a few seconds wrapped her arms around her mother's waist and let out a shuddering breath.

...I was not expecting such... Tenderness based on what I've heard of the matriarch of the le Blanc
family. It's... A rather welcome surprise, in all honesty.

"Mother..." Louise started, sounding inexplicably remorseful. "The training regimen you made for me, I-I didn't follow it, I'm sor-"

"Hush." Karin cut her daughter off, albeit in a very gentle, motherly tone. "All of that can wait until the morrow, daughter."

Louise said nothing, simply wrapping her arms around her mother's midsection even more tightly.

They both stood like that for a time. It was actually rather heartwarming, seeing the woman that Louise seemed so intimidated by embracing her in such a loving way. Both girls, clad in armour and hugging each other so lovingly... I couldn't describe the sight as anything other than beautiful.

Eventually, Karin's eyes shifted from her nose-high daughter to me, which shifted me right back into deer in headlights mode. Louise pulled back, noticed the expressionless way her mother was staring at me and was seemingly about to leap to my defence. "M-mother-"

"Your name." Karin cut Louise off suddenly, and I was taken aback. Um... "J-Jophiel Pholus van Cazonium-"

"No." She cut me off as suddenly as she had Louise, who was starting to look rather concerned, while I didn't know what to do right then. "Your name-" She started, never breaking eye contact with me. "-is Jophiel Pholus-le Blanc de La Valliere, and I will expect nothing less than excellence from you, just the same as I would any of my daughters. Understood?"

...That... Caught me, and Louise both off guard, to put it mildly. "...Y-yes, ma'am."

She nodded very slightly at my affirmation before redirecting her attention to her rather surprised looking daughter, still half-way wrapped around her. "We will redress in proper house attire and spend the day with your sister after bathing. Tomorrow, we will begin training in earnest." She spoke with absolute authority which brooked no argument, and Louise nodded quietly. "Do not keep Cattleya waiting long."

With that, Karin released Louise, turned on her heel and started moving back towards the manor, her gait being one of a woman with complete control over her own body, the likes of which only a lifetime of dedicated military service could bestow, leaving us both behind and stunned silent.

That... Really wasn't how I was expecting my first meeting with Karin le Blanc to go.

Louise and I shared a look, before giving each other a slight, wordless nod and starting for the manor ourselves while I silently pondered the implications of Karin's declaration...

These next few months... Are sure to be rather interesting, to say the least.
I closed the front door to the manor and sat down on the steps leading to the grounds below. The sun was close to setting, so Siesta should arrive pretty quick here, and I most definitely want her to be greeted by a friendly face.

After a quick talk with Louise, I’d decided to allow the family some time to be together without the interloper to be there to awkward things up for at least one evening. I was kind of hoping for some time to myself as well. For a bit, at least. Siesta’s supposed to arrive tonight, and I absolutely need to pull her aside and talk to her. Would like some time to think about what I’m going to do with her before I’m put in the moment.

I sat still for a few moments, then withdrew my Vita to pass the time with some vijer gaming. Still holding a decent charge, should get a few hours in before it dies...

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It wasn't all that long before I noticed something cresting over the hill leading down to the manor off in the distance. I stood up and squinted at it for a few moments... Can't be anything other than Siesta's carriage!

After depositing the device into my pocket I quickly descended the steps and sat down at the bottom, with my feet now resting on the paved road at the landing of the stairs, eagerly awaiting the carriage's stop.

It took a bit, but eventually, the carriage did roll up on the landing, and servants started pouring out of the manor itself to attend to it. I stood and hailed the driver as he approached. "Pleasant journey, my good man?"

He waved before responding. "Any journey lacking in bandit encounters is a good one! Even if one's arse is raw by the end of it!" He laughed heartily at that, and I found myself chuckling as well.

I responded with an only somewhat forced smile. "Well you've earned a good night's rest I think. Thank you for your efforts, good sir!"

The driver tipped his hat to me before climbing down and proceeding to stretch out any kinks earned by sitting all day on a bumpy carriage as servants moved to tend to the droogs while I, meanwhile, moved around the side of the carriage and proceeded to swing open the door to be greeted by the surprised face of one miss Siesta Horie de Tarbes.

I playfully bowed to her before returning to my full height and offering her a hand. "Was the trip overly taxing, milady?"

She seemed a little taken aback by my appearance, but gingerly accepted my hand nevertheless. "You seem... Rather cheerful, milo-"

"Siesta." I stated in a half-mocking chiding tone. She blushed somewhat before responding.

"...Jophiel." She lightly stepped down and out of the carriage rather stiffly before I led her away from the sight of the servants, placing one of the columns holding up the manor's front canopy between us and them for the sake of some privacy.

"You'll want to stretch after a long ride like that, I'd assume." I stated as the house servants pulled my
and Louise's belongings from the carriage and started for the manor, seemingly out of earshot if we kept our voices low.

She made a bit of an odd face before responding. "N-no, I shall be fine mi-Jophiel." ...Jessica described Siesta as a 'firebrand' the night before the maid seduced me, and she sure as fuck wasn't acting like some demure little wallflower in the bath or my bed... I'm not too fond of this deferential peasant girl shit, let's see if we can coax that confident, playful little minx out again, yeah?

I stretched my arms above my head with a groan in a very undignified manner, which caused her eyes to widen a tad in my peripheral vision. "Really? 'Cause you look so stiff it's making me feel like I slept on a stone bench." I tried my best to give her a disarming smile. "Come on, there's no need to act so stuffily. We're the only ones around..."

I glanced around in an exaggerated shifty manner before leaning in towards her, which elicited a slightly raised pair of eyebrows.

"...And just between us, I only do the whole 'dignified' thing when there are Nobles around. It's tiring, and annoying too." Her eyes widened slightly, and her lips parted, but otherwise she didn't give much of a response. I playfully bumped my shoulder against her's before continuing. "Don't make me beg, Love. You don't need to wear that mask when it's just us."

I fought the urge to apprehensively bite my lip, instead, keeping an easygoing smile on my face as I gazed at her out of the corner of my eye while standing in a relaxed pose.

She seemed rather uncertain, and deciding to take a bit of a risk, I swallowed the nervous lump in my throat, raised an arm across her back, and rested a hand on her shoulder. "No need to act all dignified. You can let loose when you're with me."

Her reaction wasn't immediate, amounting to an unreadable look from the corner of her eye, to which I jovially smiled. A few moments passed in silence, before she suddenly reached both arms above her head, and with an utterly adorable grunt, popped her shoulders and back, which elicited a relieved sigh from her. Praise be.

I tightened my grip on her shoulder lightly before speaking. "Feeling better now?"

She looked over at me and a very light grin played across her features before she responded. "Yes. Much better."

I allowed my smile to widen. "Good." I motioned my free hand outwards to the grounds. "Think a walk might also help loosen you up?"

She nodded pretty quickly, and with a light fluttering in my stomach at her rapidly growing smile, we set off to go exploring the grounds for a while as I took that moment as a sign that our stay at the le Blanc household would be an enjoyable one.

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"Did I give you permission to stop!" DEMON. "Every second you waste laying on the ground like a dog is another pushup you will do before you are allowed to stop!" MONSTER. "You will finish your allotted presses within the next ten seconds or you will sleep with the droogs for a week! Am I understood, cadet!?" ARRRGGGHHH!

Karin was a beast, relentless, merciless, sadistic. She pushes you, she forces you to hit your limit, then she pushes you further. Duke is right there, he's a skilled healer. If something is pressed too far, he's not fifty feet away, ready to repair the damages and give you a relatively short rest while he
supercharges your body's natural healing process to quicken the muscle building process, among
other things to prevent you from just breaking down.

In other words, literal training from hell. Turns out that actually living through an IRL training
montage is beyond hellish, you press, you go, you only stop to give the healer a chance to prevent
your body from ceasing to function. There is a limit to how hard one can train even with that, of
course, a person can only take in so many calories in a day, but sweet fuck. For the past week, it's
been wake up, eat, drill, heal, drill, heal and eat again, drill, heal, sleep, and nothing else.

Hell, Karin only granted me two days out of the Halkeganian eight-day week to practise my
Tristanian rune reading with Siesta, which will start tomorrow, asserting that protecting Louise takes
priority above all else.

Once she noticed how unfit I was by military standards she ordained that I wasn't allowed to
prioritise learning to read until I was at least up to Tristanian army standards. On the one hand, at
this rate, I would be in shape a fair bit faster than one would expect from an Earth training regiment,
on the other, PAAAAAIIIIIIIIN. All I know is pain! All-encompassing pain!

Her high, feminine, yet authoritative voice commanded out from the side. "One more and you've
earned a pause to heal cadet! Push!" My trembling arms begged, implored me to stop. "Push!!" I
ignored them, having since learned that the lure of rest without her permission was a siren's call
which only lead to further suffering. "Push!!" I fought the urge to fall, fought against the pain which
Karin was forcing me to grow accustomed to with no mercy. "PUSH!!!!!"

I reached the peak of the push with the burning in my arms, back, chest, everywhere being
accompanied by the bullets of sweat pouring off of my body, pooling in the dirt of the training
grounds beneath me.

I held it for but a fraction of a second before I began the torturous process of ever so horribly slowly
lowering myself to the ground. I'd learned the hard way on day one that letting yourself fall from the
peak of a push-up in Karin's presence is a terrible idea, and that for as much pain as she was putting
me through, she could, and would be far worse if I failed to meet her minimum expectations.

Finally, after what seemed liked an eternity I felt my chest make contact with the ground, and all
strength left my body while I fought the urge to wail in pain. My dilemma didn't last for more than a
few seconds before I felt a soothing wave wash over my body as my pain receptors were temporarily
dulled and the worst of the damage was repaired in moments. Duke was a miracle worker, back on
Earth he'd be considered to be a Holy man with those healing hands of his.

Karin had a very specific diet planned out for myself and Louise, geared to providing our bodies
with the needed protein and other shit needed to successfully build muscle as quickly as possible
when paired with a skilled mage trained specifically to maximise one's muscle growth per day.

Surprisingly, the meals actually tasted pretty nice considering it was basically workout food. I was
admittedly curious about that, and when I'd asked a few days prior Karin told me outright that she
wants us to look forward to at least some aspects of the training.

My eyes were half-lidded, just focused enough for me to recognise Karin's fantastically-made, well-
worn boots step in front of me before her high, motherly voice addressed me. "You did not believe
that you would be able to do it, did you?"

I'd respond, but I was preoccupied with being two steps away from ded right then.

Karin continued. "But I did. I knew you could, or I would not have demanded it of you. I have seen
prospective soldiers that tell tall tales about their family's proud military history crumble like a castle of sand when experiencing half of the amount of pressure I've placed on you. They all disappointed me greatly..." I felt a small hand gently run over my matted, sweat-soaked hair. "But I knew you would not let me down."

...I'll admit, as... Heartless as she can seem in the middle of training, Karin is absolutely doting once you've finished. On the one hand, it's weird, how quickly she seemed to decide to treat me as if I was her own son, on the other... I'll admit, I'm not used to receiving praise from a parental figure when accomplishing... Anything, really. It's honestly giving me no small amount of will to go the extra mile and not disappoint her.

Also, I was fucking terrified of her and didn't want to earn her ire by failing. The gruelling exercise was also helping me keep my mind off... Things.

As I lay on the ground, Karin one step away from cooing her praise to me, I couldn't help but reflect on the past week since my arrival.

I've only known Karin for a week now, But good Lord, she was serious about her declaration, and she was rather displeased that I chose to duck out from the family gathering in Catt's room. So, when a family gathering is called, I'm damn well expected to show up too. It's been weird to get used to, and Duke isn't entirely on board with the idea, which we've discussed in private and came to an understanding that it is weird but what Karin says goes, so... Yeah.

Incidentally, Duke's been alright. Talks to me pretty normally. Asks me a lot about my investments, what I hope to see out of them, is regularly annoyed by how I clearly didn't put anywhere near as much thought into any of them as he'd have expected... He's had a fair few questions about a lot of things, actually. What sort of living standards I'm used to, what my skills consist of, etc...

He was rather taken aback at how high my standards of living back in Canada were, but asserted that he'd do everything he could to meet them where ever he could, as at the very least I'm a guest, and in Tristan guests receive the highest honour and are to be treated as if they were royalty.

He doesn't seem... Opposed, so to say, to the idea of thinking of me as a son, though he is understandably wary of diving so quickly into the idea even without making the adoption official.

Regardless, the patriarch of the le Blanc family has mostly given me plenty of space during my few hours off per day. Least of all because of how busy he is, I imagine. He handles all the family's finances and all that noise, after all.

Louise... Mostly when we're together we either both spend the entire time complaining about how damned torturous her mother's training regiment is, or talking to Catt while escorting her around the manor. Lacking the will to make up anymore shit, I'd given to just telling Catt ancient myths from Earth. The Iliad, the Arabian Nights, and telling her North American myths as well. She hung off of my every word and grew visibly excited whenever I came into sight.

It was rather endearing, honestly, how Catt would light up when I enter the same room as her. Luckily, I've got no shortage of tales to tell, and if needed I can dip into modern fantasy to keep her interested. Regardless, even when Karin left me feeling like a walking corpse I found it easy to summon a reserve of energy to tell her at least one story.

To my surprise, she didn't particularly mind when I told her stories lacking in magic or even notice, to begin with. She seems to just want to hear stories from far-off lands, regardless of whether they involve traditional nobles or not. Louise herself was interested in the stories as well, just not to the same extent as Catt.
Incidentally, on Catt, I was curious about how Karin's policy of being the best one can be applied to her. Girl's book smart. Very, very book smart. If she wasn't bedridden all the time she might even be able to take over for Duke in handling the family's administrative duties entirely! I was very impressed, but she's rather humble about being rather on the smart side. Made me like her quite a bit more, honestly.

Now, Louise... Obviously, she's been practising her magic. Turns out that if she concentrates and 'channels' it properly, Louise can absolutely mimic traditional magic, though not as effectively as a proper elemental mage.

The whole family gathered around Louise and spent a good couple of minutes just hugging and praising her the first time she demonstrated her newfound ability to levitate things. It was rather heartwarming, and Louise has been in high spirits since then, though nothing much else worth mentioning in that regard has happened beyond her improving a bit in mimicking wind magic, much to Karin's great pleasure.

I was also made to practise with Shock Jockey, everyone had been shocked (hurr) at just how easily I can command lightning with nary a spell catalyst or chant, but they got used to it pretty quickly. Aside from Karin giving my Vigor'd arm quite a few long, ponderous stares, nothing much worth mentioning occurred on that front. I'd expected to be questioned really hard on it, but nope. Seems a little odd, honestly, but I'm about to complain about not needing to make up more shit as an explanation.

The womanly hand that was gently stroking the back of my head suddenly shifted to under my arm before the Matriarch spoke again. "Okay, that is plenty of time laying on the ground." I felt myself being pulled up, and mercifully Duke's magic had done its thing, so while I was horribly tired, I wasn't so much sore by that point.

"I must say," The Sean Bean-looking fantasy Belgian man started. "You are making rapid progress. Already the belly you arrived with has grown visibly smaller." I grimaced at the statement, it wasn't as though I was obese or anything! Just a little extra padding around the middle! Not even really noticeable unless I'd wear a tight shirt...

Karin dusted my front off before speaking herself. "Yes, you are doing very well by military standards. If you were capable of defeating the legendary Foquet in your condition previously, I can only imagine how Andréric you will be once I am finished with you."

Right, that... Karin had very high expectations thanks to that, obviously. By some miracle, I'm guessing the Familiar runes coupled with Duke's fantastic healing spells, I've been able to actually keep up, but holy mother of feck, it's been a nightmare every step of the way.

She asserts that I'll get into shape far more quickly compared to most, since this particular technique they're applying to me isn't possible most of the time, given that water mages of Duke's skill level are rather rare. Not to mention that most Nobles wouldn't willingly go through such a punishing regiment. So, that's cool. I'd rather bulk up the old-fashioned way, honestly, but I'm not about to say that to Louise's scary fucking mother when she's been doting on me for actually managing to keep up with her insane training techniques.

I took a moment to get my footing, but I was quickly able to support myself. Karin gave me a pat on the back before she spoke up. "You've exceeded expectations this day, and it would be wise for you to not be utterly broken by tomorrow when you start practising your literacy, so you may take the rest of the day off." Holy crap, five entire hours to myself? Sweet! "Furthermore-"

Suddenly, Karin was cut off by a servant calling out from the manor's steps. "Milords, miladies, a
package for Lord Jophiel has arrived from a mister Maximillian's Tailor?" Ah, that'll be my formal wear then.

I called out to the man with a weak wave and grin. "Have it brought to my room my good man, please and thank you!"

He nodded and turned around to march back into the manor. I was making an effort to make the serving staff feel relaxed around me because god fuck does it make me uncomfortable being surrounded by stiff servants doing their best to emulate furniture until they're called upon. They were mostly relaxed around the actual le Blanc family, but I was an unknown, and they were still a tad wary of me.

I turned back to face Karin and Duke, to find that Louise had forced herself up from the bench she had been resting on and dragged herself over to us, looking like she'd been through hell herself with her normally perfect flowing hair pulled back into a tight, matted bun. She was the first to speak up. "That's right, you commissioned a formal uniform in your people's style. That should be useful at some point."

Karin nodded as she responded. "Yes, this is a timely arrival, considering the upcoming party, it will be good for you to look presentable to the guests."

I stopped and gave Karin a confused look before looking to Louise and Duke for clarification. They both looked equally surprised... Suddenly I felt worried.

"Wife." Duke started, sounding concerned. "What are you talking about?"

Karin looked over to her husband, a look of slight confusion on her own face as she responded. "Did I not mention it? The party celebrating our youngest daughter's return home, successful summoning and learning to use magic, as well as defeating the legendary thief Foquet."

Duke and Louise's eyes had widened into saucers. "Mother." Louise started, her voice toneless. "Have you sent out invitations yet?"

Karin seemed unconcerned as she responded. "Yes, of course. I sent invitations out to all the prestigious Noble families the day after Jophiel and you arrived."

Duke and Louise both turned pale at the statement Karin made in such a blasé manner, and I found myself rapidly growing concerned enough to speak up myself. "Uh, is... Is there something wrong here? You two look very..." I trailed off there nervously.

Meanwhile, Karin looked back at her daughter and husband, and her features scrunched up somewhat as she seemed to notice how freaked out their expressions had become. "...Husband? Did-did I do something wrong-"

Duke suddenly reached out, took a hold of Karin's wrist and started pulling her off to the manor as he started rapid-firing questions at her. "Who did you invite, exactly who, and what was your wording in the letter? What have you promised for-" They suddenly stopped marching as Duke spun to call out to us in what was a full-on command. "Louise! If you have not already, ensure that Jophiel is fully aware of proper court etiquette and how to behave around-" He glanced at Karin, leaned in, spoke quietly enough that I couldn't hear them from across the field, before snapping his face up after very loudly facepalming hard enough to create an audible slapping sound. "-How to conduct himself around royalty!"

As Duke started leading Karin back into the manor, I turned to Louise, who had turned rather pale
and started muttering. "Oh, Gods, mother, mother, mother...!" She face-palmed herself as she grit her teeth in annoyance. "I love my mother to bits, but by the Gods, for a Duchess, she can be so, so..." She threw her hands up dramatically as she spat out the next words. "Common-minded!"

My eyes widened at her statement, which she seemed to catch.

Louise grit her teeth again before continuing. "I mean no disrespect, but by the Gods! Mother makes it too obvious that she comes from a virtually extinct Noble house sometimes!" She threw up her hands again. "And father! He was supposed to address this! He said he would when I was leaving for the academy! What happened to that!?!" She growled, and I fought the urge to step back away from her.

"Louise," I started nervously. "What's the big deal? Was your father speaking literally when he said royal-"

"Royalty!?!" The small blonde girl suddenly cut me off. "Unfortunately, yes, knowing how socially inept Mother can be!" She threw her hands up, yet again. "Ugh! Damn it, okay, I'll explain later, for now, you go get washed up and meet me in Catt's room with your formal wear! If we only have a few days to prepare that means we're going to need to hammer in how Halkeganian court etiquette works before any guests show up and you accidentally make a social faux pas since I doubt Midgard and Alfheim cultural expectations are exactly alike!" She started stomping off for the manor before turning around to face me again. "Move! We have no time to waste!"

With an alarmed grimace I started after the girl, rapidly realising that the next few days probably wouldn't be particularly fun...
I ran my hands over the fine red Syracuse wool coat, an eclectic stylistic fusion of Mountie, Napoleonic, and Assassin's Creed) with just a hint of Redcoat that would stand out gorgeously in Halkegania. I'd thought that I'd did a decent job of designing the uniform on the spot back in the tailor's shop, but actually seeing the finished product in person, I hit it out of the park.

The coat was currently laying out on my bed, along with the accompanying trousers, belts, sash and other accoutrements. On the one hand, I was sure that it would draw all eyes to me, which would be horrible given how much I dislike being the centre of attention. On the other tentacle, I'm gonna look dead fucking sexy wearing this, and it would be a waste to not show it off at least once.

I reached above my head to stretch before going about trying on my new uniform for the first time, seeing as how Louise made it clear that she wanted me to meet her in Catt's room while wearing it. I'd just finished stripping my top when the door to my room suddenly creaked open, which elicited an embarrassed yelp from me as I grabbed the jacket off the bed and used it to shield my shame.

The look of surprise on Siesta's face quickly shifted to considerable amusement as she visibly fought the urge to crack up at my reaction to being walked in on shirtless. Doubly so considering commoners don't really have much in the way of nudity taboos.

She spoke through her slightly parted fingers with a melodic chuckle. "Oh, now you've a sense of decency?" She shut the door behind her and made a point to latch it locked as well before she started sashaying towards me, her face ever so slightly angled down, like a predator ready to pounce on prey. "You certainly didn't seem so swift to hide your body last night, mi'lord..."

I chuckled nervously, mostly at Siesta bringing last night's events up to me so blithely, before responding. "Hey now, I didn't realise it was just you." I stated as I set the jacket back on the bed, instead reaching for the undershirt I'd decided to wear under the coat. "Sorry, no time for fooling around, I've got to focus on preparing."

She looked disappointed at being shot down when she was clearly in the mood, but ey, got a job to do. She spoke up curiously as she approached the bed and gave the uniform a keen look. "Preparing? For what?"

Ah, right. I finished pulling my undershirt on before elaborating. "Turns out Duchess Karin is a little... Ill-versed in noble etiquette." Siesta's eyebrows raised in interest at that statement. "After Louise and I arrived here, she sent out party invitations to other noble families to celebrate Louise's return home and my defeat of Foquet, and only told us she did so just now."

Siesta seemed underwhelmed as she responded. "I... Don't see how that makes her 'ill-versed in noble etiquette,' as you put it. Isn't hosting parties something nobles do all the time?"

I shrugged as I reached for my jacket, my well-fitted shirt secured on my torso. "Probably not in the way Karin did it. Apparently, she's invited the likes of royalty, which seems like overkill for such a simple thing." I slipped the jacket over my arms, satisfied with the perfect fit. "And, considering it, as a Duchess she's just one step down from the Queen herself on the social ladder, right?"

Siesta nodded before responding. "I'm not sure how that makes her hosting a party so bad."
I shrugged as I buttoned the jacket up. "Would you refuse the invitation of a Duchess, even if the occasion was arguably kind of dumb?"

The common girl's eyes widened in understanding. "Anybody lower on the ladder can't refuse, or it will look like they're snubbing their better."

I nodded before pressing her to continue, wondering if she'd get all of it. "And?"

Her brow scrunched up for but a moment before she continued. "...And lady Karin can't recall the invitations by now, or it will look like she's snubbing those beneath her, or that she doesn't know what she's doing, making a fool of the le Blancs, which would embarrass them in front of their peers and royal betters."

I gave Siesta a wide smile at being able to piece it together in spite of her humble, borderline medieval origins. "That's right. So this party has to happen, and it has to go well, otherwise it'll tarnish the family's image in some manner, or otherwise piss off their compatriots." I stated as I finished buttoning up the jacket. "Which means that I have to dedicate as much time as is possible to learning the intricacies of Halkeganian court, so I don't make a fool of myself while attending as a guest of honour." I couldn't help but sigh wearily at that.

Siesta turned to face me more properly with a concerned look on her face. "Not looking forward to the party?"

I shook my head with a grimace. "No, I've never cared much for parties of any kind, really." I gave her a wry grin. "I'd much rather spend that time studying with you, honestly."

While she had been lightly grinning previously, her smile grew significantly larger as she took a step towards me, closing the small distance between us as she did so. "Such a shame, mi'lord..."

As tempted as I was to pull her closer, I did have shit to do. I gave her a rueful grin before continuing. "Yeah, too bad. We'll see what happens tonight, though, eh?"

Siesta sighed, and gave me a disappointed nod, but didn't press the issue. "So, Jophiel," she started curiously. "This is Canadian formal wear?"

I shrugged. "More of a personal uniform, in all honesty. It does take no small amount of inspiration from the RCMP, though."

She gave me a confused look. "RCMP?"


Siesta nodded absentmindedly, not actually seeming particularly interested in the RCMP right then. "So," She started with a grin. "Let's get you all dressed up then!" She stated as she picked up the black sash and moved to help me finish dressing.

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"One two three, one two three, one two- damn it Jophiel, watch your feet!" Ugggggh. Louise looked rather cross with me as we briefly stopped during the attempt to train me how to ballroom dance as Catt and Siesta lightly chuckled from their seat off to the side. The servants seemed to be
finding my uncoordinated attempts to move with grace rather entertaining as well, much to my chagrin.

I grimaced before responding. "Give me a break! I've never had to dance before! Especially not like this!" I was doing my best to keep my grip around Louise's hand and waist light, which was growing more difficult as I grew more annoyed with the whole situation.

She once again shook her head and breathed an aggravated sigh. "I still cannot believe that you've never been taught to dance before now. Honestly, what do your people do during large gatherings?"

"They do dance," I started. "Just not like this! It's much less... Coordinated." Images of people flailing about like drunken howler monkeys to bad rap music came to the forefront of my mind, and I grimaced as I recalled why I dislike parties so much.

Louise's nose crinkled along with her response. "Oh Gods, don't tell me your upper class flail their arms and legs around like peasants do when dancing!" Catt, Siesta and the servants seemed to find that mental image hilarious, given the way their shoulders shook and the corners of their mouths grew tight as they seemingly attempted to suppress their laughter.

I sighed before speaking. "Regardless, this is confusing! And this damned jacket is really restrictive! I don't get how I'm supposed to-"

"Jophiel." Catt spoke up, having managed to cease her giggling fit. "Stop focusing so much on Louise's face. You're learning, so it might help to instead look down and focus on your feet for now. Also, you look absolutely dashing in your uniform and need to get used to moving around in it, so suck it up and just keep looking handsome!" I felt some heat rising in my cheeks at the gorgeous girl's compliment, doing my best to not dwell on it as Louise rolled her eyes at my response and Siesta visibly tensed up next to Catt.

Louise nodded in agreement before chipping in. "Yes, that would be a good idea. It would be bad form for you to not make eye contact with your partner during the party, though that does not matter right now. It is more important that you learn the basics of dancing at least."

...Huh. I suppose that makes sense. I wearily sighed again as I responded. "Well, it seems worth a shot." I shifted my gaze to my feet and was immediately thankful that the bond prevented me from feeling attraction to Louise, given that I had to look right past her chest to look down.

"Okay," Louise started. "Now, let's start again. Ready? One two three, one two three, one two three..."

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Three days of nothing but training at court etiquette, dancing, and all that noise. It was honestly rather annoying. At least Karin's horrible fitness training would have a tangible reward in making me fit. This was all just... Tosh! I was taking a rest in my room, mercifully away from everyone for a little bit. I couldn't recall the last time I was allowed to just be alone. Even at night, Siesta would sneak into my room, and while I've been getting good at interacting with people constantly, it was still starting to get to me. I'm a fucking introvert, I need some time to myself to recharge! It's literally physically exhausting having people around 24/7!

I allowed a long-suffering sigh to escape my lips as I rolled onto my side and stared at the panelled wooden wall across the room, cherishing the silence for as long as I could. Probably going to have to
just ask Siesta to spend a night or two in her room. I'm not brave enough to ask Karin to give me a
day off to be alone, after all.

I clicked my tongue and quietly muttered to myself. "Tomorrow is going to suck."

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"Okay, everything seems to be in order..." The head maid stated with a pleased grin as she finished
adjusting my jacket amidst all the chaos of final preparations. "There you go mi'lord Jophiel, dashing
as can be."

I reached up and ran a gloved hand across my now utterly silken hair as I responded. "Thank you,
Mary."

She nodded and was off and directing the other servants in seconds, leaving me to breathe and
grimace at the upcoming festivities there in the manor lobby. Guests were expected to start arriving
within the hour, and the manor was abuzz with furious activity as everyone charged to and fro,
ensuring that nothing was amiss before anyone arrived.

It felt like there was a bag of stones in my gut, least of all because I didn't feel like I was adequately
prepared to present myself before Tristain's elite, up to and including fucking royalty. Maybe if Karin
had let us know immediately and we'd focused on preparing for that rather than exercising, alas...

Louise sidled up beside me, dolled up in her gorgeous violet and lilac gown, her hair looking as if it
was pure, golden silk, her amethyst eyes seemingly glittering from behind her long, luscious
eyelashes, accentuated by very tasteful and subtle eyeliner atop her flawless skin. The grimace on her
face kind of ruined the look, though.

She sighed before addressing me. "So... Are you dreading this party as much as I am?"

I had to fight the urge to snort and instead settled on sighing before responding. "At least you
actually know how to interact with your peers. Barely basic awareness of cultural expectations isn't
sufficient when interacting with royalty."

Louise gave me a sympathetic frown. "Yeah... Just stay near me the entire time. I'll do my best to
walk you through interactions with everyone, or at least attempt to draw attention away from you
enough that you won't have to talk overmuch."

I gave her a thankful nod, though it did little to lighten the load in my stomach.

"Though..." She continued. "I'm not going to be able to do much once the time for dancing comes.
I'm going to get lots of requests to dance myself, and many girls are going to want an opportunity to
personally acquaint themselves with you, if only because you're such a curiosity." She grimaced.
"Also, because the Armands were invited, and Guiche is likely to start proselytising on your behalf
again the moment he arrives..."

I shuddered before responding. "Is there no excuse I can use to escape early?"

Louise shook her head lightly. "No, nothing which wouldn't be an obvious excuse, which would
look very bad for us." Ugggggh.

I allowed my shoulders to slump in defeat. I really wasn't looking forward to this...
A servant popped into the manor through the front door and made an announcement. "The first guests have entered the manor grounds! They'll be here in moments!" The bag of stones in my gut suddenly doubled in weight.

Duke came marching from a back room where he had been talking with Karin, who followed on his heels. Duke was wearing a gorgeous red, black, and gold suit with a short fur-trimmed cape that made him look downright kingly. Karin a dress in matching colours, simpler than Louise's, but nevertheless gorgeous with what looked like a corset and a high collar accentuating her regal demeanour. Dignified as fuck when coupled with her loose hair which looked as fantastic as Louise's.

Duke clapped his hands harshly to attract all attention to himself before speaking. "It's time everyone, to your positions! Mary, take Camilla and go ensure that Cattleya is prepared as well! The rest of you..." Duke turned to Karin and gave her a nod.

She stepped up beside Duke and shouted in her usual commanding voice. "Form up!"

Within seconds everyone was in their positions, Louise and I standing alongside Duke and Karin, facing the doorway ready to greet the guests with the servants all standing at attention flanking the large double doors from the side. For a few moments, all that could be heard was the monotonous drone of Duke's music orb, filling the entrance hall with music that wouldn't be out of place in an elevator.

I felt incredibly fatigued at that moment and felt a light jab to my side before Louise spoke out of the side of her mouth at me in a hushed whisper. "Back straight, chest out, chin up!"

I stood at attention, as I would in cadets years ago, and quietly dreaded the cheerful voices approaching the door from the outside.
The main doors leading to the exterior of the manor swung open inwards, revealing a small handful of people. Unremarkable, entirely female servants accompanying a short-statured tanned man with closely cropped auburn hair and a small, curled wispy moustache accompanied by equally curled sideburns, contrasting somewhat with his fairly squared, masculine features.

He was wearing a neck ruff over a short red mantle and a fairly typical over-designed noble outfit. Surprisingly, though it was undeniably well-made, it seemed to be made from fairly common materials.

Duke swung his arms out in a grand sweeping gesture towards the fellow stepping into the foyer as he spoke up with a prideful voice. “Count Mott! Such an honour to see you gracing our family home!”

The Count laughed and quickly approached Duke with a few long strides, clasping their arms together upon reaching him. “The honour is all mine, my friend! It is always a joy to be invited to your glorious abode!” Suck up, much…

The two shared pleasantries for a moment before he moved down the line, praising Karin for her beauty and dignity, complementing Louise on how beautiful she was coming to be as she grew and how proud her parents must be…

He then shifted his focus quite squarely onto me, with a particular glint in his eye. He somehow grinned even wider as he stepped over and offered his hand, which I took as he enthusiastically addressed me. “So this is the fantastic young man that so generously saved me and my subjects!”

I blinked as I processed his words. “Huh?”

He barked a single loud laugh before continuing. “Oh, pray tell you have not forgotten my young Lord! The most fortuitous investment you made through the Horie family! Does it not ring a bell?”

I- Wait a tic. “You’re the governor of Tarbes.”

Mott responded with a vigorous shake of my hand. “That is correct! Count Florian Cornelius Mott de Tarbes the Duteous, at your service!” He winked before continuing. “Even more so than most others, I’d say!”

I wasn’t entirely sure what he was getting at there, and expressed as much. “I’m sorry? I don’t understand…”

The Count suddenly released my hand as he stepped back before continuing unabated. “We shall speak later, to be certain my good lad. For now, I would best make my way to the gathering area,” He turned to Louise and gave her a knowing grin. “For Viscount Wardes arrived here at the same time as my entourage, and it would be most unseemly of me to keep him waiting outside, would it not?”

I noticed Louise’s eyes widen and her form stiffen considerably as Mott and his squad of maids was lead to the main hall by the servants. Though I wanted to ask what it was about this ‘Wardes’ that had her so apparently spooked, Duke called out before I had the chance. “Viscount Wardes! It has
been far too long my old friend!"

I turned from Louise back to the doorway, and there stood a man, maybe five-foot-four-inches tall. His face was sharp, youthful yet mature and framed by a silvery brown mane and trimmed beard with a pair of piercing ice-blue eyes, focused squarely on Louise.

It took him a few moments to tear his gaze from her and shift it to Duke, at which point he called back. “Were it so that my duties as the captain of the Griffon corps did not claim all my time, I would surely amend that issue with greater diligence.”

He started towards Duke, removing his greyish blue wide-brimmed feathered musketeer hat, leather gauntlets and sword, handing them off to a servant as he passed them by. His long, equally grey-blue cloak lightly fluttering with his steps as it shielded his sturdy travel wear; a leather jacket, white button-down shirt lightly accentuated with lace trimming, simple dark grey trousers and tall leather boots.

Quite a handsome man, all things considered.

Wardes closed the distance between himself and Duke, clasping arms with him much as Mott did. He side-stepped to Karin next and repeated the motion with her, sharing a curt, respectful nod with each other.

Then he stepped over to Louise, who was doing a terrible job of hiding her anxiety with her eyes round as saucers and her shoulders trembling. Evidently, this Wardes has her quite shaken… Which was putting me on edge, to put it mildly.

Wardes reached out and gently took a hold of Louise’s hand, raising it up as he knelt over and tenderly placed a kiss on the back of her hand, she grew visibly flustered, and I felt a deep, hollow rage suddenly well up in my chest at the sight.

It took me a moment to compose myself, being rather taken aback at my own inexplicable reaction to the sight… Seriously, the fuck?

As Wardes rose he made eye contact with Louise, and she visibly shuddered. Finally, he spoke. “You have grown to be a gorgeous young woman, Louise. Even more so than I had expected… And my expectations were rather high.”

Louise turned bright red at that, sputtering out a response. “H-hello, Viscount W-W-Wardes. Y-you look w-w-well.” I felt the anger slowly bubbling back up in my chest, and did my best to force it down… What the hell is up with me right now?

Wardes gave Louise a dignified smile, and she seemed to have to look away in embarrassment, which really annoyed me for some reason. He released her hand as he continued. “We shall speak later, my precious amethyst.” Duke and Karin seemed rather pleased by their interaction… Something tells me that I’m missing something at this moment.

Wardes stepped over to me and looked up at me with a dignified air that really annoyed me in a way that I felt it really shouldn’t. I offered my arm and retained a neutral expression on my face as I introduced myself. “Jophiel Pholus van Cazonium.” Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Karin’s brow twitch in annoyance an instant before Duke lightly elbowed her in the side. Still annoyed about the decision to drop forcing the ‘le Blanc’ name on me, I see.
Wardes took my arm and gave a single shake. “Your reputation precedes you, Lord Pholus.” Eh? “I am Viscount Jean-Jacques Wardes de Limburg the White Lightning, captain of the Tristain Griffon Knights.” He released my arm and his returned to his side. “I found myself doubting the assertions that the ‘Storm Lord’ was as large as the stories asserted… Is it also true that you commanded the storm clouds themselves to condense into a keen-edged blade as tall as a man to strike down the Decaying Earth’s golem with a single strike?”

What.

The absurdity of that statement seemed to draw Louise out of her stupor enough to respond in my thoroughly confused place. “Storm Lord? A sword made of storm clouds? Where did you hear such nonsense?”

Wardes shifted his gaze to Louise for a moment, which caused her to turn red and look at the floor again, before facing me again and responding. “That’s the prevailing story among the nobles of Bruxelles. It’s especially popular in and around the castle, retelling the tale of the exotic foreign noble so skilled in mage craft that he can voicelessly cast lightning with no catalyst and command the clouds to manifest into a blade capable of striking down siege golems for his personal use.” He lightly chuckled at my blank stare. “I suppose the tales were as exaggerated as they sounded, then?”

Karin suddenly spoke up next. “Jophiel can cast lightning wordlessly, and without a catalyst as we would know one, though his people’s magic is not the same as our’s and has suggested this is not the accomplishment it would be for a Wind mage. Nor has he demonstrated any abilities to create swords from the air.”

Duke interjected next. “Yes, Viscount, according to the story we were told Jophiel acquired the aforementioned sword from the academy vault, and he never attacked Foquet’s siege golem directly, though he did combat his smaller infantry golems.”

Wardes nodded in understanding. “I see… Well, I shall have to hear the true story from the man himself before this party is over and done with, to be certain. Though, first…” He turned to Louise again. “I am sure my fiancé would like for me take this opportunity to spend some with her, first and foremost.”

As Louise somehow managed to blush even harder and mumble an agreement under her breath, I felt a pit open in my stomach at the word ‘fiancé.’ What… Okay, sure, I wasn’t aware that Louise was engaged, though it isn’t as if that was ever relevant to bring up over the past month, nor should I… Be feeling this way about the revelation. Louise… I think of her as a sister thanks to the runes. So why in God’s name am I feeling this sudden surge of… Jealousy?

“Lord Jophiel,” Wardes started, breaking me out of my minor stupor. “I offer you my sincerest gratitude for protecting Louise and performing such a great service to Tristain this past month. I pray for you to find good fortune in the coming days.” He gave me a respectful nod, which I robotically returned, doing my best to get my emotions sorted out in the moment.

Seriously, the Familiar bond has been doing its damnedest to keep me from feeling any sort of romantic overtures towards Louise… Why do I suddenly feel so… I mean, I still don’t feel anything like that to her, so what… Gah. What the fuck…

The silvery-grey haired man stepped back and addressed everyone at once next. “Well, I suppose it would be best that I move to the main hall and allow you all to return to your duties meeting the guests as they arrive. I beg your leave.”
As Wardes started for the stairs to the main ballroom, Duke suddenly made a curt gesture with his arm, calling attention to himself as he spoke up. “Bah, Louise, Jophiel, I insist that you both accompany Wardes, neither of you is strictly required to greet the guests with Karin and me, and I wouldn’t dream of keeping my daughter and son-in-law to be apart needlessly!”

Karin agreed wordlessly with a nod, and Louise’s eyes widened like saucers before she nodded and gave Duke a beaming, appreciative smile. She turned towards Wardes, who gave her a light, but sincere-seeming smile which kind of annoyed me as he extended a hand to Louise. She sidled up next to him and took his hand as they started up the stairs together, Wardes giving the two parents an appreciative nod as he led the girl not that much shorter than he up the stairs towards the ballroom.

I stood still for a few moments, doing my best to get my confusing emotions in check as quickly as possible when suddenly a servant stepped in through the main doorway and announced the arrival of the next guests… Followed immediately by a familiar blonde pretty boy garbed in some very finely made dress wear excitedly stepping into the foyer, whose sapphire blue eyes lit up once they fell upon me.

I could not help but sigh as an immense grin found itself on Guiche’s face before he suddenly gestured grandiosely and started speaking. “Ah, to be in the presence of the magnificent Jophiel the Storm Lord, he who commands the lightning itself to bring righteous justice down upon the wicked, who charges into righteous battle with all the fearless bravery of the heroes of old, a man I can only express the utmost exaltation to call my friend!”

Apparently, Guiche had closed the gap between us and taken my arm before I realised what was going on, likely when I was attempting to parse the bullshit that was spewing forth from his mouth like water from a broken dam. I tried to force out a coherent response. “Ehwah?” I had to admit that I found myself at a loss for words right then.

Guiche continued unabated. “Words cannot express my joy at seeing you again after so long, my friend!” I only found myself all the more confused as Duke and Karin gave the two of us a queer look until Duke jumped in my peripheral vision as he seemingly noticed the older, dignified man sporting a very military-looking uniform with a magnificent thick blonde moustache approaching with an exasperated look on his face as he looked towards Guiche and me.

“I apologise for my youngest’s propensity for grandstanding, Duke and Karin.” The military man stated as he stopped with a dignified stand. “He has always had trouble determining when best to reign his more… Gregarious impulses in, in no small part due to his mother’s influence.”

A whitish-blonde woman that seemed to be about the same age as Guiche’s apparent father walked into place beside him with a roll of her eyes as she responded back. “You have risen all my other sons to be humourless, wooden statues of men, Mortimer. I shall not apologise for teaching our youngest to be such a charming young man.”

Mortimer sniped back quickly. “Perhaps if he was taught to restrain his charm a little more he would still be engaged to la Fere’s daughter.” Oh? Guiche was engaged to Montmorency… Damn, that’s gotta sting. Which it evidently does, if the barely hidden pained expression on Guiche’s face was anything to go by.

Just as it seemed that the couple was going to continue with their sniping, Karin stepped forward with a stern look on her face. “I’d come to expect conduct more becoming of a decorated General, Mortimer de Gramont.”
The patriarch of the Armands seemed taken aback before he collected himself and responded. “I apologise for our unseemly behaviour, Duchess Karin.” He regally bowed before he continued, which his still unnamed wife emulated. “Leliana and I are honoured for this opportunity to visit your household in celebration of your youngest’s accomplishments.” So her name is Leliana, noted.

Duke motioned over to Guiche and me, seemingly to go ahead to the ballroom… Gonna be talking about boring adult stuff, I suppose. Guiche caught that and eagerly cast an arm across my back as he started directing me towards the party area proper to follow Louise and Wardes. “Ah, Lady Karin is so thoughtful, throwing a party in the honour of our accomplishments against the dastardly Foquet!” Coming across as a little forced there, bub. “I cannot wait to regale the people with the tale, to ensure that you get the praise you’ve so valiantly earned Sir Jophiel!”

...Oh God, this is going to be a thing, isn’t it?
As verbal sewage spewed forth from Guiche’s maw, I did my best to tune it out and focus on gathering my thoughts as we approached the main ballroom, passing by the le Blanc’s finery as we did so.

Aside from the discomfort I was experiencing at the thought of Louise being with Wardes at the moment, I found myself struck by a particular realisation.

Louise wouldn’t be able to keep others away from me by sticking to me as my dancing partner for the party’s duration.

Guiche and I passed through the open doorway separating the hallway from the ballroom as my dislike for Wardes intensified tenfold at this realization, and from my peripheral vision I noticed that Guiche seemed rather taken by the opulence on display.

The walls of the room were decorated with lavish tapestries, masterful paintings, and awe-inspiring murals depicting things ranging from the founding of Tristain, to the late King Henri’s coronation, all flawlessly lit by the massive, decorative windows giving a perfect view of the manor’s colourful gardens, further accentuated by a myriad of magelights hanging from the tall ceiling, assembled to resemble the chandeliers common among Earth’s wealthy.

I, meanwhile, was rather focused on Wardes and Louise, whom had sequestered themselves off on the other side of the hall, away from Mott and his entourage who were currently occupying themselves speaking with the band that was to provide music. The sight of the short blonde girl nervously fidgeting about in place like a schoolgirl with a crush at the lean nobleman standing before her with a welcoming smile as they spoke of lord knows what caused my chest to swell in jealousy again.

I tore my eyes from the pair and shifted them to the Count instead, just as Guiche seemed to also notice him and called out with a cheerful wave.

On the one hand, I didn’t feel practised enough to attempt engaging nobles that weren’t Louise or her family on my own in such a formal setting, but on the other it would look very odd if I went off to stand in a corner on my own with so little to draw attention from me, and I’d like to be distracted from my ward and her fiancé at that moment.

Thus, I remained at the side of the fop with the curly golden locks as he moved to approach the older nobleman’s gathering, which he very much noticed. If the wide beaming smile he showed me as we started walking was any indication.

“Count Mott!” The young philanderer started eagerly with a wave, causing the Count to shift his gaze towards the baby of the Armands. “Such an honour to meet you here on this fine day! Tell me, have you yet heard the tale of the Battle of the Decaying Earth and the Storm Lord?”

Immediately I regretted my decision to not just curl up in a corner of the room, appearances be damned.

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About an hour had passed since Guiche started regaling Mott’s party and the band of his absurd fever dream, or so it sounded like when compared to the actual events of Foquet’s attack on the Academy. In this version he had been with me from the start, we’d been back-to-back fighting off Foquet’s now solid mythril golems together, and we both arrived to rescue Colbert and Tabitha from the cackling clutches of the villain Foquet that was now a burly, muscled man as large as myself as he stood atop Sylphid’s near lifeless body.

Needless to say, Guiche very much bought into the idea of not allowing the truth to get in the way of a good story, and I was doing my best to tune everything around me out until enough guests filed into the room for me to break off and hide among the crowd without fear of being noticed in my attempts to remain unseen.

Of course, I’d failed to take into account that I had a good six or seven inches on the average man there, and was damn near the only one present with dark hair on top of being dressed in a distinctly bright Napoleonic uniform in a society that was at about the Three Musketeers culturally at that.

Needless to say, my plan failed miserably, and I now found myself being a focal point of attention no matter where I went, hearing barely hidden comments among the guests about me, pertaining to my exotic appearance and my apparent accomplishments that a fair few were only just hearing of for the first time now.

The first thing I’d noticed was that, to no great surprise, most noble girls are a great deal more difficult to impress than the Charming Faeries were. While only a few expressly voiced an overt dislike of my features, most were fairly middling in their opinion of my appearance, especially in comparison to the image they’d preconceived after hearing of my apparent exploits against Foquet. Many even found my build undesirable, likening me to an Orc… That stung, I had to admit, though I was just glad that it seemed I need not worry about being pawed at by a dozen girls at that party.

A few times I’d noticed a girl attempting to approach me out of the corner of my eye with a glint in her’s, and I’d been doing what I’d personally describe as an admirable job of discreetly slipping away into the crowd-

Oh, who am I kidding? They could tell I was avoiding them and a few had clearly taken to trying to chase me down out of amusement; teasing me, as it were. It was likely they’d simply assumed that I was shy, given the way I was avoiding eye contact with… Well, anyone, and found it entertaining how the big, apparent hero brave enough to single-handedly bitch-slap a known, feared and reviled Square-class outlaw was so clearly intimidated by girls, at least to their eyes, I imagined.

I underestimated how frigging much being present at that party would bother me. I felt extremely out of place, even more so than at the Academy, and without Louise to cling to like a security blanket in the face of such a daunting crowd that was paying no small amount of attention specifically to me, I found myself rather intimidated by it all.

It wasn’t helping that Guiche kept tracking me down (hardly a considerable feat, given that my distinctive head quite clearly poked above most, if not all others in the room) and was doing everything in his power to call more attention to me to spin more tales of ‘our bravery’ back at the academy to earn the approval of other young men and ladies, and I felt like I wasn’t in a position to tell him off without looking like a cur in the process.

Guiche’s tales were garnering me many a critical eye from those that weren’t so gullible as he apparently was, though much to my great consternation they’d seemingly quickly track Louise down and ask for her confirmation that I’d really killed Foquet, which she of course confirmed readily
given that being near Wardes seemed to be making her quite air-headed, and she never quite fully took her eyes off of him as she responded to their questions; which yes, was also further annoying me considerably.

As the band started gradually switching to a more upbeat tempo with their songs, a pair of the four girls that had been playing cat and mouse with me at my expense seemed to be getting bolder, actually attempting to catch me with intent rather than just moving at me and being amused as I fled. Clearly, at least they two were thinking to proposition me to dance, which I wasn’t terribly keen on.

Had it been that boring, sedate slow dancing that was so prevalent among fantasy nobles, I could have sucked it up and just swayed around with one of the girls for a few minutes until they got bored and left me alone after being underwhelmed, but Tristainian dancing was actually surprisingly lively, and I was barely able to keep up with Louise when we were practising, and she was deliberately going easy on me so I wouldn’t trip up!

So there I was, trapped in a dance hall with a bunch of short white people that were gradually all finding dancing partners while my overt attempts at avoiding being paired off become more and more painfully apparent and awkward. If it weren’t for that damned Viscount, Louise would be able to ward off other girls by dancing with me and keep me from looking like a total fool…

Just as that thought came to a finish, I suddenly found a familiar violet-eyed girl standing before me, offering her hand with a somewhat vacant smile as she did so. “Might I have this dance, mi’lord?”

With great relief I took Louise’s hand and allowed her to subtly guide me in a manner that gave the impression that I was at least mildly able on my feet. The two girls that seemed interested in me seemed mildly disappointed as they stepped back and shifted their attention to something else, suggesting they weren’t seriously interested in me to begin with, to my great relief.

Though, Louise’s suddenly approaching me did raise a few questions, which I saw fit to ask during a slower period of dancing. “While I am extremely appreciative that you showed up to help me after all…” I glanced up at the place Louise and Wardes had been hanging around to find that he wasn’t there. “What of the Viscount?”

Louise sighed wistfully before she responded. “He noticed how you were avoiding the Aerts and Coppens girls and asked about it. I told him that you aren’t actually confident in your ability to dance in the local styles, so he suggested that I come over and try to give you a confidence boost before I have to return to his side.” She sighed wistfully. “He’s so considerate…” That- That son of a bitch is pitying me!? Who the fuck does he think he-

It quickly became apparent that I’d completely failed to hide my reaction, given the way Louise was suddenly scowling at me.

She did a much better job of keeping her emotions in check as she responded to my reaction. “Don’t get upset with me Jophiel. I wasn’t aware that Jean-Jacques was going to be present today, and I need and want to spend time with my fiancé for the short time that I am able to when the opportunity presents itself.”

Oh, she thought… Uh, okay, let’s just allow her to keep thinking that’s what made me seem so upset. “I’m sorry Louise, I just…” I paused for a moment, then decided to be honest about how I was feeling… About everything but Wardes, at least. “I feel so lost and out of place here. Like I’m on my own in a place where I don’t know what I’m supposed to do…”
Louise’s expression quickly softened and shifted to looking more than a little remorseful, which made me feel even worse. “I’m sorry Jophiel, but it’s rare that I get to see Jean-Jacques, and it will look odd if I don’t spend time with him while I can.”

That… Didn’t really make me feel better. God, why am I getting so worked up about this asshole anyways?

Louise glanced towards the one girl that was still watching us out of the corner of her eye. Seemed that the other had been asked to dance by someone else. “That girl-” She motioned towards the red-headed girl with her eyes before continuing under her breath, only loud enough for me to just hear her. “That’s the Aerts’ youngest, Cloé.”

I nodded. “Okay…”

She continued. “She can’t dance at all. Let her catch you during a slow dance and she’ll practically be standing on your feet letting you lead her. She couldn’t dance for the one year we attended the academy together before she graduated, and from what I’ve heard she’s only gotten worse since then, so if nothing else others may believe that she’s the one that’s making mistakes.”

...That seems a little mean, but… I nodded regardless. “Um, okay…”

Louise continued on. “It will be fine, everybody expects her to be bad at it and stopped being overly critical about it ages ago, and nobody will blame you for being unable to hold her up where nobody else could.”

Though I’m not entirely happy with this idea, it sounds like the best one I have to go with as it is. Shit.

“Now.” She began with a small grin. “Let’s just dance. Try to memorise how we’re doing this, and mimic it with her. Okay?” I nodded. “Alright, let’s do this.”

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After a few dances, Louise gracefully curtsied to me, to which I responded with a bow as she had to return to Wardes. He was back at their spot, watching us to my annoyance, and Louise turned to head back towards him quickly enough.

I did my best to stifle my grimace as I noticed Cloé approaching me in my peripheral vision with a small grin on her face-

“And now!” Duke suddenly started, cutting off Cloé just as she started raising her hand to me. “Allow me to please introduce the last of our guests of honour! With a warm heart and open arms, I welcome Maria Sofia Augusta von Anhalt-Zerbst, Mitmumen Augusta von Anhalt-Zerbst, Nunugu Augusta von Anhalt-Zerbst, Achim Adam Augusta von Anhalt-Zerbst, and Kirche Frederica Augusta von Anhalt-Zerbst!”

It took me a moment to process what I’d just heard. The Augustas? Arriving at the party so late? And isn’t there a feud between them and the le Blancs? Did I mishear?

Initially, the short, brunette, chestnut-eyed, distinctly Norse woman garbed in an intricate and mostly black dress stepping into the main hall gave me reason to believe that, though the huge, as large as me, dark-skinned, slick-backed red-headed man dressed in a very Persian-esque robe adorned with
Gerudo heraldry that came into view alongside her quelled those thoughts.

...Huh. I’d assumed that Kirche’s Gerudo blood came from her mother’s side. Guess not.

Following the two parents of the family, was a short, shrunken Gerudo woman complete with the trademark face beak and robes not entirely unlike those worn by the old Gerudo twin bosses from Ocarina of Time, and following her the two children of the family, Kirche and Achim.

Kirche looked as she usually does, though now garbed in a fetching, low cut but otherwise understated black dress. Achim… Was surprisingly short for a Gerudo. He couldn’t be more than five foot two, nearly an entire head shorter than Kirche and dressed similarly to his father, though with shorter sleeves which displayed his fancy gold bracelets, and he had a more olive complexion accompanying his longish, slicked back crimson hair.

Kirche immediately took notice of me, giving an acknowledging wink my way after giving me a quick once-over. Achim and Mitmumen seemed more taken with the manor itself, openly showing how impressed they were by the embellishments. Maria and Nunugu, in contrast, where quite sharply focused on Duke and Karin as the openly surprised crowd parted to make room for them.

I glanced over at Louise’s parents, partly out of confusion, to note that Duke did in fact have a rather wide, enthusiastic smile on his face. Karin… Seemed to be clenching her teeth, if the tautness in her cheeks was any indication. From my position relative to them I was able to quickly lean to the side to notice that her hands were now held behind her back, and noted that she was making such tight fists that I wouldn’t be surprised if she was on the verge of drawing blood with her own nails...

Upon shifting back to a natural standing position I made note of how Louise wasn’t doing a particularly good job of hiding her aghast reaction, and Wardes gave her a light jab with his elbow. She shuddered at the contact, quickly glanced at him and visibly fought down her initial reaction and attempted to look welcoming.

This is going to be a rather interesting party, I can already tell.

A hearty bark of laughter erupted throughout the main hall as Mitmumen cast his arms wide with a beaming smile. “The tales were true! The le Blanc family does live in the finest home in the land!” He focused his enthusiastic gaze upon Duke and quickly strode up to him, the smile never leaving his face. “Words cannot accurately convey my joy that our families may finally put this petty squabbling behind us and make peace upon the eve of our two nations coming together as allies!”

Hold the phone, what? Tristain and Germania are allying? This is news to me...

Maria sidled up alongside her husband, shared a quick look with Karin along with a single respectful nod as she interjected. “Indeed. It would ill befit two noble households of such high standing to cling to petty grievances in the wake of such a monumental alliance.” She turned around to face one of the servants that was accompanying them, giving him a quick nod before turning back to face Duke and Karin. “So, with that in mind, our eldest child has a gift she would present to your family as a token of goodwill.”

Everybody’s eyebrows perked up at that, and Kirche turned to the door as an Augusta servant entered carrying-

I could do nothing to stop the naked shock from displaying on my face at the crimson-brimmed, silver-bodied shield bearing the Gerudo tribe symbol. *The fucking Mirror Shield!*
It took me a moment to recompose myself, and luckily it seemed that nobody noticed my reaction to the sight of the shield… Save for the shrunken mini-Kirche with the plus-sized nose, who was giving me a queer look out of the corner of her eye as Kirche took the shield from the servant and moved to present it to Duke and Karin.

Kirche cleared her throat before speaking. “On behalf of my family, my countrymen, and all of Germania, I offer this, a priceless artifact from our people’s long-lost homeland, as a token of good faith between our two families on this day, in hopes of closing the gap that has kept us separate all these many generations as our kingdoms come together as one.”

She stepped forward and presented the shield to the patriarch and matriarch of the le Blanc family, whom both reached out and took it gracefully, though the tension never left Karin’s body.

Kirche continued. “This shield is unbreakable, against magic and metal it has stood strong regardless of the threat posed against it. I pray in the name of the Great Founder Brimir, that on this day this feud comes to an end, and that our families shall form a bond as everlasting as this shield…” Kirche turned to look directly at Louise as she continued. “And I pray that your youngest daughter, and my dear friend Louise Francious le Blanc de la Valliere will make fine use of this newfound symbol of our family’s unity.”

At that, Kirche stepped back and gracefully bowed to Karin and Duke, who after but a moment of shock directed at Louise with a single, microseconds-long glance, bowed themselves, still grasping the shield between them.

Duke spoke up first as he and Karin returned to their full height. “There are no words to properly convey the happiness that this occasion brings upon us, Lady Augusta, may the newfound kinship between our families outlast the sun and stars themselves!” The patriarch and matriarch lifted the shield above their heads, so that all in the hall might see it more clearly, which was met with thunderous applause.

At that Duke motioned for a household servant to take the shield, which quickly disappeared into a back room as the two families congregated on each other, the rest of the party goers returned to their mingling with each other as the dancing was apparently cut short, and I took the opportunity to escape from needing to entertain a noble girl that doesn’t know how to dance by rushing over to insert myself into the group as quickly as was possible without making a scene out of it.

I took up a position on Louise’s flank opposite Wardes as Mitmumen cheerfully erupted in laughter and gave Duke a friendly slap on the back, whispering to her as I did so. “What’s this about Germania and Tristain uniting?”

She seemed somewhat out of it. “I-I’d heard rumours, but… I’d never thought…”

Mitmumen laughed again, breaking us out of our brief conversation. “Ha! To think, that our two daughters were so far ahead of us that they had already put aside their differences and befriended each other before any of us were even considering the possibility! Truly, we are blessed with wise, forward-thinking girls, were we not, my friend?” His smile was broad and genuine.

It seemed from initial impressions that Mitmumen was a particularly… Well, genuine man, wearing his heart upon his sleeve for all to see with fairly lackadaisical body language which suggested that he was a rather light-hearted man. That didn’t seem particularly wise to me for a nobleman, but hey, the fuck do I know?
His wife, Maria, on the other hand, seemed to be cut from the same cloth as Karin with her back stiff, chest puffed out, nose held high; it was clear that she thought quite highly of herself and her family with that prideful expression on her quite pretty face. It wouldn’t take a genius to determine that she was the political mover and shaker in the family.

Duke seemed mildly uncomfortable but kept nodding accommodatingly. “Yes,” he started. “I can only hope that our children will come together in joyous friendship in the coming years as our two nations become one.”

At this, Mitmumen’s smile widened all the further. “It is good that you mention that, my friend.” The tall Gerudo man reached, placed a hand on the shoulder of his much smaller son and pulled him towards them. “Achim! Introduce yourself, my boy!”

The young fellow, probably around Kirche’s age, blanched, but did an admirable job of recomposing himself. “H-hello, Lady le Blanc, Lord le Blanc. I am Achim Adam, it is an honour to meet you both under such pleasant conditions.”

Karin and Duke both nodded to the guy in acknowledgement before Mitmumen continued. “Now, on the topic of our two families coming together, I have a proposal.” He had a beaming, genuine smile as he starting pitching his idea, and Maria clearly only barely managed to keep herself from grimacing. “I hear that your eldest daughter, Eleanore, has yet to be wed, and in fact, is without a fiancé…”

I swear to God, I could see Karin’s pupils very violently contract at that statement, and Duke’s expression seemed to be frozen in place.

Mitmumen continued. “Well, my son Achim here, such a wise and charming young man that is the top of his class in every aspect and has many avid suitors back home, is also bereft of a betrothed, and with our two glorious nations coming together as one, would it not be wise for our families to truly come together as one?”

There were a few tense moments of silence, as Karin seemed to be fighting to not blow her gasket and the gears in Duke’s head were being overclocked to process this new information, and Louise was as still as a perfect porcelain statue. Meanwhile, I was just standing off to the side there, witnessing all this go down.

Duke finally seemed to find his voice as he spoke up. “Well, the idea is certainly…” He paused for a moment again. “Intriguing, I must admit, Mitmumen, that while I dearly love my daughter Eleanore, she…” He paused again, clearly deliberately picking his words before continuing. “…Is not betrothed for a lack of trying.” There was a bit of an awkward silence between the two groups for a few moments. “If you catch my meaning.”

Achim’s eyes widened somewhat in apparent shock, and Mitmumen’s expression fell as he responded. “I… see.” His grip on his son’s shoulder seemed to tighten. “I am sorry, my son, I tried, but it seems as though it was not meant to be…” The man sounded genuinely heartbroken, while Karin and Maria shared a look of what seemed to be mutual relief, and Achim seemed more taken aback than anything.

“I-it is okay, father. If it was not meant to be, it is not meant to be.” Achim stated as Mitmumen attempted to ‘comfort’ his son, who seemed mostly unbothered by the way events had unfolded.
The tall Gerudo man seemed to be all the more moved by that response as he pulled his son into a tight hug. “Oh, such a brave boy we have been blessed with! If only we could all be as strong as you my son!”

Achim’s expression wordlessly cried out for death as his father embarrassed him quite openly in public around strangers, and I turned to Louise, who it seemed had turned as white as a sheet and only just started breathing again recently. Guess this all would be a lot to take in considering their families were still in the midst of a generations-long feud just yesterday as far as she knew, not to mention the big reveal that Tristain and Germania are supposedly coming together out of nowhere.

Duke spread his arms out wide with a wide smile. “Now, we may all return to mingling properly in time, for the night is still young.” Oh god, I’m going to be so happy if I’ve managed to avoid getting out of dance- “But for now, we dance!” Suddenly the music picked back up, people were picking out partners, the Augustas were getting in on the action with Achim and Kirche in particular being swamped by noble dudes and dudettes all eager to have spend some time with the exotic new arrivals, and… I noticed a particular noble girl rapidly approaching me with a grin on her face.

I couldn’t help but sigh in annoyance upon realising that I’d have to dance with Cloé after all…
As I sat on a bench off to the side of the dance floor I quietly mused to myself; Louise certainly wasn’t lying, Cloé can’t dance worth a shit.

Nice enough girl, quite curious about me and my homeland; though by some horrid anti-miracle, she was worse than I at dancing by several magnitudes. She damn near caused us both to fall into one of the potted plants that stood in the corners of the room, twice! I was also regretting having had my uniform’s boots been made from such soft leather, my poor feet felt quite tenderised after the pummelling the inelegant noble girl gave them.

The dancing was finished, and everyone had reverted to mingling with each other as food was brought out. I’d have stood up and grabbed something to snack on, but I was halfway convinced that Cloé had managed to do more damage to my feet than my jump had during the fight against Longueville’s golems, and chose to simply rest for a bit, as I wasn’t sure if the opportunity would present itself again later on in the night.

I had been leaning back with my eyes closed and facing the ceiling when I heard a distinct, old creaky voice directly addressing me from the side. “So, young man.” I looked to the source of the voice to spy Nunugu, Kirche’s shrunken grandmother standing before me. “You are the foreign fellow my Kir-Kir told us so much about when she returned from the academy.”

I gave the old woman a measured look as she quite unceremoniously claimed the spot on the bench next to me.

“Tell me, what do you know about our people?” She asked with no buildup whatsoever.

“Not one for pleasantries, huh?” I started.

She scoffed. “Oh please, I am far too old to waste time with that nonsense. Gotta make every second count these days!” She stated with a croaky chuckle to her voice.

“Fair enough.” I shrugged. If that’s how she wanted to play it, that was fine by me. “Well, for starters, I know that you seem to be descended from the Gerudo, a desert-dwelling folk from the land of Hyrule, that your people were apparently teleported to Halkegania in the past, that the Gerudo curse no longer seems to affect your people,” I noted with a glance towards Mitmumen and Achim, who were talking to the Guiche’s parents not that far off. “And that Kirche just handed the Mirror Shield, a sacred artefact from the Spirit Temple, off to your supposed long-time enemies.” I turned to face the old woman again, who was giving me a most critical eye. “That’s what immediately comes to mind, at least.” I finished with a shrug.

She took a few moments to process the information before responding. “Little Kir-Kir is right; you are rather fascinating.” She chuckled ruefully to herself. “Though I imagine she finds you fascinating for an entirely separate, if admittedly valid set of reasons compared to myself.” I internally sighed as she continued. “Are you from our long-lost homeland, young man?”

Well, she certainly doesn’t mince words. That felt somewhat refreshing, after dealing with decorum-obsessed nobility for so long. “No. I am merely aware of it through… I paused as I pondered how to best word my explanation to not sound insane, before shrugging. “…The Legend of Zelda. A series of tales I experienced through… A series of visions, memories relayed by way of something
akin to a visual memory orb, in which I experienced the hero Link’s adventures and battles against Ganondorf.”

The old woman simply nodded and hummed as I spoke, and took a few moments to process what she’d heard. “That is most intriguing, to experience the life of the Hero of Time himself by way of visions… Why it is almost as if you are—”

“I’m not related to him in any way if that’s where you’re going with- Oof! Oy!” I stated with some annoyance when she swung her walking stick at my chest hard enough to startle me.

“Hush, I’m trying to justify my grand daughter’s decision to just give you a priceless artefact from our homeland here.” She stated firmly, as I admittedly had to force down a chuckle at the unexpectedly comedic response.

...Hold on a moment. “Give me?” I started, in a confused tone. “She gave the shield to Louise.”

The old woman sighed. “Think about it boy.”

Oh, trying to pull the crusty old mentor angle on me, huh? Well… It wasn’t all that difficult to piece together a logical argument. “Kirche recalled how Foquet was able to hurt me with he- his magic and decided to use this occasion as an excuse to hand it over to Louise, who logically would hand it over to me on account of my warrior status since I’d get the most usage out of an anti-magic shield.” If that’s the case, then… Holy shit, am I really about to come into possession of the Mirror Shield!? Fucking sweet!

The old woman hummed in approval. “So you’re at least minimally perceptive. That is good, far too many men would not be able to piece even that together, believe it or not.” She noted that with some aggravation in her voice. “My granddaughter is far too fond of simple but handsome dullards… Regardless,” She continued with some trepidation. “I assume that you understand the magnitude of this gift, even if my damned fool granddaughter does not?”

I nodded silently.

“She was not exaggerating when she described it as unbreakable, it’s been tested: two solid boulders will give out and split when the shield is placed between them and pressure applied by a mage.” She stated matter-of-factly, and holy shit, I know that the Hylian Shield and Mirror Shield were distinct from the Kokiri Shield in that they were unbreakable, but to think that those traits would translate to a real incarnation of the two shields… “So I am not worried about you physically damaging or otherwise ruining it… What I am concerned about is the possibility of you losing it.”

That… Sounded like an entirely justified concern.

“I assume you’ll do everything in your power to avoid misplacing this, one of the few remaining artefacts of our long-lost homeland, yes?” I nodded. “Good. All’s I can do is take your word for it and trust that you will keep the shield safe.” She stated as she stood from the bench… Hold on, she’s going already?

“Wait, would you be willing to answer some questions about your homeland?” I inquired earnestly.

“No,” ...Wow. Ice cold. She noticed the aback expression on my face and elaborated. “Young man, I was born in Germania. I grew up tending an apple tree grove in a temperate valley. The closest I have ever come to seeing a desert with my own eyes would be the time I’ve spent on the beach near
my hometown. If you’ve truly witnessed the Hero of Time’s adventures in any form, you’ve
infinitely more first-hand experience with the Gerudo desert and Hyrule than I ever will.” She stated
definitively, which… Was entirely true, considering it.

“...Fair enough.” I stated with some resignation.

She nodded. “Now, if you don’t mind,” She started. “I simply must see what schemes my son has
brewing up to make for the failed attempt at marrying my grandson to the le Blanc’s eldest.” With
that, she turned and made her way towards Mitmumen… And I had to admit, I found myself
intrigued by the way she’d worded that. He, Mortimer and Leliana were all well within earshot, I’d
just been tuning them out due to a lack of interest, though now…

I leant forward, and focused in on the trio’s conversation, finding myself irresistibly curious about
what the Augusta patriarch might be planning considering how out of the blue and honestly kind of
foolhardy his attempt at wedding Achim to Eleanore had been.

“-For such a low cost, you say?” Mortimer seemed rather invested in the conversation he was
holding with the tall Gerudo man, and Leliana had a very greedy smirk on her face.

Mitmumen seemed to be the type to speak with his hands, I idly noted as he spoke back to the
moustachioed fellow. “Yes, yes! Of course! I would never dream of making family pay full price for
the highest quality Germanian black powder and long arms!”

Mortimer seemed very intrigued by whatever it was the Germanian was offering him. “And not only
that, but you have the ear of King Henreich as well…” He glanced at his wife, who looked mighty
thrilled at that moment before shifted his attention back to Mitmumen. “I must admit, this does sound
too good to be true…”

Mitmumen flourished with his hands as he responded. “And yet it is as true as the Founder’s own
sagas! Just think of it Mortimer, how far our families could go, how beneficial this would be for us
and our future generations!”

Mortimer was having a pretty hard time of hiding his excitement, from what I could tell. He looked
back at his wife again, who nodded enthusiastically, at which point he spoke. “We cannot promise
anything so early, of course.” He noted. “But I assure you, we will be having a very long talk with
our son, and I’m sure he’ll see the wisdom behind the arrangement with little convincing.”

Mitmumen beamed at the two. “Oh, they will be a perfect match, I am certain, my friend.” At that,
the three all exchanged bows before splitting up. It took the tall Germanian man not a moment to
notice his mother watching from nearby.

“So, tell me, my boy,” She started. “How much political power have you managed to gain for us this
time?” I couldn’t see her face through the back of her head, but I imagined she had a shit-eating grin
right then and there.

Maria suddenly appeared from a nearby crowd quite elegantly. “Did I miss something, husband?”

Mitmumen playfully chided his mother with a light tsk-tsk. “Mother, a competent businessman does
not count his chickens before they hatch!” He noted though the beaming smile had not faded from
his face. “Though should this particular batch bear fruit…” He seemed ecstatic. “A marriage with the
Armands, whose father is in the top echelons of the Tristainian military, will eagerly purchase
firearms and powder from us, and also give us a direct line to our soon-to-be queen Henrietta on top
of our connections to our own King Henreich. In other words, our family’s place secured in the top rung of our great nation’s social ladder, with no small amount of trade income accompanying it.” He finished with a shark-like smirk.

Maria stared at him wordlessly for a few moments, before she reached up and grasped the sides of his face. “I cherish these moments when you remind me of why I fell in love with you.” With that, she pulled him down into an unexpectedly passionate kiss, and his beaming smile seemed all the more radiant when she pulled away.

“Fortune favours the bold, after all.” He noted. “And I would not have gotten to where I am starting from dirt were I a cautious businessman.”

With that, I redirected my gaze to the floor as I parsed the new information… That sounded pretty darned big. Enough to probably warrant informing one of the family about it. Perhaps…

As I stood to go seeking out Louise or Duke, I noticed a woman with relatively short, bobbed golden blonde hair and sea green eyes and a severe expression wearing what looked like a military dress uniform passing right in front of me, who stopped and gave me a quick once-over before suddenly addressing me. “Have you seen a brunette woman whose hair falls well past her hips with sapphire blue eyes and a beauty mark on her right cheek?” She sounded somewhat aggravated, notably.

“I can’t say that I have, sorry.” I replied simply enough. She scoffed in annoyance and continued off without another word, her head seemingly on a swivel… Some rich noble girl’s personal guard that lost track of her ward, I assume. None of my concern, really…

As I scanned the dance hall for a familiar blonde head, I realised I’d been inside for the entire day, and decided that a few minutes of fresh air on the balcony away from the crowd would probably be a great idea right then.

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I let out a weary sigh as I stepped out onto the balcony overlooking the back gardens, stepping up to the stone railing and leaning on it as I tuned out the sounds of the crowd in the room behind me, instead focusing on the nature in front of me.

It was surprisingly rare for me to stop and just note how beautiful Tristain could be, with its assorted multicoloured flora that gives the world a simultaneously familiar and exotic feeling, depending on which aspects one chose to focus on.

I allowed myself to just stay there, leaning in the relative quiet as a cool breeze carried the fresh scent of blooming springtime flowers by… I really needed to find a way to get more time to myself. Maybe go for a hike, haven’t done that since summer back on Earth...

A few moments passed when I suddenly heard a distinctly feminine voice addressing me from my flank. “To be standing out here when such a lively party is afoot indoors… Are you not concerned with being noticed and thought of as odd for sequestering yourself off from the other nobles?”

I turned around to address the new person interrupting my alone time and was honestly quite taken aback by the beauty before me. Long, hip-length chestnut hair worn loose, with more than enough bangs to frame her gorgeous, porcelain face that was graced a single understated beauty mark on her right cheek, coupled with a pair of brilliant blue eyes the same colour of sapphire. She was wearing a simple white dress that while modest in that it showed no skin, hugged her generous curves quite
appealingly, which meant that it had to have been tailored to her body specifically. Like all the rest of the gathered nobles, she wasn’t wearing a cape or cloak.

It took me a moment to gather my wits, she really was easily one of, if not the prettiest woman I’d set eyes on since arriving in Tristain, and that's saying something! “I- uh,” I awkwardly started, tripping over my own words. “I fail to see what’s wrong with stepping out for a breath of fresh air. It isn’t as though I’m chasing off people from approaching me, either.” I noted that the quality of her dress was on a whole nother level despite it looking fairly simple, the materials had to be among the best available in Tristain… She was also standing in between the windows, meaning she’d be difficult to spot from the dance hall unless one specifically pressed up against one of the windows or actually stepped onto the balcony.

She nodded at my response. “That seems fair enough.” She glanced aside to either of the windows flanking her before giving me an innocent smile. “Would you be so kind, mi’lord, as to tell me if you can spot a severe, blonde woman with short hair in a military uniform in the hall?”

...Ah. I see. Looks like we stumbled upon that woman’s ward then. Gotta wonder why she’d be hiding from her guard, though… I shrugged. Not like it’s any of my business, really. I gave the interior a quick scan through the large windows and just caught the blonde in question leaving the hall down the main corridor. “It looks as though she just took her leave of the dance hall.”

The gorgeous girl sighed in relief as she leisurely strode up to me, a mischievous smile on her face. “You are too kind mi’lord. I do not necessarily enjoy hiding from Anges so, though she takes her duty entirely too seriously. She never allows me any fun!” She stated cheerily.

I shrugged. “She did come across as overly severe if you’re talking about who I think you’re speaking of. I could understand wanting to get away from such a retainer occasionally. Being under such a strict eye constantly would be stressful.”

The girl beamed at me. “Yes! Exactly! It is nice to meet someone that understands how one needs time away from their guardians to spend on themselves.” I sighed, girl, you have no idea… Silence reigned for a few moments as I turned back to face the gardens and look upon the sun that was getting close to the horizon now, this time with an apparently mischievous noble girl standing beside me. “So,” She started after a minute or so. “You are the Storm Lord, are you not?”

I could not help but groan, was there nobody in this damned land unfamiliar with that dumb title? It isn’t even really complimentary! I did throw lightning at Foquet’s golems, but it did nothing! If anything it calls attention to how piddly my Vigor was! “Yeah, I suppose…” My annoyances were starting to get to me, though I did my best to suppress them. Not like this girl did anything to earn my ire.

She gave me a contemplative look before continuing. “You do not like the title?” I shook my head. “Whyever not? You do not like being compared to the Lord of the Thunderbolt?” I paused at that. Who? She seemed to notice my confusion. “Are you still not familiar with the Old Gods? The Storm Lord, son of the Allfather, he who destroys evil with his thunderous lightning bolts and mighty war hammer?”

...Wait a tick- Did Guiche title me after fucking Thor!?

I allowed another, long-suffering groan to escape from deep within my chest. I don’t even own a hammer, for God’s sake!
The girl seemed somewhat concerned with my reaction. “Well, you cannot be reasonably expected to be intimately familiar with all of our pantheon, Lord Jophiel, though it would be wise for you to at least learn the basics. Especially since Louise is so pious herself.” I nodded… Hold on.

I gave the girl a sidelong glance. “You know Louise?”

She nodded with a smile. “Yes, we are childhood friends, and though I’ve heard through gossip and the like of her most recent accomplishments, we’ve not seen each other in a very long time…“ She sounded genuinely remorseful at that statement. “In fact, that is part of the reason I shook off Anges the way I did so that I might track down my oldest and dearest friend without my over-protective guardian making our first meeting in years needlessly tense.”

Huh, that seems understandable, though I just noticed… “And your name is, by the way?” I asked quite bluntly.

She gave me a cheeky grin. “Call me Anne.”

“Anne, eh?” I shrugged, not recognising the name. She can’t really be all that important if Louise never thought to mention her… But then again, Louise never thought to mention her fiancé to me either, I noted with some annoyance. “Louise will still be with Wardes, I imagine. You’d have to separate the two of them if you’d like her to yourself for very long at all.” I stated, doing my best to hide my annoyance.

Anne seemed contemplative. “Yes, it sounds like I just may need to engineer a means to split them apart for a time…” She stated with a grin which I swore damn near resembled that of a cat’s. Mischievous girl indeed. “I would require aid in such a plan, however…” She continued, giving me a playful grin—oh no, Odin have mercy—

“Jophiel?” A very familiar girly voice called out from behind us. I turned to face Louise while Anne kept her back to the dance hall. I spied a wide grin appearing on her face as I turned towards my own ward. “I’d noticed that you weren’t in the hall… Dancing with Cloé was not overly taxing on you, was it?” She asked sincerely.

I shrugged. “It… Was an experience.” I stated attempting to sound diplomatic.

Louise nodded as she gave me a sympathetic look. “I see… Well, that aside,” She closed the distance between us. “Who is your friend?” She asked, giving the back of the girl’s head a fairly critical stare.

“A friend of yours, as I understand it.” Louise looked surprised at that. “Anne, she told me her name was?”

Louise’s eyes turned to saucers a scant few moments before Anne suddenly spun around and had a finger placed on Louise’s lips. “Shhh,” The white-clad brunette started. “You don’t want to alert Agnes of my location after I spent so much effort getting away from her so we could meet again in peace, do you?” Her smile was as brilliant as Louise’s eyes were wide. Anne quickly stepped towards Louise and embraced her warmly. “It has been far too long, Louise.”

Louise was full-on trembling, which was a little disconcerting. She returned the hug quickly enough though. “Y-y-y-.” Louise seemed to be attempting to stammer something out, and Anne backed out of the hug, though she, in turn, took Louise’s hands in her own.

“There is no need to be so nervous, Louise. We are childhood friends, are we not?” Anne stated with
a wide smile.

Louise took a moment to compose herself, breathing in and out, then finally addressing the girl directly. “W-what were you trying to make Jophiel do?” She asked in an accusatory manner.

Anne, for her part, made of show of acting mock-offended, “Ah! Louise! How could you accuse me of attempting to get Jophiel in trouble! You know I would never dream of doing something so unladylike!” Louise was pouting slightly at her. “Definitely not!” The pout intensified. “...It wouldn’t have been anything serious!” She finished with a sheepish smile and puppy-dog eyes, to which Louise snorted before embracing her again.

“It truly has been too long…” Louise and Anne were about the same height, the brunette having an inch, maybe two on the blonde, perfect height for a nice platonic hug.

“Might we two retreat to your room for a spell, Louise?” Anne started. “So that we may catch up in peace, away from prying eyes and ears.” Louise nodded eagerly. “Then, afterwards…” She suddenly sounded a lot less lively, as if she were delivering bad news. “I have a most dire request to make of you and Jophiel.” A jolt of shock visibly ran up and down Louise’s spine, but Anne was back to her chipper self immediately. “Though for now, I would like some time to spend with my best friend.”

They uncoupled, and Louise nodded. “O-of course. Though how will we avoid being spotted?”

Anne smiled confidently as she suddenly brandished a small wand. “How we’d always avoid being spotted going somewhere we ought not.”

Louise sighed but did not stop smiling. “You’ve not changed a bit since we were young.” She drew her own wand from… Somewhere behind her back. “Though I think you’ll find that I have.” Anne’s smile increased tenfold as Louise turned to address me. “I am not sure how we will summon you discreetly, however…”

I thought about that for a moment and recalled our second stay at the Charming Faeries Inn, the way I felt ‘drawn’ to the place when making my way back. “At the Inn, after I went off after that mugger, Louise, were you trying to call me using the bond? Because I felt an unnatural force compelling me towards the inn once I was making my way back.”

Louise’s eyes widened. “You mean… Call Familiar actually worked? I’d thought that it wouldn’t since you’re human, and you didn’t say anything at the inn…” She seemed contemplative for a few moments. “Well, anyways, I shall just do that again once you are needed then.” I nodded, and she turned to Anne. “Very well, let’s go.”

After the two stepped between the windows to stay out of sight, Louise began a quiet chant, and within a few seconds, her feet gently lifted off the ground, to Anne’s great readily apparent elation. Louise gave the slightly taller girl a confident smirk, who rapidly followed suit. Once they were both airborne Anne quietly addressed her. “I always knew you’d eventually discover your element, Louise.” Both smiling, they gently rose up and over the wall and roof, presumably to make their way to Louise’s bedroom window, while I was left standing there on the balcony on my own, noting with some amusement how used to the sight of Louise just up and flying away I’d gotten after witnessing her do it while training with Karin so often.

“Christ,” I started to myself as I turned to face the gardens again. “I wonder what other fantastical shit I’ll just get used to during my time here…” I quietly pondered as Karin’s manticore, Fluffles,
could be seen elegantly soaring over the fields in the distance, evidently spending his free afternoon off patrolling the family grounds of his own accord rather than lazing about as any sensible animal would, again.
As I leaned on the balcony, at this point just waiting for Louise to summon me, I was so focused on the gardens below that I failed to notice heavy footfalls approaching from behind, followed by a hand slapping me in the back, causing me to jump and reflexively reach for the sword at my side before I noticed that the interloper didn’t seem to be a hostile.

“The Stormlord!” The man started as I internally sighed. I took a moment to look him over as he drank deeply from his goblet that was surely filled with wine.

He was an inch, maybe two shorter than me. Stark white hair, a Gallian trait as I’ve come to understand, accompanied by a chin strap beard, dull violet eyes and a fairly masculine angular face. He looked to be in his early thirties, though that didn’t mean much considering Karin was probably in her 40’s or 50’s and looked like Catt’s sister rather than her mother.

Notably, his clothing was of considerably high quality. Looked to be Syracuse wool, dyed royal blue and gilded with gold thread, not to mention the gold and silver jewellery that graced his neck and fingers. Clearly a man of a very high station.

With the goblet emptied, he set it down on the balcony railing as he continued speaking. “I was hoping to get to meet you here! The story of how you defeated The Decaying Earth, your majestic dance of death atop the great walls of Tristain Academy as you exchanged spells with the evil doer…” He theatrically spread his arms out wide. “Magnificent! A tale which will live on down the ages in theatre, to be sure!” He gave me a wide grin. “Especially if I have my way. Such a story deserves to be spread far and wide!”

I did my best to suppress a grimace at the kind of over the top man’s theatrics. “I… Suppose.” I weakly offered while I attempted to not shrug. Clearly, the tale was spinning wildly out of control, the time for applying the breaks to it having long since passed. Might as well just buckle down and attempt to weather the ride…

The man’s enthusiasm seemed utterly unaffected by my middling response as he kept talking. “Stories of days gone by, epics retold in theatre… Surely, there is no greater pleasure in all the world! Don’t you agree, my boy?”

Well… I suppose movies are shown in theatres, I reasoned before responding. “Yeah, my people have a rich history of retelling epics in theatres to the point that it’s something of a national pastime. It would be impossible for me to recount how many such productions I’ve borne witness to in my life by this point, in all honesty.” Technically true, though I am stretching the definition of ‘theatre’ a bit, truthfully.

The man’s smile grew all the wider. “Ha! I knew you were a man of the arts the moment I set eyes on you, my boy!” He stated as he playfully slapped my back again. “To be remembered for all of time, to have your name associated with history itself… All great men aspire for such glory, do they not?”

Hm… Well, I wouldn’t describe myself as being great, though… “I certainly dreamed of being a hero as a child. I idolised Luke Skywalker in particular for much of my youth.”

The man’s eyes lit up with glee. “Luke Skywalker? That is certainly a heroic name if ever I’ve heard
I nodded. “A simple desert-dwelling farm boy learns of his heroic lineage, discovers that he’s—” I paused for a moment, pondering how to mention the Force without needing to explain it all to the man. “—a mage, like his father before him, and goes on to join the Rebel Alliance and with the aid of his friends defeat the evil Galactic Empire against all odds, redeeming his fallen, once heroic father in the process…” At that moment I was glad that I had DVD’s of the original trilogy, might sit myself down and watch A New Hope before bedtime tonight…

“Now that sounds like a tale worth telling!” The man declared. “Yes, to become a hero, to earn one’s victories and be remembered for all of time as a result…” He seemed nearly awed in my peripheral vision. “Yes, it’s almost like becoming immortal, in a way, is it not?”

I pondered that for a moment before responding. “Well, from a certain point of view, I suppose.” I said with a shrug.

The snow-head seemed to be giving me a very critical eye, then his grin became positively shark-like after what I could only describe as looking like an epiphany. “Well, my boy, it seems to me that you’re destined to be remembered. Rejoice!” He declared, throwing his arms out wide. “You,” he continued, the sharkish grin never leaving his face. “Will become a hero of legend the likes of which Alfheim has never seen since the Founder himself vanquished the Crimson. *I’m sure of it.*

...The ‘Crimson?’ What’s-

Suddenly, I felt a terrible spike of terror shoot up my spine, and in a moment I had whirled around to see a man standing in the doorway to the main dance hall. He was wearing a full suit of bronze armour, and his face-concealing helm revealed only his eyes; his cold, soulless grey eyes that seemingly bored into my very soul and chilled it to its very core. He was about the same height as me, and something about him just filled me with a very primal… *Fear.*

“Ah, Alex!” The white-haired main beside me started as he turned to see what had startled me. “I was wondering how long it would take you to locate me!” He laughed, and ‘Alex’ simply remained silent, not breaking eye contact with me. “This is my bodyguard, Lord Jophiel. Do not let his presence bother you, I assure you, he is quite harmless!” He stated with a chuckle.

Yeah, not buying that for a second.

He continued. “Well, it has been a pleasure to meet the man behind the stories, though I suppose it would be best for me to greet Lord le Blanc already, lest it seems as though he is neglecting to mention my presence.” He started walking towards the bodyguard that still hadn’t broken eye contact with me, and I couldn’t shake the terror rooting me in place at the man’s presence.

I couldn’t even will myself to move for my sword for fuck’s sake… Who the Hell is this guy? Why is he scaring me so badly by just standing there and looking at me!?

“Lord Jophiel?” The white-haired man turned around to face me just as he came to a stop in front of the bronze-clad terror. “I am sure that our paths will cross again in the future; such is the fate of all men destined for greatness, is it not?” He asked rhetorically, a grin on his face. “I shall see you later, enjoy the rest of the party, my boy!” With a wave he passed by his bodyguard, who quickly fell into step beside him.

The terror holding my body in paralysis didn’t fade until after I could no longer see the armoured
man, and it felt as though I’d ran a marathon once my body was no longer locked up... Who in the
ever-loving hell was that!?

I turned back to the gardens, doing my best to control my breathing. Eventually, it occurred to me
that the man had never introduced himself, curiously… He said that he was about to introduce
himself to Duke, right? Does that mean-

Suddenly, I could make out the voice of Louise’s father booming over the crowd within following a
clap demanding silence, I could only barely make him out enough to hear; “-King Joseph Martel de
Gallia!” Followed by a symphony of clapping.

...Wait, does that mean- I felt a stone fall into the pit of my stomach. Was that the King of fucking
Gallia!? I- Good Lord, if that was I’d better hope Louise never finds out about how I was just talking
to him… He wasn’t behaving in a very Kingly manner either…

...I eventually shrugged. Not worth getting worked up over now if that was indeed King Joseph… It
would handily explain why his bodyguard was armoured head-to-toe despite the formal occasion,
and why he was so pants-shittingly terrifying. I’m sure that there exist spells which can incite terrible
fear, would make sense to apply them to Royal guardsmen…

I spent the next little while doing my best to keep my mind off of the scary-ass Alex as I awaited
Louise’s summons.

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Eventually, the pull came, and I made my way towards Louise’s room, mercifully meeting little
resistance as I approached. I found myself at the now familiar door, and with nobody around I
wasted little time in entering to find Louise and Henrietta sitting on the large bed, their legs curled up
beneath them like a pair of adolescent girls gossiping after getting home from school.

“Ah!” Henrietta started from her place at the end of Louise’s bed as I stepped into the room. “To so
boldly enter a lady’s room with nary a knock, Louise, what have you been doing with Lord Jophiel
to render him so brazen?” The brunette playfully chided as both Louise and I’s expressions
scrunched up in mutual disgust at the mere implication of anything happening between us.

Louise responded first as she recovered from her recoil. “T-that’s disgusting! Jophiel’s like a brother
to me! D-don’t joke about that again!”

“I must agree,” I started. “It would be appreciated if you would not joke about such a gross
accusation, your highness.” I stated as I did my best to avoid gagging at the mental image that
provoked.

The princess looked at us both with a hint of surprise before she playfully waved it off. “Oh, I meant
nothing by it, of course. There’s no need to get so worked up about it! Now, moving on...”

I couldn’t help but notice that Henrietta hadn’t actually apologised for clearly upsetting the both of us
as she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood at her diminutive full height, which Louise
mimicked quickly enough.

“So,” the princess started with a sigh. “As I said earlier, I have a rather dire request to make of you
both…” She looked a little nervous as she spoke. “You are familiar with memory orbs, yes?” I
nodded. “Good… Well, you see… There’s this problem involving one… It’s…” She seemed
uncertain before continuing.

Louise interjected. “It’s okay, your highness. You can ask us anything.” She earnestly stated with a hand afore her breast.

Henrietta seemed hesitant to continue but visibly swallowed it down before pressing forth. “...As I explained to Louise, I am engaged to wed King Henreich of Germania and in doing so bring unity to our two nations, for the sake of the safety of Tristain, among… Other reasons.” Louise’s face visibly scrunched up a tad at that, and I wasn’t sure which specific part it was that seemed to disagree with her. “To make a long story short; it is highly likely that the Crown will lose the civil war in Albion, Prince Wales has in his possession a memory orb which could very well doom this much-needed unity should it fall into the hands of the Neo Crusaders that would surely turn their attention to our nation following a military victory. I require someone that I can trust to travel to Albion and retrieve this orb as quickly and discreetly as possible, and with the recent reports of Foquet’s death at the hands of the Familiar of the youngest of the le Blancs—” I internally facepalmed. “-It seems entirely logical to ask this of you two. I know beyond the faintest shadow of a doubt that I can trust Louise, and should the journey get… Unpleasant, I know that both you and she are capable of defending yourselves.”

The room went quiet for a few moments, which I felt no particular desire to break as I attempted to process the new and sudden information about the civil war in Albion, and the ‘Neo Crusaders’ I'd not heard of before now, curiously enough.

“So… May I ask this of you two?” She asked nervously.

“Of course!” Louise interjected before I had the opportunity to say anything. “We would never reject an opportunity to fulfil our duty to the-”

“Stop.” I interjected myself with a sharp command, which seemed to take Louise back a fair bit. “I am not agreeing to anything until I have an idea of what I’d be getting myself into.” Not to mention that the only thing I did to Longueville was maybe give her tinnitus alongside a scare. While I am superhumanly strong with the aid of the runes, and have been receiving no small amount of training from Karin since having arrived here, I am in no way confident in my ability to fight as of yet.

“Jophiel, you can’t refuse to help! You’re a capable warrior, and smart enough to be trusted with something like this! You defeated Foquet in personal combat! You can handle a simple retrieval job!”

Y’know what? I’m putting a stop to this dumb story right here and now, at least with these two. It’s one thing if the public at large believes Osmand and Guiche’s drivel, but I don’t want Louise pulling me into dangerous situations like this could very likely be thinking that I’m more able than I am, on top of the royalty thinking that these stories mean I’m some sort of hero to be called upon at will.

“Louise. Stop and sit down. It’s one thing if a bunch of people I’m not actually going to be interacting with believe that dumb story, but I’m not going to just stand by when it’s risking putting me and you in needless danger.”

Louise suddenly looked very confused and was giving me a critical eye as Henrietta interjected. “I… Take it that the story being told about your duel with Foquet was exaggerated?”

I nodded. “I’m not going to get into details because Osmand’s reason for the cover-up is… Understandable, but I wasn’t the one that defeated Foquet in the forest. Hell, I didn’t even fight him at all after s- he escaped from the Vault.”
The princess stepped forward eagerly. “So you did fight Foquet, then.” She had a wide smile of relief on her face.

I sighed and just openly face-palmed. “Foquet didn’t know how to fight, at all. And neither did I. There was nothing heroic about that scuffle, just two assholes that didn’t know how to control their power flailing at each other until one of them screwed up and K.O.’d himself.” The girls looked quite taken aback, and I shrugged. “All’s I did in the pursuit afterwards was hold off Foquet’s Golems while… The actual hero chased him down.”

All was quiet for a few moments before Henrietta responded. “I was told from headmaster Osmand himself that the golems were of gravel, and were capable of launching dragon scale shredding stone grapeshot. Is that true?”

Louise responded before me as she looked towards the princess. “Yes. Tabitha of Gallia was there, and her Wind Dragon familiar was clearly struck several times by one of those blasts, it was unmistakably light grapeshot wounds that shattered her scales.” She turned to face me. “And you say that you fought those, at least?” I nodded.

Henrietta’s smile returned. “So, you did, in fact, duel Foquet to a standstill in the Vault, then fought off golems afterwards?” I nodded again. “So, you are regardless a powerful enough mage to defeat combat golems.” She seemed relieved, unfortunately…

I grimaced. “My lightning didn’t do anything to the golems, actually… I had to defeat them using my sword.” I stated sheepishly, knowing that they’d be very unimpressed to learn that I had to resort to physical means to fight-

“What!?” Henrietta suddenly shouted, stepping forward, her eyes having suddenly turned to saucers. “You- you defeated grapeshot golems, combat automatons capable of slaughtering entire platoons of commoner warriors with impunity because they’re virtually immune to conventional melee weapons… With a sword!?” Uh…

I found myself taken aback by Henrietta’s reaction, and Louise stepped forward towards me as well as she remarked herself. “Jophiel can outrun a droog, long past the point where a hound would have had to give up and stop or risk injury.” The princess whipped her face around towards Louise, her silken waist-length hair streaming out around her as she did so. “He can also launch himself at reinforced wood doors hard enough to break through them like a cannonball, and do so without suffering an injury of any kind. I know this because I personally witnessed him do both things myself, on the same day. Knowing that, I can actually believe that he’d be able to survive a close encounter with grapeshot golems.”

Henrietta seemed to be quite struck by the idea. “Though, with a sword!?”

Louise crossed her arms over her chest. “That part, I must admit, does seem suspect to me…”

I nervously rubbed the back of my head as I responded. “Derflinger is anti-magic…”

Both girls seemed confused for a moment before Louise spoke up again. “Ah! Right, the Spirit Sword. I forgot about him-”

“Spirit Sword!?” Henrietta swung her head around to face me again. “You have a Spirit Sword!? An anti-magic Spirit Sword!?” I nodded nervously, and she suddenly closed the distance between us as
she took a hold of both my hands. “Lord Jophiel, please, you must lend me your aid! Such a heroic figure is sure to be successful in such a simple quest!”

“I- Uh- A- Uh- Ah- Uh-” I was quite taken aback by her sudden, outright begging, obviously.

“Defeating many Square-class combat golems, using only an enchanted, living sword, and living to tell the tale… Lord Jophiel, that is, in many ways, even more of a heroic feat than defeating a Square-class mage not known for his skill in combat using your own practised combat magic!”

“Jophiel.” Louise started, as she closed the distance between us as well, a look on her face that was halfway between pleading and demanding. You know the one, the one that girls pull on guys close to them when they really want something they think you don’t want to give them.

I stood quietly, attempting to process the sudden, unexpected response when a sudden crash outside the door and frustrated murmurs could be heard from the hallway. “S-spies!?” Henrietta suddenly looked very concerned as she released my hands and pulled her own towards her chest.

At that concern, Louise drew her wand and started towards the door, and I spun around and overtook her with my sword at the ready. She threw the door open with a quick chant, and I was already in the hallway ready to confront… Guiche, and… Kirche in a pile on the floor in front of the door.

“Ow ow ow you dolt, how did you manage that, you didn’t even drink that much wine!” Kirche chided the blonde fop in annoyance.

“I told you that my legs are tired from all that dancing I did! Do you not understand how many girls were eager to share a round with the Stormlord’s right hand!?” Guiche shot back in equal annoyance.

It… Seemed that they hadn’t noticed Louise and I standing there, weapons at the ready. Well, I guess that means they probably weren’t actually spying, after all, no reason to alert them to Henrietta’s presence considering tha-

“N-no! Nobody can know about the mission to Albion! J-Jophiel, Louise! You must restrain them lest the Neo Crusaders learn of the orb at once!” …Henrietta blurted out in a panic as she charged up alongside me, accusingly pointing at the duo still in a pile on the ground, who were now staring up at the three of us, the confusion on their face very quickly shifting to dumbstruck surprise at the heir to Tristain’s presence.

God damn it, princess…

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I pinched the bridge of my nose in annoyance, which Louise was mimicking to a tee as Henrietta attempted to stifle her laughter off to the side.

“Oh, come now,” The Princess started. “It was funny!” She cried as she found great amusement in having successfully gotten a rise out of me before having invited Guiche and Kirche in, who she was actually planning on asking to help with the plan as well once she finished talking to Louise and me.

Louise sighed. “I don’t understand why you’re so insistent on attempting to trick others into believing that you’re daft, your highness…”

I sighed as well. “Was she like this when you were children, too?” I asked Louise, who nodded ruefully.

“Oh, you wound me, Louise!” Henrietta mock-cried out as she theatrically placed the back of her hand on her forehead.

I turned to look at Kirche and Guiche, who were now both standing in Louise’s room with us, looking rather perplexed at the situation.

Guiche spoke up first. “I-if I may, your majesty…” Henrietta motioned for him to continue. “You say you recognised both Kirche and me? May I ask how?”

“Well,” She started. “I’ve seen you at gatherings at the royal palace before, Guiche Armand de Gramont. So I already knew what you looked like.” She looked towards Kirche next. “And Kirche Augusta von Anhalt-Zerbst has a rather distinctive appearance. It would be impossible to mistake her for anyone else.” She smiled. “And as I said, if possible, I would like all of those that fought Foquet to aid in this plan, as I know you’re all skilled enough to fend for yourselves should danger strike.”

At the praise from his monarch to be, Guiche preened like a peacock, and Kirche nodded in understanding as she responded. “Well, as I said, you will soon be my monarch as well, and my family has a very vested interest in ensuring that the wedding goes through with nary a hitch, so I gleefully offer my wand to you, my princess. And I’m sure that I can speak for my fiancé in this regard as well.” She stated with a confident sideways glance towards Guiche, who started blushing lightly.

...Wait. What!? “Hold the phone,” I interjected, raising a hand as I did so. “You and Guiche are engaged? Since when?”

The two shared a look with a pair of shit-eating grins between them before Guiche responded. “Well, it is not official yet, though our fathers suggested the idea to us separately, and we both immediately decided to meet and discuss it among ourselves.”

Kirche nodded as she picked up the explanation. “We initially sought to confirm that neither of us was interested in the proposal, though we got to talking, and... Well, even putting aside the benefits of an Armand-Augusta political union, we found that we actually share a great many... Interests, and came to a great many... Agreements, which made the prospect of wedding actually quite appealing to us both just on a personal level.”
Guiche was looking quite pleased at that moment as he kept going. “So, we were seeking out somewhere private to… Uh…” He seemed to remember that he was speaking to the Princess at that moment. “…Finish our conversation away from prying ears, yes.”

Henrietta’s expression turned positively cat-like as she very clearly understood exactly what Guiche was attempting to gloss over.

Meanwhile, Louise’s expression turned particularly sour. “…And you sought out privacy in my room?”

Guiche visibly recoiled in fear, while Kirche just shrugged as she responded. “We were simply searching for a quiet place to get to know each other better, ‘tis not as if we were deliberately seeking out your quarters, Louise.” Though Kirche was making sense, I could understand Louise’s readily apparent anger at that moment.

Considering the situation, I waved the topic off to move onto something more important. “As interesting as this topic is, it is also rather irrelevant, we should be focusing on the matter at hand.” Though Louise looked like she had just bit into a lemon, she nodded and let it drop along with Guiche, who gave me a thankful glance, and Kirche who seemed rather nonplussed.

Henrietta nodded and continued. “So, to reiterate, the union between Germania and Tristain must go forth, as we simply cannot hope to defend ourselves against the Neo-Crusaders when they inevitably decide to invade the mainland and spread their anti-Brimiric royalty ideas.”

“Like a bad case of lice.” Guiche noted under his breath with no small amount of bile.

The Princess continued. “There is a memory orb which I need you four to retrieve for me, should it fall into the hands of the Neo-Crusaders it will almost certainly spell the doom of Tristain.”

“And an end to my father’s plans…” Kirche noted severely.

“You all aided in the defeat of Foquet the Decaying Earth in some important fashion, as backed up by the word of Headmaster Lucien Osmand himself,” …Hold on, Osmand’s name is ‘Lucien?’ How am I only learning this now? “I know that I can entrust this duty with all four of you… I need only ensure that you are each certain that you wish to lend me this boon…”

Guiche stepped forward quite theatrically. “I am undeserving of such an honour, your majesty! I thank you, sincerely and most graciously from the very bottom of my heart for the opportunity to provide even the slightest of aid for you, let alone something of this calibre!” Notably, something in his eyes gave me the impression that he was actually being sincere.

“My family has a good deal riding on this marriage being successful.” Kirche started. “As do I personally, as it turns out…” She finished with a catlike grin directed Guiche’s way.

Louise stepped forward with her hand over her heart as she gave her own response. “You are not only my Princess but my best friend, Henrietta. I would never turn you away when you are in need, and I will always be here for you, no matter your need, you may count on having my wand at your side.” Henrietta seemed quite moved by both Guiche and Louise’s proclamations.

Then, predictably, everyone turned to look at me.

Uggghhh…
I crossed my arms and shifted my focus to the leg of a nearby chair with a huff.

“Jophiel…!” Louise stepped forward, her voice sounding like a mixture of hurt, furious, and disappointed before Henrietta threw her arm out, blocking the blonde from completing her approach.

Then Henrietta closed the distance between us herself. “Sir Jophiel,” She started, her voice soft as silk with a distinct hint of pleading to it. “I understand that you are not Tristanian, but—”

“That has nothing to do with it,” I interrupted the princess, to which Kirche raised an eyebrow at me, while Guiche looked aghast and Louise furious. “You’re assuming far too much of me, of my abilities—”

“No,” Henrietta interrupted me quite firmly. “I am not. Not if what you said about having fought Foquet’s golems is true.” She stared at me for a few long moments in silence, as I sighed internally at how so much faith was being placed in my untrained abilities.

I did my best to suppress a groan. While I really didn’t want to go and put my neck on the line… I did have to admit, while I was untrained I did possess a unique set of powers that could be helpful, especially when coupled with an anti-magic shield, and the job… Actually, considering that… “And what would the job actually entail? I’m not going to agree to anything until I actually have an idea of what’s expected of me, and how I’m expected to achieve it.”

Henrietta stood quietly for a spell before responding with a nod. “That is fair enough.” She breathed deeply before continuing. “You would be required to travel to the port town of La Rochelle. Once there you would need to find passage to Albion, and after arriving in Albion you would need to get to Newcastle, meet with Prince Wales, acquire the orb from him, and… If possible…” She fidgeted in place for a moment uncomfortably before continuing. “Bring the Prince back to Tristain with you.”

Bring Prince Wales back…? “The prince of Albion? The nation is embroiled in a massive civil war, would he be willing to leave when his country is in turmoil?”

The princess looked particularly pained at my statement, and Louise moved towards her before Henrietta held a halting hand up at her, and steeled her gaze. “Almost certainly not.” She started, making a valiant attempt to keep her voice level. “Though nevertheless, I beg that an effort is made to convince him to do so. Should Newcastle fall… The royal family has been decimated last I heard. If true, if Prince Wales is the last remaining son of the Britannian Isle…”

I nodded gravely. If the last true heir to the throne dies in the civil war, the rebellion’s victory will be complete. Best case scenario after that is one of the other Brimiric nations being forced to absorb Albion and attempt to stabilise the nation that isn’t even physically connected to their land, and on top of that actually moves around on its own, and is now hostile to the idea of being ruled by Brimiric royalty…

Henrietta seemed to notice the understanding in my eyes and nodded. “My cousin can be terribly bull-headed when it comes to such matters, I can see him insisting on attempting to remain as a defender until the bitter end, regardless of the long-term consequences of his actions…” Oh, Christ, one of those types… Trying to convince him to retreat to Tristain should be fun.

Also, they’re related. Noted.
The princess continued. “In regards to aid, you will be provided with enough money to make it to Albion and back again, and… A pair of agents may or may not accompany you. I cannot make promises in that regard, but if they can they will meet with you at the Sutherland Inn at La Rochelle. You will know who they are by the utterance of the code-phrase ‘rancid grapes taste foul,’ you will respond back with the counter-phrase ‘I hate sour wine.’” I nodded.

Having actually trained agents working with us would be quite a boon. Though… “Why not just send the agents over us?”

Henrietta shrugged. “They may not be able to take the mission, to begin with, and this is a mission that must be done.” Ah. So we’re the fallback option then… Fair enough.

“So,” I continued. “It will just be the two agents working with us if they can join us, to begin with?”

She nodded. “Yes, I am not sure who else I might send.”

A few moments of silence passed before Louise stepped forward and interjected. “What about Captain Wardes?” Everyone looked at her for a moment before she continued. “If Jophiel’s concern is that we aren’t skilled enough to handle this on our own… Captain Wardes is a decorated knight. Surely, his presence will alleviate any fears he might have?” Uggghh.

The princess pondered the question for a bit before responding. “That does seem like a logical proposal. Is the White Lightning still here?”

Louise shook her head. “No, he stated that he could only afford to spare a few hours to attend the party and departed shortly before we met.”

Henrietta nodded her head. “I will be certain to ask him to accompany you when I return to the castle, then.” She turned back to me. “Assuming, of course, everyone is willing to partake in the plan…”

I nervously scratched the back of my neck. On the one hand, this could turn out to be dangerous, and I don’t like Wardes. On the other, he is a trained and allegedly decorated knight, and two dedicated agents potentially going along with us?

...Well, I suppose that getting on the good side of royalty could only be a good thing, regardless. Plus, if things do go sour and I could have done something about it had I not sat on my hands...

...Fuck it. “Sigh... Despite my misgivings, I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night or forgive myself if things go poorly when I could have made a difference…”

Guiche stepped forward, a beaming smile directed my way. “A truly brave man does not act without fear, he acts in spite of it, and the just act even when it would be inconvenient for them to do so!” He gestured dramatically towards the ceiling with his rose-shaped wand. “I did not doubt for a moment that the Stormlord would raise to the occasion!” Every set of eyes in the room rolled at the proclamation.

“I cannot overstate how much this means to me, Lord Jophiel.” The Princess then turned to the group as a whole. “While I cannot officially recognise your actions on this mission, I shall have you all anointed as Chevaliers for your aid in the defeat of Foquet. Along with the bounty that I assure you, we have every intention of rewarding to those that aided in his end.” ...Well, I’m not going to say no to added income right now…
Kirche stepped forward. “So, what’s the plan, your highness? When are we going to go about settings things in motion?”

Henrietta nodded before responding. “Tomorrow. The team will split up and reconverge at the Sutherland Inn at La Rochelle. If Wardes and the Agents are able to join up, they shall meet you by the morning of the following day. If they have not arrived by then, you four are to find your way to Albion without them.”

Seems fair.

Guiche spoke up with a question. “What of our familiars? Can we bring them along with us? Verdandi could be of use in sneaking about unseen underground if need be.”

Kirche went next. “Flame is growing quickly, I suspect that he could be a potentially great boon in battle.”

I interjected. “I hope you didn’t get on me to go on this journey only to bar me from participating at the last minute.”

Kirche snorted at that before she caught herself with a hand over her mouth and nose, while Guiche gave a confused look for a moment before the corners of his mouth grew taught and Louise lightly scowled at me. Henrietta gave me a cattish grin before responding. “If you believe that your familiars will not draw too much attention, I see no issues with bringing them along.”

I nodded. “So… Is there anything else, then?”

The princess nodded and withdrew an envelope from her sleeve that she handed to Louise. “When you meet him, give this to Prince Wales. It has been sealed with magic that only he will know how to unseal without destroying the letter within. It will confirm the veracity of your mission, and assure him that you are to be trusted.” Louise dutifully nodded as she took ahold of the envelope in question. “That aside… I feel that is all. Should anything change, I shall attempt to have Wardes or the agents inform you.”

We all nodded, and several moments of silence passed as we stood around, waiting for the next thing to come.

“Well, I believe that is everything.” She started, to which we nodded once again. “So… May the Founder guide you on your journey to the Isle of the Skies.”
Chapter Summary

This is the beginning of Volume 2.

I sighed quite wearily as I tossed my redcoat onto my bed and took stock of the situation as it was.

In the morning Louise and I are to travel to the port town of La Rochelle and meet up with Kirche, Guiche, maybe Wardes and a pair of royal agents at the Sutherland Inn within three days. We’ll travel to Bruxelles via Droogback, spend the night at the Charming Faeries Inn, then ride the rest of the way to la Rochelle.

I allowed myself to fall face-first onto my mattress, allowing a displeased groan to escape into the fine bedding.

Once we’ve reached La Rochelle, we’ll spend the night at the inn, and regardless of whether anyone else has arrived by the morning, we’re to find passage to Albion using the funds provided by Henrietta. Then, we’re to make our way to Newcastle in the highlands and make contact with the Royal holdouts.

Following that, we make our way back to Tristain however we can, return to Bruxelles and meet up with Henrietta’s contact that’ll be waiting for us at the Charming Faeries Inn.

Sounds like a simple enough plan, though knowing my luck… I rolled onto my back and stared at the fabric canopy of the bed. Good God, we’re going to be travelling into an active warzone. If I don’t wind up having to kill someone, it’ll be a small miracle.

I reached up and ran a gloved hand through my hair ponderously. Derf mentioned that the runes will keep me from freaking out immediately should I need to kill, but they will eventually turn off- at which point I’ll be hit with the full emotional weight of my actions. In the middle of a warzone… Potentially freaking out when I can’t really afford to.

I turned my head to face Derflinger, resting quietly in his place leaning against the desk along with my still functionally useless computer. We hadn’t really spoke since he asserted that I’d be incapable of returning home. Aside from asking me for general sitreps, he wasn’t really one to initiate conversation.

It occurred to me that I probably ought to inform him of the rapidly upcoming mission, so I forced myself to my feet and took a hold of Derf’s hilt.

“Eh-what?” The sword spoke up sleepily with his still inexplicably Spanish accent. “What you waking me for, partner?”

I leaned him back on the wall and desk, as grabbing him was only done to wake him up. “The Princess of Tristain just up and dropped a mission on our heads.” I got right to the point, having found that Derf wasn’t really one for pleasantries. “In the morning we’re to start travelling to Albion,
which is in the midst of a civil war, and are to infiltrate a friendly castle to retrieve a damning memory orb from Albion’s last prince, Wales Tudor.”

The sword chuckled at that. “Heh, been on this Earth for generations and no matter how old I get, it seems that royalty just can’t seem to keep their hands off of each other.”

I nodded. “Yeah, Princess is getting married to the Germanian King, is worried about an audio recording of herself she presented to her cousin getting out and ruining the aforementioned marriage? Not difficult to put two-and-two together there…” My own misgivings about incest aside, that was none of my business and didn’t really have much bearing on the mission as it was that I could see.

“Hah! The Princess and Wales are related at that? Well, you know what they say; ‘cousins make dozens!’” I rolled my eyes as the sword laughed aloud at his own crass humour.

“So, on to the point,” I started. “We’re going to be heading into an active warzone for this mission.”

“Aye.” Derf voiced simply, indicating that he’d shifted to serious mode. “I’ve got the runes working right far as I can tell. If you find yourself in danger they should power on entirely on their own; so don’t be doing no shit where you try to force them on, alright? It really buggers them up when you do that.”

I nodded. “Duly noted.” I then sighed. “Well… I suppose you’re looking forward to this.” I posited.

“It’ll probably be more interesting than just being swung around and used on practice dummies, that’s for damned sure.” The massive blade asserted with a relieved sigh. “Being able to see and hear stuff has been nice enough to keep my jitters down, but a sword’s gotta do what a sword’s gotta do eventually.”

I shrugged, pulled out the desk’s chair and sat down in front of my laptop, opening it up and hitting the power button halfway out of habit. “Fair enough… I suppose.” I responded, knowing nothing about how a sword would think or what kind of urges one would have as I gazed into the awakening brightness of my computer’s screen.

I took my forefinger and idly ran it across the top row of keys like one might a piano keyboard, grimacing as I had to deal with still not being able to access any of the stuff on the com-

Suddenly, the screen did something I wasn’t expecting. It turned right blue, and I found myself staring dumbly at the-

“Uh…” The blade resting within arm’s reach of me piped up. “Partner? What’s-”

“Wait!” I shouted as I looked down at the keys I had ran my fingers across, which obviously included the function keys.

…

…

“…THE BIOS MENU!” The sword actually jumped a bit in place. “OH MY GOD, DERF! I’M A FUCKING IDIOT!”
I took a few moments to collect myself. I’d thought that I was locked out of my computer permanently, and had I not stumbled into the setup screen by pure bloody chance… From there, bypassing the password wasn’t particularly difficult, and I found myself staring at the familiar desktop screen I hadn’t seen in over a month since I’d arrived in Tristain.

Needless to say, I found myself to be quite elated at the situation.

I sat myself back at the computer and checked the internet connection. To no great surprise it was picking up nothing at all. I’d pondered what the deal with that was back at the academy occasionally and came to the conclusion that it had to have been related to the summoning spell, that the wormhole that it must have opened between Alfheim and Earth had persisted past my initial summoning for a time in some form; not enough to allow a person to interact with it, but enough to allow a wi-fi signal to bleed through.

There’s no telling how in the hell interdimensional physics work, especially when magic is involved, but it seemed like a reasonable explanation to me. Regardless, it would explain why I lost the connection on my Vita after I woke up from my coma.

I couldn’t help but grimace in spite of myself. Had I known that would have been the last time I’d have a direct connection to Earth… I’d have sent some kind of message to… Someone. Anyone. Even a farewell message. I suppose looking at things practically, it’s good that I got those revolver blueprints above anything else, but still…

I moved the cursor over the pictures folder, popped it open and immediately popped into the blueprints folder, curious to see if there was anything in there I’d forgotten about which Colbert might want to see.

It didn’t take me long to find the blueprints of a simple rifle scope which Colbert could probably figure out how to build. “Oh yeah,” I started, “Colbert is gonna want to see this.” I thought aloud to myself. The Halkeganians have rifling, though their sights are primitive as all hell. Proper optics would go a long way towards accurizing their weapons; Hell, it’ll probably result in fully-fledged Tristainian sniper teams.

I grinned. Snipers in an age of open field warfare would be quite a boon should the Neo-Crusaders attack Tristain as Henrietta believes they will.

“Ey, Partner.” Derf piped up off to the side. “What’s got you grinning like a wolf? Fancy weapon from your world?” He inquired teasingly.

“Yes, actually.” I responded.

Derf seemed surprised, “Oh, really? Nice.”

“Well,” I started, “more of a weapon accessory. It’s a magnifying optic that should allow riflemen to strike from far beyond the ranges offered by standard iron sights, which I imagine would be quite helpful in the case of an invasion. Being able to strike out against an approaching army long before they get you within their range of attack would be a great boon for a small nation like Tristain.”

“Hm… I’d prefer some kind of fancy-pants bayonet so warriors can get the rush of a proper kill, but that does sound good, too.” Derf replied idly.
Just gotta get this copied down and send it off to Colbert when we reach Bruxelles. Now where's my paper…

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When I was sure the blueprints were transcribed properly, I folded up the paper and put it into one of my modern envelopes. Colbert might understand that it’s important if I use one of my few paper resources to send it over to him.

“And now,” I started as I slid the sealed envelope in front of Siesta. “Address it to Colbert.”

The exotic beauty nodded and obeyed dutifully, handling the pen as if it were a quill, which was rather cute from my perspective.

“There. All done.” She stated with a smile as she set down the pen.

I had my arm across her back as she wrote, and gave her opposite shoulder an appreciative squeeze. “Thanks, Love.” I stated as I reached over with my free hand, cupped her cheek and bent over to give her an appreciative kiss.

As per usual, she displayed a small grin when she saw what I was moving in for, gently closed her eyes and slightly leaned forward expectantly. Her lips were as soft as ever, a light, flowery scent wafting into my nostrils as we kissed. I gently caressed her the side of her face as I appreciated everything about Siesta right then.

You’d never guess that she was a peasant girl used to working long hours with how beautifully kempt she was. Her pale skin was soft, velvety; bobbed raven hair like silk; the subtle scent of flowers accompanied her, only detectable if you get close. Like it’s just there for her lover to appreciate…

A few seconds passed, and I pulled back. She tried to lean forward into the kiss to keep it going, but I was really just intending an appreciative peck, not a full-on makeout session that would inevitably lead to a roll in the hay. Or on the desk. Or against the window.

Christ, I love how exciting this girl gets when she gets excited…

I did my best to quash the rising heat in my cheeks as I finished pulling back, and Siesta opened her eyes after me. Her large, soft exotic almond-shaped hazel eyes; a blue outer iris with a green-brown inner iris that were like a pair of beautiful multicolored jewels. Her thin, feminine eyebrows were slightly arched from behind her slightly parted bangs, which combined with the natural slight upturn in the corners of her full, velvety soft lips gave the impression of a perpetual pleasant smile that was so inviting, gave the unspoken promise of unspeakable pleasure.

A promise she’d repeatedly lived up with much gusto...

My hand remained on her cheek, and I found it gently tracing her soft, womanly jawline and coming to a rest with my thumb and forefinger lightly grasping her small, girlish chin.

I couldn’t actually feel her skin through the fine fabric of the dress gloves I’d never removed for the sake of not reminding her that I have awful scaly scars covering them that resembled terrible electrical burns, though the motion was really more to show affection to her than for the enjoyment of touching her anyways.
Of course, her breathing had picked up somewhat at the kiss, causing her ample bosom to begin heaving somewhat, and she was lightly biting her bottom lip as her gaze bored longingly into my eyes.

I’d learned quickly that it was really easy to get Siesta going, and while I appreciated that most days, tonight…

“Okay, calm down a bit Sisi.” I lightheartedly chided as I reached up and gave her a soft cheek a playful pinch. “Maybe later on, but not right now.” She shifted her gaze to the desk for a moment with an embarrassed look on her face. I chuckled slightly at her reaction…

Y’know, considering I’ve got to take off for Lord knows how long tomorrow, I should probably make the most of the rest of the night to spend time with Siesta.

I continued, “Right now, I’d actually like to go for a walk around the manor grounds if you’d be up to it.”

She shifted her gaze back to me and she responded with a cheerful smile. “That sounds lovely, actually.”

“Oh, come on!” Came the inevitable and expected protest from the side of the desk.

“Derf,” I started sternly. “I swear to God, I will lock you in the closet again if you start acting up.”

The sword that was only a few inches short of being as tall as Siesta vibrated in protest. “Aw, don’t be so boring partner! Look at your poor woman, you got her heart all a flutter and now you’re gonna go and deny her like that? Have you no compassion?”

I took my hand off of Siesta’s face and pinched the bridge of my brow.

Ever since that night when I forgot to put Derf away during one of Siesta’s ‘sleepovers,’ he’s protested the moment I go to lock him in the closet for the sake of our privacy.

It was like finding out that your dog was sitting there watching you the entire time, though you hadn’t realised it until after the fact.

Expect it’s not a dog, it’s a homicidal perverted talking Spanish sword that makes incredibly crass comments and suggestions about what you should do with your lover and where you should put various things the next time you share a bed together the moment you notice he was watching.

“Derflinger.” I stated in an annoyed tone, finding myself feeling quite short with the sword considering I have so little time to spend with Siesta.

“Oh quit being a bitch and fuck your woman!” The sword demanded moments before I moved away from Siesta to grab him and start moving for the closet. “Wait! No! Come on, why must you be so cruel to a poor depressed old man that hadn’t seen a woman in centuries before kind beautiful Siesta tore her blouse open-”

I threw open the closet door, grabbed the designated time-out blanket and spread it open on the floor as I went about the process of wrapping the sword up in it.
“No! Wait! Please, I only want to live vicariously through you Partner! For Brimir’s sake, please, stick it in her b-” In a few practiced moments I had the sword completely wrapped in the blanket, thus muffling his distressed shouting, a spare belt tightly wound around said rolled blanket to keep it from coming loose, then tossed it in the closet and shut the door.

I might’ve gone easier on Derf considering how I found him, but you haven’t heard the sorts of things he’d say to Siesta when she comes by to visit. Or what sorts of things he encouraged her to do to me without asking for my permission first.

Also, the aforementioned lack of time to waste on things that aren’t my lover. This is gonna be my last day with Siesta for however long it’ll take for us to complete Henrietta’s assignment. I’m gonna make sure it’s a nice one.

“So,” I started, pushing aside my annoyance at the homicidal talking sword to address the girl as courteously as I could manage. “Let’s head out before it gets too dark then.” I stated as I threw on my regular trusty olive drab jacket, while also grabbing my dress coat from the bed in case Siesta might get cold on our walk.

She nodded with a wide smile and fell into step beside me as we left the room and moved away from the sounds of the still ongoing party that was probably going to last well into the night.

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Once we were on the familiar trail leading through the well-cultivated woods around the manor, Siesta quickly claimed my arm quite enthusiastically.

In all honestly, it really annoyed me how she refused to show any kind of affection in public, going so far as to actually intentionally fall a few steps behind me if she knew that there were others around, and she made a pretty big deal about how she didn’t want to tarnish my image in the eyes of other nobles by being too openly familiar with a common servant girl.

I never wanted to press the issue in the short time we’d have to spend together when Karin wasn’t tormenting me into being physically fit, though…

I grimaced. I didn’t like Siesta behaving like she was some sort of dirty little secret to be ashamed of should my ‘peers’ become aware of her. I really didn’t care if anyone thought any less of me for being in a relationship with her, it was my decision to make and we both make each other happy as far as I can tell, and that’s all that matters to me.

All of this marrying for the sake of the family malarky means squat because I’m not a local noble, I can be with who I want, for whatever damned reason I want, their societal standing be damned.

...But again, I just want to have a pleasant night with Siesta, so I’ll push those thoughts aside for when we get back.

“So, Jophiel,” the exotic multietnic girl chirped from my side, still wrapped around my arm. “Are you going to tell me about your day?” She asked cheerfully with a wide smile.

I sighed internally. Most of the time she’d ask about me and make the entire conversation revolve around me or Louise/Kirche/Guiche/whoever. Okay, I get it, she’s into me and nobility, but I’d rather talk about her for once, in all honesty.
Like, her hobbies, books, and…

...

...Uh...

...

...Oh my God. I know nothing about the girl I’ve been screwing for the past half month.

I raised my free hand up to bury my face in my hands. That is so shitty of me…

“Jophiel?” The average-height-for-a-Halkeganian girl asked, looking up at me with concern.

Well… No time like the present to go about fixing that, right?

“Actually, Siesta,” I started. “I’d like to hear more about you, for once.”

Her eyes widened considerably as she responded. “R-really?” I nodded. “O-oh… Well… Okay, what did you wish to know?”

I pondered the question for a moment as we leisurely made our way down the picturesque forest trail.

“Well,” I started. “Tell me about your hobbies. I know that you like books, but that’s really it. I’m sure you must have more interests, right?”

She took a few moments to get around to answering the question. “Well… I enjoy cooking, and Tending to plants. I had a fairly sizable garden back home that my cousin Maple has been tending to since I left for the academy.”

“Oh?” I pulled my arm free of Siesta’s grasp, to which she started pouting before I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, which she seemed to appreciate as she leant into me more heavily with a giggle. “Did you grow your own cooking ingredients?”

She nodded. “Yes, Grandpa Horie really likes my vegetable stew. I would often prepare meat stews for the whole family when he would go on a successful hunt.” She stated wistfully as we passed by a small creek that briefly ran near the trail.

“Well, that sounds nice.” I stated cheerfully.

“Mmhm…” She hummed back.

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...Jeez, she went really quiet real quick… “Anything else?”

She looked up, surprised again. As if the idea of me showing interest in her was shocking, which… Wasn’t an undeserved expectation. Jeez, I’m such an ass…


“Come on Sisi, I’m sure you have more to tell.” I stated, trying to poke her into talking more lest we waste the little time we have left to just hang out together.

“...Well…” She seemed hesitant. “Maple got married about a year ago.” She frowned. “I... Didn’t feel like I could afford to go home to attend the wedding, though. I was still trying to make as much money as I could to send back home then, so I haven’t met her new husband.” She ponderously paused for a minute. “I think his name was… ‘Nilas,’ or something like that.”

Well, not exactly what I thought she’d get into talking about, but… It’s better than her making me talk about myself, I guess.

She continued: “Apparently he didn’t even speak Picard when he first arrived! That surprised me since he and Maple got married less than a week after that!”

That had me taken aback somewhat. “Getting married a week after meeting? When they couldn’t speak the same language? Were they drunk?”

Siesta fell into an adorable giggling fit at that, leaning heavily against me as she buried her face into my side to stifle her laughter. “Y-yes, actually.”

Pfft- “Oh jeez… Really?”

She nodded. “Yeah, apparently. Jessica didn’t go into detail because she says she wants Maple to tell me the story herself. And also to give me an incentive to go home for a visit, but it’s supposed to be quite a fun tale.” She sighed. “He’s taken well to working in the vineyard for someone that everyone thought was a noble when he first wandered into town. And he’s even built a nice little cabin for himself and Maple.”

“Hm, that sounds lovely…” I stated, though I couldn’t help but find myself grimacing when I glanced up and saw that the sun was starting to set... Damn it, gonna have to turn in right away at this rate... “Siesta.” I started, she glanced up curiously through her eyelashes. “I have to leave the manor first thing tomorrow morning with Louise, and we’re going to be gone for a while. At least a week, likely more.”

She really seemed to be taken aback, if the way her mouth was hanging open wide was any indication.

“I know it’s sudden, it is for me too... So, I just thought we could spend my last night here for a while together doing something...” I paused on the next word, making sure to pick it carefully. “Calm. We don’t just... Talk, enough. And when we do, I’m the one that does all the talking, usually about myself.”

I reached up to scratch my cheek as I pondered my next words.

“Basically... I kind of realised that the only personal thing I know about you is that you like reading.” I paused. “Well, personal stuff that doesn’t pertain to the bedroom, I mean.” I clarified moments before Siesta’s hand flailed out and slapped my stomach.

“Jophiel!” She chided. “You’re awful!” She declared through a barely suppressed laugh and smile.

The smile quickly faded from her face, though.
“Um…” She started warily. “You say you’re leaving early tomorrow morning… Can you tell me what for?”

I hesitated. I really shouldn’t be telling Siesta about the mission in any meaningful capacity, all things considered… “…I’m afraid not, no.”

She didn’t take her eyes off of me as a few uncomfortable moments passed in silence. I could already guess what her next question would be.

“Is it going to be dangerous?” Bingo.

With a sigh, I responded. “Almost certainly.” I could tell her that much, at least.

We were both quiet for a few moments before Siesta rotated towards me and wrapped both arms around my midsection tightly, burying her face in my chest as she did so.

“I…” She started, softly. “I was really terrified when I found out that you’d left to chase Foquet, you know.” I grimaced, and felt even more guilty at that. “I…” She paused. “Just… Can you promise me that you’ll come back safe?”

I hugged her all the tighter. “I have every intention of coming back, Sisi. I promise.”

She sighed, and we wound up spending the rest of our short time before the day was done in relative silence, the tone never quite managing to become light-hearted again before we decided to turn in for the night as I mentally prepared myself for the adventure I’d be setting out for with Louise first thing in the morning.
Meal Ticket

Chapter Notes

Canon Side-Story: Forgive the inexplicable third-person perspective, ’twas the only way I could manage to get this chapter out.

“That may not be such a bad idea, y’know.” He stated with a small, gentle smile, standing in the doorway to his room. “Heading back to Tarbes, or even the Inn while Louise and I are gone. I’m not sure how long we’ll be away, and I’m sure your family misses you dearly.” Jophiel stated with mild concern. “Of course, I imagine Catt would enjoy your company should you stay here, but she would understand the desire to visit your relatives, I’m certain.”

She smiled the sweetest smile she could muster back at his show of concern. “I will definitely consider it.”

He grunted in his strange, unsophisticated way at that. “I’ll mention it to Duke tomorrow before we leave. I’m sure he’d be okay with arranging a carriage to deliver you to either place, should you decide to head out after all.”

She nodded demurely; outright saying no to a noble wouldn’t be a wise decision, to be certain.

“Mm… Well, anyways… We’re gonna have to be setting off really early in the morning, so it would probably be best for me to just head to bed immediately. No distractions to keep me up past my bedtime, right?”

...Right, a distraction, that’s all she really was, at the end of the day. “That would be wise, sleep well, Jophiel.” She stated, as cheerfully as she could.

“Okay. Sleep well, Si-si.”

Siesta stood quietly as Jophiel closed the door to his room, considering attempting to assert herself in case he might be losing interest in her for a few moments, instead shrugging, and moving for her own, much smaller room next to his own. While it was far more often than not fun spending nights with him, forcing herself to keep him enticed so often was getting old.

Once she was inside, she traipsed over to the mirror and desk she had been provided with, at Jophiel’s insistence, and went about clumsily undressing with her one good hand.

The white, well-fitted blouse which emphasised her chest she’d noticed the large foreign noble seemed to be fond of eventually fell to the floor and the sleeve that normally kept her disgusting disfigurement concealed from view went with it.

No matter how many times she looked at it, the pain never faded. The unpleasant swelling in her chest when she was reminded that she had been disfigured. Made disgusting. What man, noble or otherwise would be interested in a damaged woman, a peasant woman that couldn’t even do chores as effectively as any other?
Having nobody to talk to about it was... Unpleasant. She’d been halfway tempted to open up to Jophiel about it, though he’d never seemed terribly interested in the wound himself, and what Noble would want a concubine that complains to him of things he doesn’t care about?

...Though she had to admit, it often times seemed less like he was uncaring, and more that he was just incredibly dense. He did, after all, present her a most generous gift purely out of kindness...

Her eyes were naturally drawn to the aluminium necklace so proudly displayed on the dresser, sitting atop a plush cushion. A handmade gift from an impossibly perfect gentleman, who at every turn had extended kindness to her, which she could have only ever dreamed of receiving from a noble. Even when all logic dictated that he should cast her aside like the damaged goods she was… He only pulled her in closer, against all reason.

The sight of the necklace made her stomach churn with terrible, bitter bile. Jophiel. He was kind, considerate, generous, and had grown quite attached to her over the past month.

Or rather, to the perfect mistress she’d constructed the moment she realised he was a potential meal ticket, her ride to an easy life where she need not labour day in and day out to send her family meagre scraps of coppers and silver. A life where she’d be able to single-handedly, easily make her family comfortable with great fistfuls of gold, at the ‘ruinous’ cost of warming the bed of a handsome, exotic nobleman.

More of a true cost was that she was resigning herself away from eventually, potentially coming to run her own vineyard, becoming wealthy, even influential to a small degree, off her own, real effort. A laughable prospect now, with only one good hand.

She turned away from the mirror and marched over towards the generously-sized bed, at least as large as Jophiel’s own bed at the academy compared to her own somewhat cramped academy mattress, undoing her dark grey skirt and letting it fall free before she sat on the edge of the bed.

She thought back and pondered how they’d met. It was a night when she was on dusting duty, the same day as the Springtime Familiar Summoning Ritual. She’d let her mind wander, imagining what sort of familiar she might have summoned had she had the fortune to have been born a mage, and accidentally shoved her filthy duster in his face.

Immediately, fear had gripped her heart at the sight of the large, exotic, perfumed man in the strange, understated though undeniably well-made clothing. He was obviously a noble, there was no way he couldn’t be.

Many nobles kept to their oaths of protection towards the smallfolk, and while she herself was of a cocky sort, there was still a non-negligible amount of nobles that wouldn’t blink at reaching out and striking a peasant that ‘stepped out of line,’ and he very clearly wasn’t a Tristainian. Who knew how a foreign noble might treat a common girl?

But Jophiel didn’t even seem to be offended. He even assured her that no apology was necessary… Then he behaved far more courteously and kindly towards a common maid that had just coated his face in a layer of dust than anyone would expect.

He even praised her simple cooking as if it was one of the best things he’d ever consumed!

She fell back onto the bed, stared up at the ceiling for a moment before rolling onto her side, and
gazed at the finely decorated wall, lost in her thoughts.

That night, when that wretched animal Foquet attacked the academy…

First, she’d lost her hand because she’d foolishly reached down to pick up a cloth that had been dropped on the floor in everyone’s panic to escape from the area. Had she just kept going, the brick would have missed her completely, but she had to stop and reflexively reach down like an idiot.

Then, she found out that Jophiel had been fighting Foquet when that happened. He tracked her down, had been actively searching for her, and found her in that tent. It all just came rushing out when he saw what remained of her hand, she’d let herself get attached, even though they’d only spent a single night together at that point, and was terrified and resigned to the idea that he’d lose interest once he’d noticed she’d been maimed.

For the first, and only time, she’d been honest to Jophiel. Didn’t disguise her thoughts, or her emotions. Just allowed him to see the truth, for the first time, because it was surely the last time she’d see him anyways. What interest would a nobleman really have in a peasant girl, anyways? What a damned fool she must have been, to have even imagined that she’d be able to even be a mistress to him when he had the interest of the likes of the Augusta woman...

Then, when he made it clear he wanted her to remain… Regardless of the disgusting disfigurement, regardless of her newfound inability to do basic chores, he wanted her to stay… As his tutor, no less. To be given such a prestigious occupation by a nobleman associated with a Dukedom, a position which inherently required the tutor be well educated in the subject matter…

It had to have been a farce, a mask he was applying to her real intended role... Then lo and behold, a paltry two days per week were set aside for teaching him to read, and those study sessions oftentimes just quickly culminated in base sex, with her doing little in the way of actual teaching.

After that realisation struck her, she kept trying to act like the perfect concubine, the perfect side girl to keep around when he inevitably gets bored of his eventual noble wife that may say ‘no’ to him. No complaints, no making excuses, always being ready for him, being eager for him…

...He always looked frustrated, she’d noticed. His brow in a near-perpetual state of a partial furrow, his lips locked tight together, his hands balled into fists when he thought nobody was looking… Unless he was alone with her. Then he relaxed, he became easier going, chuckled more easily, even smiled.

All signs pointed to him genuinely enjoying her presence, just liking being around her. Tonight… He’d even went out of his way to ask about her. Just spent time together without making it physical, almost as if she was…

...

...Yet she couldn’t afford to take chances. Not anymore, she thought to herself as she glanced at the partial stump where her fingers used to be. She couldn’t properly handle a broom. Couldn’t properly scour dirty clothes. Couldn’t carry loads around. Definitely couldn’t perform yard work with any degree of competence…

She couldn’t go home to Tarbes like this. She’d just be a burden on the family, incapable of even working in the vineyard properly, or helping around the family home… No, she couldn’t risk it. Absolutely could not risk earning Jophiel’s ire.
She- Her family needed his money, last season’s blighted crops demonstrated how fragile her family’s stability was, she couldn’t risk losing them this source of income. Not when she wasn’t good for anything else.

No matter how much it hurt to convince Jophiel that she was something she wasn’t, no matter how much that genuine smile he was so quick to offer her made her want to puke...

...That day, on Foquet’s attack, it really had almost been the last time she’d seen him, regardless. He chased Foquet down, like a character right out of an adventure novel, a brave warrior pursuing the evildoer to bring them to justice… But it wasn’t exciting. It wasn’t thrilling.

It was **terrifying**.

All thoughts of romantically nursing a man to health were gone the moment she’d seen what true, life-threatening injuries actually entailed that day in the ruins of the academy. She just wanted him to stay safe, to stay with her, where there was no danger.

She turned her face into the mattress and softly exhaled. She desperately wanted him to stay by her side, to remain where she could be sure he was safe… But she wouldn’t show him her real self. Because she couldn’t trust him, in spite of everything he’d done, of the kind, gentle, genuine smile he presented to her so readily, she wouldn’t trust him. She couldn’t afford to take the risk.

She gazed at her wretched stump and found herself wondering again...

He was rich, fantastically so. So much so, that he could casually gift an entire bag of exotic aluminium to some maid girl that he’d deigned to take pity on… She’d keep the stump out of view when with him, keep it behind her back, or in her sleeve, or under a pillow… Surely, he might be willing to pay a healer to regrow it? To make her less unsightly…?

...No. No, she couldn’t overstep her bounds, she couldn’t risk it.

Should he chose to offer to fix it himself, though…

...Maybe… Maybe she could stop hiding it so well? Maybe if he sees it enough, but if he’d grown attached to her, he might decide that fixing it would be a worthwhile investment? She wouldn’t be overstepping her bounds, in that case, Jophiel would be deciding to fix a mistress he’d grown attached to and doesn’t wish to replace.

Right?

...

She climbed back to her feet, ambled over towards the dresser again, took the aluminium necklace off its pillow, stared at it for a moment, then clutched it to her bosom.

With a sigh, she quietly droned to herself. “...I’m such a manipulative bitch.”
“Do you have everything you need? Enough food, a warm cloak? Should you take a gun? You should take a gun.” Karin stated as she drew a pocket pistol from her sleeve and tried to hand it to Louise.

“Motheeer-!” The short blonde noble girl cried out in exasperation at Karin’s incessant mothering while Duke laughed cheerfully with Wiseman the owl perched on his shoulder.

I, meanwhile, was checking over my gear once again. The mirror shield was wrapped in cloth and strapped to Sleipnir’s haunch along with Derflinger. I had my own survival gear packed in a backpack I’d brought from Earth, with everything else strapped to my belt, including my hellion and my pistols.

The Mosin-Nagant would be too conspicuous and irreplaceable to carry into an active war zone, so it was being left behind.

With everything seemingly in order, I rubbed the back of my neck with some trepidation. I fully expected that Louise would have tried to make something up to explain our departure, but she just out-and-out informed her mother and father that we’d been given a royal mission, and Karin made no attempt to press her daughter for further information to my great surprise.

It gave me the impression that doing wetwork for the Crown was something Karin was not only used to herself but expected her daughters to eventually get involved in. If nothing else, she clearly appreciated the importance of not digging too deeply into the affairs of royalty regardless. That suggested that she was very much a professional in that regard.

I wasn’t sure if that should make me feel better or worry the ever-loving shit out of me.

“Jophiel,” Cattleya started as she approached me. Luckily, it was turning out to be one of her good days, where a servant, a man named Jakobs, remained within arm’s reach of her but she was otherwise able to get around on her own easily enough. “Are you certain that you both must leave again so soon?”

Oy, this again… “Yes, Catt,” I responded. “I still can’t give you any details, but this is important. Very much so.”

She looked very uncertain and sighed. “Louise was gone for so long, and already she’s leaving us again, we don’t even know where she’s going this time as well…”

I shrugged. I understood her concerns, but there was nothing to be done about it. As much as I wanted to stay here as well, we really just couldn’t afford to risk it, in case the others don’t wind up showing up for the mission, or if… Anyone dies while on the mission. We are going to be travelling into and through hostile territory, after all.

The more trustworthy bodies that are thrown at the objective, the more likely it is that one manages to get out of Albion with said objective in hand.

“And you, Jophiel,” Catt continued giving me a remorseful look. “You’ve made the days much more tolerable with your seemingly endless fantastical stories. You must find your way back, I need to
know if Luke and Leia will rescue Han! I dare say I’ll have scant few restful nights until I do!” She cried out with great concern, earning a hearty chuckle from me.

“I’ll do my best, I promise.” I stated with a shrug- Just as Catt lurched forward and wrapped her arms around my waist.

“You have to let me hug you, for luck!” She declared cheekily while I hoped Louise and her parents were too preoccupied to notice me turning beet red at the gorgeous girl deliberately pressing her endowments up against me.

Mother of God- why do so many girls go out of their way to tease me!?

“O-o-okay! Fine, you got your hug!” I stated as I placed my palms on her shoulder blades for a second, hoping she’d let go before Louise noticed Catt’s eagerness to tease me, got the wrong idea and got thoughts in her head about making me a legal sibling.

“Hmph!” She huffed with a pout. “No, you have to give me a real hug!” She declared with a squeeze while Jakobs tried and failed to keep himself from giggling at my predicament off to the side.

“Oh- Fine!” I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, and she giggled a giggle of victory as she buried her face in my collar. I held her in the tight hug for a few seconds before I started trying to worm my way free of her far too enticingly soft grasp. “Okay, okay, you win, lemme go already!”

She finally relented with an exaggerated pout. “You never let me have any fun!”

I grimaced and glanced over at Louise and her parents to make sure they didn’t see-

...To notice that all three were looking our way. Duke and Karin were staring, Karin just looking perplexed, Duke with a single raised eyebrow, Louise with both eyebrows raised in surprise and quickly shifting to a very conspiratorial grin which Duke, for but a shadow of a moment, almost seemed to share.

Catt just innocently gave the group a wave and smile.

Gods damn it.

“You be safe, Jophiel.” Catt stated. “I’d be heartbroken if anything happened to you.”

I did my best to not cringe as she turned and started making her way to the family unit, noting that Jakobs didn’t seem to know if he wanted to hate me or pity me right then as he passed me by. I wasn’t sure if it was made it better or worse that Catt clearly knew full well what that looked like out of context and did it deliberately to get a rise out of me.

I glanced over to the front door where Siesta was still standing and gave her an apologetic look, despite her apparently not having been bothered by Catt’s overly affectionate hug, I still felt like I should indicate I wasn’t an entirely willing participant.

Siesta seemed to be deliberately keeping her distance since the morning, oddly enough… Well, not oddly. Seems reasonable that she might be pissed off about my leaving and was just keeping her mouth shut because she wasn’t brave enough to give shit to a Noble-
Actually, that seems entirely too likely, considering it. Fucking hell, I sure am dense as a neutron star, aren’t I?

I shook my head and pinched my brow. I was far too dense to be having to deal with this cross-station relationship shit. Just another thing I’ll have to discuss with the girl when I get back…

Louise finally approached me on her own, a bit of a cheeky grin on her face. “So…” She started. “Everything seems to be in order. Are you ready to head off?” She asked with a brush of her long, strawberry blonde hair that was tied back in a low, loose ponytail. She was wearing a get-up pretty similar to the outfit she was wearing the first time we went to Bruxelles.

“As ready as I can be.” I stated with a shrug. “Have Guiche and Kirche already left?”

She shook her head. “No, they’re still sleeping, as are the rest of the party’s guests.” She gestured to the Familiar stable, which looked about ready to burst at the seams. “As I’m sure you gathered from the sight.”

Sure enough, upon a closer inspection, among the boatloads of assorted creatures, I could see Flame laying on his back on a pile of hay next to Verdandi, Guiche’s giant mole Familiar. Both critters seemed to be sleeping quite soundly.

Along with the rest of the familiares, Fluffles was perched on the roof of the stables, sunning by the looks of it. I’d never gotten very close to him since I arrived. Manticores are intimidating as all Hell. Lucky little bastards. Wish I could be sleeping right now, six in the bloody morning…

“Well,” I yawned. “I suppose there’s little else to do besides be on our way, then.”

Louise nodded. “I said my farewells, as have you apparently…” She stated with a cheeky grin. Ugggh. “So, let’s get going then.”

With one final wave and a round of calls good-bye, we were mounted on Sleipnir and on our way back up the trail leading to Bruxelles and away from the manor. I found myself looking back at it until we crested the hilltop and it was completely out of sight.

Idly, I found myself wondering if I was going to be able to get used to settling down in any one place for more than a month in Halkegania.

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“Oh!” Louise cried out suddenly. “I nearly forgot, again!” Sleipnir was suddenly turning and moving off the main path towards Bruxelles to a much more rough, clearly underutilised trail. “I wanted to stop by here on our way home, but it completely slipped my mind at the time. I definitely don’t want to forget this time!”

“Uh…” I found myself surprised and confused at the sudden turn. “Hold up a minute, mind telling me where we’re going?”

“Kogan Usan.” She stated, almost reverently. “The last stronghold of the dwarves.”

...What. DWARVES!? Holy fuck yes, dwarves are awesome!
“It’s a mere three-quarters of an hour’s trot from the highway. We should still make the deadline with time to spare.” She assured me, not that I needed much assurance.

“By all means.” I half-giggled out as we continued to move towards an apparently dwarven settlement.

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“Hey, Louise…?” I began nervously. “This… Isn’t what I was expecting.” I voiced nervously as we stepped through the exquisitely engraved front gate of the very obviously long since dilapidated stone fortress of a style very different from that which seemed popular among the Tristainians.

“What do you mean?” She asked, though not stopping her march forward as she dug around in her shoulder bag for a moment before grunting in satisfaction and refocusing on the area in front of her.

I sighed wearily in disappointment. “I was kind of expecting to find a thriving settlement. Not a… Ruin.”

“If only…” She sighed as the click-clack of her fine leather boot soles echoed off the overgrown, ages-empty entrance halls, lit up by the massive holes in the ceilings and the glassless windows. “No, you’ll find no dwarves anywhere in all of Halkegania. Not anymore.”

That statement… Did not sound good. “What do you mean?” I asked, dreading the answer.

Louise paused as we passed through a portcullis that looked like it might have held a set of tall doors once and stepped into a massive hall. Everything was still quite overgrown, though nevertheless quite majestic thanks to the immense scale, and the gorgeous engravings that seemed to grace every inch of the stonework of the structure.

“Do you wish to hear the long, or short version?” She asked, her eyes seemingly locked on what appeared to be a stone throne off in the distance, overlooking what was clearly a grand dining hall, its stout stone benches and tables still standing where they’d been set Lord only knew how many ages ago.

“Well… Just tell me what you think is important to know.” I responded, clutching to Derf nervously as I looked around the haunting, empty dwarf fortress.

Louise took a deep breath and sighed before starting.

“Two-thousand years ago, when the Founder landed on the shores of modern Gallia, first his people encountered the elves. They are not terribly important to this story, so I’ll merely note that we were initially allied with them during this time.”

She continued. “After a few months of exploration, the Founder along with his most trusted companions, first encountered the dwarves on the Varyag peninsula, to the south-west of modern Gallia.” She paused for a moment to look around the dining hall, seemingly taking in its vastness and how alien the architecture was compared to human designs.

“The dwarves very quickly grew attached to mankind and took very well to their culture. They made natural, fast allies. There were many years of peace and prosperity between the three races. Decades where humanity rapidly expanded across the land dubbed Halkegania, claimed the territories of Tristain, Gallia, and Romalia… The Elves even gifted to humanity a great floating continent that was
straight out of tales of myth and legend as a show of friendship.”

Sounds like things were going fantastically for Brimir’s people initially. Though, of course…

“Then, something appeared in Varyag. On a completely ordinary day, in the heart of the dwarven territory, a… Abomination which we only know today as the Crimson appeared and began to… Consume all in its path.”

Louise ran her hand over the back of a dusty stone chair remorsefully.

“We aren’t sure precisely where it came from. Some say it emerged from the earth itself, that the Dwarves awakened it in one of their great, deep mines from which their boundless riches poured forth. Others assert that it was an abomination from the stars, that it fell upon the now long-forgotten dwarven city like a great asteroid from the stars above…”

She sighed in melancholy. “Regardless, even the greatest of dwarven spirit mages were only capable of slowing it down. They could not stop its gradual consumption, corruption of the lands of Varyag. Mankind was not about to leave the dwarves, our brethren to their fate.”

She continued. “Brimir’s Kingdom opened its gates wide and ushered those that could escape Varyag within. The King of the Dwarves himself, Dar’Ragnr, was among them, loathe as he was to abandon his lands, Brimir, his greatest friend, convinced him of the importance of his survival.”

We were getting ever closer to the throne, which I could see was terribly worn and overgrown with moss and vines. The sound of our feet echoed off the distant walls with each step, only emphasising how very alone we were in the great structure.

“The war against the Crimson was not going well. Countless square-classes and elven spirit mages were lost to the Crimson. It is said in some versions of the tale that any person that fell to it would raise back up after death and fight among its ranks, their mind lost, but all their magic intact. Eventually, almost all of the peninsula had been claimed by the menace, the very dirt itself corrupted into a terrible bloody hue to suit the great terror’s nature.”

“Soon, it became clear that the war would not be won. Even the combined strength of the humans, elves and dwarves was not enough to push back the Crimson. It seemed as though all hope was lost… But then, Dar’Ragnr, his heart set ablaze at the thought of their allies, the entire world being lost to this horror… He took up his mighty blade, ushered forth any and all dwarves that would follow him, and resolved to march into the heart of the Crimson, to destroy it if it cost the entire species their lives.”

She paused and turned around to face me, making eye contact. I could see that recounting the story was actually upsetting her to no small degree.

“And it did. It was a great, terrible battle, though it is said that Dar’Ragnr took his people, and through sheer ferocity and the will to protect the humans and elves his people had come to think of as family, they pushed to the heart of the Crimson, to the heart of their homeland, and destroyed it. Though at the cost of the lives of all dwarves, and the land of Varyag itself.”

She kept walking towards the throne, and we both came to a stop at the small flight of steps leading to the raised platform on which the throne rested.

“I’m sure you’ve seen a map of Halkegania. You’ve seen it, the pitiful shred of dirt that hangs off of
Gallia… The loss of land was very literal. It was as though the soil itself had become a part of the Crimson, and when the abomination perished and wasted away, the land died and rotted with it, as if it was a part of its body; fading into the Sunset Ocean like dust in the wind…”

She climbed the steps nearly reverently, I followed, and we reached the top to finally come right before the stout stone throne.

“The point being: the dwarves sacrificed themselves to protect man and elf-kind, and in doing so, they utterly erased the threat of the Crimson entirely.” She respectfully lowered herself to her knees and placed a palm on the seat of the squat throne. “We could all only hope to be so selfless, so brave as Dar’Ragnr the Crimson Slayer…”

At that, she closed her eyes, lowered her face, and began… By the sounds of it, praying under her breath. Suppose I’m not the only dwarf fan in the ruin then, huh…

A few minutes passed, at the end of which she stood, reached into her shoulder bag from which she withdrew a small glass bottle filled with a brownish liquid, and set it down among a few other still full, dusty bottles.

“Is that liquor?” I asked curiously.

She nodded. “Yes, I read that the dwarves were very fond of hard drinks, the King especially, so every time I visit his throne, I leave an offering, of sorts. As thanks for the sacrifice, he and his people made for us… And also in hopes that he may look upon me from Valhalla, and bestow upon me even the smallest shred of his strength, so that I may never falter in my aspirations.”

She grimaced slightly.

“It sounds silly, I know-”

“No.” I cut her off. “I get it. Showing respect to those that fell to protect you is nothing to be ashamed of, nor is hoping for them to continue to do so.” If you believe in the afterlife, I added in my mind. “Also, you mentioned that this is the ‘last’ throne of the dwarves? In the middle of Tristain?”

She nodded. “The Founder granted these lands to the dwarves as a token of goodwill after bringing them into the nation. He even helped them construct this fortress…” She looked up and gazed around the massive, dusty and overgrown courtroom/dining hall. “This is the last building the dwarves ever constructed before leaving for their final battle. I’m… Glad that it’s so close to my home, that I’ve been able to come and pay my respects so easily. Though I also wish that it needn’t have been the case that they all perished at the same time…”

We both stood in silence for a few moments, just taking in the majesty of the room, the haunting silence of a hall which surely once held many cheery souls. The Markey, and their descendants must have great respect to have left this entire building untouched for over two-thousand years when it would surely make for a good area to reclaim for the Tristainian military.

Hell, it would even make for a fantastic bandit fortress, you’d think fuckers like that couldn’t care less about respecting the past. But I digress...

I smiled lightly at the tiny blonde. “It’s good that you have respect for the past, and those that passed to ensure your people could still be here to this day. I imagine that not many others can be bothered to stop by here to just pay their respects.”
She gave me an appreciative smile before returning to her feet and dusting off her trousers. “Okay, I think we should get back on the road now. We don’t want to get left behind because we were diddling about in forgotten ruins.”

At that, we made our way back out the fortress. It was just as majestic and awe-inspiring on the way out, though it felt a good deal more bittersweet to notice the rooms I’d previously passed by without a second thought. The last living quarters of a race of selfless heroes…

Maybe I should have asked Louise if they’d have accepted iced tea as an offering.

I shrugged and found myself squinting at the sunlight as we stepped back out into the bright woods surrounding the great structure. Hearing the birds chirping, seeing the little bugs and other insects scurrying about the verdant emerald forest… The Crimson almost sounded like the Flood, or Necromorphs, or even Redlight. A threat that would have consumed all of this, left only a horrid, putrid wasteland in its wake.

But the dwarves prevented that from happening if there is even a lick of truth to the legend. Given this world’s fantastical nature, it didn’t strike me as too far-fetched a tale. That is certainly something worthy of respect.

Louise stopped and turned around to face me as we approached Sleipnir. “I’ve got to go take care of something before we set off again. I’ll be right back.” She immediately started making her way to the dense woods.

“Hold on, shouldn’t I go with-”

“Please don’t.” She called back over her shoulder as she kept moving into the woods where I couldn’t see her-

Oh.

With a shrug and only mild embarrassment at having tried to ask a girl going into the woods to do her business if I should follow her, I opted to address the surprisingly silent greatsword resting on my shoulder.

“So, Derf, I wouldn’t have expected you to remain so quiet during a tale of great war like that.” I stated matter-of-factly.

He was quiet for a few long moments before responding. “There was nothing great about that war.”

...That… Wasn’t what I was expecting to hear. Hold on, how old did Derf say he was again? “…Were you around back then, by any chance?”

There was another long silence. “Yes.”

...I almost felt like I was touching a nerve with how unusually curt he was being with me. Though I had to ask. “You usually seem pretty excitable about battle. Do you really not want to talk about it?”

“No.” Came the immediate response.

...Well, there’s clearly a tale there worth telling, though I’d rather not piss my sword off if I need not
do so. “Alright, forget I asked…”

He didn’t respond to me after that, and the next minute or so was spent in silence as I waited for Louise to come back.

“Much better…” The tiny Norse girl declared as she stepped out of the woods, looking a good deal more relaxed than when she entered. “Now, onwards!” She declared, dramatically pointing down the road. At which point Sleipnir immediately stood up and started ambling off without us. “Wait! No, Sleppy, stop, back! You dumb dog, I wasn’t telling you to go! Sleipnir! BACK!”
Nothing much worth mentioning occurred on the way to Bruxelles. Passed a few other travellers, made extensive idle conversation with Louise, and eventually, we reached the city itself and found ourselves outside the Charming Faeries Inn.

“Didn’t think we’d find ourselves back here so soon,” I stated aloud as Louise stepped out of the newly built on-site kennel, Sleipnir comfortably secured inside.

She nodded as she responded. “Yeah, I’d supposed we wouldn’t come through here until the academy was reopened at least… Business seems to be booming, regardless.” She stated as another round of cheers came from within the now twice-sized building’s interior.

“Yup,” I drawled back. “Guess investing in the place was a wise move after all,” I said while approaching the front door. Upon reaching it I could see through the inset glass window that the place was packed, the Faeries running to and fro, customers filled every stall, and a jaunty tune could be heard emanating from within. “Thank God the place is busy tonight, I’d hate to have to put up with being mobbed by the girls again.”

Louise scoffed at that. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

I was about to open the door when I stopped and gave Louise an annoyed look, though I shook my head and let it lay. We had more important things to tend to.

The volume of the cheerful tavern music increased when I swung the door open, as did the happy shouts and cheers.

In stark contrast to how it’d been the last time we’d visited, the tavern was abuzz with activity. There didn’t appear to be a spare seat in the house, and the girls looked to be quite busy as it was. All faces were smiling, mugs and glasses were clinking together, and the atmosphere was a rather joyful one overall.

I directed my gaze to the main counter to find Jessica speaking to one of the Faeries, and started moving towards her to get our room for the night booked.

Her smile turned positively radiant once she noticed me approaching. “Boss!” She cried out with wide open arms. “Just the perfect time to visit!” She declared, catching me in a hug that I really should have seen coming. “Look at all these customers! And it’s like this most nights too! We’re raking in so much money, and being connected to such a prestigious noble family keeps boorish types at bay!”

She gave me a squeeze before backing off and beaming up at me for a moment before grabbing my wrist and pulling me towards the back room, away from the rambunctious crowds.

“Glad to see business is going so well.” I started, looking around to see Louise following us in. “Anyways, we’ll be spending the night, no time for fun either; leaving early on in the morning.”

Louise nodded as she stepped astride me. “We have things to tend to in private, so hurry along and get our keys.”
I suppressed a grimace at Louise’s rudeness towards Jessica, while she just smiled obediently before turning and calling out to another room further back. “New girl! Come here!”

A few moments passed before light footfalls came speeding towards us and entered the room. Short, sharp Nordic features, chin-length ginger hair and large sky blue eyes. I couldn’t help but smile at the sight of the familiar teenage girl rushing into the room, looking a mite dishevelled as she rested her hands on her knees catching her breath, but otherwise in good health.

“You’re getting faster when I call you, that’s good. Maybe we’ll be able to make a Faerie out of you yet!” Jessica teasingly declared. “You recall where the room keys are kept, correct?”

“Y-yes ma’am, under the counter, in the safe behind the false wall…” Lagartha stated, still bent over and catching her breath. Just what had she been up to when Jessica called her over?

“Excellent… And where are your manners? We have a very special pair of guests today!” Jessica lightheartedly chided.

At that Lagartha turned ramrod-straight and looked right at Louise and me, focused entirely on me, then turned *neon* red before she sharply bowed with a squeal.

...Well, suppose I should have seen that coming. Oh well. A teenaged girl developing a crush on someone that saved and protected her is hardly a surprise, and something she’ll get over eventually. Nothing worth getting worked up over. “Good to see that you wound up being hired here after all.”

She nodded without replying, face still directed firmly at the floor.

“You know this commoner?” Louise asked me with a quirked eyebrow.

“Yes,” I started with a nod. “Her name is Lagartha, she tried to help me track down that mugger I chased into the slums last time we were here.”

Louise redirected her gaze towards the still bowing, now the slightly quivering girl that was the current subject of discussion. “I see. You are deserving of praise for aiding a Noble in his duties of protecting the smallfolk. Too many commoners are quick to hide away when criminals flee from justice.”

...She was actually praising the girl. I mean, she was nice enough to her own family’s subjects, but this is the nicest I’ve seen Louise be to a non-household commoner. She even just mostly ignores Siesta back at the manor…

Lagartha was silent for a beat before responding. “T-thank you, mi’lady…” She said nothing else after that.

“Well, go on!” Jessica ordered after a bit of an awkward pause. “Our guests need their room key!”

The redhead squeaked and scurried off to the front, presumably to grab our keys.

“Well,” Jessica continued. “I apologise, Noble Lords, we’ve been almost completely booked lately, we only have one room to spare, so you’ll have to share a bed tonight.” She stated apologetically. “Furthest room on the far right at the end of the second floor.”

I shrugged. Not that big a deal, unless the bed is actually too small to fit the both of us, in which case
I’d just sleep on the floor.

Louise sighed off to the side. “Well, if we must…”

An annoyance, but nothing worth getting worked up over, really.

“Incidentally, mi’lord,” Jessica spoke up after Lagartha was out of the room. “Have you been receiving notifications of your share of the income being deposited into your bank account?”

I blinked, then turned to Louise for answers. “W-why are you looking at me? I’d assumed you were speaking to father about that!” She asserted.

...Well, I sure am stupid. “I suppose we should stop by the bank and check that out then,” I stated with a shrug. Louise sighed and nodded in affirmation.

Jessica smiled coyly. “I believe you’ll be quite pleased, mi’lord. Business has been good lately.” She chuckled at that. “The bank should still be open if mi’lord and lady would like to check themselves?”

Louise hummed with a finger raised to her lips. “After we’ve checked our room.” She stated, giving me an aside look.

I nodded, and at that Lagartha rushed back into the room. “I-I’m sorry for the wait milords, I forgot the combination again…” She whined as she presented the key to me, face firmly affixed on the floor.

“Ah my, I’m beginning to think you may not be front desk material, Laggie.” Jessica stated with a sigh as I took the key from the girl, who shuddered when my fingers brushed against her palm. “You’re cute enough to be the first thing customers see when they enter the Inn, though making customers wait because you can’t remember how to open the safe isn’t ideal…”

The redhead gave Jessica a despairing look.

Jessica sighed, again. “Maybe a greeter…? Oh, well, that talk can come later. I doubt the Boss is interested in hearing the intricacies of the business and employee training.”

“I know nothing about running a business and opt to keep my ignorant opinions out of the picture when you’re clearly doing such a good job of it on your own,” I stated dryly.

Jessica smiled widely and girlishly bowed. “You are too kind, mi’lord.” She stated. I imagine she’d be a little relaxed with her response had Louise not been present…

I nodded to her. “Well, I suppose we ought to move along then. Keep up the good work, girls.” I stated with a wave as Louise and I proceeded back to the front room and towards the stairs.

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I supposed we should be glad that even one room was still free considering how busy the inn was, but still, I hadn’t shared a room with Louise since my first night in Halkegania… Granted, thanks to the runes and familiar bond it was unlikely to be as awkward or uncomfortable as that night, no hormones on either side to weird things up, but I just preferred to have a room to myself.

“Okay,” Louise started as she sat on the bed which would probably just be able to hold the both of
us. “So, let’s go over the plan again, just to review.”

I nodded and claimed one of the actually quite nice chairs at the small provided table.

“Tomorrow, we head to la Rochelle, meet up with the others, then proceed to Albion.” She took a breath before continuing. “Once we land, we’re to proceed to Newcastle however we can and retrieve the Princess’s Memory Orb from Prince Wales…”

I nodded. “With luck, we won’t run into any Crusaders along the way…” I stated with a grimace.

Louise grimaced herself. “Neo-Crusaders.” She asserted.

“What, why does the ‘Neo’ bit matter?” I asked.

“Because Crusaders are warriors that act in the interests of upholding the Founder’s Will. The Neo-Crusaders are a glorified band of revolutionaries that espouse assertions of righteousness while acting against the Founder’s Will and without his blessing.” She stated, looking as if she’d bit down on a lemon. “Honestly, it’s a travesty that they hold the title of ‘Crusaders’ in any capacity…”

“The Founder’s Will?” I asked.

“For the Noble class to one day reclaim the Holy Lands - Brimiria, from the clutches of the Elves that betrayed us two millennia ago, and in doing so lead the Commoners and all future generations of Humanity to salvation.”

She looked disgusted and started speaking through clenched teeth as she continued.

“There was a dark period of Halkeganian history where the great nations fought amongst ourselves in total war, and nearly lost everything as a result. These revolutionaries are harbingers of a return to that era when we’d turned our wands inwards and were nearly overtaken by the Elves as a result. Those fucking scum claim to be acting for the smallfolk, but they’re only opportunistic wild dogs that are going to abuse and take advantage of the common class the moment they’ve secured their position on the throne of Albion!”

She grew silent for a few moments before she whispered her next statement, still through clenched teeth.

“Wild dogs that have only got as far as they have because of the neglectful actions of a weak, selfish King…”

It took me a moment to process what she just said, and with enough passion that it caused her to curse aloud.

I… Didn’t expect Louise to be the type to criticise royalty under any circumstances. I suppose she really does take the concept of Noblesse oblige seriously if it’ll sour her opinion of a monarch if they aren’t living up to those ideals.

“You… seem to have no respect for Albion’s King.” I stated nervously.

“He is worthy of no respect.” Louise immediately asserted with fire in her voice. “The Nobility’s obligation is to tend to the Commoners in return for their labour, tithe and loyalty. He demanded their labour, tithe, and loyalty, but made no effort to support them in turn! He gave them ample reason to
latch onto the Neo-Crusaders once they reared their manipulative-!

Louise stopped, looking as if she had bit her tongue, and was quiet for a time before speaking up again.

“...We are better than the Commoners, we are inherently *more* than they are, far more suited to leadership and guardianship than they, and that is why we must guide them, as a Wolf guides their cubs. Without us, they would be easy prey to the likes of wild monsters and the Elves, virtually defenceless on their own, and far too many seem to believe that this gives reason to abuse them when the Founder’s words brook *no* interpretation on the matter of Noblesse oblige.”

She looked up and made eye contact with me as she concluded her rant.

“We are their Shepherds. Shepherds do not bring harm to their flock.”

Silence hung for a few moments before I responded. “That is a very commendable way of looking at things. I’m glad you feel that way.” I said with a small smile, which she returned at my positive reaction.

Of course, I was only telling her the half truth. Her heart was in the right place, that much was clear, but... Inherently superior to Commoners? Just as a matter of course? The idea left a sour taste in my mouth. Least of all because, well... Objectively, she wasn’t wrong.

A common girl like Siesta could do nothing to defend herself against an Orc, but Kirche could turn one into a pile of ash. Halkegania is only as safe as it is because of the Noble class, Commoners just didn’t have any means to suppress threats like Orcs, Dragons, Griffons, and all other numerous fantastic creatures that inhabit this land and prey upon people...

...I still believe that a more democratic form of Governance could work here. But I hold no ability to enact such a change. This is the kind of world that Alfheim is, and I’m not changing that, no matter how much I dislike the immense class gap between the Commoners and Nobility.

Besides, if Louise is at all representative of how the majority think in Halkegania... Well, the land could be significantly worse off than living under benevolent monarchs.

Besides, Germania is a constitutional monarchy, and Hibernia a Republic. There’s hope for this world in that regard considering that.

I nodded and made a note to not forget the ‘Neo’ bit from then on. “Okay, so, that aside. Think there’s any chance of running afoul of the Neo-Crusaders on our way to Newcastle?”

Louise sighed. “Almost certainly. They’re infesting Albion like cockroaches now, we’ll surely meet a fair few on our way to the royal loyalists.”

“And before we head off to Albion?” I clarified.

“Not unless there was a traitor among us when the Princess gave us the mission.” She responded with a sigh. “We ought to be free of those scum until we reach the sky-borne Isle.”

I nodded. “Alright... Think it might be prudent to disguise ourselves, regardless?”

Louise looked thoughtful for a moment before shaking her head. “There wouldn’t be much point. It
isn’t as though either of us will be known as agents of the Crown… And it would be extremely
difficult to disguise you as a Halkeganian native. I don’t even think we would be able to pass you off
as a half-Gerudo…”

I shrugged. “It was worth suggesting, at least.”

She sighed. “Well, the plan isn’t terribly complicated, so I suppose there isn’t really much else to go
over for now.” She voiced as she stood and nodded towards the door.

I stood myself and made my way for the door, supposing that it was time to go check out the bank. I
pulled it open and-

Blinked in surprise to see a flash of ginger hair whip around the corner leading down the stairs.

…Huh, guess Lagartha was tending to chores up here and just got called back down by Jess.

“Jophiel?” Louise spoke up, evidently noticing the way I’d froze in place.

“Oh, nothing. Just noticed one of the Faeries heading down the stairs.” I opened the door the rest of
the way and motioned for her to step through. “To the bank, I presume?”

“The bank first, yes.” She responded dryly. “Then to the armourer. It would be wise to see how your
commission is coming along.”

Ah… Right, I’d forgotten about that. “Right. Let’s get going before it gets too late then.”
“Well, thank you for your patronage, I guess.” The somewhat perplexed armourer stated as we stepped out of the shop, my new mostly complete plated chain shirt now adorning my torso, only somewhat looser around the belly than it should have been thanks to my recent exercise.

Luckily I hadn’t been terribly overweight to begin with, just a little extra winter padding, so it shouldn’t get much looser in the coming weeks.

“Are you sure you’re okay with wearing armour that’s missing most of a sleeve?” Louise asked with a dubious expression on her face.

I just shrugged. “With the way Shock Jockey works, I probably wouldn’t want the sleeve covering the entirety of my left arm anyways.” I stated as I stretched my arms to make sure I still had a full range of motion in them both with the chain armour on.

The metallic armour itself didn’t seem to restrict my motion much at all, luckily enough. A belt worn tightly around the waist was enough to compensate for the now loose midsection as well.

Of course, I’d forgotten to order padding to wear underneath it and had to make do with buying a cheapo used gambeson vest that by sheer dumb luck happened to just be big enough to fit me.

And the helmet… Well, only once I’d handled it did I realise that I’d made an enormous mistake in modeling it after a German stahlhelm.

Stahlhelms were designed to deflect bullets, not blades or hammers, and they were made of steel because steel could occasionally deflect some bullets. Mythril, on the other hand, was only good enough to deflect low-velocity pistol rounds, and only if they hit at just the right angle…

So yeah, dumb mistake.

Also, turns out that after collecting my earnings from the bank on top of the inn’s income I was able to afford a padded hood and a maille coif to wear under the helm as well, and at the end of the day it was a layer of metal between me and any incoming blows, even if it wasn’t shaped very well for melee combat...

“Oh… I suppose.” The tiny blonde responded as she played with the ends of her shirt sleeves. “It’s a good thing the armourer enchanted the rings and plates before he started linking them together. You wouldn’t have wanted to be wearing hot chain and padding while travelling.”

“No kidding.” I responded cheerfully. “I’d not even considered how uncomfortably sweltering properly padded armour would get over long periods. Air conditioning will be a life-saver.”

“Air whationing?” Louise asked with a cocked eyebrow.

“Ah, it’s what my people call the act of cooling a room. Fits well enough for the heat-sapping effect the enchantment has on the maille.”

“Oh, I see.” Louise nodded in understanding. “Well that aside, let’s look into topping off our rations, then we’ll head back to the inn and rest for the night. Otherwise, there isn’t much we have to worry
about this evening.

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The night had gone by quietly, the bed had been cramped, though the familiar bond completely negated any potential feelings of awkwardness hormones might have produced and allowed us to snuggle up fairly comfortably without concern.

Doubly so after Derf had been wrapped up and locked in the closet to silence his crass attempts at humour once Louise and I had both realised neither of us were at all bothered by physical closeness.

Jessica was disappointed when we were true to our word and took off at first light, but made no fuss about it. I mentioned that Siesta might be coming by, and that seemed to cheer her up a fair bit.

Before we set off, we stopped by the post office... Place, whatever it was called, I didn't actually ask, and sent the scope blueprints to Colbert using a messenger bird. He'd have it by the end of the day, if even that. Whether he actually did anything with it was up to him, but I imagine he'd appreciate the engineering of it regardless.

Otherwise, nothing much happened as we set off down the road and towards La Rochelle on our rented droogs, Maximilian, a big black beast, and Ser Scruffles, an equally large white brute, Louise obviously not wanting to bring Sleipnir all the way on such a dangerous journey.

Louise, as it turned out, had packed her own maille vest (also enchanted to sap heat) before we'd left the estate, and had thrown it on under her travelling cloak once we’d set off just in case. “You look like a proper Noble warrior now, all armoured up the way you are.” She declared, looking aside at me on my own droog.

Indeed, I was already huge by Halkeganian standards to begin with. Encased in armour and hefting a sword damn near as long as the average Halkeganian was tall along with a nearly ornamental shield, I cut quite the imposing figure perched atop my giant mutt.

“And it’s actually keeping me pretty cool, which is pretty darned nice.” The brim of the stahlhelm was also keeping the sun well out of my eyes, which was very much appreciated as well.

“Mm... We should only be a few hours out from La Rochelle now. How long do you figure we’ll have to be waiting for Guiche and Kirche to arrive?” She asked as she looked around the environment, which seemed to be steadily growing more rocky as we moved forth.

I shrugged. “No idea... So, what’s La Rochelle like as a settlement, anyways?”

“Well, it’s an airport city. The airport itself is built around a massive tree which rests on a small mountain peak that was a thriving dwarven settlement in the Founder’s era.” She responded.

“It’s a dwarven town?” I asked excitedly.

“It was founded by dwarves, and many of the original structures that had been hewn from the mountain side were mined out by the original dwarven settlers, though these days the majority of infrastructure is human-made, and with good reason! The tallest of dwarves were said to only come up to my shoulders!”

She chuckled aloud.
“I can only imagine what it would be like, to encounter a fully grown man and for there to be as much difference in height between us as there is between you and I…” She actually snorted that time.

So the tallest of dwarves would only come up to like, halfway up my chest. Should be expected, but that means that Halkeganian dwarves are even shorter than Tolkien dwarves, given that the tallest in Tolkien lore could get up to Louise’s height, if I was remembering correctly.

“So, the dwarven buildings tend to go unused outside of storage. Their ceilings are rather shorter than most humans find comfortable, after all.” The blonde continued. “La Rochelle has kept a rich culture of stone cutting inherited by the dwarves, however. The finest stoneware comes from local artisans. The academy’s tableware in particular is shipped down from the mountain, made from local materials.”

Ah, I was wondering where they got their gorgeous plates…

Louise continued. “The Headmaster hails from La Rochelle as well, if I am remembering correctly.”

My brows perked up at that. “That so? I’d never considered where he was born, now that I think about it…”

“Mmhm…” Louise hummed melodically. “Alright, it would be wise to pause and allow our droogs a spell to rest.” She pointed at a crude wooden sign stuck in the ground off to the side of the trail. “That sign indicates that we’re near a local stream used to water mounts. They’ll know where it is and I’ll be able to summon them back at will, so we can take the chance to stretch our legs and rest our rears.”

“Oh, praise be for that.” I sighed in relief as Louise brought her dog to a halt, and mine followed suit. Louise had been quick to teach me how to properly sit on a droog’s back, but that didn’t mean it didn’t eventually get uncomfortable.

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We’d removed the beasts’ burdens and allowed them to bound off towards the stream a good fifteen minutes ago, and we had settled down on a simple stone bench to await their return after taking some time to stretch the kinks out of our stiff muscles.

“So,” I started. “You mentioned that La Rochelle is built around a giant tree?”

“The airport is.” She corrected me quickly. “An archtree. It is said that when the Founder first arrived here, he and his subjects believed they’d happened upon the World Tree itself until the dwarves had informed them of how common the great logs actually are when one leaves the beaten path.”

She chuckled a tad.

“Regardless, they’ve become somewhat sacred since then, often associated with said World Tree and generally left unmolested for that reason.”

I nodded, finding the bit of evolved Norse mythology quite intriguing. “That sounds quite interesting! What else-”
“Partner, Blondie.” Derf suddenly and unexpectedly cut me off. “Arm yourselves, we’ve got company.”

Though I hesitated somewhat from surprise at the declaration, I quickly jumped to my feet and hefted Derf to my shoulder, raising the Mirror shield as I did so with Louise stepping up alongside me with her wand drawn.

“Greetings and salutations, my good noble lords!” Came a voice I could only describe as greasy as all hell from the trees surrounding the path on both sides. The bench had been set in the middle of a clearing, next to the trail, and it quickly became clear that we’d been surrounded.

There had to have been sixteen, at least. They were wearing heavily worn gambesons, armed with assorted axes, spears, clubs, crossbows, and even a few swords. They were giving us wordless, intimidating stares, a few from behind veiled visored helmets masking their features save for their eyes.

The apparent leader, the man with the greasy voice was wearing a full cloak and a feature-obscuring opera mask which… Had unnatural shadows hiding his face.

“An enchanted mask…” Louise breathed in an annoyed tone. “This man is no common bandit.”

“An astute girl, as one would expect out of such an esteemed noble!” The man declared with an exaggerated, obviously mocking bow. “How lucky us lowly smallfolk are to have our unworthy ears graced by your heavenly voice, my lady!”

So, Neo-Crusaders, then. Should have seen this coming.

Louise notably didn’t deign to dignify that with a response.

“Oh my, did I offend my lady’s gentle ears with my crass, lesser tones?” He asked in a mock-horrified candour.

I was quickly losing my temper before the runes flared to life and I found my emotions completely leveling out.

“Well, I offer the most sincere of apologies and would humbly offer up my head as recompense… though, I have an objective I must tend to before I may venture forth from this mortal realm.” He finished coolly.

Leader: no weapons, stance suggests no combat training, not an immediate threat, low-priority.

Others: lightly armed and armoured, nothing to indicate mages, no threat to me, moderate threat to Louise, high-priority…

“A sudden crash caught my attention, our droogs bounding out of the woods leading towards the
stream. They stopped dead in their tracks once they’d noticed the interlopers, and at the sight of the beasts two bandits immediately broke formation and fled in the opposite direction.

“Wh-what the Hel are you doing!?” The masked leader demanded.

“Dealing with great hounds wasn’t part of the fuckin’ deal!” One of the fleeing men declared without breaking stride moments before disappearing into the woods.

The remaining men who had managed to hold formation were nonetheless looking quite intimidated by the presence of the pair of giant dogs, and with good reason. The droogs had started slowly padding their way between us and the bandits, their heads lowered, ears pressed back, teeth bared and had started growling.

Dogs the size of bears, hunched over and growling in their deep, guttural voices. I swear, I could almost feel them growling as much as I could hear them, and I was reminded that their claws were each the size of karambits.

“No man wants to tangle with a dog that can crush a skull in its jaws, after all…” Louise stated to my side with a smirk.

Danger’s been even further negated. Virtually no serious threat.

I stepped forward, readying Derflinger.

“...Jophiel are you-?” Louise spoke up, I could see a look of concern on her face in my peripheral vision, but there were targets to deal with.

“RIP AND TEAR!” The spirit sword gleefully announced as I launched myself at the closest sellsword. His eyes grew wide as time seemed to dilate slightly, and he didn’t even have the chance to react before I threw a full-force punch at his face using the edge of my shield.

A sickening crack and meaty squelch filled the air, at once I knew the first target was down, and I redirected my momentum to the next nearest bandit.

He’d had the chance to raise his shield in desperation, and one mighty swing of Derflinger’s steel blade clove through the bronze shield with ease, passing through and bisecting him from neck to hip.

Screams of terror and sadistic laughter cascaded around me as warm blood splattered on my face and coated my chortling blade. Two targets eliminated, twelve remaining.

Wasting no time, I threw the Mirror Shield at a highwayman off to my side as I leapt for another ahead of me. The sound of metal tearing through flesh echoed in the background as I counted down to eleven an instant before I caught my target by the throat with my now free hand.

Hefting the target into the air, I picked another of the mercenaries and cast my improvised meat missile at him with as much force as I could muster.

The sounds of shattering bones could barely be made out over Derflinger’s maniacal laughter as the remaining nine then started to react, only to be beset upon by the droogs.

Maximilian caught his prey by his unhelmeted head in his jaws with a mighty leap and a loud crunch followed before the droog hit the ground and the man was flung around like a rag doll, his body
went flying sans the head still held in the mighty hound’s great maw.

Ser Scruffles caught his prey by the leg, and dragged him along for a moment before pouncing on another mercenary that uselessly swung his club at the dog, which did not seem to bother it in the slightest.

In a few instances the man’s gambeson had been torn to shreds by the beast’s karambit-like claws, followed quickly by large chunks of his flesh.

The dog then dropped the first man he’d been carrying to tear out his grounded prey’s throat before turning his attention to the injured man that was now trying to drag himself away from the bear-like monster.

With six remaining, I shifted my attention to a bandit armed with a crossbow who had just loosed a bolt at Maximilian, missed, and was struggling to rearm his clunky, primitive weapon.

I called upon Shock Jockey, and with one thrust of my arm the man dropped with a horrible thunderclap and flash of lightning. His skin was charred black and exploded at the point of impact from the sudden influx of pure electrical energy.

With five left, I heard a distinct noise overhead. The sound of immense flapping wings moments before one man’s head exploded in a shower of gore with a distinct sonic boom, as if he’d been hit by a .50 BMG round.

Then with a terrified scream, another was effortlessly lifted off the ground by what looked like a great white bird.

In another instant, a familiar man in a wide-brimmed hat and cloak touched down on the dirt road and thrust his sword towards one of the four remaining bandits. With another thunderclap the bandit’s shoulder exploded as if hit by another anti-tank bullet.

Makes sense that Wardes would be capable of casting Wind Spears.

“Bandit scum!” He declared as he deftly parried the sword of a woman that’d charged him and quickly drew his blade across her neck before kicking her away from his person. “Pholus,” He declared as he went to confronting another. “Louise!”

I turned to face her and- She was dueling the last target!

I immediately prepared myself to tackle the wretch to the ground...

But Louise beat me to it, and with the man apparently stunned she lifted her solid iron wand above her head, and started furiously bringing it down upon the man’s unarmoured face while straddling him.

She was screaming like a banshee as she did it. Her eyes aflame with terror and rage as the man’s skull began to give way to the wand built like a fighting baton and her face began to show speckles of the man’s own blood, launched back at her by the brutal, furious assault on her assailant.

She stopped moments before the shredded body of the man the griffon had picked up slammed into the grassy field with a wet and meaty crack.
“It is done.” Derflinger all but whispered in satisfaction.

Silence hung in the air as the griffon landed alongside Wardes, and the droogs, apparently sensing no more danger, flopped down on the ground, panting heavily with their muzzles and immense front paws now stained red with blood.

Louise’s eyes were wide, and unfocused as she panted heavily, her breath coming in ragged heaves as she stared at the man whose skull she’d just caved in.

Wardes and I both were about to move to her, when a pathetic whimper could be heard off to the side of the road. The droog’s ears perked up at the sound, though they didn’t stand from their spots, nor did the griffon move to attack.

It was the man I’d thrown. By the looks of it, he seemed to have been paralyzed by the way his lower body was completely still with his head rolling about in a panic.

I stood and pointed to the bandit with my free hand. “They’re working for the Neo-Crusaders. Their leader all but admitted as such—” The leader!

I immediately spun around, looking for any sign of him… Seemed as though he ran the moment I attacked. Smart bastard.

“...Before he fled, by the looks of it.” I finished levely. Where the runes not keeping my emotions level, I might have sounded annoyed at that.

Wardes marched over to the crippled sellsword, and pinned him down by his neck, harshly pressing down on him with his sturdy riding boot. “Who is your commander, where would he have fled?” He demanded quite calmly. After a few moments he relieved pressure on the crippled man’s neck.

He coughed violently as he attempted to catch his breath before speaking. “W-we don’t know who he is—!” He hissed in pain, trying to compose himself before continuing. “W-work’s been slow lately, we normally just sell our blades to the noblefolk, but we needed the money real bad! P-please mi’Lord, I can’t feel my body, have mercy-!”

With a thrust of his spellsword, a hole was violently punched through the sellsword’s skull, as if he’d just been shot point-blank with a .45, and Wardes grimaced as he wiped the blow-back from the tip of his blade with the mercenary’s cloak. I’d noticed him doing that earlier… The blade itself must be enchanted to project Wind Spears when it’s thrust.

“J-Jean-Jacques!” Louise sounded shocked as she clambered to her feet, her eyes wide as dinner plates. “H-he was beaten, and begging for mercy-!”

“He was a bandit aiming to prey on others, then an invalid, then useless to us.” He immediately cut back.

He sheathed his blade with a light flourish before continuing.

“And despite what many would say, I’ve yet to see a shred of evidence to suggest that a tortured man’s word can be trusted. If he was to tell us anything useful, he’d have done it with merely the threat of harm, so keeping him alive and interrogating him would have accomplished nothing.”

The silverfox sighed before continuing.
“We have more important things to do than worry about the kind of scum that would attack travellers for coin regardless. The Storm Lord understands, I’m sure.” He stated motioning towards me.

I simply nodded once, not feeling the need to rock the boat as it were.

Louise looked a little shaken, regardless. “B-but…”

“Louise,” Wardes started, his tone growing softer. “Remember our duty. Noblesse oblige. Do you believe these men would have limited their banditry to Nobles? Or might they have decided that a farmer’s meagre bounty was worth claiming for themselves, at less than a tenth of the risk of attacking one of our kind?”

Louise was pensive for a time, then looked down at her wand, the tip still bloodied from having been used as a bludgeon not two minutes earlier. “I… I…” She suddenly started running down the road towards La Rochelle, but quickly came to an equally sudden stop with her shoulders now heaving and her entire body trembling.

Even with the runes suppressing my emotions, I could tell was only just having the effect have having taken her first life hit her. I deactivated Shock Jockey, jogged up to her and set my now free hand on her shoulder… Wardes wasn’t far behind and pulled her in close with a one-armed hug.

Were it not for the runes keeping my emotions flat, I’d surely have found myself shooting a glare at the man for acting so familiar with her when I was supposed to be her best friend and guardian.

“You did nothing wrong, Louise. Do not be swayed by the cries of the guilty, for they would show no such mercy to their victims. Think of the commoners he would have harmed in the future had you not stopped him now.” He consoled her as I released her shoulder and he pulled her into a tighter hug.

Wardes was doing a better job of comforting her, as he would with the runes still keeping me from feeling much as it was. So I went about recollecting the Mirror Shield and ensuring that there were no other men suffering needlessly.

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A quick round proved that save for the man I’d crippled, the mercenaries-turned bandits had all met quick, and in the case of those that faced the droogs and the griffon, gruesome deaths. I made a point to cover as many as I could with their own cloaks and settled for covering their faces with rags when I ran out of said cloaks.

The runes had started to power down by that point, and the weight of my actions were… Not really hitting me as hard as they should have been. Honestly, if anything I just felt… Numb. That probably wasn’t a good sign, but we had too much shit going on for me to worry about that right then.

Still, I had noticed but previously wasn’t at all bothered by all the… Gore that the fight had left. There was blood and… Bits strewn about everywhere. Most of it coming from the victims of the animals, but… I’d still brutalized a few men myself.

There was a single woman among them, the one that had attacked Wardes directly. It said a lot about Halkeganian culture that a woman would be among mercenaries, or highwaymen, or bandits or whatever they were, and be as well armed and armoured as the men.
Once I’d finished covering the faces of the bodies, and reunited the severed head with its body, it occurred to me that in any video game I’d have instead been looting their bodies for goodies… Funny how that thought took so long to enter my mind, and it only elected a powerful feeling of disgust over anything else.

These were men and women that had lives and families, not computer-generated NPC’s. Even if they had resorted to banditry… There was nothing to gain in stealing from their bodies, and much to lose in doing so.

I quickly gave the resting droogs thankful pats for helping us in the fight, and gave the albino griffon with the poofy line-like mane a respectful berth before turning to my allies.

Wardes was giving me a… Respectful look as I approached him and Louise, my personal task completed, such as it were.

He then spoke up. “Perhaps I shouldn’t be surprised, that the Storm Lord would be such a mighty warrior. I doubt you’d even have needed my or the hound's help in that scuffle.”

He glanced at the bodies down the road quickly.

“It is good that you are so able. Though it is not good that Louise had been attacked by one, you have done much to assure me that you are more than fit to be her guardian.”

He paused with a grimace.

“Though the laughing seemed… Unnecessary.” He finished.

“He wasn’t the one that was laughing, pretty boy.” Derf stated from my shoulder.

Wardes’ eyes bulged out for a moment before he recovered. “A Spirit Sword… Treasure that blade, Lord Pholus. Such weapons are objects of myth and legend.”

Derf didn’t respond to that, and I opted to just move on from talking about him. “Just did what was necessary…” Louise wasn’t saying much, her face buried in Wardes’ chest.

Seeing little reason to dance around the subject, I’d decided we’d best review the situation, such as it was.

“The Neo-Crusaders know of our mission, or at least that we intend to travel to Albion by the order of the Princess… How?” I asked, slightly frustrated.

Wardes seemed deep in thought before he spoke up. “What specifics had their leader mentioned before he fled from the battle? And furthermore, what did he look like?”

I responded easily enough. “As I said, he seemed to only be aware of the most absolute basics of our mission: that we are heading for Albion by the Princess- Or rather by the Crown’s order… He was wearing an enchanted mask as well. We couldn’t see his face at all.”

Wardes sighed. “Of course he’d keep his face covered… Well, that suggests at least that we have no double-agents among us, else he’d know the details of the mission already… Perhaps he overheard someone speaking of our objectives publically?” He suggested.
Louise finally pulled back to speak up. “I could see either Guiche or Kirche getting drunk and letting their tongues slip while consorting with a stranger…” She stated in a sour tone.

I nodded and interjected. “The man seemed to be fairly well-spoken as well. Much more so than a commoner would be, for damned sure.”

Wardes groaned. “I’d heard tales of the behaviour of lady Augusta and lord Armand… It’s entirely possible that one of them did say something to one of the nobles attending the party, who would then turn out to be a Neo-Crusader agent…”

Louise growled at that as her brow furrowed. “I knew we shouldn’t have let Kirche in on the plan, she must have coaxed that man into her guest chambers and boasted of the mission to impress him…”

Wardes didn’t seem impressed at that statement. “Now, Louise, we do not know for certain that is what happened. For all we know the Princess herself was not careful enough with her words in seeming privacy…” Louise looked ready to vehemently and angrily protest that statement before Wardes continued speaking. “And I might inform you that I’ve heard Lady Augusta is not the only one that is known to enjoy the company of men.”

...Wait, what?

Louise seemed to share my reaction if the way she looked up at Wardes in surprise was any indication. “G-Guiche likes-? I never thought-”

“That is what I have heard among the more gossipy members of the higher class that have been associated with his family, my lady, is all that I am saying. So if that is what happened, Lady Augusta may not be the one at fault.” Wardes stated somewhat wearily.

...Well, okay then. “Okay, so Guiche might be bisexual, noted. Can we move onto more pressing matters?” I asked, not really caring what the fop got up to in the privacy of his own bedroom at the end of the day.

“Such as how we still have a mission, and are burning daylight.” Wardes stated firmly. “Louise, it would be best for us to get moving again. We haven’t the time to try chasing down this agent, and can only hope that we will beat his word to Albion.”

She nodded as she stepped back. “R-right… Okay, I’ll be fine… I think…” She looked like a ghost, actually. Which was saying something considering how pale her natural complexion was to begin with.

The soldier’s expression grew soft once again. “Perhaps it would be wise for you to ride with me, Louise. You are still quite pale.”

Louise seemed ready to protest, but then just let her shoulders fall in exhausted defeat. “Very well…” She sounded quite beaten down…

I spoke up then. “You can talk to one of us after we’ve met up with the others, at the inn. For now we have to get moving.”

“Lord Pholus is right, Louise.” Wardes stated as he called his griffon over. It sauntered over on its
hind legs and clawed wings, hunched over like a terrifying predator.

I really wasn’t expecting local griffons to be so… *Beastial*. They were typically portrayed as regal as fuck in fantasy.

Wardes continued speaking. “La Rochelle is not far, I shall be able to invigorate the hounds on the way there, so that we may proceed at a clip to make up for lost time. He stated as he mounted the great half-feline bird of prey, and held a hand out towards Louise.

Once she was also mounted in front of him and started idly petting the feline-bird's mane, Wardes seemed to cast a spell on the both of them, and it was only then that I realised the griffon didn’t have a saddle…

“How do you stay mounted while flying?” I asked, somewhat concerned.

“The spell I just cast will keep us both firmly affixed to Whitewing’s back unless I will otherwise.” He stated matter-of-factly. “Now mount your droog, Lord Pholus. It is time that we proceed onwards to La Rochelle.”
Trophy Husband

Chapter Notes

I wrote this with the cooperation of fellow SI author Fission Battery, this is absolutely canon just to get that out of the way. Enjoy the extra reading material and world building.

“Is there anything else you would like today, master?” The beautiful young commoner girl asked with a smile so sweet it could melt the hearts of the hardest of men. Of course, considering I was no particularly hard man in spite of my history, it had quite an effect on me, all things considered.

I waved off her question with a jovial smile. “No no my dear, that is quite alright.” Though in all honesty, I would have been quite happy for miss Helena to remain in sight, I was there at the Charming Faerie’s Inn for a reason… “If you see a tall dark-haired man enter, please direct him to me, if you’ll please.”

She smiled even further. “Of course master! Don’t hesitate to summon me again should you desire anything!” With that the gorgeous young blonde woman with her tantalizingly short pink skirt and shoulderless top sashayed off to serve the other customers, and I turned my focus back to the vellum sheet in front of me.

A ‘scope,’ Jophiel called it. A small monocular with an aimpoint built into it to be mounted atop an accurized rifle to aid in long-range shooting… It was rather ingenious, simply put. An idea which had great military potential, as well as hunting for commoners and the like. However, constructing such ‘scopes’ would require a resource not easily attained in Tristain… Virtually flawless glass.

Of course, Tristainian glass wasn’t bad, far from it, but it just wasn’t good enough for the purposes of a scope, and therefore I needed to get ahold of a reliable provider of high-quality lenses. Luckily, it turned out that a famous Germanian couple was scouting out Bruxelles to expand their business into the area in preparation for Princess Henrietta’s union with King Henreich of Germania.

I’d sent a messenger out to contact the couple and request a meeting with them, which would obviously be held at the Charming Faerie’s Inn since Jophiel owns the business and I’m treated like royalty there and not because I like being served by such friendly, scantily clad girls that know just how to smile to elicit a-

I shook my head and refocused on the diagram in front of me. I’m too old to be getting myself in trouble with pretty young commoner girls, those days are well done by now.

As I turned around to scan the room again, in hopes of spotting the pair I’d asked to join me there and not because I was hoping to get lucky and spot another Faerie bending over far enough to give a glance up her skirt from behind, I noticed him.

I… I’d heard that he was tall, but… By the Founder! He had to be at least four or five inches taller than Jophiel, and Jophiel was at least five-foot-ten if not eleven! And by the Gods, the dark-skinned red headed woman standing next to him was even taller than he! By at least two inches!
The lovely Jessica pointed over to me, and the gaze of the immense, nearly Orcish in scale man followed. He gave a wide smile and wave as he approached, offering his hand as I stood to meet him, being further taken aback by his sheer size as he neared me.

He spoke first as he took a hold of my comparatively childlike hand. “Hello, I’m Lord William Teresa-Schmidt, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” He released my hand and motioned to his wife, who stepped forward to grasp my hand.

“And I’m Lady Melina Teresa-Schmidt.” She smiled warmly and looked down her beak-like nose at me. “We received your message and are very interested in your business proposal.” I did my best to hide a wince at her horrifically powerful grip. I knew that it was possible for some Germanian women to grow large, but by the Founder…

I did my best to hold back a sigh of relief as she released my hand, doing my best to not look overly intimidated by the sheer size of the two Germanians. On top of his size, his hair was dark, like Jophiel’s… Though surely, he simply dyed it as many Nobles did… Though, even his roots, and the slight facial hair showing up on his smooth, well maintained skin was equally dark.

...Although I was tempted to ask after this, I had summoned the two here for a reason. I lightly bowed as I introduced myself properly. “I am Lord Stephen Tyrone Colbert, and I am quite pleased that you both saw fit to meet me this day!” As I stood, I noticed that Lord William looked rather… Surprised. Flat-out dumbfounded, even.

“Uh…” William started. “Did you say Stephen Colbert?”

Melina looked over to her husband with concern, even placing a hand on his shoulder. “Is something the matter dear?”

It took a moment for the tall Germanian man to respond. “Uh, yeah.” He shook his head. “It’s just that you, uh Lord Colbert, remind me of a famous actor from where I’m from… You even sound like him too.”

It took me a moment to parse that statement. “Oh, is that so?” I raised a hand to my chin and rubbed it, cocking an eyebrow as I did so. “That is quite the coincidence… Dare I say, that is even rather remarkable! To think that I have a near identical twin in Germania… What is this actor’s name, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“It’s…” He paused and stared at me for several seconds. “Uh, I forgot actually, funny that.”

Melina seemed amused by her husband’s strangeness, or perhaps merely used to it, and patted his back. “It’s okay dear. I know you have your little moments from time to time.”

I could not help but frown slightly, though in fairness this was of no consequence, and I had summoned the couple here for a reason. “Well, regardless, as you all both aware, I have a particular project in mind which I will need flawless, perfectly formed magnifying lenses for.”

“I believe that should be well within our capabilities.” William responded, and adjusted the pair of glasses on his face. “We’ve become quite proficient at producing glasses over the last few years. In fact I wouldn’t be surprised if the pair you’re wearing right now came from our workshop.”

His wife head up high and preened as her husband praised their abilities.
With a smile I motioned towards the diagram on the table in front of me, displaying Jophiel’s scope, and a simplified ‘sniper rifle’ as he called it to demonstrate how one would attach the scope for usage. “Well, as you can see here, there are the specific types of lens I would require you to produce for me. Perfection is key here, I will require nothing less than the best craftsmanship.”

William stepped closer to the table and placed his hand on the diagram to turn it towards him. He inspected it for a few seconds before speaking up. “It’s quite the ingenious idea. You’d think it’d be more common but alas that isn’t the case.” He looked up towards me. “This will definitely take some work though. It’s not merely the lenses that will have to be crafted, but the frame itself to house them and that requires a great deal of time and effort.” He held up his fore finger and thumb up to his face. “Those little tiny screws are very difficult to produce.”

I could not help but smile. It was so rare to happen upon another man well-educated in the art of engineering! “I can only imagine! Your glasses-” I reached up and adjusted the pair resting on my nose. “-are quite brilliantly designed. Most, if not other designs are quite bulky, and frankly, primitive. However your designs are capable of being folded for ease of storage when not in use… Tell, me, how did you come up with such an ingenious design?”

The Germanian man’s smile faltered. “Ah well you see, I actually have no idea as they were a gift from my parents when I was young and as they are no longer with us I was never able to find out who they purchased them from.”

I found that disheartening, though in fairness it wasn’t a particularly important point, regardless. “Well, that aside, will you be capable of fulfilling the needs outlined on the diagram?”

“Dear, may I have a look?” Melina inquired, but didn’t wait for an answer and gently pushed her husband to the side. She studied the diagram with the same intensity as her husband, and spoke without looking up. “How soon do you want this completed?”

“Well, as soon as possible, preferably. You see… I am developing these for a specific man, Jophiel Pholus van Cazonium the Stormlord.”

William’s face lit up in excitement. “Jophiel the Stormlord?! The Hero who defeated two solid mithril siege golems with a broken arm while carrying an injured servant girl on his back by calling down enough lightning to melt them into a pool of slag?! That Jophiel?!”

Melina glanced up from the diagram with an amused smile at her husband’s excitement. “I believe so dear.”

Silently, I was thankful that Jophiel wasn’t present to hear that. He seemed like a rather humble sort, and surely wouldn’t have appreciated hearing that tales of ‘his’ battle against Foquet being so comically overblown… I also had to hide a grimace at Jophiel receiving the credit for defeating Foquet when I was the one that actually fought her… Though, I had to remind myself, that was for the best. It was not a good idea for me to seek glory…

I shuddered as I remembered the attack on the academy, and forced the thought out of my head, doing my best to not allow the feelings of guilt to overwhelm me in that moment. “Y-yes.” I started. “The very same. This project is very important to him, he believes that it may provide him a significant boon should we wind up at war with the Neo Crusaders, and would like to distribute as many as he can among the Tristainian Sharpshooters.”
Melina stood up straight and brought a hand to her chin. “It would normally take some time to finish this, since we’re currently on other projects at the moment, but considering the urgency of the matter we can begin work immediately.” Her features seemed hawkish as her eyes narrowed. “Though we will require a considerable payment up front to cover the cost of materials and labour.”

“It goes without saying that we aren’t fond of Neo Crusaders, so believe me when I say that this will be our top priority.” William chimed in, looking displeased at the mention of them.

“You don’t appreciate the revolutionaries, I take it?” I asked, honestly curious.

“Not particularly no.” He grimaced. “They claim to be doing it ‘for the people’ but the only thing that will result from their barbarism is bloodshed, social upheaval, and instability. These revolutionaries, instead of trying to work within the system, decided to tear it down in its entirety. It will not create utopia,” he raised his finger up, pointed to the ceiling, “but rather a reign of tyranny intermingled with civil wars and dictatorships. The end result is years, if not decades, of misery and do you know who suffers the most in this situation?”

It was a rhetorical question as he answered before I could even begin to formulate a response.

“Not the clergy or nobility which they claim to be fighting, but rather the common man which is caught in the middle of such a conflict with no means of escape.”

That was a very… Intelligent, and articulate response. Unexpectedly so. “You seem to be a very learned man. Where did you study, if you don’t mind my asking?”

He squared his shoulders and puffed out his chest in pride. “The Imperial Academy of Aachen. I studied the arts, particularly the trivium of grammar, logic and rhetoric, though it was a well rounded education that covered a variety of fields.”

Melina patted his back. “Yes, he’s quite proud of his time there. Despite a few… misunderstandings.” She smirked as he began to blush.

I paused for a moment. “Misunderstandings?”

She placed her hands on his shoulders and leaned against him. “Oh nothing serious. He just had one too many drinks one time while I was visiting him and mistook a student for me. There aren’t many women with my features, yet he managed to find one. What was her name again?”

His blush deepened. “It was uh, something Augusta, started with a ‘Ku’ or something like that.”

I stopped as the gears in my head started to turn. Augusta, red hair, dark skin… Oh. Ohhhh. Ha, hahahaha! Oh Founder… “Such a small world.” The two gave me a curious look, but I waved it off. “That aside, I’m sure that we can come to a reasonable agreement in regards to the payment. Just so long as the product is delivered in a timely manner.”

Melina released her embarrassed husband and returned to her professional demeanor. “It will take several weeks before we can begin producing a significant amount of them. You have to understand that we first need to construct a prototype of this scope before we can move forward and then once we have the design down we have to begin constructed the necessary parts. Even with it taking priority this project will still be a time consuming matter.”

“Little screws take time to make.” William muttered under his breath.
I nodded. “Very well. Send me the bill once you have the exact cost worked out and I shall have payment delivered posthaste.” I paused for a moment. “So, is that all?”

“I believe so.” Melina nodded. “I shall have the cost worked out shortly and you’ll receive a letter from Fission Battery Lenscrafters within a couple days.” She glanced to her husband and noticed that he was eyeing up one of the Faeries waiting on a nearby table. It was evident that he was as enamored with them as I was, but not as adept as hiding it.

She nudged her husband with her elbow. “Dear, you wouldn’t be eyeing that girl up would you?”

He quickly glanced away and found a particularly interesting spot on the ceiling to stare at. “Uh, no, I’m-”

She wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him against her. “Just wait until you see me in that outfit.”

He turned a distinctive shade of bright red as a silly grin splayed itself across his face, and I did my best to not chuckle aloud at the display.

With that, we all were seated, ordered drinks, and spent a good few hours enjoying ourselves before the sun set and I had to return to the Academy to continue aiding in the reconstruction efforts.
Mercifully, we arrived at La Rochelle without further incident, and fairly quickly given that Wardes kept the droogs from tiring. My inner legs were rather on the sore side after that ride, though the speedy arrival more than made up for it.

We’d dropped the hounds off with at the local division of the business we’d rented them from, to begin with, and quietly marched for the inn after explaining the blood caked on their muzzles and front paws.

Louise remained between Wardes and me, still quite shaken by the explosion of violence we’d been through earlier… We were also getting a fair few raised eyebrows, with the way we were all splattered with blood. I’d removed my helmet and coif so I wouldn’t look too intimidating with that considered.

We finally stepped into the bright, bustling inn. It looked to be quite on the high-end, fine marbles, rich woods, etc… Lovely place, really.

Wardes wasted no time in approaching the counter to address the woman manning it. “Ma’am, we’ll require rooms for the night, post-haste. We encountered bandits on the way, and require heated baths.” He stated as he gestured at the blood on his person.

While I probably should have been trying to comfort Louise… I still felt kind of emotionally numb, in no position to be reaching out to others right then.

Wardes had exchanged gold with the worker and was quickly gesturing for Louise to follow him upstairs after giving me an acknowledging nod.

I quickly found myself standing alone near the entrance of the otherwise bustling inn. It occurred to me that I should probably be heading upstairs to clean myself as well, and started moving for the stairwell.

“Jophiel!” A familiar masculine voice called out, approaching from the right. A quick glance revealed Guiche speeding towards me, and Kirche sitting at a table they’d evidently been sharing off to the side. “You finally arri-” It was then that he looked rather shocked. “I-is that blood!”

I blinked in surprise before responding. “How did you two beat us here?”

Guiche looked confused by my question. “We rode Kirche’s mother’s Roc here… Jophiel, are you hurt?” He pressed, looking concerned as he stepped closer and looked me over.

Ah, they flew… Makes sense they’d have beaten us then.

“It’s not my blood,” I stated plainly.

The well-kept pretty boy sighed with relief as Kirche stood and approached us with Flame padding alongside her, looking concerned herself.

"Roadside Attraction Part 05"
“Jophiel,” the dusky-skinned redhead started, “You and Louise were in a fight?” She sounded more interested than anything.

I nodded in confirmation. “Bandits. Sixteen. Three ran, the others…” I looked down at the immense sword I was clutching by the in my off-hand by the blade along with the mirror shield. “I killed six. Louise, Wardes, and the animals handled the rest.” The numb sensation that refused to leave was starting to make me think Derf was messing with the runes to keep me from losing it…

Guiche looked uncomfortable, though nodded warily. “Captain Wardes is here?”

“He already took Louise upstairs,” I gestured with my free hand. “She took her first life, and it’s weighing on her.” Yet my first six were having little noticeable effect on me...

Kirche sighed. “How strange, to encounter bandits on a highway between the capital and a major trading port… Should there not be soldiers patrolling to keep it safe-”

“Not here.” I interjected firmly, but quietly.

They both looked confused for a moment, but realization seemed to dawn on them and Guiche immediately motioned for the stairs. “Kirche and I already arranged for you to share a room with us, we can have fresh water delivered and a bath prepared. It looks as if you need it.”

I nodded and followed the pair, relishing the thought of getting out of my gore-splattered armour and getting the chance to relax.

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“Well, you seem to be looking better!” Kirche chirped as she stepped into the room, giving me a once-over as I pulled a clean shirt from my bag. “Mm… Much better indeed. Someone’s been working out…” She added with a purr because of course, she did.

Embarrassed by having been walked in on while changing, I quickly pulled the simple black shirt over my head and secured it in place. “Do people not knock in Germania?” I asked, somewhat annoyed at her barging in so shortly after I finished bathing.

“No when we’re hoping to catch a little peek of a well-toned boy~” She melodically teased without hesitation.

I groaned.

Kirche continued unabated, confidently sashaying into the room, her rich crimson locks captivatingly bouncing rhythmically with each step. “In all seriousness, though, it does look like you’ve been working hard since you left the academy.” She stated as she sat herself down on the edge of her and Guiche’s bed. “You’re already starting to look like a proper warrior under those clothes… I imagine you must have a very intense trainer to have accomplished so much in such a short time span.”

I paused, considering her assertion… Had I really gotten that toned since arriving at Louise’s home? Regardless… “You could say that…” I stated as I stretched my arms above my head, suppressing a grimace at the memory of Karin’s hard-to-the-fucking-core exercise routine.

“Well, it’s certainly paying off…” Kirche stated with a lascivious grin.
I found myself growing somewhat uncomfortable with her behaviour, given that she was now explicitly engaged to Guiche. Though, knowing them… “...I suppose you and Guiche have worked something out, in regards to your relationship, such as it is?” I asked.

She smiled brilliantly. “But of course! It was the first- well, the second thing we did before arriving here!” She leaned back, a satisfied grin playing across her exotic, alluring features. “We both enjoy our... dalliances, after all. Why would we not come to an agreement that allows us both to keep enjoying the company of others?”

Hm… “Well, so long as nobody is being hurt or lied to, I don’t see the harm in it,” I stated with a shrug as I lifted my now clean plated maille shirt and moved to pull it over my head.

“That’s the spirit!” She declared as she rose to her feet and clapped her hands together happily. “I knew you’d understand, not being one of those stuffy Tristainians.” Her smile then grew quite- Oh bother. “So, that said…”

“I’m in a proper relationship now, Kirche.” I immediately interjected.

“Oh?” The dusky-skinned girl’s eyes lit up, against my expectations. “With who?”

“Siesta.” I immediately stated.

“Siesta… Wait, the maid?” She asked, looking a tad surprised. “You… The translation spell must be in need of a renewal. It suggested that you were in a proper relationship with that exotic little maid.” She stated, steepling her fingers ponderously.

“...Because that’s what I said.” I reiterated.

Kirche’s eyes widened a tad, in confusion. “...But, she’s a commoner.” She stated, giving me a queer look. “Louise would never approve of truly courting anyone below your station. I sincerely doubt that you could get away with having a relationship with one of the smallfolk while living with her.”

...But… Oh shit. “W-what? How would you know that?” I asked, suddenly finding my heart dropping into my stomach.

A single, dumbstruck eyebrow rose on her face as she stared at me as if I’d just claimed to be an anthropomorphic aardvark. “Jophiel… You haven’t spoken to her about how relationships are viewed in Halkegania, have you?” She crossed her arms below her chest. “She’s known for being particularly conservative in that regard, even for a Tristainian. I don’t see her taking it well when you have to reveal that you consider yourself to be courting one of the smallfolk.”

...Well, shit. “...I-I see…”

Kirche was regarding me quite critically, a distinct look in her eyes. “Canada sounds as though it may be more similar to Germania than Tristain. It isn’t unheard of for some Nobles to marry commoners there, given that magicless common folk can earn a true Noble title by either merit or capital… But here? In Tristain?” She shook her head. “Oh no, Jophiel. This is a recipe for disaster… Louise will never approve, nor shall her family.”

I grimaced at that. I’d not really considered how Louise would really consider the thing I’ve got going with Siesta, and it’s just never come up…
Kirche facepalmed. “Jophiel, Jophiel… The girl, have you told her that you think of her this way?”

It was my turn to quirk an eyebrow, then I stopped and realised that I’d never actually talked to Siesta about anything like that… Aw crap.

Kirche sighed in… Relief? “Based on your expression, I’m guessing you haven’t. That’s good, don’t change that, it’ll make it less unpleasant for her when Louise stomps out any prospect of her being with you beyond as a concubine.”

I felt myself growing annoyed at this continued assertion. “What the hell does it matter who I choose to be with? I’m not a le Blanc, it isn’t as though my choice of lovers will reflect back on them.” I stated, making no attempt to hide my growing frustration.

Kirche just looked at me like an idiot for a few moments before responding. “I’m starting to suspect that you’re a good deal denser than I’d initially thought.” She sighed, again. “The way you were treated, presented during the party…”

She gave me a disbelieving look.

“Jophiel, if you aren’t yet considered a member of the family, it’s only in the legal sense. It was clear to everyone there that for all intents and purposes, you are a le Blanc. It would be wise for you to understand this before you go around behaving as if you exist in a bubble separate from one of the most powerful families in the nation.”

…

That gave me pause… And immediately I felt my stomach drop further at the thought of being pressed into a political marriage… I… Oh shit. I really like Siesta, but I’ve really only been thinking of her as a girlfriend, not a… Potential wife. The thought of being married to her stilled my breath in a bad way, and I actually really like her! That I might wind up being arranged to marry some random Noblewoman I’ve never even met before…

Oh man, I’d really not considered the potential ramifications of really being accepted into Louise’s family as an equal… Shit, shit, shit… I wonder if I’d be able to get out of something like that by telling her political marriages are illegal and immoral where I come from…?

“I’m starting to think that for as intelligent as you seem, you’re as dense as work-hardened bronze,” Kirche spoke up, sounding a little exasperated. “I take it you’re one of the youngest of a large family, to be so disconnected from the idea of familial obligations…”

I chose to not correct her in that regard.

“You’re effectively the only male son in the le Blanc family, Jophiel. At this point, you may very well not get the option to choose your own wife freely…” She lifted her hand to her waist, looking down at it, seemingly to look at a gold ring on her finger. “You may not be technically forced to marry for your family’s convenience, though you do not wish to find yourself on your family’s bad side…”

…That caused a few moments of awkward silence before Kirche seemed to notice the expression on my face.
“Oh, don’t get me wrong,” She suddenly waved it off. “Guiche isn’t exactly who I was expecting, or wanting to be wed to, though this arrangement… Is far better than most of the other options I had. Both for me, and for my family.”

She sighed.

“Marriage is a… complicated affair when one is of high birth. If you are wise, Jophiel, you will engage with the le Blancs about the topic and curry enough favour to at least set some... minimum standards for a future wife which they may take into consideration while searching for your prospective bride.”

My mouth was pressed into a thin line by that point.

I’d… Better talk to Louise about this topic once all this business with Albion is over and done with. There’s a time and place for this kind of discussion, and in the middle of a black op is not one of them.

“...I shall consider your words, Kirche. Thank you for the advice.” I stated as I adjusted the neckline of my armour.

She was quiet for a few moments before responding.

“Well, it’s clear that I’m not going to convince you to have any fun before we have to depart, so I’ll drop the subject for now.” Kirche sighed.

Oh thank- wait, for now?

“I mean, the primary reason I did come up here was to see if you needed any help with coping with the effects of your fight, though it’s clear to see now that my concerns were unwarranted,” She voiced- wait, what? “You’re clearly a well-seasoned warrior to be so unshaken by taking that many lives at once. I really shouldn’t have expected anything less from the man that defeated The Decaying Earth in a duel.”

...

That gave me pause, to put it mildly.

I’d… Almost forgot that I’d slaughtered those men not a few hours earlier, and was in fact bathing for the express purpose of getting their blood off of me, yet I still just felt… Numb when I thought about it.

I’m going to need to talk to Derf about this.

“...Right.” I simply replied to the crimson-haired beauty. “Well, was there anything else then?”

She raised a finger to her lips as she pondered the inquiry. “No, I do not believe so.” She stated as she raised to her feet. “I’m going to drag Guiche along to the market to double-check for supplies we may need. Would you like to accompany us?”

I shook my head as the question. “Nah, I imagine that Captain Wardes has his hands full with comforting Louise, and we’re going to need someone to remain downstairs in case our other companions arrive.”
“Ah, right. Them.” Kirche nodded in understanding. “Very well. We should not be more than a few hours, the market isn’t far…” She trailed off, looking concerned for a moment. “Jophiel, do not feel shame for leaving Louise in the Viscount’s hands. They are engaged, it is his duty and honour to be there for her in a time of need. You just focus on yourself for now, okay?”

I blinked in surprise. Where had that come from? Hadn’t she just finished saying that I was clearly unaffected by the deaths of those bandits?

“I, uh… Yeah, thanks, Kirche.” I awkwardly replied as I shifted my weight a tad uncomfortably.

“If you require us back immediately, just tell Verdandi, she’s nesting under the bed,” Kirche stated as she patted the mattress she’d just been sitting on.

Sure enough, when I squatted down and angled my head right, there was indeed a giant blue mole laying under the bed. Guiche’s familiar, good at tunnelling as I understood it.

“Quiet little thing, ain’tcha?” I asked light-heartedly. The mole’s nose twitched in response.

“She’ll call Guiche through the familiar bond if needed. I’m bringing Flame with us just in case.”

Right. Smart, that.

“Ohkay,” Kirche started as she began moving for the door. “Back in a bit!” She waved and confidently strode out the door she swung open ahead of time using her wand, and just like that, I was alone in the room with Derf and the big blue mole nesting under the bed.

I immediately turned to the giant sword and addressed him, finally. “Derf—”

“No idea why you’re taking killing so well, Partner.” He instantly cut me off, as if expecting my question. “Could be that the Bond or Runes have adapted since the last Gandalf and are keeping you from feeling feelings ’bout killing. Or maybe you’re just a psychopath. I dunno, people are complicated and so is Void magic.”

I frowned at the suggestion that I might be psycho, but shrugged it off, long since knowing that the spirit inhabiting the sword had no sense of decorum.

“Well, guess I’ll just keep on assuming that the runes are what’s keeping me calm then…” I shrugged.

“Some things really just ain’t worth worrying ’bout Partner.” He asserted in his out-of-place Spanish accent. “You’ve got the makings of a bloody life ahead of you, y’should just be glad to be blessed by such a boon.”

...Well, he wasn’t wrong about that. “Right… We should get downstairs.” I stated as I glanced at the basin of bloody bath water. “Don’t want our potential travelling companions to miss us, after all.”

The sounds of cheery music filled the inn’s bar area, such as it was. I was seated at the main counter, slowly picking at a plate of fried… Something. It almost looked like a Nug from Dragon Age, but I couldn’t be sure given that I’d not seen it prior to being crisped up in lard. It tasted kind of gritty,
regardless...

Anyways, I allowed my mind to wander for a good hour or so as the band’s music filled the air and patrons joyfully milled about as I waited for Henrietta’s agents to arrive. Had no idea who to expect, just knew the code word and counter-sign to let them know that we’re her primary operatives.

Unfortunately, given that Louise and Wardes had never come down from their room I was left entirely on my own, and most people were giving me a wide berth, save for the resident barmaid who didn’t really have anything interesting to say to begin with. So there I was, waiting in silence and boredom…

“Hm, I wonder…” A cloaked woman spoke up from somewhere behind me, seemingly speaking to herself. “Do they have grapes on the menu?”

My ears perked up at that.

“I hope they’re fresh if so. Rancid grapes taste foul.” The woman continued as I sighed in relief at hearing the code word.

“I hate sour wine,” I replied in kind.

Immediately the stool next to me was claimed, and a pair of brilliant red eyes were peeking at me from beneath a plain hooded cloak with an appraising look. “The Stormlord himself…” From what little I could see of her face framed by hints of light brunette locks, it was clear that she was an absolute beauty.

“Mi’lady really does spoil us, doesn’t she sister?” I blinked at the sound of the woman’s voice also speaking behind me, and I turned to see sitting on the stool on my opposite flank… An identical woman, but this one smiling.

...Gorgeous female twins, Henrietta? Really? Yeah, good idea, not like that’ll draw attention like a lightning rod…

“Pleased to meet you, mi’lord.” The smiling one stated. “I’m Daphne.”

“Amethyst.” The other stated as I swung my head around to face her, still giving me a critical once-over. “Where are the others?” She asked.

Down to business right away, huh?

“Sister, there’s no need to be rude!” Daphne declared from my left. “I apologize for my sister’s curtness sir, it has been a long ride here.” She stated with a sweet smile.

I shrugged. “There’s nothing to apologize for.” I asserted. “Two of our companions are out getting more supplies, the other two are upstairs. It would be wise to inform them of your arrival.” I stated as I stood from my stool and…

noticed the two giving me a perplexed look.

“...What?” I asked, growing somewhat concerned with the looks.

“...That… Is all? You do not wish to speak more with us in private?” Daphne asked, looking
I cocked an eyebrow at that. “Why would I- Look, we have business to attend to, do we not?” I asked, pushing my confusion aside.

The two shared a thoroughly perplexed look before one of them responded.

“...In a moment, there is another we must wait for.” Amethyst responded as she and her twin rose from their seats. As expected, they were considerably shorter than me, 5’2” each at the most.

I blinked in confusion for a moment. Another agent? But Henrietta just said two...

“Speak of a demon, and so shall she arrive,” Amethyst stated dryly as another figure stepped into the inn, and I blanched at the sight and resisted the urge to draw one of my pistols on Longueville.

“A pleasure to see you too, Lord Pholus.” The bespectacled woman drolled at the sight of me visibly tensing up at her appearance.

I turned to the twins, doing my best to keep myself from drawing attention from the crowds with an overstated reaction. “I believe that an explanation is in order.” I asserted, looking between the two.

“In private, of course?” Daphne asked, smiling sweetly.

“Of course,” I replied with forced calm.

Chapter End Notes

So, this probably isn't what anyone still following this story wants to hear, but RotN is officially cancelled. Looking back at the older chapters, it's far too clear that this was my first writing project, and I cannot stand having all my numerous early writing mistakes haunting this story into its future.

So, considering that, I've begun rewriting RotN from scratch under a new, less nonsensical name; "Northern Star." This rewrite will obviously include all of the skill I've attained since I started writing, which I believe will be to the story's great benefit.

So, if you're still following this story, and want to see it finished some day, then be sure to keep an eye out for the rewrite!

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